

# Tradition is a Key to Current Compositions

by Ed Wolfe

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Tradition, an option for my original compositions, has been observed, modified, copied or most recently overlooked by the modern composer. Drawing inspiration, ideas and formal content from composers of the common practice period and before enables the modern composer to combine the very best practices of the past with the innovations and technological advances of the present. Music, as it evolved, generally fell into one of two types: absolute music (music for its own sake) and program music (music tied to the printed word).

These two types of music evolved into the myriad forms we have observed, listened to and written over the many centuries of "published" or "performed" selections. The forms of absolute music are well known from the sonata to the concerto through the many genres of chamber music to the symphonic work and more recently to the band and electronic instruments of today and the recent past.

Program music, however, infinitely more complex, traditionally dealt with some form of text, whether it be liturgical, poetic, narrative, dramatic or imagined! Program music, dating back to the beginnings of the written word itself, came into its own in the Romantic Period (although Beethoven used elements of it even in his symphonic works) through the use of solo songs, liturgical settings and opera. The culmination of program music as we have come to recognize it might be considered to be the operatic works of Wagner and later the tone poems of Richard Strauss, although this oversimplification is merely an example of the thousands of programmatic works in different genres available to the audiences of the common practice period from the Baroque to the Impressionists.

During the Twentieth Century, much attention was paid to expanding the harmonization and creation of melody. Dissonance became more the norm than the exception. With the exception of the French Impressionists who took Romanticism to a whole different level, absolute music and program music moved away from the traditional forms, tonalities and harmonic progressions of the common practice period and moved towards experimentalism, destruction of tonality and even collages of sound that shattered the traditional concepts of concert music as it had evolved (as well as sometimes shattering the fragile ear of the listener and the interest of the concert goer!). Neoclassicism of the early Twentieth Century brought some aspects of tradition back in the forms produced and the concept of tonality (used now more often as a movement towards a key center rather than the use of key schemes with progression in the traditional sense). The Expressionists, the Serialists, the Neoclassicists, the Experimentalists, all searching for that style that would give to their listener a different approach and a new direction, also contributed to the rise of popular music and the evacuation of the concert hall to the large venues seen in the last fifty years at rock concerts, jazz concerts and folk concerts. The classical concert hall seemed to be attended by the

musically elite, the wealthy or the socially well-heeled. A sense of tradition seemed to be lost and an alienation of our audiences seemed to be taking place.

How then, can we reach out to our audiences? A return to tradition while using the best practices of the composers of the past including the outstanding composers of the Twentieth Century seems to be in order. In my music, there is a conscious effort to use traditional forms, recognizable forms, that could be as simple as Binary or as complex as the Sonata Allegro form or Theme and Variations or even Arch form. By placing formal limitations on my compositions, my challenge, much like the explanation offered by Paul Hindemith, becomes one of creating new material with interest for the listener and still expressing the absolute or programmatic music effects desired. It is my opinion (like Russ Garcia) that rhythm is a unifying factor and a factor that can and should add interest to the music being written, In addition, much like a comment made by Vaclav Nelhyble in May of 1967 (during one of my Form and Composition classes) that "present day composition is undefinable....largely imitative of known composers...with offbeat trends being called music...that there was not enough traditional material in these composers...that Electronic Music was tailored to the musically illiterate and, finally that Twelve Tone music is much the same...anyone can write it!" He continued to say "tradition can not be destroyed because we are born with it and that ears are not made for quarter tone music."

These comments, although extreme to be sure, left an impression on a young Ed Wolfe and the evolution of my original works have made use of Twentieth Century techniques like Serialism, Minimalism, Impressionism and many other "isms" but always within a concept of traditional forms or self imposed constraints like tonality and/or modality schemes. Melody might be twelve tone, for example with triadic or open (chords of the P4th or P5th) harmony as in the "Sonata for Oboe" or traditional modality as in "Modal Moods". But the larger forms like "Teton Sketches" and "Formations" are definitely programmatic in nature (with nature being the key word). They are not based on the printed word as in Impressionism nor do they minimize the composer's importance as in Expressionism. Instead, they are snapshots. Think about how we observe our surroundings on a daily basis. As we turn our head, our view immediately changes to a new snapshot with a different subject or view. We do not often "pan" slowly from one angle to another much like the video or movie camera and, even though our view might have motion as we look at it, when we move our eyes or head, a new snapshot appears with a different view (with or without motion). So it is in my larger works, "Caverna", a musical tour of Carlsbad Caverns in Southern New Mexico was written for full orchestra and is a succession of musical snapshots as I progressed through the cave. Most of the tourists were shooting picture after picture with their flash cameras as each new formation appeared. I, on the other hand was writing down melodies and potential key scheme outlines on manuscript paper. I must tell you, there were some curious stares from those avid photographers!

"Teton Sketches" is a journey from Northern Utah through the Teton Range and ending at Yellowstone. Most of the piece was written while sitting at the lodge and viewing the range through the largest picture window I had ever seen!

So, my music is a synthesis of the traditional forms of the common practice period along with the traditional and nontraditional harmonic concepts of the Twentieth Century and earlier and perhaps most importantly, it is not music that can only be understood by me, my family, my private students or my "clique" as in much of the music of the Twentieth Century. Hopefully it is music that can be understood by concert goers and web listeners all around the world, That is the goal. That is the tradition.