

Letter to my Teacher: June 2017

Dear Wen-Chung,

I so much enjoyed our phone conversation of a few days ago. I realize that I have kept most of my mature work from you, because you never really could accept the return of tonality, something that I have embraced since 1976. Enclosed is my best work: I hope that you will listen to it, forgetting when it was written and just take it in as music. It was a very difficult decision for me to send these works. Most obvious is my attempt to connect with the common culture, popular and folk culture and bring these musical roots to a new realization. Mainstream Modernism is as obvious a failure as Minimalism or Total Serialism: that music will never survive. My inclusive approach is, for me, the only solution. Anticipating some rejection, I am willing to take the plunge. I feel that there is nothing naïve or simpleminded in this stuff. I also feel that there is nothing old fashioned or reactionary in the tonality and dissonance treatment. Of course, the structures of these pieces have more to do with the editing of film or the reorientation in the visual arts, mainly because I feel that traditional musical structures are used up, while traditional musical techniques are not. I also believe that what I am doing is the next step in serious music, just as C.P.E. Bach's rejection of baroque conventions took music to its next step.

The "Bonheur de Vivre" Clarinet Trio is one track of a premiere CD from The Pierrot Ensemble, which is the first-chair players of the Brno Philharmonic. The CD should be out in a month, and this is the promo. I have enclosed the program notes, because the cinematic roots of the piece are really intrinsic to the structure and ultimate understanding of the concept. The "Piano Celebration Vol. 2" music for 2 pianos and piano 4-hands are pieces that I performed in concerts and lecture recitals, because they are so portable. It came out on MSR Classics at the end of last year. In many ways, this music recalls the performance pyrotechnics of the nineteenth century when composers used this venue to popularize orchestral works. "CPE" and "Serge P" build on music of the past, but this transformation creates new musical identities that belong in the 21st century. I would like to think of the process as simultaneous development and deconstruction, with an intentional self consciousness of past practices. If I am working in a decadent era, then I must use that decadence to the advantage of the creation of new perceptions.

“World of a Bengal Child” is a cinematic developmental narrative, Movement One taking the material so far, and Movement Two propelling it into new tonal areas, which are like changing camera angles in a movie. I am particularly proud of the cumulative energy and drama of the end of the Second movement. The rest of the music on this disc springs from pure entertainment and humor, features largely lost in contemporary classical music. Maybe I am trying to spread musical populism à la John Adams, but unlike that nugatory pretender, I have not given up the mechanisms of subtlety and complexity (“Chorales II”). I still need the informed listener with the proper attention span. As I said in my program notes, my tonality is not your aunt’s bag of ditties. I will admit that I gleaned collage techniques and style modulation from Rochberg, who failed in his attempt. However, he failed because he could not generate original material out of the synthesis and really wanted to bring back the past. I feel that the tonal extensions and dissonance treatment in the larger pieces on this disc go far beyond what composers of the post WWII inately tried to generate. Why, because of the immense contrasts of consonance and dissonance which I consistently and deliberately employ. Yes, my C major chord does not mean the same thing that it did to CPE Bach and my symmetrical pitch pyramids don’t mean the same thing that they did to Varèse. Old is old: whether it is 300 years old or just 3 generations old. What I do take from Varèse is obeisance to acoustical reality, something that seriously evaded Schoenberg.

The last disc, “Chopin’s Ghosts,” for Naxos will come out before Christmas, 2017 and this is the first fully edited sub master. I consider this , the two sonatas, which are emblematic of my acquired technique, to be my best work, and I have enclosed brief program notes. This disc is the companion piece to “Seven Deadly Sins,” a collection of music for violin and piano, released on Naxos in 2014. Once again, the roots of the materials are in popular culture, jazz, and folk music, perception altering processes found in television and video games, and a self conscious reflection on the past. I am not pining for that long ago time: I am paying homage to it as the basis of a new, fresh aesthetic, somewhat mocking and skeptical, but totally affirmative. It is obvious that I have abandoned traditional classical *avant-garde* music for something larger and more accessible. Ultimately, Ives was probably right: he just did not have the technique or worked hard enough. I truly believe that the faux pantheon created by the turgid music of Boulez, Lutoslawski, and the like is merely a neurotic sonic sand castle. Why not employ the same sophistication and complexity with materials that the

common man can relate to? Why not write tunes? Where would the great composers of the past be without their tunes? It should be obvious by now that my lifelong compositional decisions were carefully thought out in acknowledgement of the failure of more than two generations of composers who are pathetic victims of Schoenberg/Xenakis worship. They were never that good to begin with: they committed the Original Sin of composers, tediously boring the listener with self-justifying constructions. What the hell is "Stochastic music?" Who gives a flying F**k about the Babbitt Time Point System? John Cage-although his music is worthless- performed one exemplary service: he blew the stink off the serious contemporary music swamp. I still remember how we sat in MacMillan Theater, taking in drivel like monks in church, pretending that the Emperor (Charles Wuorinen) wasn't really mooning us.