

# ON RELIGION, POLITICS AND CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay is an examination of the role that an artist is called to play within the ideologically and politically polarized world of today. It examines the composer's relationship with a community of listeners, patrons and fellow practitioners and the political forces shaping this community, as well as the information media and cultural institutions which affect the artist's welfare and ability to affect cultural change. It also focuses on the writer's personal experience with these forces as they have affected his own work over the years.*

## Introduction

This essay marks the occasion of the tenth anniversary of my first attempt to understand the evolution of the language of musical composition in terms of paradigm shifts<sup>1</sup>. As with any writer who is first and foremost a creative individual and secondarily a scholar, my observations are naturally filtered through the colored lenses of 'creative' as opposed to 'objective' thinking. This filtering process is not necessarily a bad thing. I consider creative thinking to be more profound than the more mechanistic kind of thinking which we habitually accept as 'objective'. Being also a person of faith, I consider faith to be a stronger pillar upon which one may build one's inquiry on the nature of truth than the rationalist/technocratic approach which admits reason and proof as the only acceptable tools for this inquiry. As I have written elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> I believe that, at their deepest, rationalism and faith are not contradictory and point towards the same essence; at their shallowest, they are both based on arbitrary axioms beyond which reason and proof cannot penetrate in any case.

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<sup>1</sup> Christos Hatzis: "Towards a New Musical Paradigm". 1996. [www.hatzis.com](http://www.hatzis.com) The concept of Paradigm Shifts as a way of understanding the evolution of science and culture was first introduced by Thomas Khul in his groundbreaking essay "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions"

<sup>2</sup> Christos Hatzis: "Music for God's Sake: An Examination of the Spiritual Foundations of my Music". 2004. [www.hatzis.com](http://www.hatzis.com)

Since roughly the middle of the twentieth century, our world has been progressively split and polarized into two opposing ideological and political camps. We habitually attribute this polarization to the resurgence of fundamentalism among the main religions of the world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam and to the accompanying intolerance and the acting out of this intolerance which are testing our western social philosophy and democratic institutions to a dangerous degree, pushing them perhaps to a point of no return. The politics at either end of this debate are extremely complicated and the causes are not as obvious as popular wisdom and rhetoric would have us believe. Anyone who attempts to see this phenomenon as a one-sided demonstration of intolerance is far from decoding the forces that constantly shape the world that we live in.

I believe that a contributing reason for this resurgence of so-called ‘fundamentalist intolerance’ is the fact that, while in our economically developed western societies we constantly struggle for a consensus as to who or what constitutes ultimate authority, other societies have managed to survive for long periods of time without such existential ponderings. Our evasive (I would dare say ‘futile’) search for a commonly accepted axiom upon which we may build further ethical, ideological and cultural discourse, and our desire to readily export our existential agnosticism to other societies and cultures has been perceived as threatening to and by these societies or cultures. This perceived threat stems from our own deeper uncertainty about the conceptual products which we so enthusiastically seek to export. Postmodernity, as a critical theory, has revealed an inherent weakness in our traditional systems of arbitrating authority and legitimation. This weakness has to do with the fact that authority is no longer the exclusive domain of experts but of those who *invest* such authority on experts: you and me and *everyone* else. The experts can offer witness to their version of the truth, but it is ultimately the jury that decides if the expert version is the Truth, and the jury’s verdict is final, at least until a subsequent jury says otherwise. In the world of ideas, these occasionally competing versions of truth are the stuff of ‘language games’.<sup>3</sup> The winners of the language games become the custodians of authority—momentary custodians, that is, for the language

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Francois Lyotard: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. 1979. Manchester University Press, UK.

games are played constantly and the fortunes of the winners and losers shift constantly too. Traditional arbitrators of authority, who in the past have had an unquestioned monopoly on Truth, perceive this newly espoused relativity and uncertainty of value as a threat to their monopoly and, by extension, the social order that such monopoly implies. The natural consequence of this sense of feeling threatened is ideological militancy and extremism, which are in turn forms (often deadly ones) of language games.

I am not writing this to defend postmodernity or relativism of value and truth; quite the contrary. It was this 'relativism as ultimate essence' that eventually alienated me as an artist and human being from postmodernity and forced me to grow beyond its postulates. Language games, however, are for better or worse the operating mechanism of present-day politics, at least on the surface. Unraveling the complexity of present-day politics and the language games they represent is a way of getting closer to understanding the politics of contemporary art and music in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and, by analogy, the politics of many other fields of human endeavour as well.

Recent North American (and world) politics has contributed a great deal to the polarization I mentioned earlier by alternatively feeding upon and contributing to it. In an age in which messages are designed and delivered through television or other time-compressed media in the most epigrammatic and uncomplicated form possible, we are increasingly witnessing convenient grouping of many different and contradicting belief systems into two compacted 'bundles' that can be easily bannered and presented to voters and ideological consumers as an 'either/or' choice. Political and fiscal conservatism, 'religious' fundamentalism, a concerted effort to keep religion as a political force in public life and education, anti-gay and 'pro-life' activism, and 'ethics over rights' advocacy form one such 'bundle'. Political and fiscal liberalism, 'scientific' objectivism and religious agnosticism or denial, a concerted effort to keep religion out of public life and education, pro-gay, pro-choice activism and 'rights over ethics' advocacy form the other. These descriptions are by necessity generic and many conservatives or liberals would object to these 'bundles', but they form the basis of most political platforms, particularly in North America, partly because of the influence of special interest pressure

groups whose support is counted upon on election time as opposed to the core philosophy of the political parties in question. Whatever the reason, there appears to be very little gray area between these two separate worlds: in the black-and-white politics of our time, to diffuse or question these groupings is tantamount to losing one's political support base, or the 'edge' of one's electoral message. In an election campaign, a party may 'soft-pedal' some of the more controversial issues in order to appeal to undecided votes, but it will not deny the party's position on these issues to their own core constituency.

Increasingly, there is a temptation to identify any individual who may be supportive of a specific cause as belonging to one of these two generic 'camps', irrespective of whether or not such convenient and sweeping categorizations accurately (or even, remotely) describe the individual in question. Thus, if you are known to be religious, it is automatically assumed that you are politically conservative, 'anti-gay', 'pro-life' and 'anti-rights'. Similarly, if you are known to be a rationalist, it is assumed that you are anti-religious and a political liberal or radical. The term 'religious radical' is therefore increasingly perceived as a contradiction in terms. If you describe yourself by such a term you are most likely to be viewed as politically suspect by a wide spectrum of political interests. If you also happen to have a vocation which puts you in the public spotlight, as is often the case with artists, then any attempt to resist or transcend these categorizations of political convenience will make you the target of both political/ideological camps. The representatives of one will attack you for not being faithful to their 'agenda' while those of the other will attack you for belonging to the 'enemy' camp. It is clear that this political polarization discourages original thinking and any kind of 'standing up to be counted' for what you personally believe in, as opposed to the party agenda. It is also clear that such party agendas do not serve the interests of a healthy, democratic society but of those who see accumulation of power as the only real goal of politics.

An artist who is outspoken about his/her artistic and/or other beliefs will inevitably be identified by the powers that be as belonging to one of these two camps, particularly if the artist's ideas (expressly stated or through the artist's work) begin to find their way visibly and/or audibly into the arena of public ideological and philosophical debate. It is

exceedingly difficult for such artists to combat these identifications, particularly when they are promoted by an information media which has infinitely greater reach and power than any individual artist. The more politically polarized the information media becomes, the more trapped artists who are outspoken about the philosophical and social implications of their work will be by this polarization.

Being such an outspoken artist myself, I have on quite a few occasions been caught in the midst of this ever expanding political debate, neither side of which is very appealing to me. On one hand, I believe in God, a benevolent essence which wishes the best for me and all my fellow human beings without exceptions; who, every time I take a step further away from this essence, it creates an opportunity for me to return to it; who creates such opportunities for every living soul on this earth and beyond; from which all the vibratory patterns that we perceive around and within us as animate and inanimate existence proceed; from which the notions of the sacredness of life and of all creation emanate, as well as the notions of love, of self-esteem and of the esteem of others. Do these beliefs make me automatically a political supporter of the so-called 'religious right' and its socio-ideological postulates? They do not.

## **Credo**

I believe in a God that is not an essence separate from you and me: it is our innermost essence, the best in each and every one of us, our point of origin and final destination<sup>4</sup>. As such, this 'you' versus 'me' relationship with the divine is no relationship at all, unless one defines the 'I' as a 'schizophrenic' entity that is only possible and conscious of itself when it is separated from its source. In such a case, this 'I' and a society that comprises of multiple such 'I's are in serious need of healing by integrating the source of the 'I'-dentity with its various schizophrenic expressions. If you suspend your disbelief and assume for a second that this is so, then you will realize that our world is in the state that it currently is not because God is cruel or uncaring (qualities that we tend to attribute

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<sup>4</sup> (Parenthetically, I should mention that Judaism and Islam have preserved this concept of God more faithfully than Christianity for they have resisted pictorial representation of the divine while Christianity has diverged from this understanding during its attempt to win over the pagan world of the early first millennium).

routinely to the divine) but because God profoundly respects the greatest gift that we have been endowed with: our free will. We have no one else to blame for the fact that this gift routinely expresses itself as a willful separation from its source of empowerment. It is the exercise of this free will that has brought us where we are today. Free will is our inviolable right and God respects this right and does not interfere with it. God hopes that we learn from this exercise as we alternatively find ourselves on the delivering or receiving end of our collective and individual free will.

For those of us who do not believe in death as a permanent end but rather as a continuous process of learning that transcends the grave as well as time and place, free will is a classroom in which we eventually learn its proper use through trial and error. Viewed from this perspective neither the world we live in nor God are cruel: we are, while we are constantly being taught (and are hopefully learning) how not to be. Why doesn't God prevent our cruelty to others or others' cruelty to us? Because if God did this, free will, our birthright would be violated in the process. So, if God respects our rights to the point that we are allowed to mess up God's creation unopposed, who are we to disrespect the rights of others, even when we think they may be wrong? Who are we to legislate against other people's sexual preferences or women's' rights to their own body, or other people's right to worship God as they see fit or to even deny God's existence, for that matter? I cannot in all seriousness believe in the existence of an Almighty Being who is incapable of settling the affairs of this world except through my own political advocacy. The God I believe in is in everything and everyone. This God is not hiding from the affairs of the world: we are the ones hiding from God by hiding from ourselves, by disguising our desire for control as 'ethics' or 'religion' and by finding false support for our cru-sadism in the darkest corners of the universe. To call this quest 'religion' is an insult to God and, ultimately, to ourselves.

To me theocracy means a utopian system in which everyone connects directly with their own essence. At such a profound level of connection, we all *meet* and there is no difference of political, philosophical or other opinion. No one arbitrates such a connection: there are no self-appointed representatives of God on earth which is what

most people understand by the term ‘theocracy’; no arbitrator of a set of rules of behavior; no judge of individual conduct. In the knowledge of everything that God allows individuals to ‘get away with’ in this world, we cannot call ourselves ‘children of God’ and be less patient and less allowing. In such an ideal universe, where all or most of the members of a society have attained personal enlightenment or *theosis* and where knowledge is profound and pervasive, notions of privacy are meaningless for we would be able to read each others’ thoughts. So are notions of government and secular law, for the kind of dedication and egalitarianism that is called for by such a system will render all these other notions unnecessary. Even in a less utopian world, we know that, no matter how close to ideal the political system is, it will not function properly without dedication and selflessness on our part and a sense of individual and collective self-sacrifice for the common good. Take these qualities away from a political process and watch fear and corruption set in and democracy fail. Introduce these qualities into a political process and even a dictatorship can turn into a benevolent political system (of course if these qualities applied to those who governed, it would have not been a dictatorship in the first place). So the activism of a person who believes in God and in theocracy is not the kind that lobbies governments and legislatures for the continuous creation of laws that will prevent people from doing what their heart is set upon, or will punish them if they act on such desires, but the kind that is concerned with bettering the lot of those around us, particularly those who are not of a similar political or ideological persuasion or creed. The activism of a group of people who truly believe in God would have them always on guard for being their ‘brother’s keeper’, as opposed to lobbying the government for tax cuts and equivalent reductions in social programs.

### **The ‘Art’ of Politics**

Where does such a view of the world and of religion fit within the liberal/conservative political debate? Nowhere! If you look at the world as I and a growing number of people do, the only real political debate and the real divide is between spirituality and the politics of fear. The latter completely engulfs the entire liberal/conservative debate of our times. It is no surprise that in recent political election campaigns around the world fear has been the tool that increasingly wins elections. Liberals market the fear of conservatives gaining

complete control of democratic institutions and conservatives market the fear of liberal weakness in dealing decisively with terrorism and other sinister forces that threaten our lives and law and order, while capitalizing on our fear of big government and out of control budgets. So-called 'fundamentalist' regimes market the fear of western greed and interference and western so-called 'democratic' institutions market the fear of so-called 'fundamentalist' regimes. There is no room in this debate for either religion or reason, yet both are invoked all the time by proponents of each side of this political debate. The concerted effort to depict the liberal/conservative political debate as an 'either/or' political choice is the real political tragedy of our times. To believe that either side of the existing debate has anything to do with religion and spirituality, is to enhance the deception that the answer to our problems lies in answering this 'either/or' question correctly and acting on that answer.

Of course practitioners of the 'art' of politics are aware of the fact that there is a growing spiritual awareness among the electorate nowadays which can be harnessed for their benefit. Conservatives have traditionally scored the greatest gains in this harnessing and harvesting process, but liberals are now beginning to see that they too may effectively tap on religious sensibilities amongst the population to their own political ends. Since traditionally these sensibilities are not 'lived' and profound experiences but rather cultural norms and ideas which members of religious and cultural communities have been raised to accept and practice in a rather mechanistic manner, the harnessing and harvesting is a relatively painless process: often 'coded' political rhetoric that will convince many members of these communities (or frighten them to the alternatives) sufficiently to bring them to the polls on election day is all it takes. By 'coded' I mean the subliminal or sometimes overt agitation of the fear factor within each one of us: threatened 'ethical standards', 'way of life', 'law and order', etc., acting as 'codes' for unchallenged habit, privilege, and its enforcement thereof. If one is to judge from electoral results in recent years, it is a technique that works effectively, albeit not without its sociological side-effects such as the rise in social unrest and crime.

The only real fear—the one that we are constantly manipulated with—is our fear of each other and of the forces that control our life and well-being. This fear can thrive only in the absence of a deep spiritual connection with our source, therefore in the absence of spirituality. A ‘religious’ or secular regime, be it autocratic, democratic, conservative or liberal, which establishes itself violently or gets democratically elected<sup>5</sup> by promoting fear, is as far from God and spirituality as anything could possibly be. Furthermore it is an affront to spirituality, for it promotes the idea that spirituality can somehow thrive within an ‘us’ and ‘them’ environment, however this ‘us’ and ‘them’ is defined each time to satisfy specific political expediencies.

### **The Politics of Art**

Before I am construed as also engaging in politics of fear, I do not propose that this is a hopeless situation or one that is beyond the ability of any individual to make a difference in our world. In spirituality you do not judge an action by its result. The action itself is not to change someone else, but only you. Spirituality is your pact of allegiance with the divine, your deeper essence. Within such an allegiance, no other human being could possibly become a means to an end. In art and creativity in general, such activism would first and foremost focus on the needs of others. Furthermore, this notion of ‘others’ would not be limited by any qualifying characteristic which would reduce the scope of the activism to something taking place within a special interest group of some kind, no matter how large or widespread such special interest might be. For example, if an artist, or anyone for that matter, identified as his community a group of like-minders who all subscribe to a specific clearly defined mind-set or aesthetic, this could hardly be construed as the kind of activism I am talking about here. While such a closely knit group might display an extensive degree of activism within its own confines which would aim at further integrating the group (which in itself is not a negative thing) this ‘group mentality’ might also effectively isolate the group in question from the larger community of human beings.

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<sup>5</sup> The recent electoral victory by Hamas in Palestine has seriously challenged the idea of ‘democracy cures all’ promoted by the west. Of course here I am referring to any elected government that uses fear as a tool to be elected either through actual pressure on the electorate or simply by means the campaign rhetoric. The latter would include just about any western democracy nowadays.

The classical contemporary music scene has gone through such a phase throughout the twentieth century, gradually closing in on itself as a result of this kind of activism within its own self-imposed confines. The more the group's ability to address the larger spectrum of human need began to atrophy as a result of this in-house activism, the more fear and uncertainty about the future set in; the larger spectrum of human needs (and the human beings with these needs) is then increasingly perceived and weighted as an impediment to further uninhibited exploration within the field of inquiry, in this case contemporary music composition and related art fields<sup>6</sup>. This fear and uncertainty manifests itself outwardly partly in the form of lobbying and advocacy with the government or larger cultural institutions and systems of patronage. When panic sets in, the advocacy turns militant.

Of course the need for patronage for the fine arts is nothing new: most of the art and music that we cherish today would have not existed without some kind of patronage that provided the considerable financial and other infrastructure whose existence we often take for granted. As the organizational modes of western (and other) societies have changed gradually from hegemony by the church in the Middle Ages to feudal power, to (mostly) urban market forces, to today's information societies, so has the character of arts patronage. Perhaps the difference, which sometimes evades us as artists, is the history of art's accountability to the infrastructure that gives rise to it. The great artists from the past that we know today and appreciate their work are artists who consciously and often conscientiously addressed the needs of the social infrastructure that made their existence as artists possible. Had they not addressed these needs, we would have not known today who they were or their work for that matter. The difference between the various forms of patronage in the past and present day arts patronage, which at least in Canada is still considered to be largely the domain of the various levels of government, is the increasing pressure to allow market forces to determine the function (and fortunes) of anything in society which requires a financial infrastructure for its existence.

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<sup>6</sup> This affects the performing arts more than the visual arts, because their relationship to market forces is markedly different in each case.

Until fairly recently, social philosophy partly under heavy influence from European colonial mentality held that art and culture should be exempt from the influence of market forces. In the fairly recent NAFTA agreement between Canada and the United States, culture was excluded from the negotiating table...at least in theory. I say “in theory” because in actual practice it is not possible to exclude anything from such agreements. Culture costs money and the party in a free trade agreement that maintains higher taxation in order to sustain culture and a better overall standard of living becomes over time the economically less competitive of the two trading partners. In the meanwhile, there is nothing preventing the other party in the agreement from taking full advantage of the subsidized cultural products thus sustained in the existing climate of free flow of information and (relatively so) of commodities. If Canada, for example, decided to nurture talent and pay for it, the United States could easily reap it at Canada’s expense or *vice versa*. Free trade in its present form can only be responsible for decreasing cultural subsidies everywhere, while countries are struggling for survival and economic advantage within our increasingly competitive world.

Combine this world-wide economic reality with the postulates of relativity of value and authority as espoused by Postmodernity, the prominent cultural paradigm in our western societies for a number of decades now, and you end up with a rather bleak picture for government and institutional stewardship of culture in the future. Even though there is still a difference of opinion within the liberal/conservative political debate with regards to culture, I believe that ultimately it is a difference in rhetoric as opposed to any fundamental commitment to public stewardship of culture by either side of the debate. Ultimately the authors of the political positions in the debate are accountable to the voters they represent, and the general public is only interested in the culture it consumes, not in the one that some expert or elected representative will tell them is important. So in a country like Canada ‘universal health-care’ is a sacred cow because the majority of the citizens think that it is something worth spending their tax dollars on and culture is not, because it has not managed to form such a universal consensus among the citizenry. And even if it had, such consensus would be dominated by the major (and more influential)

pieces that form the new Canadian and North American cultural mosaic, as opposed to traditional pockets of cultural activity, such as classical contemporary music, whose cultural importance is no longer self-evident and is increasingly under public and institutional scrutiny. Closer to the world of contemporary music, CBC Radio's current scrutiny of its mandate as a national broadcaster in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a corresponding move away from classical contemporary music and even classical music all together, and the slightly earlier attempts by the record industry (Sony Classical in particular) to redefine the term 'classical music' to include any non-current music practice such as big-band jazz and popular music of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are attempts to come to terms with this new phenomenon of market-defined legitimacy and cultural authority. They are also attempts by existing, publicly-funded institutions to survive the shifting sands of the legitimacy language game. For many of these institutions, not to mention individual musicians whose livelihood depends on these institutions, this has been a crude awakening.

### **Where are we now?**

Could this crisis in contemporary classical music have been averted? My feeling is that the crisis might have been partially averted but the transformation in our ways of thinking about music and communicating would have had to be more pronounced and for a longer period of time for this to be possible. But before we tackle this question at any length, let's start with some more important, and perhaps more painful questions: Why we, as musicians active in the forefront of social and cultural change, would want to halt change in the first place and turn ourselves into reactionary forces in the process? Isn't change always associated with progress? Isn't forward momentum in the Darwinian sense, the manifest destiny of life on this planet, whatever the 'casualties' along the way? Haven't scientifically-minded people since the Enlightenment always trusted this 'natural flow' of things more than any ideology/religion/theory that has explained the human condition in some other way? I am not asking these questions because I would answer them in the affirmative—I wouldn't, except for the last one—but because they may help deepen the intellectual and aesthetic crisis we are currently experiencing as a community of creative individuals and propel us towards some much needed answers. Depending on how we

answer the above questions, we may find ourselves as creative artists experiencing not one but two crises: a crisis of survival but also a crisis of value.

For many decades, the prevalent paradigm in contemporary music has been a scientific (actually, pseudo-scientific) one. This view of music as a field of pure scientific inquiry and the implicit philosophy associated with this inquiry has had nearly universal acceptance for the most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After a series of spectacular revolutions starting in the 1910's and lasting until perhaps the 1950's, musical practitioners have worked quietly and in relative obscurity integrating the 'findings' established by these earlier revolutions. While calling themselves the 'avant-garde' these later practitioners gradually slipped into an establishment role, resentful as they may have been of being thought of as such. During this process of internal integration, the view from the outside (as in any other paradigm) was one of repetition of experiments the results of which were already known or easily predicted. To the practitioners and advocates of the new emerging and thriving pop culture, avant-garde music appeared as the last stage of a paradigm whose internal evolution had reached an end-stage—what physicists would call a state of 'maximal entropy'. As public interest rapidly shifted to popular music, particularly since the 1960's and art music was relegated to a relatively obscure position in the overall cultural mosaic, a parallel process of erosion in legitimation threatened to sever classical contemporary music from its traditional sources of funding, the government and corporate sponsorship, both of which are beginning to shift their attention to more publicly visible (and therefore more legitimate) forms of cultural activity. These past few years we have been witnessing natural selection in rigorous action. Our own cherished pseudo-scientific paradigm is now pitting us against some of the prevalent postulates of Darwinian Theory and, as a creative community, we now find ourselves on the receiving end of our own philosophy.

I don't think anyone would disagree by now that the sociopolitical process of natural selection has turned away from classical contemporary music and towards the more consumable cultural products of pop culture. It might have been possible to influence this process to some significant extent, if for the better part of an entire century classical

musicians had not built self-imposed walls which prevented them from effectively participating and even leading this sociopolitical process. Not only has this community been insular but it has also turned reactionary within its own confines. The more threatened it feels from the outside, the more it turns on those of its practitioners who ring the alarm bells and try to build bridges with mainstream culture and a possible future. It is of course the psychology of the sinking boat, when panic overtakes cool and profound appraisal of the community's predicament as a whole. What we are witnessing at this point is a struggle for mere survival, let alone cultural leadership, even though it is the latter that may ultimately make survival feasible and certainly more elegant. Of course, a struggle for survival by all available means, however short-sighted or dangerous on the long-term, is possible too and it is not out of line with the concept of natural selection, which is in essence an amoral process of the survival of the fittest. So if some members of the contemporary music community feel that militant tactics of survival is what is in the best interest of the community as a whole, I cannot very well argue against such tactics from within the conceptual framework of natural selection. I can, however, question the framework itself as a fitting way for understanding the predicament in which we find ourselves at the present moment.

### **Where do we go from here?**

If professional survival was the only thing in our minds when we chose to dedicate ourselves to music, then we have made a poor career choice. There are other, more utilitarian fields of human endeavour that would have guaranteed professional survival more readily, although none as readily as they have in the past, for now *value* as well as the structure that emanates from it are in complete flux. Be that as it may, music is a vocation and a calling. A 'calling' points to something outside of oneself; it points to the act of communication and caring for something or someone beyond the self. This is why music is such an important component of so many people's lives and why its perversion is such a danger for our collective social and spiritual health. In times of trouble our sense of self-righteousness will always point the finger in some other direction for this perceived perversion of the gift of music: the greed of the music industry, the naiveté of most listeners, and the lack of education which would have made listeners more

perceptive and receptive to our ideas. But, so long as we place ourselves at the centre of the universe dispersing blame outwards, we will not find the cure to the ills of the world or of our own community of special interests. We must start the process of healing from within: by asking unpleasant and painful questions such as the following: If our mission is to improve society's lot through music (which presumably would justify why society as a whole would be investing in and receiving our work), is it not society's right to evaluate the usefulness of our work and judge it accordingly? If this is the case, then is it not the listeners who make our existence and our work possible the ultimate authority that we should feel accountable to? If the listeners for whatever reason feel ignored by our creative endeavours would it not be appropriate for their collective will to be expressed through the democratic process, which presumably we all cherish and defend? Finally shouldn't our public institutions faithfully reflect this collective will?

My emphasis here is not on how the listeners may or may not respond to our work, but how we understand our responsibility towards them in a similar way that artists of the past have understood their responsibility towards their respective systems of patronage. At a socioeconomic level, the listener is music's present patron. Regardless of who pays for the commission, the work is still performed in a concert hall presumably for *listeners*. They are the centre of gravity of the communication process and we can ignore them to our peril. But at a deeper and more meaningful level—the spiritual one—touching the lives of other human beings through music must be one of the most precious gifts in life, one that no career or any other considerations could possibly match. Experiencing this constantly is not only liberating to one's creativity: it reaffirms the reason why music exists, why composers still write it and performers perform it. It also reduces the previous conversation about politics and the survival of contemporary classical music to meaningless clutter. How could music that plays such an important role in our collective transformation as a species fall by the wayside? This is probably the same question that colleagues who do not agree with a single thing of what I say here often ask themselves. Our point of disagreement is on who decides what kind of music fulfills this role. If we feel that we can both ask this question and answer it ourselves, then our circle of

awareness does not include in it anyone but ourselves, and herein lies the problem of contemporary music today.

Imagining the centre of gravity of the creative process to reside with the 'other', the listener in our case, is far from compromising to our creativity; it is in fact a liberating experience. It is a means of spiritually connecting the part to the whole. Mind you, this condition of liberation will not be fulfilled unless we view the 'other' as an integral part of ourselves. It is only then that we do not compromise anything within ourselves in our resolve to serve others. So, when colleagues complain that a composer compromises his/her creativity when (s)he composes to other people's specifications, they are not entirely wrong. In a fragmented universe where there is little connection between the 'I' and the 'other', writing to the demands of the 'other' is tantamount to pandering or 'hacking'. There is a great deal of this already in classical contemporary music and this 'new populism' is providing hard-core elitists with further ammunition for their theory that high art and the masses should perpetually remain separated on the pretext that this 'new populism' can only destroy high art. I would agree with this argument inasmuch as 'new populism' divorced from its spiritual undercurrent is in fact a musical perversion and, as such, it may not be that different from commercial products by the music industry that are presently contaminating our acoustic ecology. To dismiss, however, every attempt to reach an audience as a perversion, regardless of context, would in itself be a perversion of elitism. It would not serve to guard 'high art' but to mask isolationist attitudes.

So why are the prospects of classical contemporary music so bleak? They are not. There is a great future in art music, but a serious conceptual realignment is required. Similarly, there is a great future for our species but a serious conceptual realignment is required there as well, if we are to survive some imminent deadlines that scientists and mystics alike are increasingly warning us about. There is no doubt in my mind that we require a paradigm shift, which may happen before or after disaster strikes.

## **My approach**

The issues discussed here have been in the driver's seat of my own personal transformation as an artist and human being. I was not always a person of spiritual conviction and faith. It is something that I evolved towards by constantly trying to understand the instinctive choices (sometimes 'weird' ones) that I make during the process of composing and living. As a creative individual, I trust my instinct enough not to question the nature of my choices during the artistic decision making process, no matter how much my critical faculty sometimes revolts against such decisions, but only afterwards, when a conscious attempt is made to understand with my mind what has just taken place intuitively. So the critical understanding of my own artistic behaviour is always an 'after the fact' phenomenon, if such understanding ever forms at all. With such a strategy for creating and relating to the world at large, it is hardly surprising that there would be a backlash against my work from music critics and others with a critical/analytical approach to music. It is not that my music is immune to such an approach or that it cannot yield worthwhile results through such scrutiny, but such approach would only scrutinize external (algorithmic) aspects of the work and would not be able to penetrate the essence of the forces that give rise to it.

I believe that that critical/analytical faculty in a listener acts as a filter that limits the understanding of the deeper forces at work in compositions like mine and by other composers that I admire and relate to, and this is probably why ordinary listeners connect with this music more so than music critics or even colleagues within the new music community. Of course another explanation for this phenomenon may be that our music is naïve and therefore on a par with the perceptual apparatus of ordinary listeners as opposed to the highly developed ones of my more enlightened colleagues and music critics. Whatever the answer is to this question—and it will be different depending on who you ask—the important fact is that my communication with the listeners is increasingly unmediated by experts: it is direct, personal and mystical, in the sense that it does not need to be intellectually understood to be potent. No amount of negative criticism seems strong enough to affect this process of endearment. Personally, I don't think my music is naïve or pandering to anyone's undeveloped tastes. But it is first and

foremost the fruit of my love for my fellow human beings, however imperfect that love may express itself at times. I think that in the end this love has a way of conveying itself through this communication process to the listener.

What I understand as musical communication is an infinitely more complex process than the one music theorists (*some* music theorists) propose, that is the conveyance of structure through the aural understanding of motivic-thematic-harmonic development, and/or the linear development/juxtaposition of musical material in general. All of the above of course are tools for the conveyance of musical information and are food for the mind, but not nearly enough food for the soul of a listener. At its greatest moments, music conveys the entire DNA of one's psyche and it is at this level of decoding that the absorption of music by a listener can become a catalytic experience to one's own mental and psychic development. The more you think you know about music (I am speaking here of what is generally understood as 'academic' knowledge), the less equipped you are to deeply and powerfully connect with it. This is also true with our knowledge of God. God reveals himself to humans who live in humility with an awareness of their own impotence. This awareness transforms them into powerful receptors, for their humbled ego does not stand in the way of such a profound process. It is the same thing with composition. I confess my unworthiness to my God and to my fellow human beings and allow myself to become a conduit in a process in which I could not possibly claim authorship. The rest is in God's hands and I would have it no other way.