

Christos Hatzis

“The Crucible of Contemporary Music: Community Building Through Art Music”¹

Composer Christos Hatzis’ commitment to social change through music has been long-standing. Earlier works (and writings about these works) approach musical structure as a metaphor for social and psychological processes that can be understood instinctively by listeners with no particular musical training or other educational prerequisites. His recent work aims to take art music out of its traditional habitat of social, economic and educational privilege and actively engage the underprivileged members of our society. In the process, classical music taboos are discarded, perceptions of social legitimacy are reevaluated and borders are crossed. Hatzis’ musical activism stems from his own religious faith and his view of the artist’s social role as an imperfect “imitator of Christ”.

Composition as an exercise in self-involvement

My foray in the art of composition started as a rather egocentric activity and has remained so for most of the time I pursued a career in music. To some degree this comes with the territory. Artistic creation is like “playing God”: creating something presumably out of nothing, losing yourself in the creative process; pushing against an unidentifiable inertia that would have the world remain as it is, with only a sense of instinctive and primitive satisfaction prodding you along this invisible and essentially reasonless path. During these wonderful and dreadful moments of creating you have no company: there is no sharing, and no one else walking along this mentally arduous path with you. Even though you are not conscious of your ego or anything else for that matter during the short bursts of pure creativity, the subsequent conclusion that you have been able to create something out of nothing on your own seems to be a natural after-effect of this process and it is the ultimate ego booster. It is very difficult for an artist to not be privately or even publicly self-congratulating after such an accomplishment. Later, at the marketing stage when you

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feel compelled to promote your accomplishment with others, you sense the need to stretch the heroic and promethean aspect of creativity and establish converts to your art through this process of self-exultation.

Notwithstanding the more mundane description of creativity as “1% inspiration and 99% perspiration”, creativity can only be understood in terms of poetic language and hyperbole. But, even though the loftiest of human intentions and feelings are associated with creativity and we are accorded through it a mystical union with all of humanity, it is first and foremost the product of an overgrown ego. If history teaches us anything, it teaches us that what we call “creative genius” is often a case of extreme self-involvement mixed with worldly ambition but channeled in a way that it may also be of benefit or pleasure to others. Just because the products of a creator may benefit others, or create the appearance of benefit thereof, it does not necessarily mean that their cause is altruistic.

How can the fruit of self-involvement turn out to be of benefit to a community is something which I cannot quite understand ethically or philosophically but there may be a theological explanation for this phenomenon captured in Christ’s parable of the Prodigal Son. The further away from our spiritual source we stand, the stronger the longing for our return home is². If this longing is shared by others who also stand at a similar distance from home, then the creative expressions of this longing can resonate with the minds and hearts of all these other people. Music³ then is a resonance that helps confirm something that is already at work within the listeners. If these listeners also happen to be less self-involved than the originator of the communication signals (the composer), then they may in fact be capable of having a more profound experience through this music than even its own creator. I don’t know if other composers experience

² Normally, the opposite seems to be true. The more a soul strays away from the Divine, the more it appears to be enmeshed in earthly matter and lose its knowledge and understanding of the Divine and of its own power. But this is more likely to happen when the process of the spiritual fall is still in progress, when a soul is entangled in the pleasure of self-involvement, oblivious to the cause-and-effect relationship between self-involvement and personal decline. After the fall, a soul may still stay hopelessly disconnected from its own origin (my own understanding of the concept of “hell”) or alternatively it may recognize the self-inflicted injury that led it to its decline and declare, like the Prodigal Son, “in my father’s house even the slaves are treated better than I am treated here”.

³ Even though, on account of being a music practitioner, I speak specifically about music, my comments for the most part would apply equally to other arts and creative endeavours in general.

this, but quite often, during and after performances of my works, I feel envy for the listeners who connect to my music in deeper and stronger terms than I can. It is typical of a creator's self-involvement that, instead of feeling grateful for this, I feel instead a sense of having been passed over or left out or somehow cheated out of something important, even though the cheater is none other than I. It feels as if this is a self-inflicted punishment to those who do not prove worthy of the gifts they are given; whose life falls short of the degree of spiritual access or knowledge they have been granted.

This feeling of having been found wanting can agitate the creator's ego in two diametrically opposite ways: (1) it can shut you off, if your ego is offended, and sever the delicate connection between the creator and the source of his⁴ creativity, leaving the human creator in temporary or perpetual denial or (2) it can motivate you to improve yourself in the hope of raising your personal worth to the level of your creative access and ultimately raise both even higher. Evidence of (1) is widespread, particularly in commercial music where pop music idols literally worshiped by thousands or millions of fans become emotionally and psychologically unstable for they cannot internally reconcile the level of external adoration and accompanying public expectation with their understanding of their own self-worth. The Michael Jacksons and Britney Spears of the entertainment world are such examples but there are countless others that do not impress upon collective memory as indelibly. But in all creative endeavours, not just the commercial ones, pairing creative access with low self-esteem can have a spiritually and psychologically devastating effect on creative individuals by inviting comparisons between themselves and other practitioners in their field. In classical contemporary music, my field of endeavour, this obsession with comparing our creative and political access to that of others has become so pronounced that it is turning itself into a self-purpose for young and old practitioners alike. It is giving the entire creative community a self-centered dynamic while it enables an outside view of the community as a power contest which on the whole is becoming increasingly alienated from its greater constituency of listeners and the public at large.

⁴ When gender specifics cannot be avoided in the text, the words "he", "his", "him" should be understood to imply both genders.

The alienation

The causes of the alienation that classical contemporary music is experiencing in connection with a critical mass of listeners who have always been associated with classical music up until roughly the middle of the 20th Century are many and some of them have been discussed in my previous writings⁵. I would like to focus here on causes that are relevant to the discussion at hand. To do so, I need to reintroduce the concept of the *Renaissance Paradigm*, a musical paradigm the beginning of which dates back to the advent of polyphony in the 12th Century while the end can be loosely tied to the New York School of the 50s⁶. During the course of the music history which I understand as the Renaissance Paradigm, composition has been propelled by an overriding sense of forward momentum, progress, and a generally held belief that greater and better things lie ahead. A composer in the classical era of western music was not as intimidated by the monumental compositional accomplishments of J.S. Bach as some composers are today although soon after Ludwig Van Beethoven we begin to see great composers living under the shadow of past giants, like with Johannes Brahms, for example, who felt that as a composer he had to both acknowledge and exit the shadow of Beethoven. That being so, the idea that greater and better things lie still in the future was the predominant social ideology in other fields of endeavour like technology and science and this general optimism affected the arts as well, although looking over one's historical shoulder, in itself a sign of personal and creative insecurity, became more widespread from the 19th Century onward. Admittedly, the Renaissance Paradigm in music must have peaked in the towering figure of Beethoven. Since then, great composers who have been conscious of their own place in history must have inevitably been drawn to comparisons with this musical giant and have felt that they were found wanting in the process.

⁵ All of Christos Hatzis' writings are available at www.hatzis.com (click on "Writings" on the left-hand-side menu).

⁶ John Cage, Earl Brown, Morton Feldman and Christian Wolf. Polyphony is seen here as a musical precursor of the Renaissance Spirit which found its full expression in the Enlightenment Project of the 17th Century and reached its final dissolution in the aleatory and total serialism of the 1950s.

I am certain that this Freudian connection with a predominant ‘father’ figure, this simultaneous desire for adoration and “patricide”, is a widely experienced condition among music creators. The peak may vary, depending on who you ask, but the point is that after a great historical peak or a series of such peaks, music has become increasingly preoccupied with ancestry and historical dependence and less with community and the ‘here and now’. Even in the 20th Century, when this emotional/psychological “patricide” became imperative for music to move forward by expressing itself as the modernist denial of the past, the preoccupation with the past grew exponentially to the point of obsession. While rejecting the past, modernist art saw itself as its legitimate heir. Arnold Schoenberg has talked about his decision to adopt atonality in his compositions as his response to the “call of history”. Modernism’s “here and now” was still calculated and argued as the next legitimate link in a long family tree; its sense of legitimacy was attributed to its roots in the past and not to the contemporary political support from the larger community of intellectuals that favoured it in its heyday.

By the middle of the 20th Century, while the rest of the world was becoming comfortable with the postmodern definition of the middle class as a self evident social and cultural goal, contemporary music was becoming increasingly introverted and preoccupied with its own aristocratic lineage. What set it apart from the parallel musical universes that were thriving at the same time, like jazz music earlier and pop music from the 1950s onwards, was this aristocratic lineage which it flaunted to maintain its privileged status. At a time when in society aristocratic title preserved itself by appealing to the tourist industry of the middle class, classical contemporary music snubbed the middle class and its cultural products as unworthy and transient. By the early 21st Century the middle class, secure in its own sense of social legitimacy, is now paying back this arrogance in spades. I believe that this is partly what lies behind the almost punitive attitudes that right-wing demagogues are sensing and exploiting within the electorate at large. This is what empowers their public anti-art stances and utterances even during election campaigns, when politicians are normally weary of antagonizing any particular group of voters including artists.

The Educational Divide

If ancestor worship, and accompanying disregard for contemporary listeners, was the principal cause of this alienation of composers in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the erosion of musical education at the lower educational levels was an equally potent one. Up until the dissemination of sound recordings, musical entertainment depended on the ability of a critical number of people to read and play music. Reading and playing music at an amateur level was regarded as a significant social asset among the middle and upper classes. With the advent of the sound recording the need for music to be heard through live performance waned and in our days, with the near disappearance of music programs in the primary and secondary levels of education, the ability to read music at an amateur level is all but extinct. Universities still teach music literacy to the few students who have had prior private training or were fortunate to attend one of the few remaining elementary and high schools that continue to have music programs but, with its roots severed, it is a matter of time before this educational system will have to completely rethink itself in non-historical terms, perhaps for the first time in a millennium.

The fact that musical literacy is now completely in the hands of institutions of higher learning the larger of which, compared to their smaller or non academic siblings, suffer from considerable cultural inertia, contributes greatly to this isolation. Although with decreasing enthusiasm, today's universities still champion the institution of tenure. There is a lot to be said in defence of this institution⁷ but Darwinian adaptability is not one of these things. Universities change slowly and are less adaptable to the need for a switch from teacher-centered to student-centered focus in education. This shift is now happening rather rapidly in a number of institutions, as universities react to a radical paradigm shift in society at large but in university culture this shift was long in coming. As a result, a great number of educators in elementary and secondary education have been provided in their training with a toolkit of skills that is not perhaps the most appropriate for the cultural realities that they, as young teachers, encounter in their classrooms. Young teachers must either adapt to the musical reality of their workplace by retooling quickly

⁷ Such as the freedom of speech and independent thinking that tenure engenders, which are realistically limited or non existent in employment situations where this institution is absent.

on the job or attempt to perpetuate a culture that is dictated from the top down or, rather, from the past to the present.

In today's society, musical literacy, meaning the ability to read and write music, is not viewed to be as crucial a skill as language literacy. While the ability to read and write in ordinary language opens a large window of social and intellectual opportunity, the ability to read and write music opens a comparatively smaller window of intellectual opportunity only. One of the reasons is that most music traditions have been and continue to be aural, transmitted from generation to generation by rote, relying more on memory, natural intelligence and a 'good ear' as opposed to musical literacy in the Western European sense of the word⁸. With the advent and proliferation of the audio recording and the musical equivalent of O.C.R. computer programs, a talented "illiterate" musician may still be able to communicate with musically "literate" ones either via technology alone or via "literate" intermediaries (orchestrators, copyists, etc.). While musical literacy is very important in the workplace, a large number of talented individuals have had significant careers in music without the skill of reading and writing music⁹.

Musical literacy of course is not only about reading and writing, nor is the knowledge of reading and writing music the only, or even the most significant, impediment in the communication between the musical/educational elite residing within the ivory tower walls of the university system (or the group of professional practitioners that is constantly being produced and proliferated by such a system) and the youth culture at the ground level of elementary and post-secondary education (or what is colloquially understood in today's culture as "the street"). The most significant impediment in the communication between top and bottom is the difference in their understanding of the "here and now". The bottom of this pyramid thinks of "here and now" as a series of semi-random,

⁸ This is probably why World Music, a relatively recent immigrant to North American communities, has quickly interfaced with popular culture while Western European colonial music is having a more difficult time making similar inroads.

⁹ Still, there is a professional stigma associated with musical illiteracy. In the world of commercial film music, for example, composers who cannot write or read music are often referred to as "hummers", a derogatory expression. In the actual project hierarchy, however, it is often the "hummers" who hold the important project positions, while the educated musicians play support roles such as copyists, orchestrations, etc. with significantly lower remuneration.

postmodern “epiphanies” and the ripple effect they have for a while before another pebble is thrown at a different part of the existential pond creating competing and fresher ripple effects. Since the process is perceived as being random in the first place, there is no urgent need to rationalize it or recognize it in the context of past practice. By contrast, the top of the pyramid thinks of this “here and now” as the next logical (modernist) link in a long historical cause-and-effect chain of cultural revolutions, ours being the latest. Accordingly, defining our present moment very much depends on understanding the past causal links that led us to this moment. This is probably how a graduate music composition student, if asked, would explain the “here and now” or their musical world. The idea that this student’s philosophical “here and now” would be in any way tied to a very large community of listeners would be as foreign to him as the idea that this same “here and now” is tied to a princely succession of intellectual giants from the past would be to an illiterate musical practitioner on the street.

Elitism and society

At first sight, there may be nothing wrong with this pyramid structure. Even though I described the discrepancy between top and bottom as the difference between modernism and post-modernism, one could argue that all educational/cultural pyramids of the past had a similar structure. Arguably, historical consciousness as well as skill in the fine arts has always been strong at the top and relatively weak at the bottom of the social ladder. The people who have recorded the past for us and have created the works of art that define our understanding of civilization have always been commissioned to do so by the people in power, so history may be tainted by the fact that its recording and the value system applied upon it have always been in the custody of the power holders and expresses mostly their views, no matter how much revisionism you may apply to this process after the fact.

What is unique about our situation now, especially with music, is that in our days the patronage of music is not influenced by the tastes of the princes. The present day consumer and arbitrator of value is increasingly the person in the middle or bottom of the social pyramid. In fact the pyramid model itself is no longer a useful description of our

present situation. I am only using it because many classical music practitioners still think in terms of it and therein lie many the problems that classical music is facing today. If you think in terms of intellectual aristocracy and rights thereof, then democracy is a difficult system to come to terms with both conceptually and practically. To the defence of aristocratic thinking, however, I must point out that when you combine the basic postulates of democracy with the spectre of widespread illiteracy, the possibilities are frightening for everyone but the illiterate.

A democratic system cannot function if the majority of the citizens are illiterate to the point where (in the view of the literate) they are not exercising the judgement and responsibility which is and should be a pre-requisite for citizenship. In such an unwanted situation, democracy can turn into a tyranny of the majority and soon afterwards into a dictatorship since the majority of voters can become easy pray to the first demagogue who knows how to play up their fears and insecurities to his own advantage. So (the conspiracy theory goes) those who would want to undermine the democratic system would first attempt to undermine its educational system and create an illiterate majority that can be easily manipulated. There is plenty of evidence that this may be happening in democratic systems around the world—at least this is the view from the top of the intellectual pyramid. You scream “danger” but no one hears because there is a huge gap separating the world of intellectuals from the rest of the world. This sense of hopelessness is what permeates many practitioners and lovers of classical music nowadays as well as other sectors of the intellectual elite who are sensing that the institution of democracy and other cherished notions, such as justice, human rights and individual freedoms, gained by a great deal of human effort and blood over the centuries, may be going down on a path of no return.

Mixed with this, however, is a sense of intellectual privilege and the need to maintain it. Consumer music can sustain itself from the revenue created by reaching a critical mass of consumers. High art on the other hand requires institutional patronage. Since in today’s democratic societies neither priesthood nor princehood is potent enough to be the principal proprietor and patron of the arts, the government has grudgingly assumed this

role, more so in some countries than in others. The idea of government stewardship of the arts was born along with the idea of the welfare society. Both notions are now under severe scrutiny in the realm of public debate and things are not going very well for either recently.

Let us scrutinize a bit this notion of government stewardship of the arts. In theory, the government is expected to act as the custodian of the values that are important for society, and the arts have traditionally been considered to be such a value. But the government is also expected to faithfully represent the constituency which has put the government in a position of authority in the first place, i.e. the citizenry. If there is a discrepancy between the two, then the citizens should have the final word. To avoid the kind of adventurism with long term repercussions which is possible through this process, there is a constitution and a judiciary which cannot be swayed by sudden swings of public or governmental opinion and this is how the system remains in equilibrium over time and protects itself from sudden public mood changes. The problem for the arts is that they are not enshrined in the constitution in any specific way. Art's appraised value can therefore fluctuate from one generation to the next. Should a radical re-appraisal happen, the citizenry of an ideal democratic system can instruct the government to act according to its wishes that is the wishes of the majority. It is important therefore for anything of value to maintain a critical mass of support among the citizenry at all times. When that is not possible or feasible, and since theory and practice is not always the same thing in politics, it is often felt that support for an unpopular thing can be maintained by advocacy with elected representatives and lobbying with various levels of government. Of course "arm-twisting" elected representatives runs against the ethical grid of the democratic due process even if the purpose of the this arm-twisting may be a honourable one: the purpose does not justify the means. Even if effective in practice, this advocacy segregates on the long term the petitioner from the public.

A politician's decision-making always takes into consideration the fact that the majority of voters will likely be non-vocal, sedate and generally disinterested in most matters of government but the public, even when politically lethargic, cultivates resentment against

those who get away with things outside the due democratic process of public sanctioning. So when artists and arts organizations think that they are acting in the public interest by trying to preserve cultural heritage such as classical music through government advocacy without attaining a corresponding critical mass of public support in the process, the public increasingly views this as elitist politics that have nothing to do with its own welfare. Whatever short-term gains are made, the long-term result is increasing alienation of arts practitioners from society at large. This alienation is exacerbated by the fact that the commercial music industry, whose sole purpose is to make a profit for its shareholders, sees itself poised well to dispute the elitist definition of public stewardship of the arts and seeks to open the mandate wide so that it can take for itself a significant share of the spoils in the process. So we find ourselves in a kind of topsy-turvy situation where noble notions like inclusiveness are championed by the greed of the music industry forcing the arts community to assume a more reactionary role in the public debate of arts patronage.

The CBC Radio 2 debate in Canada

This ethical dilemma is one that has occupied extensively my waking hours this past year, specifically in connection with the programming changes on CBC Radio 2 which took effect at the beginning of the 2008-09 broadcast season. As an artist and citizen I have always been a public advocate of inclusiveness in the arts. My own work has been a constant effort for inclusiveness and understanding (more on this later). The CBC Radio 2 program changes essentially limit classical music to non peak hours of the day, while introducing a wider kaleidoscope of music from various genres during peak hours. The evening program called “The Signal” airs three hours a day, seven days a week, and focuses on newly created music of all persuasions. CBC describes its new philosophy as “gender blending”, an idea to which I am partial in both theory and practice. With these changes, gone are the peak-hour classical music programs and the weekly program “Two New Hours” which had championed exclusively the music of Canadian and international contemporary classical composers, including my own, for about three decades. “The Signal” incorporated a great deal of the repertory formerly showcased in “Two New Hours” although this repertory is now a smaller fish in a larger pond. Along with the

programming announcements, CBC Radio announced the termination of the CBC Radio Orchestra, the first orchestra to commission, perform and record on CD an orchestral work from me.

When Mark Steinmetz, the director of CBC Radio 2, asked me to officially endorse the programming changes at CBC Radio 2, I was confronted by a moral dilemma: on one hand here was an opportunity to see in practice a great many of the things that I wished all along for our national broadcaster: a transformation of itself to reflect the changing cultural character of the country which I have called home for over twenty five years. On the other hand, I was fearful that sudden change after decades of virtually no change at all would result in things becoming worse before they became better, but there was no doubt in my mind that changes were long overdue. This contraction of classical music content also meant that my status as an established Canadian composer, a status which I owed to a large extent to the old CBC Radio, would be constricted significantly, as would that of several other colleagues, both composers and performers who have dominated the public broadcaster's airwaves over the years. On the other hand it also meant that our constriction would open up opportunities for a large number of other musicians, who in the past did not have as ready access to the public airwaves, and that listeners who would normally not tune in to Radio 2 because they were not classical music fans might do so now.

In reaction to the announced changes, the music community engaged in organized protests against the changes and I was asked to take part in them for "the future of the arts in this country was at stake". Several conspiracy theories proliferated along with the organized opposition, including "a conspiracy by the government to destroy the fabric of public support for the CBC and thus be able to terminate CBC altogether without significant public outcry", or that "the changes are a form of caving in by the CBC administration to increasing pressure from the music industry and its own greedy interests". While I have no way of knowing if there is any basis to any of these accusations (given the current state of political life in North America they sound real

enough), I decided that I had to take first and foremost an *ethical* stance, no matter how conflicted I felt about my divided loyalties on this issue.

As an artist, I stood to lose by these changes. A lot of things I value in music and which were showcased as culturally important by CBC Radio 2 in the past would now be submerged into a relativistic “soup”, for neither artists nor listeners (nor broadcasters, for that matter) were given enough time to develop a system of new values according to which this new plethora of musical ideas and perspectives could be sorted, prioritized and presented as a possible new national identity. “Gender blending” needs to be part of a larger proposition and I was not sure that the new CBC had enough vision to rise to the infinitely more difficult task of this new cultural leadership which must go far beyond a simple presentation of “playlists” for the Canadian public. While it is true that the search for a new Canadian cultural identity must navigate through the crashing rocks of pluralism, non-relatedness, the illegitimate child of pluralism, is not in itself a form of identity that can describe a people or hold a country together. As the country continues to flirt with an identity crisis, I was wondering if the CBC was able to rise and meet the cultural demands of the present moment and/or be aware of the dangers that are implicit in not rising to meet those demands.

As a citizen and for quite some time, I was growing weary of the fact that, since my arrival in this country and because of the skills I acquired as a composer through my training in North American post-secondary institutions, I was being accorded privileged access to our national broadcaster that other musicians I knew and worked with did not have. I was grateful for this access of course and I worked hard to prove myself worthy of it, as many other classical music colleagues have too. Nonetheless, my ethical reasoning is that inclusiveness is the most central feature of a healthy democratic system and I could not see myself blocking this conversation/confrontation of views about culture proposed by the network simply because the newcomers might make my own intellectual and physical existence more uncomfortable. In a democratic system, but also in ethics and last but not least in Christianity, which is my own guiding light, community cannot be

defined as an exclusive group of like-minders, which is unfortunately what several Christian and other religious and ideological communities have devolved into.

Title, privilege, exclusivity are incomprehensible to me as a means of social advancement, hence my discomfort with the system that advanced my own music in the old CBC Radio 2, even though I am sure it was happening for the best of reasons. Now the earth has literally shifted under the art community's feet and our legitimation that was never previously questioned by us has evaporated, not to mention that it solicits a rather negative reaction from the public at large. Against this legitimation landslide, the classical music community argues for respect of title. An argument that you hear quite often and was included in a recent newsletter of the Canadian League of Composers is that classical music should be accorded a preferential treatment in the national broadcaster because pop music owes a great deal of debt to it: all compositional tools of pop music (melodic, harmonic construction, etc.) have been developed in the 'laboratory' of classical music. This attitude that we, as creative individuals, are owed due consideration by the public and we are not getting it is what has brought us to this unfortunate predicament in the first place. We argue against accusations of elitism by countering that an art practitioner's average income is hovering around the poverty line, yet we fail to see that in the public's eye, elitism is not an economic phenomenon but an intellectual one. Inequality in education breeds more public resentment than inequality in wealth.

Politicians who are perceived as elitists by the electorate may see their political fortunes run dry nowadays, while those with "home-spun" personas of "Joe Six-packs" or "hockey moms" can lavishly reward their rich supporters from the public coffers and still remain popular with the very public that will be ultimately paying for these gifts. Pop musicians are keenly aware of this too. Many cultivate user-friendly personas, meaning public projections of average or below average intelligence (depending on your target audience). These personas belie the intelligence of the actual individuals skilfully hiding behind these personas. The accompanying cynicism which is inevitable with such strategically calculated hypocrisy can only have a stifling effect on creativity and the pursuit of

ultimate Truth through it. Furthermore, the conclusion by such artists that “smart is not hip” may be a two-way street. Listeners in turn are caught in this same conundrum and act according to the messages they receive from the music industry, with everyone undervaluing their own ability in order to stay with the “in” crowd.

Returning to the CBC Radio 2 changes, I decided that, no matter what the potential perils, inclusiveness was what a public broadcaster should aim for, so I supported the announced changes. My statement “My CBC includes a world of music” in their national print campaign was intended to alert the public of the need of the national public broadcaster to be more reflective of the new Canadian identity spearheaded by the new immigrant communities and their offspring that are progressively dominating nowadays the urban fabric of this country.

Personal history

My struggle for cultural inclusiveness in the field of contemporary classical music began soon after I finished school in the United States and moved to Canada as an immigrant. The culture of my new country at that time was quite colonial, more so than our neighbour to the south. Contemporary classical music was getting most of its leads from the cultural centres of Europe and, while there was a great deal of talk about a distinct Canadian identity, I was not hearing this in the products of the contemporary music scene. Canadian composer R. Murray Shafer would bravely use his influence and public persona to warn against the Eurocentric character of the CBC and other musical institutions, but in the realm of actual music creation even Shafer’s music fell squarely within the sphere of the avant-garde, which, according to its apologists, was not to be tied down to regional identities but to preach the universal gospel of (Western European) modernism everywhere with equal dogmatic purity.

I will not present my own artistic development in detail here, for this has been dealt with in previous writings¹⁰, but will touch briefly on some central themes which will help elucidate the present stage of this development. The themes are:

1. inclusiveness,
2. structure as a metaphor for something universally shared by listeners of no particular musical background,
3. understanding of structure as a series of layers, the innermost of which are occupied by the composer while the outer ones are opened up to other, often competing viewpoints which allow the listener to enter and naturally deepen into the structure of the composition, and
4. determining musical value according a work's *usefulness* to the end user (as determined by the end user) and not by some other independent yardstick.

I have already spoken about my ethical reasons for inclusiveness. Add to these the fact that when I hear other people's musical expressions I think of them as different languages that I need to learn how to speak, however imperfectly, so that I may better communicate with these people. This interest does not only cover current languages but also historical ones, hence virtual conversations. But my wanting to understand how J. S. Bach thought compositionally, by meditating on his music in addition to collecting analytical insights from it, was first and foremost the result of my desire to have a musical conversation with those listeners and musicians who love Bach's music. This geographic/chronological love affair with eras and areas of human presence has resulted in virtual 'collaborations' with Medieval women composers (Cassia in the 9th Century¹¹ and Hildegard of Bingen in the 12th Century¹²), as well as actual collaborations with a Baroque orchestra (Tafelmusik)¹³,

¹⁰ Cf. "Music for God's Sake". Go to www.hatzis.com and click on Writings on the left-hand-side menu. In particular read the chapter "Musical Structure as Metaphor".

¹¹ *The Troparion of Kassiani* for soprano and SATB choir. Based on texts by Cassia (9th Century Constantinople), the first woman composer in history whose work survives today.

¹² *De Angelis* for mezzo-soprano, three altos, STAB choir and drones, based on music and texts by Hildegard of Bingen.

¹³ *From the Song of Songs*, a work for Arabic vocalist (alto), tenor, oud, Baroque orchestra and choir based on texts from Solomon's Song of Songs, exploring connections between Arabic, Hebrew and Baroque musics.

a World Music band¹⁴, and communities as far from one another as the Inuit¹⁵, the Armenian¹⁶, Ukrainian¹⁷ and Greek¹⁸ and children's choirs from various countries meeting and singing together (Songbridge 2003 and 2008)¹⁹. This involvement with distinct self-defined communities sowed the seeds for the current community development projects I am engaged with, which I will discuss further down.

With regards to (2), the understanding of musical structure as metaphor, which as previously mentioned has been discussed elsewhere (cf. footnote 10), I will only mention here the importance of this approach to musical communication with audiences in a context where no "common practice" is in evidence. The fact that a common musical language spoken and understood by both composers and listeners no longer exists, owed to the severe deterioration of music literacy among listeners and the uninhibited desire for wild exploration among composers, makes any kind of information-based communication very difficult and contributes, no doubt, to the sense of alienation and hopelessness which composers feel when contemplating on how best to communicate with their listeners.

Sound, however, and intelligent sound in particular can be understood by a wide margin of listeners as meaning something very specific. Psychoacoustic surveys of listeners, usually conducted by commercial interests, reveal unmistakably similar responses by untrained listeners to similar auditory stimuli. Such listeners understand sound as

¹⁴ *Mystical Visitations* for World Music vocals and instruments commissioned and written for Arabic vocalist Maryem Hassan Tollar.

¹⁵ Several works written to date which are inspired by Inuit throat songs: *String Quartet No. 1 (The Awakening)* for string quartet and audio playback, *Fertility Rites* for marimba and audio playback, *Hunter's Dream*, an one-minute audio miniature, *Arctic Dreams 1* for flute, vibraphone and audio playback and its sibling *LIGHT (Arctic Dreams 2)* for the same forces plus children's choir(s) and audience, and the radio documentary composition *Footprints in New Snow*.

¹⁶ *Light from the Cross*, a cantata based on hymns from the Holy Week, commissioned by the Eastern Prelacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church of North America in New York for soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian.

¹⁷ *Wormwood*, a cantata based on texts from the 9th chapter of the Book of Revelation and on texts by the composer. Commissioned by the Children of Chernobyl and the Gryphon Trio to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

¹⁸ Too many works to list individually. The most significant to date (which also involves the audience singing in Greek) is *Sepulcher of Life*, a choral symphony for soprano, Middle Eastern vocalist (alto), symphony orchestra and choir, commissioned by four Canadian philharmonic choirs.

¹⁹ *LIGHT (Arctic Dreams 2)*, *ibid.* and *WATER* for Irish folk instruments, children's choirs and audience. Commissioned respectively by the Toronto Children's Chorus and Shallaway.

metaphor, a specific sound bringing to mind specific qualities of “softness”, “danger”, “comfort” or “fear”. It is my contention that musical structure, not just individual sounds, can invoke similar responses from listeners, such as the drama of the passage from darkness to light, transcending fear, the feeling of fall and redemption or more complex “structures”, depending on the context and the ability of the composer to “algorithmically”²⁰ express these structures in sound. It may in fact be that recognition of such a structure in progress is what encourages most attention-deficient contemporary listeners to transcend their three-minute attention span and engage in the kind of storytelling that deep structure engenders, making musical narrative (and communication) possible in our days.

With regards to (3), understanding the relationship of musical structure and musical material as overlaying layers of a sphere with deep structure at the centre and musical material in the outer layers (cf., again, footnote 10), the only thing that I will mention here is that, by inviting performers and listeners to occupy the outer layers of this structure continuum either through improvisation or rich semiotic content while you as the creative proprietor firmly hold the structural centre, you help establish the kind of connections that encourage two-way communication with listeners. Due to this concession of terrain, listeners feel invited and engaged and don’t regard themselves as simply passive witnesses of a composer pontificating.

Finally, with regards to (4), *usefulness* as the ultimate value judgement, this is a contentious issue for which I am not expecting a consensus. Arguments about the arts as a self-defined value are as old as the world. To some people art is as self-evident as religion is to others. But in this battle for critical community support, nothing is self-evident until the citizenry at large says it is. This does not mean that an individual must ideologically and morally bow to group pressure or that the group is always right—quite

²⁰ I don’t mean here actual mathematical algorithms but the unconscious “capture” mechanism of ideas translated into music which lies at the very heart of the compositional process. A useful analogue can be found in the blockbuster film *The Matrix* and the proposition of its makers that every aspect of reality but also of seeing, thinking, feeling, behaving and understanding is but a computer program, complex enough to be totally invisible, unthinkable and unbelievable to the majority of the actors of this existential drama, who feel all along that they are experiencing reality as opposed to a *simulacrum*, until something earth shattering happens to help them exit their collective illusion.

the opposite in fact. But it means that, unless and until we can convince the citizenry that we are right, we have no moral grounds upon which to stand in order to solicit the support of the government or any publicly funded institution²¹. Standing up against society is often a necessary act and a heroic act at that. Our history as a species would have been less elevated, were it not for the courage and self-sacrifice of individuals who stood against the tide of public opinion and suffered for it but also changed the course of history by doing so. Standing up against society, however, is not always a heroic act; it may also be an act of extreme self-centredness, dog-headed defiance and arrogance, as countless beneficiaries of unwarranted privilege display at a time of historical and public reckoning. It is difficult sometimes to know which of the two describes you best when you are caught in a whirlwind of self-involvement and your judgement becomes clouded. Because of this self-involvement, you will always see yourself as a martyr to a cause, no matter how history sees you after the fact.

Music and Community

By *usefulness* in art, I mean recognizing the value that is ascribed to your music not by you but by others. Whoever these others may be, this is *your* community which you are called to serve. Large or small matters not, so long as you contribute selflessly.

Moreover, if this community you are called to serve is not the entire human family but some smaller aggregate, you need to make sure that it does not function in opposition or at the expense of the larger group or without *usefulness* beyond itself, as determined by that larger group, and so on.

Even though the principles that led me to my present conclusions and decisions have been a guiding light in my own composition for quite some time, for over twenty years in fact, it was not until recently that I came to realise that it is imperative to become personally active in community building as a composer and as an individual. By any

²¹ Decrying the CBC for example for allegedly going after ratings and not substance raises some interesting questions: (1) why are ratings and substance mutually exclusive terms in the minds of the self-appointed guardians of culture? And (2), if indeed they are, is it not so because we as cultural producers have failed to affect in a significant manner a critical mass of listeners? Can culture be publicly sustained (or should it) in the absence of numbers of support? Can this elitism be proven to be of any value to society at large (and to the *satisfaction* of this society at large) which is called upon to pay for it?

standard, it took me an inordinately long time to arrive at the present moment²². I have been speaking about spirituality, religion, involvement, social responsibility for years on end but personally I remained as self-centered and career-conscious as any individual who might be espousing diametrically opposite ideas than I. I still feel that I am too much of the latter, but I am hoping that through the application of these ideas into social action this diagnosis will change over time.

Several things have precipitated and acted as catalyst for this recent change of attitude. The most obvious is the crisis of value and social acceptability that the contemporary classical music community has suddenly been awakened to, although that too I had seen coming and predicted in my writings for quite some time. The most fundamental reason for this switch to community activism, however, is the fact that it is clear to me now that, unless I do so, I will not grow as an artist and as a human being beyond the level of growth that I have already attained. You grow by sharing; by not seeking the spotlight and trying to control the big picture but by silently and quietly changing some small corner of the universe and offering hope where none exists. The same selfishness that drives us as creative individuals to greater position and visibility is what, under a different application, is destroying the fabric of our society daily: it is not the character of the application only but the drive itself that is the problem. Unless we understand this, no matter how noble a banner we are waving, we are being part of the problem, not the solution.

It took me a while to realize that some of the projects that came my way in the past year or so had this one thing in common: in some way they were about community revitalization. I will mention here three such projects, one already completed at the point of writing this and two still pending.

²² In spite my earlier description of R. Murray Shafer's music as Eurocentric and not as uniquely indigenous as he claims, I feel nothing but admiration for his leadership in community building and engaging with audiences of all descriptions and backgrounds, particularly in rural communities in Ontario and the rest of Canada. He is one of very few contemporary music composers who understand the need to directly engage with one's environment.

1. *In the Fire of Conflict* for rap singer, cello, percussion, SurroundSound audio and dance. This was a commission by Toronto Summer Music, a prominent classical music festival headed by Agnes Grossman. The title of the composition was also the theme of the 2008 festival, quite appropriate, since my original intention was to focus on inner city conflict. After having an unusually difficult time wrapping my head around the subject and my musical approach to it, I decided that I needed assistance in the form of a collaborator who would be closer artistically and physically to the subject matter. I approached Steve Henry (aka Buggy H), a Detroit area rap artist whom I had met virtually through www.MySpace.com and invited him to this project. I knew next to nothing about Steve except the music that I heard on MySpace and his fervent missionary spirit but, as I realized later, I was guided to the right person for help. Steve, it turned out, was a former gang member who, after six years of incarceration, decided to exit the life of violence and form a mission which aims through rap music to draw young people away from gangs and gun violence and into a life of social responsibility, a dangerous undertaking at best which has so far met with limited success. Steve created the rap tracks and lyrics in this work. When it premiered in Toronto on August 6, 2008, it had a very powerful effect on the mixed but mostly conservative classical music audience. Since then a great deal of grassroots social-cultural activity has been taking place, mostly initiated by members of that August 6 audience who plan to use this work for various causes, particularly inner-city youth projects. You can listen to the second half of *In the Fire of Conflict* online at <http://www.reverbnation.com/christoshatzis>

2. A new work for the Pacifica String Quartet (www.pacificaquartet.com) and City Music Cleveland (<http://www.citymusiccleveland.org>) to be commenced upon in the spring of 09. The Pacifica String Quartet is a well known American string quartets touring constantly and building an international name as foremost interpreters of contemporary music. City Music Cleveland is a remarkable new chamber orchestra in Cleveland which is already making a difference in the community in the way it combines social causes with classical music. This is a no

nonsense organization that understands that classical music needs to shed this aura of elitism and social privilege and make a difference in sectors of society where even commercial music does not reach because there is no money to be made there. These bleak corners of the inner city, which no one finds it worth their while to engage with, is perhaps where classical music may redeem itself and regain a sense of pride and purpose. Suffice to say that I am fascinated by the way this organization combines a business “service provider – client” model with a social and a cultural cause and great music making, all at the same time and with uncompromising excellence.

3. *Pauline*, a new, full length chamber opera collaboration with Canada’s best known author, Margaret Atwood. Margaret’s novel ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ has already been set as opera by Danish composer Poul Ruders and has been recently performed in the USA, Canada and Europe, but this is the first time Atwood will be creating an original libretto for an opera. The story is about the last days of Pauline Johnson, a turn-of-the-century Canadian poet and stage personality, half white – half native, as she is dying of cancer in Vancouver haunted by the ghosts from her controversial past. Composition on this project is to commence in the summer of 2009, be composed mostly during a sabbatical leave from the University of Toronto from July 2009 to September 2010 and be presented some time in 2010 in Vancouver, BC. The presenter, City Opera Vancouver (<http://www.cityoperavancouver.com>), is a new organization dedicated to bringing opera to alternative audiences, the kind of audiences that would normally not step foot into an opera house. COV is currently engaging in two major projects: putting this opera together and building a permanent theater to house COV with *Pauline* presented at the official inauguration of the theatre. The theater is the historic Pantages Theatre in Vancouver, now a ruin, located in the most downtrodden area of Vancouver, perhaps of North America, the East Hastings and Main intersection, about which television journalist Dan Rather has recently done a documentary for HDNet. There are several cultural and other initiatives to turn the neighbourhood around without changing its demographic or pushing current

residents away from the neighbourhood. This neighbourhood being almost at the heart of the city hosting the 2010 Winter Olympic games, is a testing ground for the kind of social experiment in which previous Olympic hosts have failed—Dan Rather’s main point in his documentary. This is the aspect of the project which excites me the most. It is anticipated that, on the reputation of Margaret Atwood alone, the mounting of the opera will draw opera lovers from other parts of the city and the country but also crowds from the neighborhood, a significant percentage of who suffer from poverty, substance addiction and mental health problems. The rebuilding of the Pantages is also combined with the erection of a social housing apartment building adjacent to the theatre itself.

The cynical part of you may say that there may be other, less lofty reasons for this sudden attention to community engagement among classical music practitioners. Let me offer one possible scenario: As charitable foundations, which have been traditional supporters of the arts, are shifting their focus to the world’s rapidly increasing social and demographic problems and away from the arts, this source of funding might only be available if arts initiatives are perceived as an agent for social change and alleviation of conditions of illiteracy, repression and disadvantage within society. Governments too, might find it easier to justify to their citizenry their support of arts initiatives that are clearly aimed at improving the standard of living in the most disadvantaged quarters of society. So this switch of focus on the part of the arts may be nothing more than a survival mechanism, an effort to secure continuing access to art’s funding base. As the saying goes “where’s a way, there’s a will” and social activism may be nothing more than a strategy for the fiscal survival of the arts. After all, politicians and affluent members on the boards of charitable foundations may find it less disagreeable to be engaged with the world of classical music concerts, post-concert receptions, fundraisers, etc., as opposed to ghettos, soup kitchens, and half-way houses.

All this is true, of course, and people in charge of the balance sheet in arts organizations, who find themselves increasingly caught between the rock and the hard place, are beginning to recognize the opportunities that become available with this approach. But

there may be another, more positive way of looking at this phenomenon. That at moments of crisis, when options are dramatically reduced, the road with the light at the end of the tunnel is the road of salvation, the one we would normally not choose in situations of comfort and self-complacency; that perhaps the crisis itself is a gift from God to point us to the right course of action.

As the American seer Edgar Cayce, one of my spiritual mentors, said repeatedly, knowledge not lived or put to active use is sin and can become self-destructive. This can apply to science, to the arts or to any effort to accumulate knowledge of any kind without a corresponding sense of spiritual understanding and responsibility which can in turn help this knowledge be put to the selfless service of humanity. Classical music and some of its contemporary offshoots are propositions encoded in sound for solving important puzzles about our species. All this life-enriching content, however, has been stored inside small social “capsules” of educational and cultural privilege and for a variety of reasons, or perceptions thereof, it is seen as unavailable to society at large. This perceived inbreeding makes classical music not only socially ineffective but *poisonous*. Popular culture is quick to respond to these subtle associations made by and for the general public. Classical music is heard on television or in the movies as the music of the upper social classes: the background soundtrack to luxury car advertisements, expensive restaurants, pompous high class gatherings, etc. In reality, a lot of this music is life-saving medicine that many people need but think they can’t afford and therefore wish no one else should have access to it, for it makes their sense of abandonment by the powers that be even more acute. The widespread hopelessness in the lower strata of our society, agitated and channelled no doubt by politics of greed, sees these capsules of educational and cultural privilege as something everyone would be better off without, thus mobilizing against the very thing that may hold the answers to our future: our species’ intellectual and spiritual legacy, which has been distilled over millennia and preserved as an elixir for times of trouble.

Classical music practitioners on the other hand, many of who might agree with the previous paragraph as a description of the situation that we all find ourselves in currently, feel baffled as to why this important depository of knowledge which they represent can

be devalued so quickly and so severely in public and government perception and be brought to the precipice of near extinction. It is a small step from here to the dangerous conclusion that therefore the public at large and its elected government must be the enemy and they are best ignored while the classical music practitioners continue to serve the constituency that still appreciates them—the educational and cultural elite. This is how this “capsule” I spoke of earlier gets built and solidified from the inside and is then confirmed as a fact from the outside with all the disastrous repercussions thereof.

Putting self aside

Beyond ploys and survival strategies, I hope that social activism through music and personal engagement, whatever the reasons that push us into action in the first place, becomes a catalyst for positive inner change. I hope that, while the purpose does not sanctify the means, the means may rectify or help redefine the purpose. Action and interaction lead to more profound awareness than the detached pursuit of knowledge. There are so many things in our world today that require immediate action to avert a crisis of monumental proportions. Ethical, environmental, societal, economic and demographic imbalances are all at the tipping point, the point of no return. This is no time for complacency and irresponsibility. It is also no time to think first and foremost about our individual interests or the interests of our small group of like-minders even though fear of the larger picture and its chaotic behaviour may propel our animal survival mechanisms to contract towards our own centre. It is imperative that this centre, the self, must be discarded and sacrificed to the altar of the whole if we are to survive as a species. We cannot stand alone or in small groups against the avalanche of change that is coming our way. We can only face this avalanche as a unified whole.

When our options become this clear, it does not mean that we will all necessarily choose to do the right thing, hence the collective pessimism of our generation about the future. But for a committed Christian like me, this desperate situation brings spiritual reassurance, for the only empirical conclusions as to the only available course of action one may draw from this situation are increasingly in accord with the postulates of Christ’s admonitions: “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and

take up his cross and follow Me”²³ and “those who want to save their lives will lose them. But those who lose their lives for me will find them”²⁴. This is not an invitation to blind obedience or to a cult, as might be implied by the “Me” in these quotes, but an invitation to experience the liberating power that self-denial and self-sacrifice engenders. The “Me” in these quotes refers to the central protagonist of the cosmic drama that is still playing out in our days; the leader who lays his own self aside and offers himself as sacrifice for the spiritual awakening of others. It does not refer to an exploiter recruiting followers for self-centered purposes as many cult leaders do.

These two commands are the blueprint for activism of Christ’s followers, supplemented by other unambiguous ones like “turn the other cheek” (not brandish the other gun) and “love your neighbour as yourself” (not demonize the heterodox, as it happens often in the so-called “Christian” fundamentalist right-wing politics). In our wired world of today, the “neighbour”, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, can be anyone, close or far, similar to us or diametrically different. You can engage at a physical distance or proximity.

Through my work with Steve Henry, I have found a soul-mate in the most unlikely corner of the universe and our lives have been affected indelibly by this encounter, even though we have not yet met in person. When you lay your self aside, even a little bit, your vision becomes less cluttered; you recognize in others the spark of God and resonate with them through it; you begin to be drawn to their world as they to yours. Music can be this resonance, this glue that holds us all together. When you move out of the spotlight, you are seen less but you can see more. The relationships you develop with others are more give-and-take and you grow more as a result of giving. You develop with your listeners a one-to-one conversation, not a centripetal relationship between a circumference and you at the centre of the universe.

Community activism to me means laying the self aside. The minute you do this to however small degree, the community and its needs become visible to you and you are drawn into action. This is what “denying one’s self and carrying one’s cross” means. This

²³ Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23.

²⁴ Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35.

is what the “imitation of Christ” is, which every human being is called upon to assume as a pattern in their lives, regardless of their religious or ideological persuasion. This imitation of the Christ pattern has nothing to do with creedal particulars or modes of belief: it is a universal pattern of becoming one with the whole by laying the particular aside, pointing to the next stage of our species’ evolution. Whoever assumes it in its entirety becomes the pattern or graduates to the next level of this evolution. It is in such cosmic terms that this pattern is to be understood and engaged.

So the crucible in which classical and contemporary music find themselves presently is certainly a painful place but it is also a necessary place, for therein everything is being melted into a new indivisible identity. This new identity will be the new culture of the future, if there is a species still existing to perpetuate it. In spite of the doomsday prognostications of the present, I believe that we and our culture will emerge from this crucible quite different from the way we entered it, but whole and unified, to a degree that we will see ourselves as a new race of humans significantly different from the current one. That this should happen in a relatively short period of time, as evolution sees time, is not surprising, given the kind of crucible we are now entering and its power to mould and transform thereof. This historical purgatory is the gateway to the New Age, as it has been predicted time and again. But we will not enter it unless we are holding someone’s hand and carry them with us through this crucible. This is what serving a community, stepping away from the spotlight, and loving others as ourselves means.

As for myself, I hope that I may find the courage to give up all the petty and insignificant things that in the past I have thought of as important in my life and career and which have been a cause for blockage as opposed to connection with my fellow human beings. I hope to be able to literally lose myself in a life of service divorced from self-interest and ego. It is easier said than done, but I am already noticing that my students have become much more precious to me than I had ever thought possible and I feel increasingly blessed for the people who cross my path, both friends and foes, for both in their own way are helping me understand who I am and who I ought to be. The kind of music I compose and its ideological defense is increasingly of less interest to me: if this music is the result of

the need to connect with others and learn from them, then it has a purpose and that is all that matters.

I will end this discussion with this encouragement for taking the long view in trying to understand the changes that are happening to us and around us and, although presently painful, see them as heralds of great and beautiful things to come. I truly believe that the future is bright, even though we may need to walk “through the valley of death” before we get there.