



Composition today -The Song or the Technology?

I have composed music for over 40 years. In the last ten years I have built a small home studio and experienced the joy of computer based composition. During my struggles to learn I have dealt with some questions I would like to share with you. I intend to explore the tension and demands that come upon a composer as he decides what to write and how to write it. Let's begin with a question that affects us all.

Are we composing music for the sake of the music or are we writing because of the demands of the technology? Obviously the answer is both. However the trend seems to have shifted from the composer with his guitar or piano to the composer with a computer, mixing board, modules, software etc. In other words technology is increasingly involved in the process of composition. In the days of baroque or early classical music a major new instrument learning curve didn't arrive every few months let alone every few years. It was a major leap to go from the harpsichord to the early piano. As an electronic musician I accept that there is of necessity a requirement to learn and use the technology. It's just that the technology is advancing at an exponential rate and coming from so many different innovators and vendors that one can feel left behind.

Do we get swept up in the innovations and find we no longer have time to listen for the song? It has always been important for a composer to have space to

listen. Think of Chopin moving to the island of Majorca for instance. As the waves crashed outside the monastery, no phones rang, and no emails arrived he began writing some of his greatest compositions. As a Jazz musician, I can remember artists like Sonny Rollins ceasing to play publicly in order to spend time under the bridge or out in the woodshed practicing, listening until that new sound came flowing through his fingers. *Composition is both practical and mystical.* You must develop skills to operate the technology whether it is an acoustic guitar or a complicated sequencing program. One must also allow room for the imagination to soar. Imagination allows the composer to see like an eagle from another perspective. As most of us know, too many manuals can lead us to headache rather than to create.

I know of two primary approaches to composition. One is that the composer *hears the music before he writes it.* We marvel at Beethoven's 9th being written when he was deaf. His inner ear was so finely tuned that it was not dependent on his outer ear. He had mastered the technology of his day and could sequence the music in his head and write it down with his hand. He was using the simplest and yet most complex computer the human brain. He was dealing with the same problems that face the composer today but his dependence was totally upon his inner ear. I have awakened in the middle of the night having heard a song and gone to the keyboard and written it on the spot. I have had songs come in dreams or as I'm driving a car. In these cases I needed to get the song recorded so that I could remember it. At one point I would record it onto a cassette. Now I can sequence it into my computer and have a full band playing it within a few hours.

The second method of composition is to *not hear or know what you are going to write ahead of time* but to sit down with the available technology, whether it be an acoustic guitar, a piano or a sophisticated sequencer, and experiment until the music comes. I can envision Bach sitting at the organ composing lines to his latest fugue until they fit. He is married with a large family and creating music weekly for Church and Secular playing. His goal is to master and use the technology in so much as it helps the music to be heard and delivered on time. Like Bach I have sat at the piano and started playing until a sequence of chords came that I liked. I once wrote a sixty-minute score called the *Princess Caliatra Suite*. I composed the theme for that as I was waiting for my wife to go to breakfast. I sat at my keyboard playing and the theme arrived. I quickly saved it and came back later and finished it. The piano and the method of composition were both familiar to me which made it easy for me to concentrate on the song.

While we are constantly trying to keep up with the technology is it easy to lose the ability to hear the song? We are not coming back to the old familiar piano or harpsichord every year. We are coming to a studio with racks of modules, a computer with complex programs with hundreds of plug ins and we are being challenged to study constantly to keep up with thousands of peers throughout the world who are doing the same. The instrument maker or supplier doesn't have a shop in a distant city we visit every few years, as did Chopin. The instrument makers are available on the Internet and their keyboard, modules, hardware or software are available for

immediate download or to be delivered shortly. In this scenario we look at our familiar set up and ask,

"Is my equipment outmoded, do I need to update, does this fit my needs, how much can I afford to spend?"

How do we know when to stop? When is enough technology enough? Does it become like the movie *The Matrix* when the machines begin determining what the people do. Will there be a time when only those with enough tech savvy will be the composers of our day? The challenge with the computer based method of composition is to know when to say enough. I like it like that. Time to stop

So where is the balance? I believe Simplicity is the key. Know what you are trying to do. There are more possibilities than anyone person can handle technologically. Take time and find the space to hear. Seek the way of writing and mixing that works for you. Don't try to do everything everybody else is doing. Not only listen to others but also listen to the silence.

The question is, am I producing the music I hear in my heart? Do I have a way through the technology to reach the music I want to create? A few years ago my hard disk software triple dat was getting behind the technology. Creamware, the company that made it basically stopped improving it in any real way. I went to my local supplier and said what shall I do? I don't want my dsp effects to drag on my computer processor. They sold me Pulsar the next step of Creamware's technology. When I got home and tried to operate the installed technology I almost lost my mind. This led me into a world of software ins and outs that I was not anticipating. I spent months trying to make the adjustment and I suppose learned some valuable lessons. But I cannot say that my composition has improved because of it. It actually took me some time to get back to just writing music. Again I came back to examine what simply works best for me. What will help me achieve the goal of making beautiful music? Should I somehow purchase the latest innovation and hope I can fit it into what I am doing or should I revamp my system on the basis of what aids composition and what does not?

I came to this bottom line. It is not the quantity of hardware and software that I own that makes me of value as a composer. It is what I hear in my heart and in my inner ear. That is the first priority. What you and I have to give to the world is what is uniquely within each of us. What you deeply hear will sound a little different than what I hear. But if you take the time to learn your song you will know what you need to do to make me hear it. The technology will be in submission to your song and a tool in your hands. Keep composing.

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