

FARLS Lecture on Composing and Composition by Paul Suchan

Presented at the University of Saskatchewan Spring 2017

Introduction:

Good afternoon, my name is Paul Suchan, I am a former student here at the U of S. I graduated from the B.Mus/Mus. Ed program in 2007 and have been living in Montreal since 2009. I would like to thank Dr. Marion for inviting me to come share some thoughts on composers and composition with you here today.

The subjectivity of composers:

But before I start, a small warning: Having a composer discuss *their* concept of composition is a dangerous request, as a composer will unwillingly and unknowingly propose a theory of composition that defends *their* work. After all, every true composition is a involuntary memoir, betraying a composer's story; where and when they lived, what school of thought they follow, and what assumptions they hold, all told through the patterns of their music.

No wonder then that composers are naturally zealous defenders of their work. They are not defending their compositions per se, but rather a catalogue of their choices and ideas, choices and ideas that anyone with access to a score can flip through and judge at their leisure.

No doubt, performers, theorists, and musicologists all have risk involved in the choices they make, in the ideas and interpretations that they must put forward and defend, but some of these choices have been decided for them; a pianist has chopin to stand beside them, while a composer has absolutely nothing to hide behind, every single decision is his or her own.

It should then come as no great shock that I will be equally committed to defending my theory of composition, however blemished and subjective it may be. And it is certainly is subjective. If was giving this lecture ten years ago, I would have had something completely different to say, and I'm sure that in ten years my position will again be changed.

We see this in composers all the time, a changed policy on absolute vs. programmatic music, a switch from atonality to tonality. This doesn't discredit a composer's music however, but merely gives us the proper context in which to view it.

And after all, isn't this what is what we love about about this art form. No definite answers or solutions. A never-ending labyrinth of ideas for those who search for them.

With that small caveat out of the way, I would like start our inspection of the role of the composer in the modern - 21st century - world. We will start by looking at what exactly it is that a composer does, follow that with a look the current musical landscape, and conclude with some thoughts and advice on a what a composer's place in that landscape.

—

What a composer is and does:

The principal dilemma facing any composer is this: How do we infuse sound with meaning? or put another way: How do we make sound meaningful? Many of us have had experiences where there doesn't seem to be any meaning or point to a piece of music, often leaving us disillusioned or confused. As human beings we are essential "meaning searching organisms" always searching for it, even if it is not always present.

Now this question of meaning is a tricky question, and many 20th century composers and musicians have stared long and directly at this question, and have in the process gotten the meaning of music all tied up with so called musical progress, but just like staring directly at the sun to get a better understanding of how the sun works, looking too closely delivered no satisfactory answers, producing works of questionable musicality, and leaving everyone a little sun spot blind.

"Do we really need to do this" I can hear people thinking. "Over and over again it seems we come to these same tired questions of the purpose of art and meaning", but in order to properly understand the role of the composer in the 21st century it is crucial that we approach these questions in order to define what we do and to properly defend our vocation.

Now rather than starting our search by putting our face right in the music, so close that we can smell the ink, I would like to take a step back, away from the music, away from the music stand, and find some higher ground where we can take a proper look at what music is and how it functions in society.

Now, from this high vantage point we can see so far that we are actually able to catch a glimpse of the similarities between composition and the other creative arts such as poetry:

Here we have a quote by Nabokov, from a poem entitled "Pale Fire". Speaking on his experience as a poet, which could easily be substituted for a composer the narrator says:

"I feel I understand Existence, or at least a minute part
Of my existence, only through my art,
In terms of *combinational delight*."

Another quote by the American philosopher Emerson again on the subject of poets:

"The highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or shall I say the quadruple or the centuple or much more manifold meaning, of every fact"

Both of these quotes make reference to this idea that these art forms create meaning through the various combinations of their elements, that any single "fact", which in the sound world might be

a note, a chord, can have different meanings depending on what it is combined with, with what connections it has. The meaning creating connection is between a sound, or group of sounds with another sound or group of sounds. This type of meaning is only reliant on the actual sounds themselves and their connections to each other, we could call it “inter-musical” meaning.

Continuing to look from our vantage point we see society responding to music in many surprising ways, including some that aren’t necessarily musical. Here we see someone who has an attachment to a piece of music because it was playing when he first saw his new girlfriend, here we see someone that likes this work for wind orchestra because, among other things, it sounds like a train. Here we see a young girl listening to a piece of music in part because her friends all like it, here someone on Youtube is enjoying a piece by Bach because it is played on vegetable instruments.

In some examples the meaning creating connection is between the sounds and something not especially musical. In other examples we see more of an emotional or social connection. We could call these “extra-musical” connections.

Some of these examples can actually be frustrating to composers and musicians who have studied music we feel that it is cheap or shallow, but the fact is that the meaning created in these connections are no less real.

Now to sweep in a little closer to the problem, and examine these two types of musical meaning in more detail. We see that what we call “inter-musical” meaning is often described as musical form, or musical phrases, or timbre, or chord progressions, or note collections. These are ways of helping us form strong connections between the sounds. Great composers use this in many ways -

(use example from “Wake the Grain” - start with it very one dimensional, add sections)

What I called “extra-musical” meaning is a bit more open ended. As we saw from our examples above, it can be anything from an emotional response to a piece, music that imitates sounds found in the real world, or even the look or attractiveness of a musician performing, something that seems unfortunately common today. Of course any text that we add would also fall into this category, apart from the actual sounds of the words themselves.

For better or for worse music a culture will decide on these extra-musical meanings, leaving little room for real reflection. If just one note from a violin was sounded and we asked a cross section of the public what style that was, “classical music” would be a common answer, even though one note from a violin could be anything, but we do live in a culture that pigeonholes so called styles.

In theory these two forms of meaning in music are separate, but in practice they are much more blended, although different pieces blend these to a varying degrees. Some pieces, such as the 4th symphony of Brahms, rely more on inter-musical connections to create it's meaning: the grand architecture of the form, the variance in timbres, while other pieces, say a pop song with music video rely more on extra-musical connections; the dancing, the text.

Since I have only 40 minutes, and not 40 sessions, It rally is beyond the scope of this lecture to go into all the detail and nuance of these separate meanings so let us return to the role of the composer in all of this.

As composers, we have control over some of these meanings, especially the inter-musical meanings but not all of them, but we shouldn't be bothered by this, or let it dictate how we perceive the quality of our music. In my view, strong inter-musical meanings have the potential to be consider "timeless", while extra-musical meanings are more dependant on the culture of the time. However strong extra-musical connections are also part of a composer's duty and should be included as well -

The music of Bach is considered timeless because of the rich inter-musical meanings that he was able to fill his music with. How this section is related to that section. The way in which he starts the Kyrie of his B minor mass with a grand chorale, then uses the melody of the chorale as the basis for a grand fugue following the choral. The deepness of Bach's music is astounding as certain ideas are obvious to us on first listen, but new ideas continue to spring out of the music after 50, 100 listenings - to those searching for them of course.

It is interesting to note that while Bach was extremely religious, and this extra-musical connection between his music and god is very obvious, Bach's popularity has not faded even in this increasingly secular society, a testimony to his rich inter musical writing.

The truth is, any great composer imagines in every musical fact an abundance of possible inter-musical and extra-musical meanings - that is just what a great composer does.

Now, what does a composer need to know to be able to do this, to create sound with meaning? This short answer is "a lot". Being a composer is hard, I'm not being ungrateful for the opportunities I've been lucky to receive - far from it, but being a composer is really hard. It makes sense that a finished piece of music called a "work".

To start with a composer needs to wide and deep general musical knowledge. There is a common saying that goes: "Jack of all trades, master of none". While I would agree that in most musical professions it is advantageous to be more of a specialist, my experience suggests that this is actually the opposite for composers. This is because in order for a composer to be competent in all the required areas, it helps to have a wide variety of experiences and talents.

What does a composer need to know: Well to start - they need a working knowledge of: all the common instruments, their ranges, their idiosyncrasies; of orchestration, blend and balance; of five-hundred years of music history, important composers, important works, of music theory, including a unique perspective that the composer is able to offer, of current movements in the other art forms, of technology, music notation software, live sound, and the blend between acoustic and electric music, and finally of “showbiz”, personally my least favourite area, as each composer must run these activities like a business, especially freelance composers.

This is an immense amount of knowledge composers need to have at their fingertips so it is not surprising that historically, most composers come into their own during their late 20s or 30s, but really hit their stride in their 40s. Upon reflection, I can see that my own zig-zag of a career path would have been professional suicide if I was depending on performing, but in composition it has been an asset. At age 7, growing up in North Battleford, I started my musical journey by taking organ lessons from the little old lady down the street and by the time I was 8 was playing the tiny two manual electric organ in the church. A few years later the church bought a nine-foot grand piano and it was instantly clear to me that I had been playing on a toy, so began my “career” as a classical pianist. Forward to when I was 12, while attending a St. John’s recruiting session I saw a saxophone for the first time and, like a moth to the flame, I was hopelessly drawn in. The start of my “classical saxophone” career. Playing the saxophone gave me the chance to play in bands, be exposed to jazz music, marching band music, in high school I continued to play the piano, and saxophone. Upon arriving at the University of Saskatchewan, and hearing Dean McNeill speak and play, I was suddenly transformed into a jazz saxophonist. Since then I’ve had the opportunity to sing in choirs, play piano in jazz trios, play latin music, not to mention conduct ensembles both large and small. Now living in Montreal I’m lucky enough to compose full time, and able constantly draw on my past and present performing and conducting experience while I compose.

And it was after years of playing with different musical groups when I decided to pursue composition full time, did I realize the amount of space and silence needed to work. This is the second considerable challenge with being a composer, the solitude. I’m very honoured to be working on a legacy project at the moment, a project that involves all three major groups here at the University, but a project of this size requires hundreds of hours with only you and your thoughts. And hundred of hours with your own thoughts can be dangerous, as you can start lose the way you relate to other human beings. This is sometimes a self-imposed solitary confinement. Composers are often seen as an eccentric group precisely because of their social interactions.

But we composers must always remember that even though we need our solitude to work, we are equally dependant on society, and can’t exist removed of it. That creativity is found in nature, in daily experience, in our relationships. So when I am feel like I am tilting too far one way or the other, I return to Emerson for guidance:

“Solitude is impractical, and society fatal. We must keep our head in the one and our hands in the other. The conditions are met, if we keep our independence, yet do not lose our sympathy.”

The current landscape of composition:

The musical landscape in the year 2016 certainly does seem very bleak. A dwindling appreciation for the arts, the expectation that all music should be free and an ever decreasing attention span, spurred on by screens everywhere we look, are just some of the challenges facing musicians. For composers, the fall has been especially precipitous, especially if you go back one hundred and fifty years. I mean, ask the average person to name a composer and chances are it will be someone from the 1700 or 1800s. Part of this has to do with the great democratizing of music over the course of the 20th century, like anything that has been democratized, simultaneously brings music to the masses while lowering the common denominator. I think that it is important to remember in this culture climate we don't equate popular with good, even though with YouTube views, and Top 40 we are constantly tempted to. After all we writing music that evolves with every listen.

In this culture, how do we judge our music and our place in the community?

Well, fundamentally, I don't believe these challenges don't change what a composer's role.

In my experience, I have found that there is an incredible demand for composition, as there will always be a need for skilled men and women to turn contemporary sounds, ideas and values in to music.

But for composition to flourish, it must not be a top down system, not directed from symphony orchestras and universities, but starting in the community, between friends, colleagues and small organizations. These partnerships are quick to evolve along with society, and more importantly don't have any extraneous responsibilities, symphonies need to sell tickets, universities need to follow curricula. and in general, institutions like symphonies are slow to evolve, and function more as a musical museum.

And the truth is, I see this process happening everywhere - from high school students writing for their choirs to Saxophonist Tommy Davis commissioning composers through grants, to Saskatchewan composers David Mcyntire and Janet Gieck composing for the RCM syllabus, to Montreal colleges composing music for video games from Ubisoft.

I while I do believe that while these opportunities are possible, Saskatchewan composers are at a disadvantage because of the opportunities to compose are not as abundant for those starting out.

This is part of the reason I started the Strata festival - to create where all composers can have an opportunity to develop their craft, and make it another level.

Advice:

And now we come to the point of the lecture where, *descending graciously from the ivory tower, impart my wisdom upon the eager audience especially any aspiring composers*. In seriousness however, giving and taking advice can be a dangerous process for both parties. Especially for composers, as a student following a teachers advice a little too closely can erase any sort of uniqueness or individuality so important in this art form. And after all, as the saying goes “Advice is one thing that is freely given away, but watch that you only take what is worth having.”

So let me qualify this advice; This is advice from a 33 year old composer in the early stages of his career with some successes but many failures. This is advice for the year 2017, an era of free music and eight second attention spans. And rather than direct this to the wide cross-section of folks sitting here, this will be advice for an imaginary 18 year old first year student Paul Suchan sitting of course in the back row, where all the cool kids sit. Although I doubt he would have come to this FARLS, only the first FARLS, but would of rather waited until there were none but the required amount left, and then gone to them only out of desperation to fulfill the requirements.

To this young Paul I would say: while there are many composition cliches such as “composition is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration”, or “good composers borrow, and great composers steal” and “write all of the time and have human beings play your music” that ring true, I would like to focus solely on my experience, what I’ve learnt first hand since I was sitting there, and avoid the cliches if possible.

So there are three pieces of advice I would like to offer. the first is: Write music that is too good to ignore. And if, Paul, you’ve been paying attention to this lecture, that means writing music full of *meaning* both deep and wide. Create strong musical metaphors in your music that allow for new discoveries on repeated listenings or readings. The difficulty of this art form is also the beauty of this art form, that it doesn’t *need* to be or do anything, it doesn’t necessarily serve any function, except the meaning put there by the composer. When you let you ideas grow and evolve throughout each piece, and shy away from mindless repetition, much is possible and waiting to be discovered. Rely on your intuition, but a good craft will allow this intuition to flow freely and unencumbered by technical deficiencies. Study the music other great composers. It can be discouraging to have studied a score, and then years later seemed to remember nothing about it, but as Emerson wisely said about books: “I cannot remember the books I’ve read any more than the meals I have eaten; even so, they have made me.” Studying these scores will help refine your thinking.

A composer must gather all the sounds of his/her time and fulfil the role of human strainer, allowing the watered down cooking material to drain, and leaving the tasty meaty bits of contemporary life to ponder and chew on. So don't rely too much on the accessible but transient extra-musical meanings found in popular culture. Even in this adolescent culture, the time is ripe for composers of all backgrounds to find new and unique ways of creating sound with meaning.

The second piece of advice: You must know that what you are doing is important and necessary. Listen, musicians get into music for a whole host of reasons. Some are naturally talented, and enjoy the freedom of playing and the praise of others, some play for the companionship or to be part of a group, and others because it is part of a family tradition. These are all great reasons for music to be part of a person's life, but if you decide to pursue it professionally, these reasons won't keep the flame lit very long. To avoid burnout you need to know that what you are doing is important, and you need to carry in your pocket a personal philosophy that justifies your decision. I mean, this explains the philosophical rambling of the last 30 minutes - this is my personal engine, the idea that our constant search for meaning in music perfectly reflects the search for our meaning in life. This idea, this concept, gives me all of the fuel I need and any other lucky byproducts of this choice, such as recognition from my composition peers, this wonderful award that I have received from the University, or even making a decent living, these are just icing on the cake.

The final piece of advice is a tough one: Each composer must create their own path. So let me ask the 18 year old Paul: What is your ideal? What is your idea of a composer that perfectly embodies your highest values and principals? (Of course, this will change as you age, but that's okay). Now, if you were say a student pilot in training looking to become a professional pilot, the path isn't necessarily easy, but it is straight forward. You follow the guidelines, do the study, complete the tests - you're a pilot, free to work as a pilot. The career path of a composer, or anyone who works in a creative field, is not so linear. Of course you can do many practical things that will help you on your path, finish projects on time, be nice to people and so on - it is the creative end of this endeavour that is the challenge.

You must create a new path because the place you are going must be by definition different. If Stravinsky is your ideal - you love his mastery of counterpoint, his unique orchestration - you can't get there by writing the same music Stravinsky wrote. Paradoxically, to follow Stravinsky, you can't follow Stravinsky, because to be a composer *like* Stravinsky you must create something different. There is this fine line you will need to walk between being overly influenced by great music, and having something original to say. If you do manage to create that new path, and follow your ideal (not that I have arrived there), you'll find that the place you end up is a *new ideal* - one that you've created - and this is the progress of any great artist. If you can do this for even one piece of music - then you can say with confidence I have created a work of art, or as Nietzsche so succinctly put "He who attains his ideal by that very fact transcends it"