

KEYNOTE ADDRESS: 2006 SCI NATIONAL CONFERENCE,
SAN ANTONIO

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It's a great pleasure to be here, in this beautiful city. You may not realize it, but we're celebrating *two* birthdays this morning; the society is 40 years old this year, and I am 70. I want to thank Tom Wells & the SCI for giving this aging senior citizen the opportunity to reminisce and say a few words to my composer colleagues.

As I look out, I see familiar faces—faces of old and dear friends—but more importantly, perhaps, younger faces. And so *many* younger composers! Your presence here in San Antonio testifies to the health and vitality of the Society of Composers, Inc. and to the equally vigorous state of composition (in and out of universities) throughout North America. I should also add that I'm one of the judges in this year's ASCAP/SCI competition, and I'm greatly impressed by the high quality of student works. They, too, testify to a superb level of creative talent, energy, discipline and skill. We haven't chosen a winner yet—that will be done tomorrow—but the overall level is remarkable. Bravo to the students (!) and to their teachers.

Mention of words like “student” and “teacher” bring to mind the birth of this organization—and its original name, the American Society of University Composers. The change of name, by the way, took place during my term as national president. It was brought about not only by changing demographics within the profession, but the desire to get rid of the society's rather suggestive acronym. (I was going to use the word “kinky,” but that word has a very special meaning in Texas.)

I remember the earliest days of the ASUC, when it was a gleam in the eye of Charles Wuorinen and Ben Boretz. It would be an exaggeration to say that I was “present at the creation”—but I was one of the first people (outside of the founding fathers) to learn about its inception. I first heard about the soon-to-be ASUC in January 1966, at a post-concert party in our house in Brunswick, Maine. This was after the opening event of the Carl Ruggles festival organized by Bowdoin College (celebrating Ruggles's 90th birthday year). At that party, Ben Boretz turned to me and said “Next week, after I get back to New York, a group of composers are going to make a public statement that will change the course of American music.” And sure enough, only a few weeks later the formation of this revolutionary new society was announced.

At that time it had a rather sharply focused direction, and a single-minded esthetic. Words like “Columbia-Princeton,” “combinatoriality,” and “Perspectives of New Music” come to mind. That aspect has changed over the years, and so has the society's name. But I believe it's *still true* (just as the founders believed 40 years ago) that some of the most exciting examples of new music—at least in the Western hemisphere—are being created on college campuses, and that universities have proven to be major patrons of the arts. (Perhaps against their will at times, but that's another story.)

It's also true, I believe, that (whether based on a campus or not) *composers—by the very nature of their job—are teachers*, explicators of music, even missionaries. We “teach” when we write program notes for our pieces; we “teach” when we give pre-concert lectures, or when we're interviewed by the press or radio/TV, or when we work with student performers in rehearsals. (I hope all of you do all of those things—and enjoy doing them!) And of course our compositions themselves are object lessons of sorts, if you believe (as I do) that pieces of music are *commentaries upon other pieces*—not only one's one, but those of other composers.

My feeling that composing and teaching are intertwined is a long-standing one, and it's inevitable, I suppose, that over the years I would become closely involved with the work of the College Music Society. What brought me to San Antonio this week was not only the SCI conference, but the CMS meeting down the road. In the late 1980s I served on the CMS Board as representative for composition, and later as national president—giving me the dubious distinction of being the only person who's been president of both CMS and SCI. What's always attracted me about CMS is its role as a great “umbrella”—its commitment to the idea of *dialogue* across musical disciplines—a safe haven where composers and theorists and musicologists, performers and conductors, music ed and ethno people could speak to one another!

It would seem, on the surface, that (with regard to *focus*) the two societies are as different as they can be—one strictly professional, the other broad and general. But that's not necessarily true. One could argue that composers are—within their academic departments—college music societies in miniature, individual umbrellas, reaching across divisions and making contact with their colleagues. And the classroom versatility of composers is amazing. I would contend that no-one teaches *music appreciation* better than a composer! Many of us are constantly explaining what we do to laymen -- and, in the process, giving our views of music history and musical structure, in non-technical language. I have to add that when I was a teenager I fell in love with Aaron Copland's book *What to Listen for in Music*, the *Poetics of Music* by Stravinsky and *The State of Music* by Virgil Thomson. In college, which I attended as a pre-med student, my Intro to Music text was *From Madrigal to Modern Music* by composer Douglas Moore -- and I was fortunate to have Moore as my instructor.

Similarly, I believe that composers make dynamic, insightful *theory* teachers, looking at structure from a unique perspective. We also have a very special relationship with *performers*, who are potentially our greatest allies and champions. (By the way, the centuries-old division of labor between the *conservatory*, where performers and composers hang out, and the *university*, populated by theorists and musicologists, still works very well in many European countries.)

Given my inclination towards reaching general listeners, I've been very fortunate to have spent most of my career teaching at a small liberal arts college. I've also been blessed with the opportunity to speak before general, liberal-artsy audiences during my years on the guest-composer lecture circuit. In this capacity I've enjoyed sounding off on a wide variety of topics, concerned with aspects of new music, composing and the “composerly” life, which seem to appeal to non-musicians. As we go into the home stretch of this morning's talk, I thought I might name a few of those topics—partly because they present a check-list of issues that have been of concern to composers, or at least to this composer, over the years, and partly because I hope some of you may want to borrow them.

In the mid-1960s I found myself discussing issues of pitch control, responsibility, “freedom,” music as object vs. music as activity, and how the esthetics of serialism and indeterminacy dealt with those questions. During the 1970s I found myself presenting talks on electronic music, and ways in which live performance and electronic media could be combined. On one occasion, funded by the state arts commission, I traveled around the state of Maine with an ARP 2600 in the trunk of my car—stopping at various high schools and making wonderful sounds for the kiddies. This was 1975 or so, and no one in rural Maine had ever *seen* a synthesizer. I always took questions at the end, and invariably the first question was “how much does it cost?”

My interest in this topic extended into the 1980s. Tom Wells may recall one particular lecture I gave in 1986, when I was at Ohio State for the academic year on a special guest professorship. This was a lecture open to the entire OSU community, and I gave it the title “Live Performance and Electronic Extensions.” To our surprise, a great many people in the audience were from the medical school! I think they expected me to speak about artificial limbs.

By the late 1970s and then into the ‘80s, issues of musical *ritual* and *space*—where the musicians are placed, whether they sit or stand or walk about, where loudspeakers are placed, the ritual and theater of performance, the playing of instruments as a kind of choreography, instruments themselves as props and sculptural objects—all of these became very important to me, and I enjoyed talking about these. I also developed an interesting little talk called *The Composer's Split Personality*. (It's not about schizophrenia! My son is a psychiatrist, and he would be delighted by the title, but in the '80s he was a junior high school student.) The “split personality” phrase was a shorthand way of reflecting on the sharply divided halves of a composer's professional life.

The act of composing is a *private, solitary act*. Sounds, or the presence of other human beings, can be a terrible distraction. In my talk, I tried to evoke the image of a composer in a quiet, soundproof room, working in complete isolation. But—to complete the image—when the work is completed, he throws open the door and he's in the midst of a party! Or an *orgy*, if you prefer that. Performers, conductors, copyists, publishers, record producers, critics, radio announcers—all those people whose support, friendship and good will you depend upon to get your music heard! This introverted recluse, this hermit who's been locked up in a closet for weeks or months, has to become a social butterfly, mingling, schmoozing, politicking. (Remember, this was the 1980s, before most composers had the computerized tools to self-produce their work. But even now, I believe, the necessity of having a dual mind-set still holds.)

In recent years, I've been fond of talking about my inner creative processes by referring to three “models.” I'd like to think that these models also suggest traits which listeners, and composers, should cultivate. These three models are PUZZLES (in particular, crossword puzzles—I generally do about three puzzles a day), restaurant MENUS (as some of you may know, I was the dining critic for *The Maine Times* between 1973 & '83), and MAPS (especially interstate highway maps, street maps, and subway maps). For each of these three models, there are persons who *devise* them, and persons who *read* them. Either role is enormously rewarding—and, I believe, quite musical.

I've also discovered that general audiences are interested in the role of MEMORY in the compositional process. There are two aspects that I like to stress. One involves tweaking the long-term memory of one's listeners—by inserting subtle changes in passages as they re-occur, so that the “repeat” of material heard earlier is, in fact, varied

in certain important ways. [At the piano, play examples by Debussy, Mozart and Schumann.] Secondly, composers—drawing upon their *own* memories—frequently create passages which pay homage to the music of other (sometimes long-dead) composers. [At the piano, play examples by Mahler and Elgar.]

Finally (that's what you've all been waiting for—"in conclusion"!)—if I were a lot younger, and less of a dinosaur when it comes to computer technology—I would devise a brand-new talk about the FUTURE of music, with special focus on the *digital revolution* in our midst. Just consider how so many elements—our training, our working methods as composers, our ways of perceiving music (let alone creating it), our strategies for reaching a public of performers and listeners, and networking with fellow composers -- are expanding and evolving. The Society of Composers, Inc. has already become a significant player in the realization of these changes. The next 40 years of this society are bound to be more exciting than any of us can imagine. We'll see you in the year 2046! Thanks very much to all of you.

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