

TO MAKE A UNIVERSE OF SOUND : FOUR VISIONS

It came to me that I wanted to be a composer when I began to hear imaginary sounds mentally. I was sixteen years old. The imaginary sounds did not resemble the music I already knew. The imaginary sounds did not resemble the music I already knew. The imaginary sounds were first triggered by a poem I read in a high school Literature class. From that point I could turn these mental sounds on when I wanted to, or sometimes they would come involuntarily. It was frustrating, because all of my musical training had been for the purpose of performing other peoples' music. Nothing I had been taught could help me decipher what was going on in my mind. I held on to the idea that I wanted to compose. I struggled with it, but was unable to write down what I heard. I went to college. I took traditional theory courses for the first two years. I gained a little skill with notation but this did not help me. It was still learning about other peoples' music, not mine. The third year I enrolled in a composition course. I was dismayed to find the same kinds of exercises. The instructor used Mendelssohns songs without words for models of the kind of music we should write. I rebelled. I used every exercise to reach further toward what I heard. I would go home, and struggle for the pitches I needed at the piano. Foremost in my mind though were the qualities or colors (timbre) of the pitches, or how instruments other than the piano would be mixed together to form my compositions. I would find the pitches I wanted and form a mental image of the instrumental mix. Little by little I learned how to write what I

was imagining. My composition instructor always tried to get me back to the assigned exercises, but I continued to search for what I heard. By the end of that first year of composition I had managed to write several pieces: a piano piece, a piece for violin and piano, a woodwind quintet and a piece for horn and harp. My struggle to gain skill in writing was not over but at least I had begun - What would have helped me? If I had learned musical language as a child learns its native language it would have helped. A baby always experiments with many kinds of sounds before learning to speak. Gradually a vocabulary is developed. The child speaks long before reading or writing. It's the reading and writing that presents difficulty, both for music and language. But, the important difference in how music and language are learned is that most people are very used to inventing sentences of their own long before learning to read or write. I was never encouraged to invent musical sentences - only to read what was already invented. Although it is important to be able to do this, it is equally important to invent. Children should be encouraged to explore musical sounds in an unbiased way, to play by ear, to sing any way they want. Eventually reading and writing can be taught as easily as reading and writing language, but only after the child has had a great deal of experience making music his or her own way. So I struggled at 19 with what I could have learned much earlier. However, music education in this country is geared principally towards training performers and listeners, while composers and instrument makers are neglected. Com-

mercially this is good for publishers, manufacturers of musical instruments and the market place. Living composers need royalties for their music and it costs money to develop new instruments. Publishers jam the market with old music and performers learn it and play it for trained listeners. Although there are real values inherent in this situation, it also emphasizes music as a consumer item rather than an expressive medium available to anyone whose creative impulses are intact. Singing is a natural human impulse. Making sounds with objects as extensions of the body is next.

Though not everyone will develop to a high level it certainly should be possible to try and to find encouragement and support for creative activity in music.

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