

## **Composing Music From the Inside Out: Achieving Desired Emotional Effects Through the Retention Yet Expansion of Traditional Theoretical Principles**

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There are myriad ways of approaching composition. A composer may start with an abstract musical idea, gesture or generative chart and then build upon it, simply emote what they are feeling at the time, simply improvise or form preliminary structure for the composition. Regardless of technique, I think it is valuable for composers to view their music from the perspective of the listener, and ascertain whether the emotional content of the piece represents their desires. Following are some examples from my compositions where I had a clear idea of the desired emotional impact, and how I achieved those effects through the retention yet expansion of traditional principles.

### **9-11: Voices Echo, for Wind Ensemble, Choir and Recorded Voices**

In the year 2001, I received a California State University Research, Scholarship and Creative Activities Award to compose a work incorporating student input for our wind ensemble. When I discussed with students what I should write about, the overwhelming response was the 9-11 tragedy (the day that the planes struck the world Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. in the United States). I met with students on several occasions, soliciting musical ideas and began work. After several trials, I felt my efforts were hollow and overly sentimental. I had been working with abstract musical ideas, or subconsciously imitating what a movie score might sound like – both of which rendered substandard emotional results. I discarded all of those ideas and recalled that on the afternoon of September 11, 2001, after becoming saturated with hours and hours of images of the tragedy on the television, I had gone to my MIDI piano and played into my music notation program. I didn't know what else to do – how else to digest the horror that was unfolding. Since my other material was not working, I decided to go back and listen to that emotional outpouring. The result was pure rage, anger and profound sadness.

The difference in emotional quality between my earlier versions and this raw and honest emotional outpouring were so divergent that I began to formulate ways that I might recapture that moment, and expand the initial ideas into a piece. First I decided that the best way involve students was to use their voices in the musical texture directly, instead of trying to assimilate their feelings. I put up a sign in the music building inviting them to record their thoughts about that day and how it effected them. As I interviewed them, the students grappled for meaning, for words and for understanding. Toward the end of each interview I noticed that the students became more reflective, and began to address the implication of the attack on US culture, society and the role of the government foreign policy. [I should note that Americans are at this time almost equally divided on our current foreign policy, as evidenced by the narrow margin of President Bush's presidential victory, and his current approval ratings - which are below 50%. Many

Americans believe adamantly that America is correct in its policy, while an equal number view these policies as aggressive and militaristic].

I decided the overall emotional flow of the piece should be as follows, and organized the voice components to follow this dramatic path:

**Movement I: Attack**

CALM → CHAOS → ANGER → FEAR →

**Movement II: Aftermath**

SADNESS → CONTEMPLATION → HOPE

Each of these areas is clearly delineated in the music, and as such, the form of the piece is quite transparent, giving the listener clarity of structure.

Let me focus on two areas of the work where I had a desired emotional effect and used traditional concepts in non-traditional ways to achieve it.

**BEGINNING**

At the beginning, I wanted to take the audience from a sense of calm to a sudden realization that something horrific is going to happen, and then to throw the audience into a chaotic and horrified state. I knew a wedge – shaped dramatic contour, coupled with multiple loud hits would accomplish this. To create a sense of expectancy, I used a unison note in the flutes, with no discernable pulse. I added bowed crotales to give the flutes a shimmering timbre, then added a conflicting note, but again, no pulse is felt. Gradually the voices begin to layer on top of each other in stretto as the music builds dynamically and texturally, until the first climax at \_\_\_\_\_. Thus the increased range, increased dynamics, thicker texture and denser harmonies all serve to increase the drama and move the music forward.

I thought about the initial climax for quite a while and decided that the best way to render the emotion of horror would be to surround the audience with loud and disturbingly unfamiliar sounds. I chose to use bass drum heads being rolled in the balcony, chains and plates being thrown into a metal trash can, as well as multiple bass drums and thunder sheets.

After this initial “attack,” to render chaos I layered the voices in a non-organized manner so that it is impossible to hear everything being said. The listener is searching for meaning, for something to grasp onto. The musical accompaniment is set in juxtaposition with the rhythms of the voices and at times are randomly improvised.

To round out this first small section, I wanted to return to the opening material, but render a half-cadence of sorts, so that the listeners would expect more to come. I also wanted them to experience the same basic sonority at the beginning, but have a different emotional response. Some have commented that this return of the original material is the climatic point, because of the preceding musical passages.

**SECOND SECTION**

The second section begins with a snare drum, which conjures a militaristic feeling. The band tutti, in mixed meter, is based on a recurring motive that evokes a feeling of rage and anger.

## SECOND MOVEMENT

In the second movement, I wanted to first portray an injured country, and then gradually insert some sense of optimism. The “sound” of American music is, for many in the US, the sound of Aaron Copeland. Many say the open fifth sound, which he uses liberally, evokes the great expanse of the US. So by using stacks of open fifths, but in low register, I hoped to evoke an American sound, but one that has been shaken. This feeling is amplified by the addition of a clashing bass note, and the staggering of chord tones in what should be a passage using parallel motion.

As the movement progresses, this basic progression both rises and becomes less fragmented, though it is basically a passacaglia that modulates upward. In the voice tracks, the length of the excerpts becomes longer, more coherent and more reflective. Thus, the overall shape of the movement is from darkness into partial light.

The use of sung voices at the end evoke a sense of the afterlife, or of another plane of existence.