

Elements of a Style

By Edward Jacobs

How many pieces have you written?

In a recent conversation with a couple of composers whose work I admire,¹ this question was posed. These composers are in mid-career, wonderfully accomplished and experienced—far more so than I—each with numerous performances and recordings of very high quality. Each has composed for a wide variety of performing media; each has created works that express and encompass—at least to my sensibility—an exceptionally broad range of the human experience. Nonetheless, they wondered if they were writing the same piece over and over again. This question is difficult, yet important for me because it leads to an investigation of the characteristics and limitations of my style and, most productively, it leads me to consider new ways to exercise and stretch my creative imagination.

I would certainly hate to think that I'm continually rewriting the same piece, but there are undeniably common elements among many of my pieces. Are they structural elements or surface elements? If both, then do I know only one way to do things? If there are so many common elements found in my works, am I just trying to keep rewriting it until I finally get it right? Will I ever get it right?

*Every writer, by the way he uses language, reveals something of his spirit, his habits, his capacities, his bias.*²

What is art? What is music? What makes “good” music? What constitutes a “good” idea? What constitutes “good” development, expansion, and investigation of an idea? What constitutes sound musical logic?

If we could find a way to answer these questions, then we would be on the way to articulating our musical values, or what might be called our *musical aesthetic*. While we may not sit down with this express purpose in mind, I think that composers do formulate answers to these questions with their music. The music we write is, in itself, an *expression* of our aesthetic. The aggregate of choices we make in order to create that expression is *style*.³ More difficult and revealing questions lie behind the choices that constitute our style: Why do we make those particular choices? What has led me to the choices I've made?

Over the last ten years, most of my music has begun with the same exercise, though the process has become more concise with time. Whatever the ensemble, I begin by writing lines of varying character for each of the

instruments, or instrumental families, as an exploration of idiomatic writing for those instruments. A good deal of what I write at this point eventually finds its way into the piece at hand. Regardless of the character that emerges in these etudes, though, the line that always grabs my attention is a long, plaintive melody. Some of my pieces (e.g., 2/27/86; *The Fiction of a Glance*; "I've Shook My Fists at the Sky") begin with a melody of this character (see fig. 1), and some (*The Fiction of a Glance*; *At Recess, We Play*; *Blurring the Margins*; *The Thing With Feathers*; or *Ensemblespiel*) use such a melody as the primary focus of an important formal/structural passage in the piece (see fig. 2).

When I think about the nature of these lines, I attach their character to melodies I heard in my childhood, the melodies sung by the cantors in the temple I attended each week as a child. The cantor in the adult services, Michael Hammerman, had an operatic voice about which the "grownups" raved, "Like a concert every week!" His voice was surely beautiful, but what I loved best was the clarity of the detail in the ornamented lines he sang. He sang without amplification, in a very large space, and the power of his voice was almost overwhelming to me. But in the call-and-response portions of the liturgy, my small, unsure voice gained strength as it joined forces with the adults around me. Though no one in the congregation could match the quality of his voice, we could all, as a group, respond to him as a *tutti equal*.

In contrast to the adult services, my weekly experience at the children's service was not a concert, but more like a sung communal prayer. Each Saturday morning I surprised my family by getting up early, dressing up as best I could, and getting myself to the temple. (They later confided to me that they feared I would become an impoverished rabbi. Imagine their relief when I announced my intention to major in music! *Oy vey!*) In a small chapel, the children's service was led by a man much like my grandfather, though without the Eastern European accent, who had a voice that was all too human, just like my own. The intimacy of the setting, though, made inescapable the depth of his connection with the prayers he chanted. Eventually, some of these prayers and melodies took on deeper meanings for me, notably the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, which I sang for my grandparents and, years later, for my father.

By the time I was twelve, even before my bar mitzvah, the liturgy had become very troublesome for me; my interests in other areas had broadened and deepened, and I no longer felt connected to the temple—nor have I felt close to any organized religion since. Nonetheless, the melodies that seem most irresistible to me somehow draw me back to experiences that built my appreciation for community, personal reflection, and the value of spirituality as much as for musical expression. It appears that I

Figure 1: Opening of “I’ve Shook My Fists at the Sky,” *Meditation & Agitation*, for solo clarinet.

Rubato, quasi-cadenza (♩ = 56), *Molto espressivo*

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Figure 2: Melody drawn from *Ensemblespiel*'s sketches, later used as soprano line of a chorale (see figs. 3, 4).

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still feel a deep connection to the character of those melodies, even if not, at present, to their source.

These lines that I write as I start each piece, and the plaintive melody to which I become attached, are just the beginning of my compositional exercises at this stage of creation. As I continue, I write a bass line against this melody, then write inner lines (see figs. 3 and 4). Essentially, I use my initial melody as the *cantus firmus* of a counterpoint and part-writing exercise, not unlike exercises from undergraduate harmony classes—without the modal/tonal context upon which those undergraduate exercises are based.

This chorale-writing process began with *Crossing . . . over* (1990), but the length of the resulting chorales has diminished substantially, from the 43-chord chorale shared by *Crossing . . . over* and *The Fiction of a Glance* (1994), to two distinct ten-chord harmonizations of a single melody in *The Thing With Feathers* (1999), and an eleven-chord chorale in *Ensemblespiel* (1999) (see figs. 3 and 4). Each of these chorales provides a sublimated framework and wellspring for all the melodic and harmonic material throughout each piece, but they also rise to the foreground at each work's closing. As a denouement following the piece's rhythmic and dynamic climax, the chorales emerge in a slow *Klangfarbenmelodie*. As thematic clarification, unobscured, non-abstract “aural” views of the chorales reveal the “theme” that has been the subject of improvisation and variation.

Figure 3: *Ensemblespiel*'s 11-chord chorale as abstracted part-writing exercise.**Figure 4:** *Ensemblespiel*'s chorale as harmonization of original melody (see fig. 2).

Figure 4 shows the same 11-chord chorale as a harmonization of the original melody. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The treble staff contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, including a triplet of eighth notes. The bass staff contains a supporting harmonic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody is more complex and rhythmic than the abstracted version in Figure 3.

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Just as I find that my melodic writing at this early stage in a piece reflects a sensibility that is heavily influenced by my early experiences in the temple, I find that my approach to harmonically unifying my music reflects powerful experiences in and with jazz—as does my melodic writing at a later stage in composition. I use these chorale harmonizations in several ways, but most often in a manner analogous to the “changes” in a jazz tune. In essence, these chorales represent the chord progression over which I “improvise” most all of a work’s surface lines and counterpoint. Ultimately these lines are sometimes sounded in a rather bare texture, and at other times with the chorale’s chord progression as supporting harmony.

The lines that I “improvise” over these progressions are usually very quick-moving ones, and they become the biggest challenge to players. With a rhythmic character that is clearly influenced by listening to and transcribing several tenor sax players (Dexter Gordon, John Coltrane, George Coleman, Billy Harper, George Garzone), most of the surface lines are a product of my love of jazz. The weaving and overlapping of these lines is a style-characteristic that goes back to the first piece I wrote, a continual attempt to write a “solo” that is only complete when several players contribute to its statement.

For better or worse, when most players encounter my music they find their individual parts challenging but not unusually so (relative to much contemporary music, that is). Players most often comment on the articulations and phrasing I notate in my lines—much more than they comment on the rhythm. Typically, a player becomes aware, fairly soon, that my lines will fall well beneath their fingers (*usually*), but that my articulations and phrasing do not fall into familiar patterns. They are, for most players, not patterns that seem intuitive. Quickly, though, the players realize the influence of jazz on my music, and hear that I'm not necessarily pursuing a "legit" approach. While the influence of jazz is certainly there, it is certainly not something I think about on a conscious level. It is, simply put, the way I hear line.

Responsible players meet this challenge quite quickly, and begin ensemble rehearsal with their own parts well prepared. The toughest challenge is just around the corner, though, as the ensemble learns that many of these detailed lines overlap and interweave. Only once have I encountered players who said, "We played what was on the page and it all just fit together fine."⁴ More typically, my concept of a "group solo" tends to demand a kind of rehearsal that can be infuriatingly detailed, at least at first. When I rehearse my own music, I tend to spend the first rehearsal on just a few passages, trying to make sure that the players get the gist of what I'm up to. After that first session, after they've become accustomed to hearing how I like to construct textures, rehearsals tend to move along well.

What these players learn to hear is that the short passages in their parts are a portion of a single thread. Their lines overlap, follow, overlap again, and pass to another player's lines. Though a challenge to execute, the result is a larger fabric whose texture changes colors with each thread's weave. This approach allows me to treat the ensemble as a single instrument with an extraordinary range. In this regard, the influence of Donald Martino's *Triple Concerto* comes to mind, as does my work in electronic music with Mario Davidovsky, who encourages his students to give each sound a vibrant and dynamic life of its own. For certain, Davidovsky's music has provided me with an elegant model for the care of timbral detail.

Good composers borrow; great composers steal.

This paraphrase of T. S. Eliot's statement⁵ was sarcastically offered to me by my first composition teacher, Sal Macchia, at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. A few years later, I used this license to borrow an idea from Elliott Carter, and tried to run as far as I could with it. In mm. 174–75 of his *Variations for Orchestra*, Carter briefly creates a texture that seems like such a simple idea: the first violins move from a unison to a *divisi* chord, then return to a unison. I don't know why this little idea has so

stayed with me, but I have used it repeatedly since 1988. I often use it at the opening of a piece, to introduce chorale chords integrated within an important melodic motive, but I also use it as an alternative way of bringing the chorale together with the longer lines that are based upon it. In such passages, several instruments will articulate a rhythmically active line in unison—one of those improvised on the chorale progression—in which some notes of the line expand into a chord. As the lines unfold, so does the embedded chorale (see fig. 5).

For Whom Do I Write?

*If one is to write, one must believe—in the truth and worth of the scrawl, in the ability of the reader to receive and decode the message.*⁶

It seems relevant to say here that I am not a person who believes that music, *in itself*, conveys or contains emotion. I would never deny that composers, performers, and listeners all experience a wide variety of emotions in their respective encounters with music. But I am convinced that whatever extramusical thoughts emerge through experiencing music are brought about more from the performer/listener than from the music itself. This seems evident from the enormous variety of experiences that can be related in reaction to any given piece of music. I am quite sure that whatever thoughts, emotions, and/or feelings arise in a listener are due to the contextual “baggage” that the listener brings to the music being heard (e.g., personal associations), or even to the very act of listening to music (e.g., “I hate it when music *forces* me to listen”).

I take the space to state this because I know many wonderful composers who are writing in order to convey specific extramusical messages and/or emotions through their music. When I hear such pieces I often enjoy them very much, but when I take from their music something other than what I’m told they were trying to convey, I don’t consider either one of our efforts a failure. (I’ve never been moved to imagine a storm during Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony, but I still think it’s a fabulous piece. My students like to talk about the battle that Beethoven depicted in that movement—are they wrong?) I’m not referring here to general moods, which are certainly possible to set; rather, I’m addressing fairly specific emotions or story lines. For such things to be conveyed, the listener needs to be instructed to read/hear a program note that “sets up” the experience. With such preparation, I believe we can hear whatever has been suggested. But without such prompting, I simply don’t believe that a common listening experience can bring about a common emotional experience of any specificity. Consequently, I can’t imagine writing music with that goal in mind.

When I am told that my own music has been a catalyst to a listener’s emotional experience, I have found myself delighted, but also somewhat

Figure 5: Measures 235–39 of *Ensemblespiel*: Beginning of chorale's unfolding within unison line. Numbers represent chords 1–5 of chorale.

The image shows a musical score for five instruments: Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), B-flat Clarinet (Bb. Cl.), Alto Saxophone (A. Sax.), and Bassoon (Bsn.). The score is in 2/4 time and consists of five measures. Above the staves, five boxes labeled 1 through 5 indicate the chord changes for a chorale. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, such as eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The instruments play in unison, with some parts featuring triplets and sixteenth-note runs.

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surprised by what I am told the listener felt. Aside from general moods, listeners will relate fairly specific thoughts that have little, if any, connection to me, to my life, or to what may have been on my mind during the composition of that particular catalyst. I am genuinely delighted that I played a role in the experience they had, but I did not compose the feelings that made that experience potent; I composed a catalyst that allowed their own emotional baggage to generate feelings.

I suppose that I agree with Roger Sessions, who wrote in *Questions About Music* that a composer would do best to write for those who share his/her values. That is, if you write according to your own values (*musical aesthetic*) your audience will come to you. An audience who shares your values will identify those values within your music and will continue to seek an expression of those values via your music. It will therefore come as no surprise to learn that I write for myself only. I just love the musical game that is *composing*, and I do it for me. Certainly, there are many who will not care for the sounds I make, but there are always a few who take a moment to let me know that my work has delighted them. However, when my music leaves them with nothing, I'm encouraged that they'll find what they need elsewhere—their disappointment is not my responsibility. I only feel a responsibility to try to get closer to my own imagination's limit with each successive piece: Can I imagine a vivid musical world? Can I make that world, through the marriage of my creativity and my craft, engaging, enticing, stimulating, interesting, and provocative?

Why Do I Write?

*All writing is communication; creative writing is communication through revelation—it is the Self escaping into the open. No writer long remains incognito.*⁷

This question *seems* easier than it is. I have always enjoyed *thinking* in musical terms. The act of making music—whether singing, playing the saxophone, conducting, or composing—has always provided a kind of “charge” and solace that I find nowhere else. The solace comes from being alone, and from the freedom I feel, when alone, to explore whatever musical terrain I am led to by my imagination; the charge comes from creating an order of things that represents my imagination’s musical/aural world. I should point out that a desire for order seems all but absent in many areas of my life (my office, for example); it applies only to activities in which ordering seems like choreography. I rarely feel a need to straighten out my filing cabinets, but I very much enjoy conducting, teaching, even planning the syllabus for a class. To me, the kind of organizing I enjoy makes me use my imagination to engage in problem-solving.

I used to enjoy math for the same reason: not because of “the beauty of numbers” that mathematicians speak of, but because there’s a kind of abstract conceptualization of a scenario that demands construction in my mind. In such problem-solving, I must make a flexible mental/aural model that allows for exploration of a variety of possible paths—and I must construct more models for each of those paths. It’s a kind of game where I put notes together, try out possibilities that are new to me, find common ground among seemingly disparate instruments, and find ways to make evident the connections I hear among seemingly disparate musical thoughts.

Even while I get both solace and creative stimulation from this game that I love, composing is often a struggle. Again, I will recall a recent conversation in which several writers/artists were put on the spot: “Describe your relationship with your creativity.” While some focused their response on the word *creativity*, to me the emphasis was on *relationship*. My relationship with creativity is like a marriage whose vows I take literally—i.e., *’til death do us part*. This is a marriage from which I cannot withdraw. This is a marriage that is, like most, at times deeply passionate, at times turbulent; at times a partnership of two uncooperative people, at times of two dispassionate people; at times a union of people who seem capable of finding joy from just being in the same room together and at other times just seem to be in a rut; at times a marriage of two people who seem remarkably disconnected and, at other times, of two people who can’t get enough of each other. Like any interpersonal relationship, I have come to acknowledge, understand, appreciate, work through, and make the most of the various phases in the cycle of my relationship with my creativity. And,

like any such relationship, I feel frustrated when one of us seems uninterested . . . I am very frustrated when I am able to concentrate but seem unable to be creative, or when ideas are overflowing but I am unceasingly distracted. As much of a struggle as it can be, this is a relationship with a partner to whom I am deeply committed. Thus far, to me, this union has led to each of my pieces being somehow *better*, more “sound” in its craft and structure, more mature and more articulate than the work that preceded it. And, I note to myself, each work has several passages or sections in which my imagination has led me to try something new, as well as passages in which I try to make more effective the “something new” that my imagination had led me to in an earlier work. Despite the struggle, I’m growing from the partnership.

This relationship was formed and is nurtured in pursuit of the “musical magic” I embrace and feel the impulse to create. That magic is about communication, above all. I don’t mean communication of an extramusical sort; I’m talking about the kind of communication to be found in a dance troupe, a theatre company, a sports team, or even in the day-to-day interaction among and between people on a personal level.

The communication I’m after—what I want my music to encourage—is a very intense communication *among* the performers, the participants (the congregation?). Of course, a drama should unfold through the organization of musical ideas, but a parallel drama should unfold within the ensemble as players concentrate and coordinate their efforts toward a common goal. In the case of my music, that goal is my imagination’s “über-instrument.” When that happens, when the ensemble’s efforts are truly focused, then the musical phrases, gestures, and drama that emerge are startlingly vibrant to me: the performance hall quite literally seems to vibrate. When I’ve witnessed this communication and connection among performers of my music, then I feel I’ve succeeded in my goal.

In the process of trying to create such catalysts, I do not see my job as a composer to be that of finding and molding ideas so that they will fit into some world that seems “right” but, on the contrary, to create the worlds into which my ideas live and breathe. My efforts to imagine such worlds test the limits of my imagination. And I will confront the limitations of my style—bringing about evolution in new directions—by working to find appropriate materials and techniques to realize these worlds at the boundaries of my imagination.

Our tradition is filled with composers whose *styles* (choices that express musical values) somehow remain consistent even as their syntax is modified. It seems that if one’s aesthetic is well developed and secure, then the most identifiable elements of one’s style transcend syntactical choices. The works of Stravinsky and Picasso, for example, are easily identifiable

regardless of the language they use in different periods of their careers. Even while I obviously cannot yet know how, if at all, my syntax—or other elements of my style—may change in the course of the musical investigations to come, I think that whatever limitations I will face will be related to limitations of my curiosity. If I continue to listen to and look at the work of a wide variety of artists, then my sensibility and aesthetic will broaden and deepen in as yet unknown directions, and I will continue to find excitement in my relationship with my creativity.

Notes

1. Ross Bauer and David Rakowski.
2. Strunk and White: 53.
3. With thanks to my colleagues Jeff Jarvis, Thomas Huener, Britt Theurer, Margaret Bauer, and Todd Finley.
4. With thanks to Chris Finckel, cello, and Marilyn Nonken, piano!
5. "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion" (Eliot 1920).
6. Strunk and White: 70.
7. Strunk and White: 53.

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