

Leaving the Ivory Tower

By Dan Wanner

My decision to be a composer was informed by a process of elimination as much as by my talent-driven desire to write music. Growing up in Miami Beach, I had a dedicated piano teacher, but my many years of half-hearted study as a child and teenager eventually led me to eliminate performing as a career option. I then followed a fairly typical progression, clambering from disheartened pre-med student to ecstatic music major to bewildered D.M.A. candidate—guided by teachers who led me from a period where I could write pages of music every day to a period where I could write a single page of music every year. Exaggerations aside, my mentors by and large knew when to lead and when to let me wander along my own course, and I will be forever grateful for their efforts. Indeed, if not for a particularly energetic graduate student exposing me to the joys of *Rite of Spring* and *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, I would never seriously have considered music as a profession. My brief career as a professor turned out to be a mixed blessing, as did my even briefer career as a program editor. If not for a revelatory event—which I'll get to later on—I might still be searching for the proper outlet for my creativity.

But first, a brief look at the fruits of my labors as a grad student, as they shed some light on my current compositional techniques. My Piano Concerto is a good example of the type of music I felt compelled to write during my university days. It was written during a scorching New York summer with a fall deadline, which just so happen to be ideal conditions for a composition: I've discovered a distinct need for discomfort to be creative. My best music thus tends to be written (a) on a deadline—perfect for imposing a nervous tension, (b) when the temperature is hot enough for me to perspire onto my manuscript paper—this may have something to do with growing up in Miami Beach, and (c) with strictly imposed limitations—necessity is indeed the mother of invention.

To comply with my last requirement for discomfort, I employ strictly enforced developmental techniques, with a majority of my compositional decisions dictated in some way by the almighty motive. After much experimenting, I determined that the working out of ideas from a central motive or set of motives is far and away the most artistically productive. By “development” I mean having most or all of my gestures follow the essence of a central motive, usually stated at or near the beginning of a work. For me, music has always been about development; nothing beats those moments in music when the potential of a simple concept is realized.

While incorporating simple developmental techniques, many of my graduate school compositions were also influenced by Schenker's voice-leading, Bartók's formal structures, and the free atonality of Expressionism. Back then I was so enamored of Webern that I avoided all doublings and any possible tonal relations. In other words, I was suffering from a minor case of hyper-self-conscious compositional technique. I chose to compose atonally because, simply put, I like the quality of "crunchy" chords. But even though I took pains to avoid tonal relations in my grad school pieces, I was unable to completely give up on a hierarchy of pitches. I felt that such hierarchies helped define focal points for the listener and that their absence meant a loss of focus, which could not be adequately produced by other compositional techniques. The ensuing struggle to merge atonality and a hierarchy of pitches brought about a number of interesting studies.

This leads me back to my Piano Concerto, a lengthy opus that is currently collecting dust on my bookshelf. A good example of my struggle to work with pitch relations within an atonal language is found in the first movement, which is a series of variations over a ground bass (fig. 1).

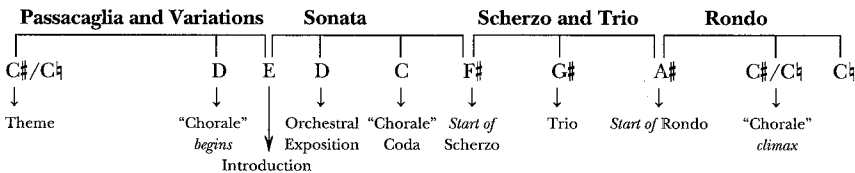
Important moments in the subsequent movements are delineated with unison "announcements" of pitches that follow the retrograde of the bass line of the opening passacaglia (fig. 2).

The bass line serves local purposes as well; for example, the harmonic motion of the first variation is based on the retrograde of the initial-theme

Figure 1: Ground bass from the passacaglia of the Piano Concerto.



Figure 2: Unison "announcements" in the Piano Concerto.



bass line (fig. 3), and the third variation (a piano solo) begins with a statement of a retrograde (starting on the fifth note) of the bass line (fig. 4).

Another interesting aspect of the Piano Concerto is how it deals with a proportionality of time: the movements were all carefully planned to have an exact temporal relationship to one another. For example, the overall movement lengths are 7.5, 10, 2.5, and 5 minutes (or 3x, 4x, x, and 2x; incidentally, the pitch classes [2 3 0 1] are also important as thematic material). The internal sections of each movement are also related temporally (fig. 5).

However clever this appeared to me at the time—and indeed I thought it was very clever—I was still struck by how arbitrary my compositional decisions seemed, in terms of both pitch and timing. In my next work, *Unitych*, for violin and cello, I avoided such “clever” approaches to my craft—which never really felt natural—and instead focused on making the music as appealing as possible. I wanted to write the type of atonal piece that I hadn’t composed before: one that succeeds on a first listening.

Unitych is probably the most successful of my atonal compositions to date; it is five minutes of heady and angry and rhythmically engaging music. I essentially thought of the overall form as a written-out decrescendo, taken from the opening gesture of the piece (fig. 6).

Figure 3: Harmonic motion of first variation as retrograde of bass line.



Figure 4: Beginning of third variation as retrograde (R5) of the ground bass.

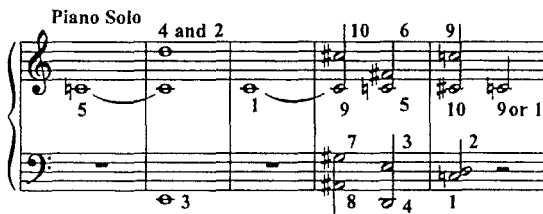


Figure 5: Temporal relationships between movements of Piano Concerto.

Passacaglia and Variations

Theme	Var. 1	Var. 2	Var. 3	Var. 4	Var. 5	Var. 6	Var. 7	Var. 8
1.5 min.	1 min.	.5 min.	1 min.	.5 min.	.5 min.	.5 min.	1.5 min.	.5 min.

Sonata

Introduction	Orch+Solo Expositions	Development	(Cadenza)	Recapitulation	Coda
.5 min.	3 min. (1+2 min.)	3 min.	1 min.	2 min. (.5+1.5 min.)	.5 min.

Scherzo and Trio

Scherzo	Trio	Scherzo Recapitulation
1 min.	1 min.	.5 min.

Rondo

A	B	A	C	A	"Chorale"	Coda
.5 min.	.5 min.	.5 min.	.5 min.	.5 min.	1.5 min.	1 min.



Figure 6: *Unitych*, mm. 1-4.

The decrescendo is one of intensity: the energy accumulated from the violent opening section gradually dissipates as the piece progresses. Unlike the Piano Concerto, *Unitych* succeeds because the motives are simple, the gestures overtly related, the important pitches repeated often enough to get an audible sense of their importance. For example, the opening measures are centered around B \flat (fig. 6), which appears on enough downbeats and accentuated moments that I consider the piece to be “in B \flat .” Fairly consistent triplet figuration (fig. 7) gives way to a more fragmented texture (fig. 8) and, ultimately, a slow, quiet conclusion.

Figure 7: Triplet figuration in *Unitych*.

28 Presto $\text{♩} = 180$

fff *f* *fff*

fff *f* *fff*

Figure 8: Fragmented texture in *Unitych*.

46

(jeté)

50

mf *fff*

mf *fff*

The choice of motive—the decrescendo—is simplicity itself. I had tried such simple organic compositions for many years; but my earlier efforts—like *Vortex*, which is an attempt at a piece that spins ever faster and intensely toward a center, like a written-out crescendo—are less successful. Thus, *Unitych* succeeds where the Piano Concerto fails, thanks to its clarity: the motive in *Unitych* is easier to recognize, the pitch relations are fairly clear, and the piece is decidedly short—factors that I feel are important when dealing with free atonality.

Still, I was not entirely satisfied with the compositional course I had followed up to this time. Looking back on the Piano Concerto and *Unitych*,

several key questions come to mind concerning my approach to composition, an approach with which I did not feel entirely comfortable for one key reason. Did I approve of the type of development used in such works as *Unitych* and my Piano Concerto, one that is based on a single, relatively simple concept? Yes. Was this kind of developmental music fun to compose? Yes. Is the development (i.e., “fun stuff”) audible? Well . . . no. And therein lay my greatest problem—indeed, an ongoing problem.

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In late 1997 I was finishing the final cue of my first film score—to a short movie by a graduate student—and thought some simple piano chords would adequately capture the essence of the scene, which evoked both calmness from a long journey completed and palpable unease regarding an uncertain future. As I worked, I came to the shocking realization that it had been several years since I had written (outside of practice exercises) a major chord in one of my compositions. My fear of major chords was due to that hyper-self-conscious compositional technique I mentioned earlier. I recognized how important it was for me to treat this irrational fear; many “music therapy” sessions dealing with augmented and diminished chords led me to memories of the minor mode and finally ended with that breakthrough moment when I understood the basis of my fear of the major chord. It was a tough process, and I emerged scarred but intact. And although I am still leery of the major mode, I have learned to accept its power and use that power to my own advantage.

An even more important revelation from the film scoring episode was the realization that I loved the whole process of setting a film to music: the interaction with directors and producers, the challenge of writing music to an existing scene, the satisfaction of seeing my name up in lights. Without sounding too melodramatic, I had found a true outlet for my music that finally made sense. With film scoring, my passion for composing had returned, a passion that had vanished since those days before grad school, when I had been able to compose pages of music at every sitting.

I have to admit that I entered the film music scene with some hesitation, partially due to my university background and partially due to my limited knowledge of film music in general. My uncertainty, fueled by my ignorance of film music history, was intensified by how negatively I perceived the Hollywood composer. André Previn, who experienced some backlash from his early Hollywood days, writes in *No Minor Chords: My Early Days in Hollywood* that typically “the maligning comes from people who have never lived there, because if they had they would have found a musical community of the deepest culture and the most remarkable musi-

cians" (qtd. in Thomas 1997: 42). With the popularity of independent films and the emergence of the home recording studio, the film music community is no longer confined to Hollywood. But my own experiences with this new, expanded "Hollywood" film music community—both in the quality of live performance in the studio, and technique among my composer peers—make me wholeheartedly agree with Previn's assessment.

I dealt with my lack of knowledge of film music through study. By approaching the music of my favorite films with the same ears I do classical music, I came to appreciate how much high-quality music has been, and continues to be, written for films. Sure, there is a lot of garbage on the silver screen, but in my experience the ratio of quality music to garbage is about the same in films as it is in the contemporary classical scene. My favorite film scores display a wonderful variety of developmental approaches to music. Take a classic film like the western *Once upon a Time in the West*, where Ennio Morricone's use of developmental techniques in the early scenes accurately mimics the character development later on in the film. Or a less complicated score like the one to the war film *Saving Private Ryan*, where John Williams's transitional passages function both to conclude a scene and to begin a new one, simultaneously releasing tension and building momentum. Or even something like Alan Silvestri's score to the action-adventure sci-fi film *Predator*, which uses simple but engaging motivic development to cleverly derive new thematic material and in turn propel the action forward.

My interest in film music is not really unusual for classically trained composers. A number of "serious" composers have written for films, even back in the days when film music was the ultimate neglected art: Thomson, Copland, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Leonard Bernstein are just a few examples. Even today, many composers from the older generation (including James Horner of *Titanic* fame) and the younger generation (including Marco Beltrami of *Scream* infamy) have, or are working on, their doctorates. And don't forget long-time academician John Corigliano's recent Academy Award. Or Tan Dun. Is it possible that the university composer has come to respect Hollywood? It's quite possible, but it's also true that film scoring has the potential to be far more lucrative than academia. And since movies can potentially reach millions of viewers, scoring for films is much more enticing for the composer with a healthy ego, who needs and craves public approval.

Still, as the classic film composer Victor Young wrote, "Why, indeed, would any trained musician let himself in for a career that calls for the exactitude of an Einstein, the diplomacy of a Churchill, and the patience of a martyr?" (qtd. in Thomas 1997: 55). A more modern list would have to include the tough skin of a masochist and the schmoozing skills of a Bill

Clinton. The longer I struggle in the film music industry, the more often I find myself muttering “Why, indeed?” But with film scoring, my passion for composing has returned; for that reason alone the struggles are worthwhile.

My score for the opening credits to *Bigger*, a never-released action film, is at times dissonant and challenging, yet my use of simple motives and rhythmic consistency makes the piece easily accessible. After some introductory flourishes—the C \flat to C \sharp dyad establishes itself as the important motive of the cue—the piece settles down into a simple rhythmic ostinato built on quarter-, eighth-, and sixteenth-note patterns (fig. 9).

Harmonically, the piece remains within a tonal framework while using a healthy dose of “crunchy” chords. The bass line, beginning on C \flat , gradually moves to a relatively unstable G/C \sharp and then back to the relatively stable C \flat (fig. 10) in preparation for a gradual build-up leading to the climax of the piece.

The push to the climax maintains these ostinati, the texture becomes denser, and the instrumental range increases. This culminates in a “stinger,” an exact moment on screen that is accentuated by a musical gesture (last beat of m. 32) and an immediate release of the built-up tension (fig. 11). The work ends with a slow, concluding passage in D \flat /C \sharp , so

Figure 9: Rhythmic ostinati in *Bigger*.



Figure 10: Harmonic motion in *Bigger*.

each beat repeated 4 times

16

20

Figure 11: Climax of *Bigger*.

The musical score for the climax of *Bigger* is presented in three systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs).
 System 1 (measures 28-29): The right hand features a complex, chromatic arpeggiated pattern. The left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. A *cresc.* (crescendo) marking is present in the right hand.
 System 2 (measures 30-31): The right hand continues with the arpeggiated pattern, now including sixteenth-note runs. The left hand accompaniment remains. A second *cresc.* marking is present.
 System 3 (measures 32-33): The right hand reaches a peak with a *fff* (fortissimo) dynamic. The left hand accompaniment continues. The system concludes with a *dim. molto* (diminuendo molto) marking and a final chord.

that the long-range harmonic motion of the entire two-minute work follows the opening motive, from C to C#.

Looking now at *Bigger*, I ask myself the same questions I did at the end of grad school: Is the development based on a single, relatively simple concept? Yes. Is the music fun to compose? Yes. And—this was the sticking point before—is the “fun stuff” audible? It sure is, even on a first hearing, which is usually all you get in films. After all, people don’t come to the movie theater to hear music.

Reference

Thomas, Tony. 1997. *Music for the Movies*. Los Angeles: Silman-James Press.