

On Plurality

By *Duncan Neilson*

When asked why I write music the way I do, the first thing that came to mind was a story: the story of the blind men and the elephant. So it will help to start with a telling of this story, a parable, and it goes like this: Six learned men, all blind, go to visit an elephant. The first bumps into the side and describes the elephant as a wall. The second feels the tusk and describes the elephant as a spear. The third feels the trunk and calls the elephant a snake. The fourth feels the elephant's knee and thinks that it is a tree. The fifth touches the ear and calls the elephant a fan. The sixth grabs the tail and describes the elephant as a rope. When the blind men reconvene and compare stories they argue loudly and completely dispute each other's opinions. And so the parable concludes that although each blind man was partly right, they all were in the wrong!

So.

I am one of the blind men. A composer. And the elephant is sound and music. Metaphorically speaking, I work hard to faithfully describe the portion of the wild creature that I perceive—the sound, the timbre, the rhythm, the style. And I agree with the elephant parable right up to the ending, but here is where I part ways. There are other composers, other blind men, and their claims are important. So instead of disputing their claims I have begun to listen.

I wasn't always this way. When I was in college, if you didn't like Stravinsky or the Talking Heads, I would have proven you wrong, loudly. In fact, had you disagreed, I may have thought that you were an imbecile. So of course my friends tended to like Stravinsky or the Talking Heads, or at least wouldn't give me a hard time about it. We had our little clique. And all that I read or listened to tended to reinforce my opinions. Sure, I considered myself open-minded, but if you liked Bob Dylan or John Cage, forget about it! And if the composition that you wrote didn't resemble the style or the substance of my composition, I really thought that you were barking up the wrong tree. So the composing equation was easy: people who were like me were smart, and people who were unlike me, dumb. Thankfully, something was about to happen in my life that would make me abandon this way of thinking—abandon, in fact, just about everything for a while. This was the day I walked, like a blind man, smack into the Berlin Wall.

Berlin was the first crack in the shell of my comfortable reality. I lived and studied in Berlin in 1990, when the wall was coming down. I found

that to really understand the insanity of the wall—to feel it and not simply shut it out—one had to go a little crazy. One had to leave the familiar realm of order, and things having to make sense. In Berlin, the artificial borders were being broken down and things were changing so quickly that there wasn't time for answers—just constant questions. Would the Russians be invading? Would there be a peaceful transition? Would there be violence? Would democracy prevail? Nobody really knew what was happening at the time. News was outdated as soon as it was printed. Every day the Berlin Wall was eroding away from hammer blows on both sides, and the armed border guards weren't firing a shot. There was an incredible feeling of elation in the air. But how long would it last?

Of the many memories I have of Berlin at this time, one still haunts me. One evening I visited the wall just before sunset. Hundreds of crows, giant flocks of them, would gather in an open area on the western side. They'd cackle and crow and generally make a ruckus. Then suddenly they'd lift into the air, fly over the wall and land on the far side. I couldn't see them on the far side but I could still hear them. So I'd watch the sunset colors developing and glance at the candy-colored graffiti gracing the western side of the wall. And soon enough the crows would come flying over again, cackling and cawing and laughing. And suddenly it dawned on me. The crows. They're laughing. What an unbelievable comedy! How many families did this wall break up? How many dreams and lives did the wall try to contain? How much money and human labor did it take to build it? To maintain it? How many died trying to cross it? And here were these crows flying freely across the wall, this enormous barrier to human understanding. The crows were laughing. I began laughing too.

I've been a border crosser ever since. At first I rebelled from the sense of the wall. So in Berlin I was attracted to music that appeared to have no borders. I went to performances of free jazz. I saw John Zorn's *Naked City*. I listened to electronic music and recordings of hip-hop that used lots of genre-crossing sampling. To me, the borders were down, and I liked music that crossed genres, blended styles. Later, when I returned to the States, and I resumed my piano and composition studies in Portland, Oregon, I got a job at the best record store in town. And not only did I want to listen to music that blended styles, I wanted to listen to *everything*. So my paycheck was recycled right back into the store. I would come home with armloads of CDs. By day I'd practice my Beethoven and Prokofiev, and by night I'd listen to Bob Dylan, Stockhausen, punk rock, Cassandra Wilson, *taiko* drumming, everything. I just listened, listened, listened. Suddenly the world of music was wide open.

Over the years this activity has developed into a composition philosophy. It's less an official philosophy and more something that just seems to

work for me. There are three parts. The first is this: avoiding the hardening of artistic categories. Hardening of artistic categories is the same as hardening of the arteries. It prohibits flow—the flow of creative blood, the flow of ideas. It is very important to know the distinctions between categories, to know the similarities and differences. But if the borders become too rigid and too exclusive, then I see aspects of the Berlin Wall creeping in. Hardening of the categories is often an attempt to isolate or silence voices that seem contrary. And the real lesson I learned from the Berlin Wall is that it's important for all voices to be heard. Even if the voice seems contradictory. So, maintaining a balance between recognizing categories but at the same time not allowing them to become overly rigid is important.

Secondly, I find it is important to define and set boundaries around your own musical identity, then set your identity on the shelf and genuinely step into another person's perspective. This may sound easy but in practice I have found that it is not. In fact, it's one of the most difficult things I have tried. To genuinely understand someone else's viewpoint, instead of simply tolerating it, takes time and attention. This is time and attention that I once would have spent on making sure that everyone understood my music, my views. The process of knowing your identity and then setting it aside to experience someone else's viewpoint is a back-and-forth process. By experiencing a new perspective, you provide contrast to your own identity, which may have become static. You also offer yourself a chance to expand the horizons of your own identity if you choose to do so. And just because you have explored a new philosophy, doesn't mean that you'll adopt it. I believe that this process, though difficult, is important and healthy. Otherwise, stories like the blind men and the elephant come true, in which each person is unable to comprehend the other's viewpoint, and thus each misses the larger picture.

Thirdly, I believe that pluralism is a good idea. I tend to be a pluralist in my work. My work encompasses many styles and idioms. Others may not approach composition in this way. That's okay. What is important is that each composer, regardless of style, be given a chance for his or her unique viewpoint to come through. This is pluralism. For a teacher, this is difficult to put into practice because it is so easy to impose one's unsolicited viewpoint, to tell a student, "Yes, that's fine, but I would write it this way." The music that is important in my life may differ strongly from the music in someone else's life. That's fine, too. The fact is that music is still important in people's lives. And just like the blind men who each called the elephant a wall, a spear, a snake, a tree, a fan, and a rope, there's a good chance that we as composers are experiencing different parts of the metaphorical elephant.

Since Berlin, I've been inspired to write music in many different styles and for a wide range of performing ensembles (chamber groups, orchestras, vocal groups, electronic media, experimental theater, and rock groups). I will focus the discussion here on solo piano, the instrument on which I was trained as a performer, and expand the plurality discussion from Berlin to my current place of residence, New York City.

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If a piano were to relax, as we humans keep trying to do, it would be something else altogether. A piano is full of suppressed desires, recalcitrance, inhibition, conflict. Yet because its opposing forces are carefully balanced, they are still.

—Anita T. Sullivan

The opposing forces within a piano (wire, wood, steel) strike me as emblematic of life in New York City. Two of my recent piano compositions, *Hyperfiction* and *Butterfly Zone*, are influenced by different sides of New York, and offer contrasting glimpses of the city. They also exemplify the boundary-crossing aesthetic mentioned above.

Hyperfiction is a group of sonic postcards. The pieces distill urban energy, alternating mad, frenetic episodes with moments of quiet and repose. Like postcards, each piece conveys a lot of information in very little space. Sudden, even violent, contrasts between consonance and dissonance, softness and loudness, politeness and rudeness erupt. Different musical styles mingle and collide like taxis on Broadway. One of these "postcards," *attract opposites*, combines sweet melody and random noise-outbursts, a conversation between complete opposites stuck in an elevator. A second piece, *sci-fi*, is a condensation of B-movie sci-fi. In this piece, hostile aliens and Godzilla really do stomp through New York City—cartoon laser blasts and all.

A third piece, *tangle lesson*, starts off like a normal tango and then gets hijacked. The piece was influenced by a time I was sitting at a bar and thirty people barged in, having just left a tango movie, and they took over the stereo (much to the waitress's chagrin). As the couples danced to scratchy tango records, one record began to skip, at which point everyone stumbled. That wonderful moment of mayhem suggested the piece—thus the broken tango of *tangle lesson*. There are twelve "postcard pieces" in all, ranging from about thirty seconds to two-and-a-half minutes in length. Ordering the pieces within the set was like juggling twelve well-shaken bottles of soda.

Hyperfiction is similar to the channel-surfing aesthetic of the late '80s and early '90s, when videos/movies sped through images so quickly that it prompted discussions of information overload and short attention spans

of listeners and viewers. A few “protest” videos came out at this time, filmed in black and white, with long, unflinching camera shots of musicians who never once lost eye contact with the camera and viewer. It was almost uncomfortable to watch—one was tempted to look away. *Butterfly Zone* is similar to this aesthetic in that it provides long stretches of sonic fabric, in contrast to the quick-splice aesthetic of *Hyperfiction*. Where *Hyperfiction* rewards the short attention span, *Butterfly Zone* rewards longer contemplation.

Butterfly Zone is dedicated to the outdoor enclosure (of the same name) that appears each summer at the Bronx Zoo, housing thousands of brightly colored, iridescent butterflies. Visitors are surrounded by butterflies when walking through the enclosure, and are allowed a close-range view of many common and rare varieties. Inside the Butterfly Zone I lose track of time. Fifteen minutes go by in what feels like five. The flight of thousands of butterflies creates an atmosphere inside the Butterfly Zone that constantly changes, yet remains the same. Musically, I thought I could represent this by juxtaposing short melodic patterns (butterflies), and slightly offsetting them (flight). Thus the same pattern is heard in both hands at the piano, and then one hand adds a note. After a number of repetitions the pattern will eventually realign, at which point two notes are added and the pattern modulates. This process continues on up through six added notes, and creates the illusion of constant sameness and constant change.

The four-part design of the piece includes: (1) butterflies (repetitive patterns); (2) enclosure (an “invisible” group of notes deep in the bass, suspended by the middle pedal, which creates background resonances); (3) sunlight (loudness and softness); and (4) humidity (pedal and no pedal). Just as any two visits to the Butterfly Zone may differ (due to weather conditions, crowd size, etc.), any two performances of the piece will have great potential for variation. The performer is free to add dynamics and pedalings at will. *Hyperfiction* and *Butterfly Zone* are contrasting observations of life in New York City, played out in the “carefully balanced” yet tension-filled medium of the piano.

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There is great power, and humor, in opposites. This was an unexpected artistic lesson learned from the Berlin Wall. Granted, I hope to never see another Berlin Wall. The Wall was a painful divide masking the shared humanity of a country. So I’m very pleased that it’s gone. (Actually, I wish a small part of it were still standing so that people could see what a crazy idea it was.) But I also find that in the realm of art and music, creating boundaries to highlight contrasts can be very powerful, and even very humorous.

Extreme juxtapositions of dark and light, naïveté and evil, loud and soft, and consonance and dissonance are exciting to me. Because setting up these opposing forces in a work of art can be deeply satisfying and deeply humorous, I sometimes juxtapose these kinds of opposites when I'm writing. And I feel like the crows over the Berlin Wall, flying freely back and forth over the artificial boundaries. It's interesting to apply some of those principles of extreme contrast to works of art. Again, I don't want to see the Berlin Wall reappear in reality. That's something that even the arguing blind men could probably agree upon: the Berlin Wall wasn't a very good idea.

So, to return to the opening metaphor, I am one of the blind men. I perceive a part of the sonic puzzle. I write it down. Like the other blind men, I used to argue when I would encounter pieces that seemed to contradict mine. But, over time, this has slowly changed. Though I am far from perfect in this endeavor, I am less content to argue now. I am more likely to listen.

Reference

Sullivan, Anita T. 1985. *The Seventh Dragon*. Lake Oswego, OR: Metamorphous Press. Epigraph from page 11.