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In Pursuit of the Positive
(Evading Expressionism If You Want To)

Dennis Kam
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I.

I wish to preface this paper with a few remarks in order to qualify some of the ideas presented -- for I believe that an understanding of their nature and intent, as well as the context out of which they arise, is as important as an understanding of their meaning. In fact, in the event that you disagree with my ideas, I will be satisfied if you at least understand why I propose them.

First, I would like to say that I speak from the standpoint of a practicing composer -- not of a scientist or researcher, supporting ideas with data obtained from statistical or experimental studies. Ideas in this paper emanate primarily from direct involvement with composing and all that it entails -- and numerous moments of reflection on what it is all about -- rather than from mere observation, research, speculation, or theorizing. (I should mention, however, that as composers, we listen and react to a lot of music.)

While I realize that some of my notions may lack the kind of data offering empirical verification for belief and assent, I also believe that ideas verified or bolstered by, for example, statistical surveys of human perception are problematic because human reactions, feelings, and thoughts change over periods of time -- and therefore cannot be conclusively reliable in describing modes of perception in art and

music, which by nature, are also in constant flux. Obviously, this is not to say that statistical research is without value for it can provide concrete evidence for widely accepted or long-held beliefs and intuitive assumptions that are often true. Yet, even if information obtained from statistical tools were considered to be useful in establishing support for ideas within a certain time frame, they would still depend upon too many variables to be definitive or all inclusive. I sense that you and I, who are involved in the actual activity of composing, are liable to be more suspicious of supporting our beliefs with this sort of research than others who do not compose; we are more sensitive to its epistemological limitations.

Actually if anything, my personal slant to compositional issues has been influenced mostly by relatively recent thought in aesthetics and the philosophy of science. In these realms, I am especially indebted to a variety of scholars such as Peter Kivy, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Stephen Davies, Thomas Kuhn, and Paul Feyerabend. I mention their names because I have learned much from their writings and believe that they should be read by all composers. Unfortunately, time constraints and the nature of this presentation will preclude any attempt to deal with their superb work here. In addition, my approach will necessitate that ideas be stated without much scholarly documentation and elaboration. For this reason, you may feel that I open doors to many issues surrounding the central issue -- some of them in closets -- without letting you in. I hope that this will nevertheless create, in effect, some dialogue regarding these issues.

The second thing that I would like to say, with prefatory intent, is that my ideas should not be taken as *prescriptive*. No doubt, the

nature and tone of my assertions may wrongfully imply that I suggest a direction for all composers, so I issue this caution at the outset of this paper. There is always a dangerous tendency in the compositional community to confuse conviction, commitment, and even experience with truth. Rather than prescribe any direction or method, I intend to merely *provoke* some questioning, thinking and sensitivity in regards to *what* we as composers *say* in our compositions, what kind of effect our compositions may have, and a problem we face if our music has expressionist features. Connected to all of this is the view that our music has some kind of meaning despite intentions. Thus, if I am accused of attempting to prescribe anything, it should only be my insistence that composers be concerned about the *semantics* of their musical utterances. This issue comes as a result of questioning and introspection that has existed on the emotional as well as the intellectual side of my compositional life during the last two decades.

II.

My ideas revolve around a fundamental interest in exploiting and pursuing possibilities of remaining contemporary without having to rely or depend on features linked to expressionism, which I believe is still influential -- especially in the academy. In other words, is it possible to escape the dominating stylistic paradigm of musical expressionism in order for us to compose music that is considered contemporary or progressive? In general, this interest emanates from a perception and concern that, even with the best or most innocent intentions to compose absolute, non-programmatic, or non-referential

music, much of what has been composed by us (if our music has fallen into categories such as contemporary, avant-garde, or "new") produces negative rather than positive feelings in audiences. Frankly, I have come to the conclusion that many compositional resources, especially those linked to expressionism in twentieth-century music, have naturally conveyed or been associated with meanings or moods possessing negative connotations such as anxiety, fear, dread, depression, tension, conflict, and violence -- just to name a few. Thus if there is truth to any of this, my concern would be whether it is possible to compose contemporary concert music with a positive flavor? (I underscore *my* because I realize that there are those who may not be concerned about the positive and may even prefer to deal with the negative.)

While it is not my intention to deal with expressionism with any thoroughness, it should be discussed briefly so that we speak about the same thing. A definition found in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* is: "a theory or practice in art of seeking to depict not objective reality but the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse in the artist." Note the stress on the predominance of the subjective (inner world) over the objective (outer world); in music, I think of expressionism as an exaggerated variety of romanticism. Now, if we stop with this general definition, expressionism may have been present in all eras of music. However, when I speak of expressionism in this paper, I refer to the prominent variety commonly associated with the Second Viennese tradition -- one that was related to German Expressionism in painting and literature, and that assumed specific characteristics influenced by a specific

intellectual or emotional predisposition in the twentieth-century: a **tendency towards subjectivity or inner experiences steeped in the darker sides of reality**. This trait has often been related to ideas about the self as described in twentieth-century psychology, of which Sigmund Freud was a powerful figure. The ambiance of turmoil and suffering resulting from World War I has also been pointed to as an influential factor. While Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern have been thought of as usual representatives of this tradition, many other composers can also be seen as falling into an expressionist esthetic. Elliot Carter -- one who evolved into expressionism after leaving an earlier neoclassic mode -- in his essay Expressionism and American Music (Perspectives on American Composers, ed. Benjamin and Edward T. Cone. New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), pointed to Americans such as Cowell, Ruggles, Ives, and Varese as having had expressionist tendencies. Actually a list composers who have written expressionist music would encompass many composers in the twentieth-century. You and I have probably written some.

Although musical techniques from this tradition and esthetic are now thoroughly familiar, respected, established academically, and perhaps even embraced "emotionally" by many of us, we have tended to forget the expressive milieu from which they arose. And in our preoccupation with the technical aspects of this music, we have also tended to forget that compositional advancements and resources originating in this tradition -- atonality, pointillism, melodic fragmentation, distortion, disjunct or irregular rhythmic structures, contorted gestures, etc. -- inherently complemented and served the expressive ends of Expressionism. We need to remember that

associations of atonality and its concomitant characteristics with Expressionism became normative. Even the works of Webern or post-Webern composers resulting from more abstract, formal, or non-programmatic (non-referential) intentions, but yet possessing expressionist characteristics, could not escape the natural associations with the negative ambience of Expressionism. This may be a significant reason why "angst-filled" music is still not easily embraced or accepted by the musical layperson, not excluding music professionals.

For decades, many (of us) in the composition community have believed that lack of familiarity or exposure, inadequate education, and the deterioration of cultural values are essential reasons why expressionist music has not become an integral part of our culture. We have optimistically believed that, in time, this "sophisticated" music would eventually become familiar as the music of Mozart and Beethoven. And in our zeal to correct the situation as educators as well as composers and apologists, we have explained "new" music by focusing on **sonic** and **syntactic** aspects. Yet, from a broad and somewhat candid point of view - - and especially with Expressionism as a case in point -- we might conclude that many listeners do not care for certain kinds of twentieth-century music because they also have difficulties with the **semantic** and **sentient** components of the music as well. This may be a primary reason why expressionist music still has not penetrated normal concert venues except for the few in which twentieth-century music has been programmed by specialists or benevolent performers intending to represent this historically significant music. This is why the usual venue for this music are still

"new" music concerts, conferences, of festivals. This is why this music is heard primarily in films - - when negativity and /or tension are being supported sonically. With this uncomfortable situation, this is why composers with an atonal orientation may prefer abstraction (or "music for its own sake" positions) and would rather deal with technical aspects than with meaning or content. The limited status and reception of expressionist music has not and probably will not change because of its specialized meanings and moods.

III

In this country, those of us developing and evolving as composers in the academy during the decade of the 1960s can well remember the excitement generated by the world of atonality and serialism. In many ways, the growing influence of this world stimulated divisions within the composition community. There were: 1) progressives who responded favorably to atonality, 2) conservatives who were influenced more by the music of Hindemith and/or Bartok, and 3) ultra-conservatives or traditionalists who still hung on to tonal foundations of the past; among these, Americans influenced by Howard Hanson at Eastman were clear representatives of this group.

I remember personally becoming enamored with the music of Webern, fervently studying his scores and listening to every recording of his music that were available in the early 1960s; recordings of contemporary music in general were scarce then. By the time I graduated (from Oberlin) as an undergraduate, I had become a card-carrying serialist confident of my compositional direction and certain

of what I thought to be compositional "truth." In my mind, the compositional world was simple with clear avenues. It appeared easily categorized into "them and us", us being those who were not only ahead of the times but heirs a historical mainstream. Every new work of Stockhausen, Boulez, Castiglioni, Nono, and Berio confirmed this world view and proved to be musically invigorating if not profound. And even throughout the years as a graduate student (at the University of Illinois), the pursuit and discovery of novel compositional ideas and techniques (I should point out -- without concern about musical semantics) seemed to possess a power and excitement that I have not seen duplicated since then. This was also a time when coming to grips with the combinatorial world of Babbitt was considered to be the height of compositional sophistication.

As we are well aware, things were changing rapidly and dramatically -- even within a span of a decade. By the mid-sixties, the works of Penderecki, Xenakis, Riley, and even Cage shook the compositional certainty (or snobbery) of the serial world by opening up the compositional world to new directions. For many -- including myself -- the resulting pluralism was exciting and led to a revisiting of many basic issues. While the concept of meaning may not have been an important issue then, the minimalism of Riley (In C) and Reich brought to the surface an awareness of alternative moods for music of our time. In other words, it was not only the technical features in this music -- that were obviously different from those of the Germanic orientation -- but the possibility of different feelings or moods that aroused an interest, or in retrospect, an empathetic cord (so to speak) in many of us. I have come to conclude that aspects such as the

slowdown of "information", rhythmic regularity, and an "emancipated" consonance in minimalist music contributed to a more positive mood. In subsequent years, I believe that others like myself have even come to naturally think and feel, disregarding meaning or mood, that the serial or atonal sound -- once was so prominent in our compositional life -- to be dated or out of touch with progressive developments. Ironically, among the numerous directions available to composers, the atonal orientation emanating from the Second Viennese tradition has been, for at least two decades now, considered to be on the conservative rather than progressive side of the composition spectrum. Borrowing from the words of Thomas Kuhn, "new paradigms" have caused us to view the compositional world differently.

IV

While, as I have warned at the beginning of this paper, it is not my intention to prescribe any compositional direction or technique, I would like to suggest one possible solution to the problem that I have attempted to articulate. Before doing so, let me reiterate that, basically, I have had and still have a progressive orientation to composition. Thus, it has been natural for me to depart gradually from the influences of the now conservative Second Viennese School. Because of this, it is somewhat disconcerting for me to observe young composers still having the impression that one must embrace an expressionist orientation in order to be contemporary even though it is quite understandable since Germanic Expressionism once had such

a revolutionary image and impact in the history of music. But with my bias and concern for the positive in music, it has been more disturbing to see those who have adopted the expressionist vocabulary forget, overlook, neglect, or even deny the existence of negative semantic qualities alluded to in this paper. And as an educator, I find it surprising, if not irritating and at least bothersome, that there still exists the apologetic attitude of one "becoming conservative" if one does not incorporate expected features of expressionism, especially in light of the current state of pluralism in the wider compositional community and the existence of many other innovative possibilities that have developed since the inception of atonality and serialism. I can surmise 1) that the restrained status of expressionist music makes it still seem revolutionary in comparison to what is familiar and most prevalent, 2) that there is a time lag in the understanding of what has happened to twentieth-century music during the last three decades, or 3) that thinking of previous revolutions as still revolutionary is in itself symptomatically the conservative part of a normal cycle. What has been exciting about pluralism -- already proclaimed and described by scholars like Leonard Meyer during the 1960s -- has been the numerous possibilities for continued progress and artistic freedom in contemporary music. Of course, the nature of progress in the arts is, in itself, a complex topic that deserves more time for attention than is available here. What I have to suggest at this juncture is just one possibility for pursuing a more positive expression in our pluralistic situation: **the use of materials out of their normal contexts.**

In 1982, I completed a work for two pianos entitled *The Epistemology of Delicate Time in Blue Three*. Allow me to play a portion from the beginning of the version for solo piano.

Excerpt 1 *The Epistemology of Delicate Time in Blue Three*

At the time that I composed this work, I was not consciously aware of the semantic or sentient aspects that concern me now. However, I can recall being interested in creating a piece of music that was "pleasing" in an old fashioned way to my ear and senses but, at the same time, novel or progressive in approach to aspects such as form, pitch relations, texture, rhythmic distribution, continuity, and psychological time. The best description that I had for the piece -- if I related it to any composers -- was that it was a cross between Scriabin and Feldman.

Now I believe that while this work may be difficult for some to understand or accept especially because of the way it unfolds in time (continuity), it still has an overall pleasant effect in terms of its sound and mood. In other words, while syntax may be a problem for audiences, hopefully sonic, sentient or semantic aspects have more of a positive impact. The positive nature of this excerpt is more evident if I were to contrast it with another "recomposed" version.

Excerpt 2 *The Epistemology of Delicate Time . . . (recomposed)*

I submit that this version has more of a negative effect due to two expressionist aspects in particular. As you have heard and see, events

now comprise atonal sets with more dissonant attributes and are further displaced rhythmically than in the original piece.

The "softer" or more pleasant effect of the original version has much to do with the relatively consonant quality of chosen pitches -- despite the pointillism. On closer examination of the first four measures, you will notice the traditional implication of dominant (C-Bb) to tonic (F-A) oscillations which are disguised or not clearly apparent because of the pointillistic context and the mixing of the two sonorities with the pedal. I don't believe that I was conscious of this kind of implication, which is prevalent throughout the work, when I first began composing this work but it was probably stumbled upon aurally because of a desire to create a "pleasing" sound or, in hindsight, an unconscious desire for a positive mood. At this point, let me just say that traditional elements in non-traditional contexts allowed me to pursue a positive ambiance with a progressive stance. In other words, seeking the positive in no way compromised by progressive and innovative instincts for there were many elements outside the realm and influence of expressionism that could be explored.

Now I am certain that some composers, despite taking semantic and sentient aspects into account, may simply prefer the "sound" of the recomposed version due to a bias against any tonal implications. This is where we probably arrive at an impasse of personal taste for after being intensely committed to and inclined towards this kind of sound for at least a decade, tonal implications in varying contexts frankly sound fresher, more novel, and interesting to my ears.

More recently, I have been more conscious of exploring the effects of contextual differences in my works. In a work entitled *Song in Green*, I superimposed the "spread out" melody from the 2nd movement of my *Fantasy Variations* for flute and piano with chordal material from another work of mine for piano entitled *Paradigm Green*. Listen to both versions.

Example 3 Song from *Fantasy Variations* (1980), 2nd movement

Example 4 *Song in Green* (1994)

I am not sure if one or the other is more positive although my guess would that Example 4 might be perceived to be so because of the clearer and less mysterious texture. However, I do know that these contrasting contexts in which the same melody is presented does create different moods, exhibiting a potential for further study and exploration of other possibilities.

I offer these examples of contextual situations as only one area of exploration. As you know, dealing with context is not without precedent for change of context has been an important aspect in the music of many of today's composers, John Zorn being a good postmodern example. But even back in the 1960s, the use of collage and quotations out of context became a compositional staple in the eclectic music of Crumb and Rochberg. At that time, these techniques provided -- in addition to a fresh approach for composers -- sonic, semantic, and sentient bridges for lay audiences. It is not coincidental that Rochberg eventually was outspoken about leaving the serial world.

I think of the music of Cage depending on contextual factors and even believe that the humor or levity (if not outrage from conservatives) resulting from musical elements existing in unexpected contexts from chance operations, softened the blow of a generally radical and unsettling ambiance, and provided a potential for lessening effects of expressionist features. Ever since, the list of composers seeking alternatives to the Austro-Germanic influence in twentieth-century music has grown enormously. I have thought of the increasing number of "down-town" composers in the academy as a clear sign of this growth.

V

My concern for the positive -- often superseding technical and axiological concerns -- has come from a gradual awareness of my own social, psychological, philosophical, and religious background and orientation. I see this concern as part of an overall attempt to integrate my art with my world view and a way of coming to grips with how my music relates to our American heritage. While I believe that an artist, often alienated from a decadent and superficial society, can be seen as prophet contributing something special or necessary for the preservation or revitalization of culture -- sometimes expressed in counter-cultural or anti-social stances -- I don't believe that one's message needs to reflect or dwell on the negative in order for it to be effective. An artist needs to be in touch with reality in order to communicate, and reality includes the positive.

I can understand why some of us may be wary of this notion. The positive might be associated with entertainment, frivolity, and what's shallow in society. Many of us seeking profound or intense avenues for expression once found expressionist music to be an engaging and attractive option. The negative component of this music was either overlooked or interpreted in our minds to be merely a "romantic" characteristic. For many, a commitment to this music or a German aesthetic has been difficult to shed and thus minimalist and even new romantic developments have just been written off as regressive, simplistic, or lacking in depth.

These recent developments aside, it is seemingly obvious that twentieth-century music does not have to be relegated to negative meanings or moods. Without loss of technical or compositional integrity, I believe that it can possess the potential of competing favorably with popular concert hall favorites by possessing more positive meanings and moods. In this respect, postmodern, "new" romantic, and even minimalist trends -- however we might be disposed to them stylistically or technically -- are examples of attempts to contribute some of this by finding alternatives to expressionist tendencies. It is not coincidental that composers like Adams, Part, and Gorecki have received widespread attention and interest with their music from recent decades. I don't think that their music is embraced because of a return to the past. I believe that their music has messages -- and I include positive ones -- that are *relevant for our time*. Thus, I see all of this as a challenge for us, regardless of what direction, style, or techniques our music might possess, to acknowledge and be aware of 1) *what we say in our music*,

2) *what effect our music may have*, or 3) *how our music is interpreted*.

Life is not a "bowl of cherries" or a "rose garden;" certainly evil and tragedy are part of the human condition, so a responsible artist should be aware of and sensitive to all of it. It is right for an artist, moved by tragic circumstances, to feel compelled to deal with negativity because of its meaningfulness and relevance. German Expressionism was certainly relevant for the cultural milieu of its time. This paper is not meant to disparage or discourage this. It is addressed to those who might not have considered or acknowledged negative meanings or moods associated with an expressionist aesthetic. It is also addressed to those who seek to balance their music with a positive expression, acknowledging the positive side to reality, and its perennial relevance. Why shouldn't art deal with that side as well? Have we composers been drawn or resigned to negative aspects because our compositional resources naturally fit and complement the negative side? Are composers overly enamored with complex musical gestures for the sake of virtuosic display without sensitivity to its possible effects? When undergraduate composers have difficulties accepting the study and aesthetics of twentieth-century techniques originating from the Second Viennese School, do we pacify and console them with the prediction that these resources will be useful for them if they ever composed for films? Did talented composers drop out of the field because they couldn't deal with the dominating compositional barometer of serial atonality in the academy? When we hear the criticism, even amongst our colleagues (and at SCI conferences) that works all sounded "typical", is it a reference to mindless or heartless use of expressionistic elements?

Are we able to compose music for celebrative occasions such as weddings or birthday parties without resorting, with compromise, to tried and true formulas of tradition? For that matter, why isn't the music of Schoenberg even played at funerals more often? If I bemoan the popularity and success of Yanni's (not Xenakis) or any "new age" music, do I have something better to offer society? Am I confusing despair, depression, tension, or morbidity with depth drama, and profundity, intensity, melancholy, or even romanticism? When did you last express love and tenderness in your music? Etc., etc. . . In regards to the primary issue that I pose today, these and a host of other diverse questions -- some very practical -- continue on. Meaning and mood may be difficult areas to approach with any intellectual tidiness, but I find that their existence and relevance are too real to escape - - particularly when listeners are involved.

Postscript

A few weeks ago, I was fortunate to catch unexpectedly, on our cable station (Bravo), a documentary on the film music of Toru Takemitsu, one of Japan's most celebrated twentieth-century composers. (You may know that he composed the music for the film *Rising Sun*.) The hour long program recounted and described the wonderful music that he had composed for numerous films, going all the way back to the 1960s, under the direction Japan's finest movie directors. Near the end of the program, Takemitsu said (in essence since there were subtitles): "I wish someone would ask me to write some *happy* music; (it would be a welcome change) . . . they don't think I can".