

Newsletter

January 1999

Anything Goes? Composition at the Turn of the Century

Jeremy Beck, University of Northern Iowa

Editor's note: To explore the state of musical composition at the turn of the century warranted not only the publication of Professor Beck's point of view in this lead essay but those of recognized composers. The Editor asked Nancy Van de Vate and Elliott Schwartz to respond to this essay; their provocative thoughts and at times intense reactions follow.



Composers today live in a pluralistic age. The profusion of different styles as well as the vast resources of music history

at their disposal create a limitless canvas, full of possibilities. This canvas is both seductive and intimidating. In exploring its terrain, the possibility of artistic success is elusive; one may easily become lost in the maze of conflicting compositional ideas and so-called trends. For example, it is widely understood that in twentieth-century music any chord, any sonority, may follow any other chord or sonority. But unless a given progression is designed, unless the ear is given a sound-world out of which to perceive such a progression, then disunity and confusion can be the only result.

"Anything goes," without structural or perceptual discipline, leads to chaos and anarchy in music. Without relationships, music is meaningless. It becomes sound for its own sake, without meaning to what precedes or

follows it. It simply "is." In such a form, it assumes an arrogant self-importance that many examples of this type of music do not deserve.

I am not speaking of "tonal" versus "atonal," "minimal" versus "serial," "modern" versus "post-modern"

Meaning in, and communication through, music must be earned. It cannot be assumed.

or any other such narrow partitioning of Western musical culture. I am talking about intention, communication and meaning. Meaning in, and communication through, music must be earned. It can not be assumed. Notes on a page and a crescendo in the orchestra are merely scribbles and a cheap effect without a clear intention (and the successful execution of that intention).

How little concert music in our time bears the evidence of significant thought! If one chooses to use a sonority comprised of, say, a minor sec-

ond and a perfect fifth, how are those intervals related to the rest of the piece? Is this an incidental use of these intervals? Then it is incidental in relation to what? Too many pieces are written because they 'sound good' or because the composer is trying to win this week's favorite prize. While not discounting the importance of intuition, one needs to strike a balance in one's work. Sonorities are too often tossed in next to each other as if the composer were creating a musical hash without a definite flavor. Subtlety and, with it, intensity of meaning, are lost this way.

Compounding the problem is the general disdain held by many composers (particularly American composers) for musical study beyond superficial analysis ("this piece is in sonata form"; "here are tone numbers 5, 6 and 8"). If composers don't even understand in detail the best music of our time much less of earlier periods, how can they then possibly expect to understand and develop their own music? Do they think it will simply advance and strengthen itself?

INSIDE: TWO REQUESTED RESPONSES TO THE LEAD ESSAY; THE EDITOR'S REFLECTIONS ON PUERTO RICO; REPORT OF A SUMMER WORKSHOP; TWO ISME REFLECTIONS; A READER RESPONDS; NEWS AROUND THE PROFESSION; IMPORTANT ADVERTISEMENTS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS, AND MUCH MORE

Coming Events!

- February 5-7
Teaching Women and Gender in World Music
Agnes Scott and Spelman Colleges, Atlanta
- February 18-20
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- February 19-20
South Central Chapter
University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond
- February 26-27
Great Lakes Chapter
Ohio Northern University, Ada
- March 12-14
Pacific Southern
San Diego State University, San Diego, California
- March 19-20
Great Plains Chapter
University of Missouri-Columbia
- March 19-20
Rocky Mountain Chapter
University of Colorado at Boulder
- May 1-2
Northeast Chapter
The Crane School of Music, Potsdam, New York
- June 11-13
Teaching Women and Gender in Music—
Popular Music
University of Wisconsin, Madison
- June 11-16
Center for Professional Development in Music
Technology
Illinois State University, Normal
- June 28 - July 1
1999 International Conference
Kyoto, Japan

Workshops in World Music—The Intercultural Institute at New England Conservatory, Boston, Massachusetts

- July 6–11: *Instrumental Music of Uganda and Music of Haiti*
- July 12–17: *Classical Music of North India and Classical Music of Turkey*
- July 12–17: *Klezmer: Jewish Music of Eastern Europe*
- October 14-17, 1999
Forty-Second Annual Meeting
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Watch for Announcements for Dates of:

- Mid-Atlantic and Pacific Central Chapters
- Workshops in Rhythmic Concepts in Undergraduate Theory

Composers in our time have become lazy—trite solutions to problems abound and may be heard in every concert season. New music concerts continually are filled with cliches derived from all parts of the musical spectrum, from the so-called “avant-garde” (which hasn’t been “avant” for over twenty-five years now) to the “regressive-tonalists” (those composing tonal music without any historical understanding of earlier developments in this century). No wonder contemporary concert music has no significant audience! It has nothing to do with composers needing to be “accessible” or audiences needing to be more open-minded. It has to do with meaning. Once composers dig down into their souls and then develop the musical and theoretical skills necessary to communicate the treasure they find (assuming it’s there), then the audience will follow, willingly challenged.

Right now, this potential audience is simply filling the role of Diogenes: it is searching for an honest composer. Such a composer, in the words of Roger Sessions:

... will persist in following his own bent until he, as the saying goes, finds his own public, which he can easily recognize by the fact that it comes to him rather than he to it. This can happen easily and quickly or slowly and gradually. He may find himself swimming either with a current or against it. If he finds himself successfully and happily swimming in either direction (I am talking about the success and happiness in the practice of his art, not in the vicissitudes of life outside of it, and I am talking about swimming, not drifting), the chances are overwhelming that that is where he belongs; in other words, it is where his real musical nature and musical impulse impel him, and not the result of an effort to conform to the tastes either of the company in which he finds himself or of that which he might wish to join. (from “Questions About Music,” pp. 10-11)

How does one become such a composer? Simply put, how does one compose concert music at the turn of the century? It is far too tempting for a young composer today to side-step the issues of intention, communication and meaning by simply donning the cloak of that which this composer perceives to be the current “hot” trend (these days, read “use of the vernacular” or “world music,” which is not to say that good pieces composed with these approaches don’t exist). This ‘safety-in-numbers’ perspective perhaps forestalls the possibility of failure, but, in avoiding such a possibility, the young composer then is equally forestalling the possibility of true artistic success one may achieve through creative risk and personal responsibility.

Art is about taking chances and searching for the new in one’s own, individual way (not in creating novelties alone). Under this definition, style and trends have nothing to do with anything. Style is only the outer manifestation of that which the honest composer seeks to communicate. Therefore, the concept of style may be seen as a descriptive method of categorization for those who need music to be delivered in convenient, pre-understood packages. Trends are designed and followed by those with an ear for the superficial in music.

The challenge of living in a pluralistic time such as ours in which the individual composer is often faced with an overwhelming amount of material and information from which to choose is that, for composers to be artistically successful, they must have a razor-sharp sense of focus and maintain a tremendous store of self-confidence. In these eclectic times, one may not know where one

stands in the world of composition until one reaches a far later point of hindsight. Even then, the level of insecurity one may confront can be overpowering. But this insecurity must be confronted and brought to submission.

Any changes a composer chooses to make in their music must come from their own critical ear, centered in a belief and trust in what they are doing and still need to do in order to further their artistic growth. Change must come from this inner, personal place; it can not be superimposed from the outside: that way lies a false and posed music, suitable for nothing. How may one avoid the tendency to fall into a superficial solution to what may be a very real problem? One of the great modernists of this century, Elliott Carter, advances Sessions' metaphor, giving the following basic advice, good for composers of all stripes:

... a person who follows his own path with firm conviction doesn't change that easily. He does what he feels he has to do, with or against the stream. That's the only way to resist [the feeling of being swept along in the musical stream]!" (from "Elliott Carter: In Conversation with Enzo Restagno" for Settembre Musica 1989, ISAM Monograph, pp. 93-94)

In the last months of the waning twentieth century—a time of turmoil, change and ambiguity in many parts of our world—there is no way to teach this type of musical conviction (if there ever was). Young composers may (and should) be nurtured, guided, supported and given the basic tools of their trade, but finally, in the dimly-lit casinos of their personal exploration, when they roll the dice, they have to place their own bets.

The College Music Society

The College Music Society is a consortium of college, conservatory, university, and independent musicians and scholars interested in composition, ethnomusicology and world music, music education, music in general studies, musicology, performance, theory, and other fields. The Society is dedicated to gathering, considering, and disseminating ideas on the philosophy and practice of music. Among professional music organizations CMS creates forums in which individual fields can expand, interact, and communicate with one another. Recognizing the richness of musical diversity and the challenge of balancing the traditions of the past with the possibilities of the future, the members of The College Music Society are united by a dedication to the science of learning and the art of teaching and are engaged in a dialogue that will shape music teaching in the years ahead. Its members are committed to projecting the artistic and humanistic value of music in the culture at large.

Publications of the Society include the *Newsletter* and the interdisciplinary journal *College Music Symposium*. The series *CMS Reports* addresses current issues in the music and higher education field. Another series, *Monographs and Bibliographies in American Music*, has produced monographs on music in and of the Americas. The Society has reissued *Columbia Records' Black Composers Series*, which documents the work of black composers in the concert music tradition, and made available *Black Music—The Written Tradition*, a recording by the Black Music Repertory Ensemble. The Society also publishes three immensely valuable reference works: the *Music Vacancy List*, the *Directory of Music Faculties in Colleges and Universities, U.S. and Canada*, and the *International Directory of Music Organizations*.

Professional Development initiatives include institutes, workshops, and symposia that provide opportunities to examine issues and hone teaching skills.

Conference programs include performances, presentations, panels, and plenary sessions, and provide opportunities to examine and discuss new and recurring issues within music in higher education. Topics range from specific disciplinary presentations to interdisciplinary concerns in the field of music and the broader concerns of music and higher education. Annual Meetings of the Society, which take place each fall, are held in different locations according to a plan designed to bring into focus the music of various regions. During the past decade these meetings sites have included Chicago, New Orleans, San Diego, Santa Fe, Washington, D.C., St. Louis, and Savannah. Future meetings will be held in Denver (1999) and Toronto (2000). The Society inaugurated an international conference initiative in 1995.

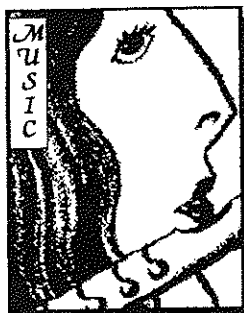
The Regional Chapters provide forums for the exchange of ideas on issues of local, regional, and national concern. The Great Lakes, Great Plains, Mid-Atlantic, Northeast, Pacific Central, Pacific Northwest, Pacific Southern, Rocky Mountain, South Central, and Southern chapters provide the opportunity for interaction by members residing within these regions. The Annual Meetings of the Regional Chapters are held during the spring of each year on a campus of an institution within each region.

The Society holds memberships in the International Society for Music Education and the American Council on Education.

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June 11-13 • Teaching Women and Gender in Popular Music • University of Wisconsin, Madison

June 11-16 • Center for Professional Development in Music Technology • Illinois State University, Normal

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July 6-11

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July 12-17

Classical Music of North India and Classical Music of Turkey

July 12-17

Klezmer: Jewish Music of Eastern Europe

Workshops in Rhythmic Concepts in Undergraduate Theory

Dates and locations to be announced

A Composer's Response

Nancy Van de Vate, Vienna, Austria

(Requested by the Editor)

In considering issues raised in the article, "Anything Goes? Composition at the Turn of the Century," this writer prefers an historical and social viewpoint to the somewhat more moralistic one adopted by Professor Beck. The 20th century, like the 14th and 17th centuries, is in my view a stylistically transitional period for classical composers. The *Ars Nova* and *Nuove musiche* have reappeared as "The New Music." During periods of stylistic transition, pluralism is always the result. Composers try new approaches, but there is no common practice by which their excellence can be measured.

Transitional periods are very difficult for composers, as they seek new ways in the absence of universal standards. In general, most of the outstanding composers of the past—for example, Palestrina, Bach, Mozart, and Brahms—were retrospective and stylistically conservative. They inherited a common practice and used it exceptionally well. They were not innovators. Beethoven and Monteverdi did effectively straddle style periods, making successful transitions from one period to another. Some might also include Schoenberg in this category, and with respect to Beethoven, it could be argued that early Romanticism was not sufficiently different from Viennese Classicism to represent a really major stylistic change. Nevertheless, I can think of few composers before the 20th century who were both innovative and excellent during a stylistically transitional time.

The complexity of *Ars Nova* music contained the seeds of its own demise, and I believe many of the very technically complex works of the 20th century will disappear from the ongoing repertoire, just as their 14th century counterparts did. Unfortunately, this fascinating theme of parallel developments in the history of Western music cannot be taken further in the short space allotted here. I merely wished to point out that the capabilities of composers and the kind of music they write are to a large extent determined by time and place, and that stylistic pluralism is not at all new.

The lack of genuine craft and musical profundity which Professor Beck mentions as characteristic of music now being written can certainly not be denied, at least by this writer. Can a composer somehow overcome these qualities by an act of individual will, as he seems to suggest? I believe so, but would like to mention in this context several uniquely American attitudes which seem to handicap contemporary composers, who don't, after all, work in a vacuum.

The United States is the most democratic nation in the history of the world and its citizens perhaps the most individualistic. If I am as good as you are, is not my music as good as yours? Are not the idiosyncracies (and roughnesses) of my compositions an expression of my rugged individualism? Can I not define myself and my music without capitulating to group standards? These are very old conflicts—between individualism and social order, between courage and foolhardiness. Music, however, is a collaborative activity: even the composer, who works alone, depends on performers and audiences to bring his music from the shelf to performance. Composers ignore this at their peril. (Academic theories about music being written to be seen but not heard are very elitist and not really relevant, since such music can only reach those who read notes, a small proportion of any population, past or present.)

Many American composers have adopted what I call the sports or political

(continued on page 6)

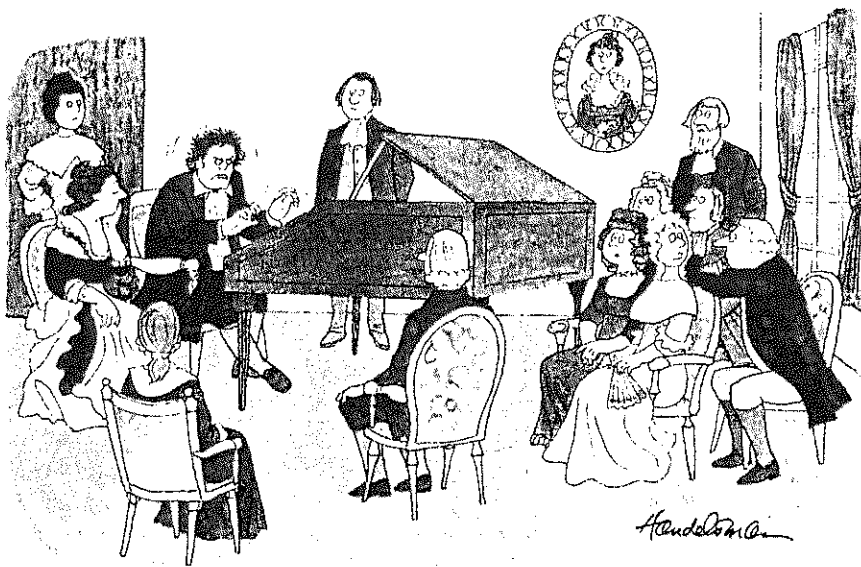
A Composer's Response

Elliott Schwartz, Bowdoin College
(Requested by the Editor)

What a disappointment! When I saw the title "composition at the turn of the century," I assumed that Jeremy Beck would explore several key issues of critical importance to those of us who create (and listen to) music in the 1990s. I expected to read his views on electronic technology and its impact on our musical thinking, the continuing and ever-changing interaction of global and Western sensibilities, or the ever-increasing plight of the individual creative artist (whether composer, performer, publisher or record producer) fighting to make his or her solitary voice heard in a musical milieu dominated by corporate giants and mass-market mentality. Professor Beck could have written about the challenges—rather than the dangers—of creating art in what he accurately describes as a "pluralistic age," particularly those of striking the balance between freedom and discipline, of reconciling the lure of *tabula rasa* ("Make it new!!") with the inescapable lesson of history (that nothing is new). Or it would have been interesting to read his comments on the late-20th-century composer's unique role as "guardian" of tradition (whichever tradition), and as the agent for the wedding of formerly disparate traditions into new ones—the composer as curator. Any or all of these topics would have held my interest!

Instead, I found myself reading a fairly predictable diatribe by one who firmly believes in a single path to compositional salvation, and who warns against the seductive lure of alternative paths. Professor Beck suggests that these alternatives are "easier," and therefore doubly dangerous. His own preferences seem fairly clear to me. They include rigorous control over parameters of pitch and time, which assume higher priority than volume or timbre; note his disparagement of a crescendo marking as "mere scribble" and "cheap effect." (It was also interesting, for two reasons, to note his reference to a composer choosing "a son-

(continued on page 6)



"Nice sonata, but it wouldn't hurt him to comb his hair and smile now and then."

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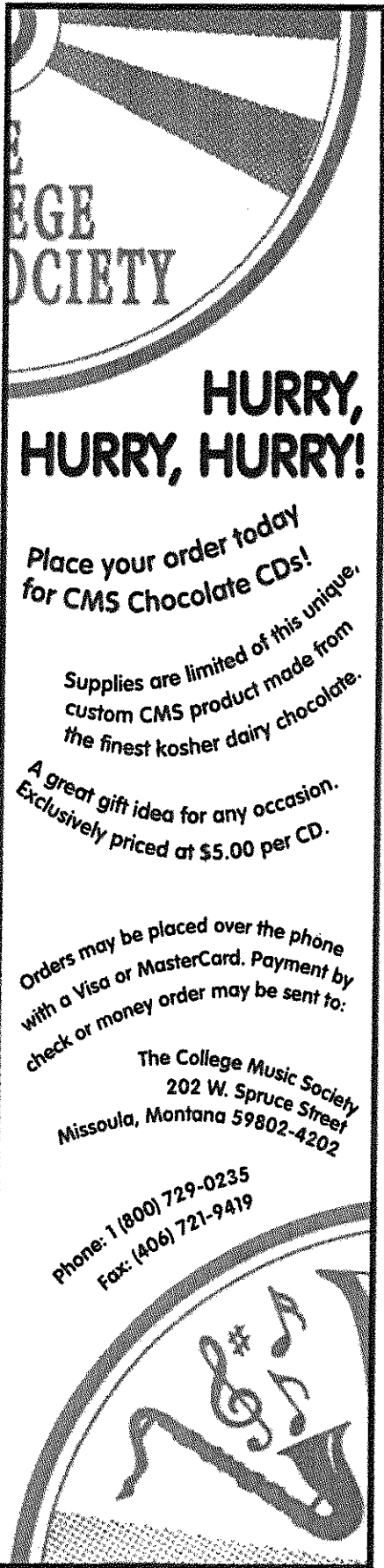
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Van de Vate

model as they attempt to build their careers. In other words, there must be a winner and a loser. If you win, I lose. For the most part, they do not function as a community of professionals. Being a successful American composer is a matter of a gaining and using professional power, not of practicing one's profession among colleagues or exercising (collegial) leadership. This gaining of power, it seems to me, is unfortunately often done with little or no regard for professional or personal ethics. We could well ask ourselves to what extent current political practices at the national level have influenced ethics in our own profession.

Another American myth is that freedom produces better art than societies with tight authoritarian controls. The USA has not produced in the 20th-century more or better composers than Poland or the former USSR did under Communism. Even a cursory view of art for the last 5,000 years shows that great creations emerged in totalitarian societies, sometimes even under slavery: the pyramids of Egypt, the ancient temples of China—the list is endless. Freedom without some kind of financial or material support is simply the freedom to starve or to earn your subsistence in some way other than by composing music, writing poetry, or sculpting great statues. The reluctance (and inability) of American composers to band together and demand strong governmental support—and their fear that intervention is always a part of subvention—leave them with virtually no financial help from the public sector.

These are only suggestions for discussion beyond the narrower question of why so much current new music is badly written. Other questions which could usefully be asked concern the validity of the concept of "marketing" culture; the role of the American academic community in canonizing new music and the extent to which this may be negative for composers; and whether contemporary music in a free nation must inevitably reflect the values of the larger society. The most interesting question of all for this writer would be where new music is headed at the turn of the century. I see no clear direction.

Schwartz

ority" of minor second and perfect fifth: first, because very few composers of my acquaintance are as fixated on intervals today as they were in the 1960s, and, secondly, because an interval collection is not a "sonority"—not until it's articulated in a specific timbral-registral-dynamic space, such as three high-register muted trumpets, *pianissimo*.)

I assume that Beck's preferences also include the division of the octave into twelve, and a highly developmental, quasi-organic approach to formal process. It may be significant, in this regard, that he refers to "Western musical culture" in his second paragraph (what happened to the rest of the globe?), and that the only composers he cites as role models are Roger Sessions and Elliott Carter. All well and good. Their quoted comments are excellent, and their music is often brilliant. But one of the great joys of living and composing at this remarkable century's end is that one can derive pleasure from—and learn from—a multiplicity of traditions and composer models. Babbitt, Feldman, Ligeti, Cage, Boulez, Oliveros, Schnittke, Reich, Shankar, Foss, Xenakis, Gubaidulina, Nancarrow, Takemitsu, Fernyhough, Lucier, Zorn, Diamond, Birtwistle, Andriessen—all very different from one another, all representative of the late twentieth century, all equally wonderful.

By the way, I do realize there was another part to Beck's title ("Anything Goes?"). Although the phrase was intended as a put-down, it serves only to highlight Beck's lack of sympathy for traditions or techniques other than his own. His argument about "sound for its own sake" and the value of "relationships" is a biased one, in that different traditions (and composers, and listeners) will perceive those values in culturally defined ways. Moreover, there is NO approach to composition which advocates total license; every tradition teaches respect for craft and the acquisition of specific skills. ALL composers—even John Cage, supposedly the champion of "freedom"—have made careful, informed decisions, and weighed their choices (either in the act of composing, the act of performing, or both). They make these choices on the basis of experience, training, a given value-system of priorities, and (within the context of this total fabric) an innate quality we can only call "talent." Some composers have it; others don't. Some have been badly trained; some are hanging on to stylistic fads and masquerading as creative artists when in reality they haven't a spark of creative imagination. But that's been the case for many centuries. (What else is new?) At this century's end, we deserve a fresh debate and more relevant topics for discussion.

An Author Responds

Jeremy Beck, University of Northern Iowa

The Editor requested two composers to respond to Professor Beck's lead essay in the January 1999 issue of the CMS Newsletter; this is his response to the composers' critiques.

I appreciated both responses to my essay "Anything Goes? Composition at the Turn of the Century." While I am not sure that I agree with Nancy Van de Vate's perception of our time as a transitional period (I see it more as a delta of styles, intersecting and spreading separately out into the future), her analysis of American democratic attitudes as possibly having a negative effect on the art of composition is excellent. This is a paradox in our (American) artistic culture which every composer will need to examine closely. Also worthy of examination is her point about "many American composers adopting the sports or political model" (win/lose) in building their careers. I hold the same perception, and I am concerned about the type of education young composers receive from such an approach to musical life. Educating young composers in a healthy and purposeful way is the ultimate concern of my essay, and I believe a discussion which includes morality is not inappropriate.

I was disappointed in Elliott Schwartz's defensive tone in his comments; he seemed to misunderstand much of what I had written, or at least what my point had been. He chose not to address the very real issue of how to educate young composers; instead, his (long) first paragraph mentioned everything my essay was not. I wrote what I wrote, saying many things that I felt needed to be expressed in the community. When Professor Schwartz was invited to respond to my essay, I wish he had done so; I would have been interested to hear his opinion. If he had wanted me to write about something else, if he had wanted to read about his own interests, well, he could have gone ahead and written his own essay (which I guess, in the end, he did).

In his misreading of my essay, Professor Schwartz made some inaccurate statements in his response which I would like to correct. He says I am "one who firmly believes in a single path to compositional salvation" (I am not, and did not say so) and that I warn "against the seductive lure of alternative paths" (I do not, and did not say so; I warn against following that which is trendy, which I do not consider to be an artistically viable alternative path). As well, there was nothing in my essay to suggest that I worship solely at the altar of Sessions and Carter; of course I quoted them, but such quotation (in a three-page essay) hardly implies that I am not interested in the music of Ligeti, Schnittke, Crawford, Reich, Adler, Zwilich, Singleton, Cage, Foss, Bresnick, Lutoslawski, et. al. (I am).

Professor Schwartz then goes on (oddly and critically) to suggest I am a 12-tone or serial composer, that my "preferences seem fairly clear." Putting aside his inaccurate assessment (I have composed tonal music for 20+ years), the implied criticism in his evaluation demonstrates our generational divide; at this point in time, advanced tonal music may well be influenced by principles and even procedures derived from old 12-tone or serial practices. I am sure he knows this, for such a blending is characteristic of the synthesis of our time; to continue making artificial dividing lines between the multiplicity of approaches in the twentieth century is to stay lodged in the past.

But the most important difference in our perceptions lies in the last paragraph of Professor Schwartz's response. Here, he presents the argument that "ALL composers . . . have made careful, informed decisions, and weighed their choices. . ." (emphasis is his). What? Does he really believe that? I suppose using cartoon characters as structural determinants is a choice (as one of our contemporaries has done), but I don't have a problem being biased against such a choice, considering it shoddy and foolish.

Elliott Schwartz is a gifted and thoughtful composer. I am sure he was (and continues to be) a giving and supportive teacher. His analytical contributions to the profession ("Music Since 1945") are useful and perceptive. I hold him in great respect (even as I disagree and argue with him); all the more reason I was disappointed in his response to my essay.