

Souvenirs

& Mementos

Growing up in the 1960s-1980s was an exhilarating, but disorienting experience. As a creator, one had to be subsumed by the abstract expressionism of modern art—a political dogma of the Capitalist West, one deliberately and artificially promoted in opposition to socialist realism of the Communist East. This was the time of the Cold War and the civilized world was divided into two camps. There were no in-betweens!

Impressionist turned modernist Ukrainian-Canadian composer George Fiala did not even want to talk to me. Ukrainian-American violinist Marko Lepky did speak to me, but said in his heavily-accented voice, “Ghet veet eet!”—that is, write something modern. Well, I did not want to “ghet veet eet.” You can imagine how I felt when my first teacher in composition, Gustav Ciamaga, said at the beginning of the first lesson, “Today we will start by writing something atonal.”

I was not the only one belittled and ridiculed for my “old-fashioned” values. Working at the Music Library in the 1980s was composer Marjan Mozetich. He would be writing his post-modern compositions as he signed out books to us students. Behind his back the music professors laughed at his romantic minimalist “scribblings.” In 1981, his “Dance of the Blind” created a watershed moment in Canadian music, heralding the demise of modernism. In the USA, it was David del Tredici’s “Final Alice” (1976) that created the same kind of watershed moment during the American Bicentennial celebrations.

At the core of every modernist composition is some kind of intellectual or philosophical trick. These kind of mental acrobatics require a maturity and erudite sophistication well beyond the capabilities of children. Mozart could not have been a child prodigy in the 20th century. My attempt to lampoon John Cage’s 4’33” (1952) took thirty years to mature before it became my “Opus Zero”. In the process I learned that Cage was not the first composer to write a piece of music that was based on an interval of silence.

Modern Art vs. an Air Vent

San Francisco Museum of Art (1963)



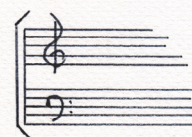
European composers had already done this before. Why was this history being ignored in favour of an American composer? Is not musicology “the study of Western European classical music—ONLY?” It is! Well, that is what Prof. Carl Morey, Dean of the Faculty of Music, explained to me when he rejected my proposal to examine Mykola Dyletsky’s groundbreaking 1679 treatise on the circle of fifths. If Ukrainian classical music falls outside the paradigm, should not American music be excluded for the same reason too?

Five Expressions Variations on a theme by John Cage

by
Wasył Sydorenko
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The manner of performance
is left to the discretion
of the performers involved.

Theme



1'00"

Wasył