

**PODCAST #21:
AH, SIMPLICITY!
by Erik Nielsen**

Hello. This is the 21st in a series of podcasts on different aspects of music composition. This is also the final podcast in the series so I'm going to get a bit more personal and talk about something a lot of us composers struggle with: the need to be direct in our music. That's why I'm calling today's podcast "Ah, Simplicity!"

There's a wonderful radio series broadcast nationally via WFMT in Chicago with host Bill McGlaughlin called "Exploring Music." The series and Bill's approach actually inspired me in a lot of ways as I was trying to figure out how to give voice to my thoughts in my initial podcasts. It's a wonderful series and I highly recommend it. In one recent broadcast the subject was folk music and its influence on classical music, particularly in the late 19th century. Bill's question was "why did composers of art music turn to folk music for inspiration?" His answer: with the increasing complexity of classical music, folk music, with its direct expression and simpler musical language, was refreshing and helped these composers feel more grounded in the world. As Bill put it, "folk music makes it real." I think there's a real lesson there for us composers, regardless of whether we use or are inspired by folk music. I believe the lesson is to try our best to express ourselves musically as simply and directly as possible.

Not long ago a student composer who was beginning a piece said that, although he liked his basic ideas, he wanted to "complexify" them. Though I was charmed by this word he had coined, my response was to ask him whether it wouldn't be better to think of enriching his ideas while remaining as simple and direct as possible rather than to think of a goal of making the music more complicated. That's a lesson all of us composers, myself included, need to keep in mind. It's all too easy to get wrapped up in technical issues and approaches and forget that music is a medium of communication. We want to reach people, not confuse them or make them feel inadequate or stupid because they can't keep up with us technically.

Originally I was going to follow the pattern of a number of earlier podcasts and play examples of simple, direct musical expression from different genres, but instead I decided to be, well, simpler and use only a single example. And since this is the final podcast I'm going to choose a piece of my own music. However, I need to give a little background first. Soon after the tragic events of September 11, 2001 the director of the Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble, Steven Klimowski, contacted all the many composers the group had commissioned to write new works over the years with a request: please write a 3-5 minute work for any combination of clarinet, violin, cello and piano. Try to keep the work simple enough so it won't take a lot of rehearsal time to put together. The pieces will be performed at a benefit concert for organizations aiding victims of the attacks in New York. I was one of those asked and I immediately said yes. Then came the hard part: what to make the piece **about**. For days I wrestled unsuccessfully with this problem. Fortunately for me, at the time I was in almost daily email contact with my good friend, the poet and playwright David Budbill. One of the great things about getting an email from David is that at the bottom is one of his poems. The poem he attached in those days was one I already knew, but re-reading it gave me the inspiration and direction I needed. The poem comes from David's book **Moment to Moment** and it's called **What Issa Heard**, Issa being a Japanese 18th century poet. Here's the poem:

Two hundred years ago Issa heard the morning birds
singing sutras to this suffering world.

I heard them too, this morning, which must mean,

since we will always have a suffering world,
we must also always have a song.

To me at that moment the poem shouted the importance of Art in our lives as a means to express our deepest hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, triumphs and tragedies.

Now I had a concept and title for the piece, **We Must Always Have a Song**, so once I decided to use the entire available instrumentation of clarinet, violin, cello and piano I looked for musical means to convey what I wanted in the simplest and most direct way possible. Whenever I want something simple and direct I often begin with the pentatonic scale. (PLAY PENTATONIC SCALE.) It is the closest thing to a universal scale we humans have, being found in the music of every inhabited continent and it is amazing in its variability. I played around until I came up with a simple melody in $\frac{3}{4}$ for the main theme. (PLAY FIRST THEME.) I treated the A section of the piece as an aaba with the main theme played twice and then the second theme, which sounds this (PLAY WE MUST ALWAYS HAVE A SONG 2'04"-2'23") followed by a modified return of the main theme a final time. After an introduction then, the A section sounds like this. (PLAY 1'25"-2'41".) For the middle of the piece I stuck with the pentatonic scale, but expanded the harmony and changed the tone of the piece to something much more jazz- and blues- inflected. Using a piano background that sounded like this (PLAY PIANO BACKGROUND) I put a simple melodic idea on top. (PLAY B SECTION MELODY.) The second time through I used the melody in a canon among the clarinet, violin and cello. Here's the middle section of the piece. (PLAY 3'47"- 4'52".)

For the final section of the work I returned to the main theme but used it in a more fragmented way and accompanied it with string tremolos used earlier as well as some of the material from the middle section of the piece. Here is the final section of **We Must Always Have a Song** as performed by the Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble. (PLAY 4'54"- 6'18".) Is that all there is to the piece? Not quite. Both the introduction and transition material include some dissonance and fragments of ideas which to me at least lend a bit of an air of mystery to the piece.

Once I had my approach to the piece the work went quickly, but when I finished I worried that what I had written was too elementary, too basic to be successful. Fortunately, I resisted the urge to "complexify" the piece. The response of both musicians and listeners was very gratifying and taught me a number of valuable lessons, the most important of which is to use the simplest and most direct means possible to make your point. In **We Must Always Have a Song** I made very conscious choices as to the type of musical materials to use to create the piece as it was. Does this mean all music needs to be short and transparent? Of course not. But writing music merely to show how clever and accomplished we are seems to me both self-indulgent and a waste of time. Having said this, I realize being direct in art as in life is often difficult. I know it is for me a lot of the time. But we need to keep the goal firmly in mind as we work to balance head and heart to express ourselves.

What are some other examples of direct musical expression? Here are a few: **Little Tornado** by Aimee Mann, **Alabama** by John Coltrane, **We Can Work It Out** by the Beatles, **Solitude** by Duke Ellington, the second movement of Beethoven's **String Quartet in B flat Major, Opus 130**, **Ave Verum Corpus** by Mozart. You may have your own "simple song" favorites, but these are a few of mine.

So now we've come to the end of this series of podcasts. I hope they have been useful. Please keep in mind something I said in the very first podcast: if you want to compose, you can. It's that simple. Enjoy the journey.