

WHY REFERENCES? By Orlando Jacinto Garcia

When I was in graduate school in the early and mid 1980s, I had the good fortune to work with an Asian American composer and teacher at the University of Miami named Dennis Kam. At that time he was very much involved with the idea of musical stasis or a music that by its nature, changes the perception of time in the listener. He wrote a music that because of its slow evolution of material caused a freezing of time in the listener. These ideas came from a variety of sources including the minimalist composers, his own musical heritage, and Morton Feldman and the New York School. Being very interested in minimalism and the New York School, these aesthetic notions were very attractive to me and I spent 5 years working with Kam taking in and developing these ideas. I am very grateful for this opportunity as it very much impacted what it is that I am doing today. As importantly, in 1985 shortly after completing my Doctoral studies, I had the great fortune to work with Morton Feldman at the Atlantic Center for the Arts. During the 3 weeks at the Center, I spent 10 to 12 hours per day with Morty and his then student (and later wife) Barbara Monk, and another composer David Maves. The 3 weeks were the most intense and important of my artistic life. This experience initiated my very positive relationship with Feldman that lasted for the next two plus years until his untimely and tragic death in the fall of 1987.

In contrast to Kam, Feldman rarely spoke about the freezing of time or even much about stasis. He spoke more about the liberation of sound and of sound evolving organically. In this scenario the composer's job is merely to facilitate this liberation. In addition, Feldman often stated that music is not about style but rather the counterpoint between register, timbre, and pacing. In other words what made a work good was not the style it was in but rather how the material was presented with regards to the register, instrumentation, and the pacing or rate of change. This applied to any work whether you are talking about Beethoven or Boulez. For Feldman, good works "sounded" and they "sounded" because there was a consideration for register, density, timbre, pacing and the counterpoint between them. This notion had a big impact on my thinking as I noticed that the works that I respected (and still respect) where very different stylistically but all "sounded". When I think of works like Berlioz' Symphony Fantastique, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Stravinsky's Symphony of the Psalms, Debussy's Jeux, Penderecki's Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima, Reich's Music for 18 Musicians, Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire, Berio's Epiphanies, Xenakis Pithoprakta, Varese's Octandre and Poeme Electronique, Takemitsu's November Steps, Ligeti's Melodien, Webern's Concerto for Nine Instruments, Stockhausen's Songs of the Youths, Ginastera's Cantata para America Magica, Gubaidulina's Piano Concerto, Cage's prepared piano pieces, just about any of Feldman's works, and many others, the one thing that they have in common is that they "sound" yet are all stylistically very different from each other.

Taking this notion further, my feeling is that if good works transcend style then good works also transcend references. By references I mean the association one might make upon hearing certain musical materials (harmonies, melodies, rhythmic ideas, etc.) with a certain type of music or style. This transcendence is possible since in my view one can appreciate a good work without knowing the references or associations that certain musical gestures may have, possess or evidence. For instance, I do not know the Germanic folk music that Beethoven references in his works yet I can appreciate his music. The same can be said of the Russian folk music Stravinsky

referenced or the French popular music that Satie referenced in his piano music. Yet this lack of familiarity with this music does not impair my ability to appreciate it. In my view you do not need to know these to appreciate these works. Perhaps more importantly these works transcend these references because they "sound". They exhibit an attractive counterpoint between register, density, timbre, and pacing. In short the right note at the right time and place.

Not surprisingly, given my affinity for the New York School, my approach to dealing with musical references is to try to diminish them and I do this in several ways. The most obvious way is to present material in a restricted manner and having the material unfold very slowly. This often changes the context for the material. In my earlier music I utilized gestures based on restricted dissonant intervals presented in a very sparse and fragmented manner. In many ways this music had some very direct references to Webern and Feldman's music. Why these composers? Primarily because these composers, in my view have few references outside of themselves.

As my own work has evolved over the years I have found myself including a much broader harmonic palette with much more varied intervals and gestures but again always presented within a relatively static framework. This places these gestures in a very different setting, "freezing" them in time if you will while "liberating" them and focusing on them as sounds. For me this process strips or at least lessens their referentiality.

My work Why References?, for piano and recorded processed sounds, is a good example of this recent approach. The work was written in the summer of 2002 for pianist Kathy Supove and my colleague and friend Robert Rowe who requested the piece for premiere at a concert being held at New York University which he was organizing. The piece includes a relatively broader harmonic palette than earlier works, and perhaps more importantly requires the pianist to perform on 2 percussion instruments, commonly associated with the folk music of Latin America, namely the maracas and the claves. Unlike their setting in the folk music of the region where they are found, in Why References?, these instrument are used as timbre resources and integrated with the piano and processed recorded sounds. This does not negate the references but certainly lessens them (or places them in the background). I should mention that the introduction of these instruments occurred in a relatively organic manner as I was working with the recorded and live piano parts and searching for additional timbres at the same time. I happen to have a set of maracas in my home studio (more as a decoration than anything else) and was convinced by their timbre that they would add to the sound world of the work.

In addition to the broader harmonic palette and the percussion instruments there is a third consideration for references in the work; this being the recorded processed sounds that are employed in the piece. The recorded sounds are heard in 3 sections of the piece and consist of digital recordings of some of my earlier piano works that I have subtly processed and mixed. So although lessened by the processing and mixing there is a subtle reference to my piano music in the recorded part of the work. Incidentally, a version with disklavier in progress includes the counterpoint between the recorded sounds and the disklavier part in the first and third sections of

the work. Lastly, a fourth consideration for referentiality in the work is the title. Why References? is obviously an allusion in some ways to Why Patterns? written by my mentor. While my work includes musical material and instruments with inherent references, these become diminished or placed in the background when put in a different context as cited earlier. Although Why Patterns? is a work that employs repetitive patterns, for me these are in the background. The items that make the work "sound" (counterpoint between timbre, density, register, pacing) are in the foreground.

A few closing remarks. All works to some extent, have references. Even the music of the most experimental composer, references something. The work of the New York School is an example of this. Although Feldman, Cage, Brown, Wolff, and Tudor tried to create something without references; stripping music of all references is not possible. To a certain extent Feldman's music referenced Webern and Varese; Cage's referenced Cowell and Gamelan music in some works, Duchamp, etc., in others. This is not a critique, merely an observation. Because while you cannot remove all referentiality, you can reduce it and at the same time increase the degree of abstraction that a work exhibits. These composers were successful at doing just that. This is to a certain degree what I am trying to achieve in my music.