NEWMUSICBOX

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Would you describe yourself as a neo-romantic? Why (not)? 1

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I don't think tonality and overt melody ever left the building, but in some circles they were like a couple of illicit lovers locked in a small broom closet for quite a while. Until very recently, the perceived power in the concert music world came largely from universities, conservatories and publishing companies. A few notable colleagues took an entrepreneurial approach and created their own followings, but for the most part, those at the helm of the larger institutions acted as gatekeepers and much of the music exposed to the public was filtered through this system. Composers whose music didn't match the trend-du-jour either had little voice, suffered some amount of ridicule from the mainstream musical literati, or chose to pursue alternative careers in commercial music.

With new technologies bringing desktop publishing and the Internet to our homes and writing studios, that filtration system is increasingly irrelevant. Composers of all kinds of music possess far more power in 2003 than ever before, and this is directly related to what many of us notice as an infusion of more tonal, accessible pieces on concert programs.

Economically, the advent of personal computers has brought composers a newfound power in our ability to self publish, and we're no longer at the mercy of publishing and record companies to have our works heard. If we can gather the necessary funds, we can print and bind our scores and parts, produce our recording sessions, master and burn our CDs, set up distribution deals, and program websites accessed each month by thousands of potential buyers from around the world. All of this means that whatever style of music we wish to compose—**tonal**, **pan-tonal**, **bi-tonal**, **atonal**, or **dial-tonal**, **"uptown," "downtown," or just plain midtown**—we have the opportunity to disseminate it.

Musically, the broad reach of the Internet and of cable television and radio has infused our formerly Eurocentric culture with a vast array of musical styles from every part of the globe. In turn, many of us use these influences to create a new breed of cross-pollinated music, and the result often incorporates styles which might be labeled tonal, right alongside those that are less so.

Sociologically, I don't think we can ignore the fact that our society has changed, and so has its valuation of the arts. Our predecessors often benefited from generous government grants that shielded them from certain economic realities. Modern day composers must have a stronger awareness of the connection between the music they publish and the audiences they wish to reach. None of this is to say that we shouldn't continue to create our art for art's sake. Of course we must. But many composers and musicians who are trying to make a living with their music also embrace the concept of pleasing not only their own ears, but those of their listeners. This new focus is yet another reason we've seen an increase in tonally-oriented works on concert programs.

Tonality is a relative term, and a loaded one at that. All music has tonality, whether it's by **Brahms**, **Babbitt**, or **Subramanya Bharathi**. There has indeed been a noticeable insurgence of new compositions in the U.S. that are idiomatically called "audience friendly," (as opposed to all those mean, evil pieces out there), and the music in many of those works often flits like a moth around tonal centers, even if it doesn't land right on the light bulb. Moreover, with all the attention paid to tonality, I've observed that strong rhythms do a great deal to lure audiences and hold their interest. What we're seeing more of on concert programs are not only melodic, motivically-driven pieces, but also compositions that while tonally off-center, are pulse-based and highly rhythmic.

I refer to my own musical approach as pan-tonal, and solidly in the mutt-like tradition of an American with an **Ellis Island** background. Along with the many diverse global and stylistic influences in my writing, there are moments in a few of my pieces that include passionate outbursts akin to a **Liszt** or **Rachmaninoff** cadenza. But would I call those blurts **neo-romantic**? Nope. My difficulty with the term neo-romantic, or neo-anything, for that matter, lies with the fact that such descriptions cheat music that's new by insisting on labeling it as something that's new-but-actually-old. It seems that each time we come across music that we can't quite describe, we preface it with "neo" and tether it with a ball and chain to the past. All music is, in some manner, naturally derivative of that which came before; this is the beauty of being part of the continuum of musical history. New combinations of sounds will always be a step ahead of the language necessary to characterize them, but the lack of a suitable moniker shouldn't lead to pigeonholing an original work. I think we should resist the urge to put everything we hear into conveniently labeled boxes and instead, live on the wild, unnamed side. It's not "neo-anything" music, it's new music!

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