

## Composer Notes

I've always been fascinated by the passion revealed when people express their political views. Often, two people with almost identical beliefs in basic human values find themselves seemingly at opposite ends of the political spectrum when they manifest those basic values into loyalty to a particular political party. The process of crystallizing basic human values into specific party loyalty is, I suspect, probably influenced more by random lived experience, familial history, socio-economic factors and the desire for simplistic explanations of the human condition than it is by reason.

Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* had a profound effect on me. It's the story of Howard Roark, an architect who refuses to compromise his integrity and design genius to satisfy the vanity-driven desires of his clients. Every commission contract comes with the clause that, once signed, the client must build to the exact specifications of Roark's design. If the client doesn't agree, Roark walks away from the commission, choosing unemployment, if necessary, to protect his standards and values.

Throughout all of Rand's many works of fiction and non-fiction, she shows how individuals of genius and vision have taken us from cave to skyscraper and then often been enslaved or crucified by the tribe or collective in spite of the inestimable benefit they have gifted human society. Roark's story is the story of all great artists, composers, inventors and thinkers. Rand mounts a convincing argument that while the choice to starve rather than compromise should not compel society to support any individual's claim to 'visionary' status, we should recognize a genuine innovator's right to retain the product of their labour if they are successful in their endeavours.

The themes in my *Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra* are inspired by the characters in the novel. The interaction between the themes and orchestral textures are my interpretation of the ever-present struggle between the individual and the collective. Each character has a melodic theme that, I hope, expresses their nature and their place in the narrative.

The harmonic structures emanate from my love of post-bop jazz chord structures with their extensive use of altered tensions. Interestingly, many of these have their origins in twentieth century orchestral music and even, in the case of some techniques, music from the romantic and classical periods. It seems that we in the jazz world are often unaware of our tendency to reinvent the wheel so to speak.

I was also interested in the application of the Golden Mean, a mathematical formula that permeates the universe in things such as the spiral arms of the galaxy, the proportions of a snail shell or pine cone and even rates of growth of a tree. It seems this formula is so engrained in our psyche that even our perceptions of facial beauty are influenced by a face's adherence to this formula. When they follow market trends, day traders recognize the Fibonacci shape, one of several shapes to watch in the graph. The human emotions of fear and greed which drive amateur investors appear to also bend to the dictates of the Golden Mean. Architecture, automotive design, photography and music have all incorporated the formula: the music of composers from Bach to Bartok have utilized the Golden Mean.

I initially planned the proportions of the movements and the mood changes and sections within the movements according to this formula. Of course, once the composition starts, the music takes over and strict adherence to meticulously defined proportions goes out the window, but it's a starting point. This is only my second serious attempt at a major orchestral work and I needed target points to aim at.

As a jazz pianist, having spent years of hours of daily practice to hone my skills with varying results I was initially concerned that spending months away from jazz practice and composing at the keyboard would negatively impact my jazz technique. I spent a year composing the Concerto and during that time only touched the keyboard to formulate orchestral voicings, doublings, counter-lines and textures. And yet, with each passing month my jazz technique improved. As the composition began to flow with less effort, I found myself able to hear everything around me in jazz performances with greater clarity, more able to pre-hear my improvisational options - and my technique improved considerably. I discussed this with Jim McNeely, a famous jazz pianist and composer and Larry Sitsky, head of composition at the Australian National University, a wonderful orchestral composer and national treasure.

Both answered my questions in a similar manner.

*Jim McNeely: "We all discover this Mike. Composition sets up different neural connections."*

*Larry Sitsky: "I wanted to be a concert pianist and a composer. I didn't think I could do both so I chose composition. From the moment I made that choice, I became a better pianist."*

Perhaps the lesson we can take from the legacy of Beethoven, who created an enormous body of fully realized works while maintaining his reputation as a formidable improviser with great technique is this: that any skill practiced daily becomes stronger with consistent application. Compositional skill develops to the point where it becomes composition in real time, in other words improvisation.

I wish I'd made this connection twenty years earlier.

**Michael Nelson**