

Escape from Success

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June 17, 08

The Freemantle Music Conservatory just presented another baroque music concert on June 13. The presentation was an artistic success; all the performances were solid technically, and very listenable by any standard. I played two concerti, the Bach Am Violin Concerto, and the Telemann Viola Concerto in G. I was once again asked the question that I have been asked many times since I came here, "What the heck is a musician of your level doing in this tiny, insignificant, backwater town?" It is a question I stopped asking myself years ago, but it is one that deserves an answer, because it is basic to what I am about, and what I am trying to do with my life.

One of the hardest lessons I have learned in life is that success depends not on what you can do, but who you do it for. In other words, success is only possible in the big city where all the main cultural venues are situated, and where, for better or worse, all the best people are forced to live. It took many years, but I eventually decided it was more important to me to live my everyday life in a place that was sane and safe. I'm sure my Asperger's condition has a lot to do with it, because I have never been comfortable with people in social situations; an overpopulated environment was always a constant reminder of my inadequacy as a person, and an agonizing stress which, with age, became more and more unbearable. I had to choose between success before the footlights and a walk in the woods in my back yard. It was that simple.

I began my musical life in Chicago where I played with the Chicago Youth Symphony, and heard many top international classical music stars; my high school class boasted at least ten students who went on to major professional careers--my best friend, not one bit more gifted than I, is now recognized as an important American composer. After four years at the University of Illinois, where I studied with some of the world's most well-known composers and teachers, I went to Los Angeles.

In L.A. I worked with another group of front-line musicians, including David Raksin, the composer of the jazz standard, *Laura*, one of the most recorded songs in history; Raksin was taking me under his wing and recommending me for low-budget film music gigs, which, if I had followed through, would have given me a solid foot in the door of the film music business. After getting my M.A. in music composition from UCLA, I turned my back on an assistantship offered to

me, an opportunity that would have permanently ensconced me in the sheltering arms of academia, for the balmy beaches of Santa Cruz, a place, which was, compared to L.A., a haven of calm. In Santa Cruz, once again I rose to the top of the heap, and was pretty well-known as a composer, conductor, and performer; I played with and wrote for some of the top musicians in San Jose and San Francisco.

And, although I enjoyed the notoriety and the recognition, not of the public but of these few famous people who respected me and considered me one of their own, I was still not satisfied with the world I lived in--a world of smog, traffic, noise, and psychic pollution; eventually I couldn't even walk to the beach anymore without being assailed by an army of skateboards and flying frisbies. When a high-speed police chase ended in a smashed car right in front of my house, just yards away from where my infant son was playing on the porch, I knew I had to escape further into the backwoods, and further away from success. I went to the Northwest, Pullman, Washington, and began another chapter in my flight from fame.

I admit that there is an element of arrogance involved in my escapist behavior. I was a child of the 60s, a long-haired hippy, and it was easy for me to reject all the established values of the 50s, including social respectability, and material acquisition. I placed a higher value on my freedom than on acceptance. My Asperger's condition already had condemned me to an outcast state, and the social rejection I suffered at the hands of insensitive, judgmental people colored all my ambitions--I felt there was no hope, so why try. I also realized that my gifts were extraordinary and that, for better or worse, I was ever so slightly ahead of my time. As my compositional accomplishments developed, it became clear to me that my work was beyond the ken of most of the people in bureaucratic positions who might have helped me if they wanted to. I didn't even enter composition competitions, which is the way many composers make their reputations, because I was sure that my music, outside the mainstream, would not be accepted.

Shortly after I moved to the Pacific Northwest, I stumbled into several activities that renewed my interest in success. Through my connection with the Spokane Symphony (I got a job playing section viola) I had a piece for piano and strings played by Stephan Koszinski, a pianist and conductor who has achieved some national fame. I met and collaborated with Portland composer Jackie T. Gabel, on several performances of my music, in exchange for my performance of his piece *Hellenic Triptych* for viola and electronics; Gabel also included a set of piano pieces of mine on a CD put out by his recording company, North Pacific Music. But most importantly, I hired on at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston Idaho as adjunct faculty. I taught there for eight years, establishing several

community ensembles, including the college/community orchestra. By the end of my stay there I was doing much more teaching than either of the so-called full-time faculty, and had people traveling more than a hundred miles to study with me and play in my groups.

Unfortunately, when I dropped out of the Spokane Symphony, my opportunities in that town dried up, and my success at LCSC inspired me to do the singlemost stupid thing of my career--I left town to get a doctorate. I figured that if I could do so well teaching adjunct, I might as well get an advanced degree and get a REAL job. Little did I know that my Asperger's personality would condemn me once again to disappointment and failure. I distinguished myself in many ways at the University, and got many job interviews on the basis of my adjunct teaching experience, but when the smoke cleared, nobody would hire me for a permanent position and I wound up back in Pullman without even an adjunct appointment to show for my pains.

Alaska blew into my life on the winds of fate, and here I sit an anomaly of the Chugach Mountains. Here, I experienced the worst personal disaster of my entire life, but I also found myself a home. Many people have advised me to go to Fairbanks or Anchorage, as if that represented a move to the big city, but I remind them that I have already been to the big city--that's why I'm here.

Since leaving the Copper River School District I have begun several outreach activities, the most significant one being this website. But, in 2007, I also sent out e-mails to music teachers all over the state, and the result was a lovely performance of a piece I wrote for the Fairbanks Flutists, Dorli McWayne's flute choir; this is the first quasi-professional performance of my music I have had in over five years. Through an odd stroke of luck I got connected to another flute choir director, Gail Edwards, and she is planning a performance of the piece, *Aurora*, in San Francisco. I also entered a few composition competitions, and already received an Honorable Mention from an international flute composition competition in San Jose. It seems that the world is catching up to me, and my musical style might actually be entering the mainstream at long last. I have always thought it would be possible to make it in the big city via long distance, and connections are now being forged with big city musical entities that appear to be hungry for what I have to offer. This after I had given up all hope. Go figure.

But let's face it, most of you out there in Mooseland couldn't care less about the struggles of a composer trying to carve out his niche in the temple of fame--you care about what he is doing for you and your kids. It is the most startling surprise of my life that I became a teacher and not an ivory tower recluse like my afore-mentioned best friend. That my highest ambition these days is to forge an artistic alliance between Glennallen and Valdez is astonishing beyond reason. And

yet, it makes so much sense: I have always thought it was the man who made the music, not the music that made the man; and my sense of responsibility to distribute my gifts where they are most needed is the moral center from which the humanity of my music springs. Therefore, it is not for my career that I remain here, but for you, and you make me more myself. This can only result in better music. And if I never achieve the reputation of my peers in the big city, I know that in the daily activities of my life I am justified, and in heaven my reward will be great.

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