17 Gloomy Sentences (and commentary) at the turn of the millennium (in the form of an editorial)

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1) "Move forward, move fast," says Nick Didkovsky, but most people disagree [1]. 2) Herbert Brun’s ‘self-appointed morons’ develop convincing rationales for not understanding, and not wanting to understand, the new [2]. 3) Many in our society seem to resist all change and exploration, and doggedly negate what little musical and social progress we have made.

4) Astounding: with less than 10 years left in this millennium, ideas about ‘music’, ‘art’, ‘composers’ and ‘technology’ show little evolution (and prospects are dim).

5) Things not to do: justify the backward, proclaim the status quo, rationalize the oppression of the new and different, impede the flow of ideas, discourage the experimental.

6) Ideas to discard: ‘tradition and culture’, ‘like and dislike’, ‘emotion and intellect’ (not to mention ‘man and woman’, ‘religion and belief’ and ‘race’).

7) Question: How can we be so backward?

8) We are all desperate to categorize, distinguish and identify ourselves. 9) What do we gain from limiting ourselves and keeping the others out—an identity?

10) Jim Tenney suggests simple xenophobia as the root of all of our problems [3]. 11) We develop complicated algorithms for stasis and for backward motion, for not evolving.

Title: More precisely, 15 gloomy sentences, one more-or-less hopeful one (#16), and one suggestion (#17).

1) Most of our society, including, surprisingly, many of our fellow artists, seem to be saying, “Don’t move, stand still—what’s wrong with what we’ve got?”

2) The self-appointed moron is increasingly in the ascendent, at least in the United States. I call this the ‘new stupidity’. A pervasive and superficially well-argued antagonism to change, radical ideas and the experimental frontier is becoming the predominant philosophy of our time. Not just conservatism, prejudice, or even fear of the new, but a proclaimed hostility to new ideas and new art. In music, this new stupidity manifests the fundamental premise that the untrained ear knows best, and should immediately like what it hears. My brother used to say, “Don’t flout your ignorance.”

3) “Don’t go to space, stay on earth and clean it up.” I wonder how many members of my species can not want to see what’s up there. A long time ago I claimed that I wanted to be the first Martian composer [4]; now I worry that my daughter, Anna, will be doomed to an earthling all her life because of humanity’s collective lack of vision.

4) We know so much, have so many great ideas and new things to try, yet we concentrate all our economic resources on maintaining the status quo. An average big-budget Hollywood movie costs more than is spent on the music program of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and the budget for U.S. military bands is larger than the funding of the entire NEA.

5) a) These acts do not constitute conservatism, nor even a respect for history. We composers can learn a lot from the musics of Clara Schumann, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Joanna Beyer, Hildegard Von Bingen and so many others. We do not need to ignore history to move forward. But history should not be a joke, nor should it be used to debunk experiment. Neither should experiment be used to debunk history. The two are the same.

b) If a composer wants to know something about the music that preceded her, fine. If she doesn’t, great. There is no correlation between this kind of historical knowledge and the value of the music she makes.

6) These words are still in common use, but we have no real idea of what they mean. The real motivation for using them is to slow the rate of society’s evolution towards the artistic and social well-being of this planet’s inhabitants. Item: Words like ‘tradition’, ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ are used more often to exclude than to include.

7) Don’t bother to answer, “We’ve always been like this.” I know, just as there have always been those of us who say, “How can we be so backward?”


9) The distinction of being human seems more than specific enough for me. None of us have gifts, photosynthesize, eat our young, or sexually propagate—far more salient distinctions than obscure and barely detectable chromatic differentiations in our protective outer membrane.

10) He’s probably right—maybe it’s in our genes, and in those of other species as well. What would happen if we reversed that concept: if we were afraid of sameness (simplophilia) and only felt comfortable with difference (xenophilia). That would spell the end for McDonalds and, on a note of personal hope, usher in a new era of small local breweries!

11) a) Witness the new attack against politically correct language (PC language), as if it could possibly be wrong to try to develop our language and ideas for the better, to improve the situation of those who have been oppressed for so many years. Daniel Goode points out that “the flag, mom and apple pie are the original PC” [5]. b) Sorry to be so naive—perhaps it’s the composer’s job. These algorithms for stasis consolidate power—economic, social, political, musical. It is an accident that sixteenth-century il counterpoint is taught as a standard part of the college music theory curriculum, but 12-bar blues, Chinese tuning theory, Islamic modes, South Indian rhythmic theory, Javanese pathet and gendering, and Peking opera (among others) are not. We don’t teach an historical/musical period for any geographical area except a small part of Europe—we don’t even teach Sillings in New England [6]. We are ready to canonize the most obscure, long-gone parts of our tradition, while ignoring equally rich (often richer) and important other living ‘traditions’. The common justification is that it’s “our culture.” But for most of us, it’s not. In academia, we often wonder why most of the student composers are white males. Let’s ask ourselves how an Iroquois woman college-music student feels about spending two to three years studying the music of DEWM (Dead European White Males) and being told how essential this study is to her musical skills. As a JAWAM[WA] (Jewish Alive White American Male [With Attitude]), I had trouble with this myself.
12) Things to do: Trust the new, and don't bask in the old.
13) Something to consider: When the greatest change is imminent, like the turn of a millennium, the greatest enthronement takes place. 14) Comment: If someone gave you directions to your own house, you would be insulted.

15) Music is in the worst shape of all the arts, with no history of a critical language and no agreement that it is even worth talking about at all. 16) LMJ's commitment to globalism, to experimentation, to stylistic nonboundaries, to allowing musicians to articulate their own work, is a humble beginning.

17) To Didkovsky's "Move forward, move fast", let's add, "and don't look back".

References and Notes
1. From the liner notes to the Dr. Nerve CD, Beta 14 ok (Cuniform Records, Rune 26, 1991). Nick Didkovsky is a New York–based composer and performer, leader and guitarist of the band Dr. Nerve.


3. Personal conversation with James Tenney, a composer and theorist living in Toronto, Canada.


6. William Billings (1746–1800) is one of the first and most important American composers. He lived in Boston, Massachusetts.

7. Milton Babbitt, "Who Cares If You Listen", High Fidelity Magazine 4, No. 9 (1936). This article has been reprinted several times.