

## A Pentalustral Interlude

**IN 1991**, when we instantiated the *Leonardo Music Journal*, I wrote a somewhat paradoxical editorial titled “17 Gloomy Sentences (and Commentary) at the turn of the millennium (in the form of an editorial)” [1]. One sentence was hopeful:

16. *LMJ*'s commitment to globalism, to experiment, to stylistic nonboundaries, to allowing musicians to articulate their own work, is a humble beginning.

A quarter of a century later, I remain hopeful, made so by the extraordinary world of music, sound and ideas that the *LMJ* community and the artistic community at large continues to create. As a teacher, composer, performer and editor, I encounter daily something fascinating, new, intriguing and often wonderful that inspires me, most of all, to “get back to work.” *LMJ*, under the visionary and energetic stewardship of Nic Collins, for the past five lustra has remained new, essential to the artistic world, and an important resource.

I'm still cautious, and sometimes a bit gloomy (maybe by nature)—but about different things. The composer Dirk Rodney said that in art, “All is novel, nothing is new.” In my 1991 editorial I decried musical conservatism, non-inclusivity and arbitrarily inhibitive distinctions [2]. I'm less worried about those at the moment and more worried about how artists can continue to work in a turbulent and almost dystopian world in which art seems to be at best a luxury, at worst a dangerously misguided indulgence.

Since I helped launch *LMJ*, and since I left its helm in 1997, the world (inside and out of art) has changed dramatically. The availability, ease of use and power of music-making technology have increased, literally exponentially. At the same time, there are a great many more younger artists, and commensurately more institutions granting degrees in composition, sound art and digital arts and media. It has become harder for younger artists to find their own new voices and to feel that they are making an important contribution, given the enormous quantity of kindred work being done.

But at the same time we continue to make earth's higher

species depauperate on the earth, working our way inexorably toward ourselves. Even in what used to feel like an unassailed United States (admittedly, only from certain perspectives), cataclysm insinuates itself almost daily. Ecologically we see, on a daily basis, the incipience of doom: devastating droughts in my home in California; ever-increasing coastal hurricanes; ecological collapses of both flora and fauna; disasters of every stripe. The world is besieged by continual and pervasive war, genocides, misogynistic violence and oppression. Political and socio-economic decision-making is dominated by corporations and religious fundamentalists, and the increasing maleficence of an out-of-control accelerating-feedback capitalism. Black humor determines where we choose to live: pick your favorite apocalypse. Everywhere on the planet the terrifying disparity in well-being, privilege, wealth, health, freedom and safety is a runaway train headed over a cliff—in fact, maybe already over that cliff.

Given all this, how can or does it make sense to: Learn or teach in an MFA program in new media, composition, sound or digital arts? Be a sound installation or soundscape artist, or sonic geographer? Write new compositional or performance software; fabricate new “DIY” interactive technology or laser-cut your own dulcimer? What license must we self-issue in order to use an Arduino card and Max patch in a college black box theater or a loft in Oakland, Berlin or Brooklyn, in order to call attention to fracking in the Urals, systematic raping of women in India or Brazil, systematic for-profit imprisonment of Black men in the United States?

And, as Gordon Mumma often pointed out long ago, electronic art forms rely heavily on advanced technology, and by extension giant corporate infrastructures. Even software development, once a kind of off-the-grid musical art form, is now often a hunt-and-peck through Google [3]. The term “political art” seems more and more the appropriate subject for a smarmy, satirical YouTube video.

The Internet, with its overwhelmingly flat artistic and knowledge topography, presents new opportunities and new dangers. Lou Harrison used to say that composers

born after Hiroshima had no sense of history, because they no longer had a surety of the future. Entering into a historical musical conversation makes little sense if there won't be any more history. The Web, a nascent technology when we began *LMJ*, not to mention its decades-older progenitor *Leonardo*, has irrevocably transformed the way artists learn, produce, collaborate and think. The Internet is like a planar space-filling curve of fractal dimensionality. Everything seems immediate, proximal, connected and available. The Web's virtue is how easy it has become to get information and instructions and to learn something new (or old). Consequently, the definition of an artist (or scientist)—to be “curious”—takes on new meaning. Artists have always tried, sometimes successfully, to be unsafe in a safe world. Yet increasingly art has become *safe in an unsafe world*. Safe because it poses no threat to the status quo, the corporate, academic and technological infrastructure that easily exploits and pigeonholes it.

So: What to do? Not to sound Panglossian, but I believe that the answer is “pretty much what we've always done.” The artist's assignment is preoccupation with fancy, meaningfully useless ideas. We should devote our full energies to the creation of new apertures into the mind and senses. We are obliged to do these things with all the honesty and humility we can muster.

So my non-gloomy thought on *LMJ*'s 25th anniversary

is that the journal, and artists, are doing what we should be doing: making art and talking about it. We do that in our age-old response to justice and injustice, equality and inequality, sanity and insanity. We should never stop asking hard questions—about art, the world, society, justice, peace and what it means to be a decent human being. We need to, each of us alone, engage in the thorniest of these arguments with *ourselves* alone. We should never let ourselves off the hook about what, why and how we do what we *do*. But we should continue to *do*. For the doing and the asking, we need *LMJ* and things like it.

We can't, in fact, do much else, so we owe it to ourselves to not waste the lottery-pick life we accidentally won. This is good news, I suppose, like getting a mild flu in third grade and having to stay home from school—there's not a heck of a lot you can do about your good fortune, and you're not really hurting anyone else. Most of us can't help being artists. The world's problems are what they are—devastatingly serious—and will worsen or improve without much interference, I'm afraid, from us. I'm sure when the zombie apocalypse comes, I'll even find a few free moments to write a round about it.

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Founding Editor, 1991–1997

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## References and Notes

- 1 Larry Polansky, “17 Gloomy Sentences (and Commentary) at the turn of the millennium (in the form of an editorial),” *Leonardo Music Journal* 1 (1991) pp. 17–18.
- 2 From a nonmusical standpoint, I also said that humanity desperately needed to leave the planet and saw a glimmer of hope in the increasing number of small breweries. I am sad to say that there has been far too little progress in the former and more than enough in the latter.
- 3 Full disclosure: In writing this essay I entered “lustrums” in Google to check its plural.