

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

Larry Polansky

# 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 ascendant, 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 flaunt your ignorance."

3) "Don't go to space, stay on earth and clean it up." I wonder how any member 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 be 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 Schuman, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Joanna Beyer, Hildegard Von Bingen and so many others. We don't need to ignore history to move forward. But history should not be a yoke, 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?"

8) As (fill in your own affiliations): serialist composers, Caucasians, free improvisors, Westerners, Bay Area experimental composers, Australians, Indonesian composers, leftists, art rockers, Buddhists, microtonalists, feminists, live-electronic composers, Judeo-Christians, composers of the new harmony, mixed-race families, peoples-of-color, world-music composers, earthlings.

9) The distinction of being human seems *more* than specific enough for me. None of us have gills, photosynthesize, eat our young, or asexually 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 ('similophobia?') and only felt comfortable with differentness (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 no accident that sixteenth-century (!) 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 *gending*, 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 Billings 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.

Larry Polansky (composer, educator), Box A36,  
Hanover, NH 03755, U.S.A.  
E-mail: larry.polansky@mac.dartmouth.edu

Received 2 August 1991.

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 entrenchment 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* (Cuneiform Records, Rune 26, 1991). Nick Didkovsky is a New York-based composer and performer, leader and guitarist of the band Dr. Nerve.
2. Herbert Brun is a composer and theorist, who for many years taught at the University of Illinois. His idea of the 'self-appointed moron' is taken from his article "Composer's Input Outputs Music", in *On the Wires of Our Nerves: The Art of Electroacoustic Music*, Robin Heifetz, ed. (London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1989). Reviewed in *Leonardo* 23, No. 4 (1990).
3. Personal conversation with James Tenney, a composer and theorist living in Toronto, Canada.
4. Larry Polansky, "Jim Tenney and Space Travel", *Perspectives of New Music* 25, Nos. 1-2 (1987).
5. Personal conversation with Daniel Goode, a New York-based composer and performer.
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* 8, No. 2 (1958). This article has been reprinted several times.

12 a) Why are we thrilled and entertained by what we already know (and like)? This leads to strange assumptions in musical discourse: e.g. that to not understand is to not like—shouldn't the opposite be true? b) Even the old is not enough: it's hard to convince people that the *Music of Changes* is 40 years old, the *Concord Sonata* 80 years old. These pieces are about to become the music of the previous century. Shostakovich and Bartók are still considered too adventurous by most performers. Recently, a music reviewer for the *New York Times* joyously proclaimed that it was now 'okay' to not like Schoenberg. c) What about the (truly great) music being created today and tomorrow by artists like Brenda Hutchinson ("too raw"), John Bischoff ("Where's the musicality?"), Barbara Benary ("too multicultural"), Wayne Sadra ("Indonesian contemporary music is a poor imitation of what is being done in the West"), Ken Atchley ("too obscene"), Gayle Young ("too primitive"), Jerry Hunt ("too insane")? Forget it.

13) By the way, whose millennium is this anyway? We are not approaching the year 2000 in the Jewish, Javanese, Balinese or Quenchua calendars, to name a few relevant to my own family.

14) Unless of course you didn't know.

15 a) Music has a long history of reviewing, but almost none of criticism. b) We are simply afraid to talk about music critically, as if this somehow lessens the music: "Music is about sound after all; if you have to explain it, it can't be very good." c) Milton Babbitt's infamous "Who cares if you listen" is only infamous in the context of the general lack of serious thought about music by musicians [7]. His (now-almost-half-a-century-old) ideas would not be at all surprising in literary theory, philosophy or mathematics. He was simply arguing for the integrity of the artistic act and, in a very colloquial sense, saying "Don't let the bastards get you down." Compose what you believe in! How could anyone be hostile to this idea?

16) It is almost unbelievable that in 1991 we still have to think about these issues—they should be non-issues by now.

17) And maybe, more practically, "watch your ass".