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BEING A COMPOSER IN AMERICA

LARRY POLANSKY

*“Heaven endures and earth is lasting. And why
can heaven and earth endure and be lasting?
Because they do not live for themselves.
On that account can they endure”*

IT SEEMS TO ME that there are two very important considerations for a composer in the United States of America.

1) *We must acknowledge the sources of our abundance.* We have a relatively high standard of living, and may make use of high technology freely and cheaply. Most composers are able to work for a living, even if, for the majority, it is not at being a composer. Throughout the rest of the world severe paucities of life’s essentials exist—not just materially (food, shelter, and healthcare), but in less tangible areas like intellectual freedom, quantity and quality of information, and education.

This imbalance may not be necessary. It should be possible to redistribute our meager planetary resources in such a way that everyone would benefit, or at least no one would suffer. Until that radical societal reorganization is established, composers in this country are in a position (at least for the present) to benefit from our government and economy’s exploitation of less powerful societies.

2) *We must not waste this abundance.* While it is incumbent on us to work diligently for the material benefit of man, and a just democratization of planetary resources, it is equally important to continue composing at the highest level possible. It is true, as Gordon Mumma points out, that the microchips and printed circuit boards we use in our work (which more than occasionally carries political messages) are fabricated in the worst of political regimes under the most abominable conditions imaginable. It is also true that many of the technological developments essential to our music (sound synthesis, artificial intelligence techniques, high speed digital technology) have been primarily facilitated by an insane interest in the senseless destruction of human lives.

Strange as it may sound, the best solution seems to me to be the use of these abominations in the creation of art—not with the intent of subverting their function, but rather, because this *should* be their eventual application, and by using them thus, we may steer their evolution a bit in the right direction. Where there is surplus, the first responsibility is to use the surplus, the second to analyse why that surplus exists.

The United States has the potential, in the last part of this century, to be a kind of philosopher state, with all the benefits and dangers that this implies. Composers must recognize what they are offered, and use it for evolution, not destruction. Our work should always have as its goal our own self-transformation, not self-glorification. A community of mind is at hand, and we should not back away.