what if?

Larry Polansky
University of California, Santa Cruz

I often write pieces with some kind of question in mind. That question can be just about anything, but sometimes it is simply "what if?"

Some musical ideas beg to be pursued for their own sake, on their own terms, just to see what happens. Asking the right questions—fecund, clear, as profound and ramifying as possible—is important. But the hard work for a composer is to ask elegantly, poetically, transparently, and above all, musically. There are many interesting questions, far fewer interesting pieces.

If a question is pursued with integrity and confidence, the consequences can lead to difficult pieces: difficult for the composer to realize, difficult for the performer to play, difficult for others to understand. It's true that curiosity can cause problems, but for a composer a lack of curiosity is the more serious problem. If we are to "keep it new" we must take the consequences. Change is hard, but it is everything. The hope is that if we keep sticking our noses where they don't belong, they will, eventually, detect something new.

THREE PIECES

I include three of my own pieces as examples: Christian Music (four rounds) (2007), days, weeks, months, years (for solo pianist) (2006), and "for piano left hand" (#14 from the piano piece תברך [B'midbar] [Numbers]) (2008).\(^1\)

The idea of Christian Music is simple: what if the conventional axes of musical notation—x and y, pitch as a function of time—were reversed? If we "flip" the axes, say, displaying time as a function of pitch, difference and similarities in pitch become those in time and vice versa. Simultaneity in time becomes equality of pitch (and vice versa). A steady rhythmic pulse becomes a chord.

The pencil sketch for Christian Music shows this clearly. The "melody" in black noteheads is written in the conventional way, left-to-right, with time along the y-axis. Each "box" is something like a measure. Superimposed on that is the melody in white noteheads transposed by a ninety-degree rotation (counter-clockwise). In other words, the white-notehead melody is written as if the black-notehead melody were rotated to the left, and written in a 2 × 3 grid (or "two measures" per line) rather than the 3 × 2 of the original. Two representations of pitch versus time (or time versus pitch) combine to make something

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\(^1\) A video illustration of תברך [B'midbar] [Numbers] may be found online at http://www.orpheusinmus.
be/en/anthology-repository

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The pitch/time inversion (rotation) as well
new interpretable in a number of ways. It's a round at the two measures and at

Lenny Ponzysky
The meaningful things other than playing the piano, or even making sounds
are part of the meaning of this piece, so we often consider the piece in its
entirety. When a piece can be a whole, the music in the work is a whole.
The question, "Is there music in this piece?" is meaningful when the piece
is considered as a whole.

The performance of a piece can be an act of sound without meaning.

What happens to a performer who performs a piece without meaning?
A performer who does not have meaning with the piece can perform a piece.

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