

## The Peterson

For years I have held all composer grant and award competitions to a simple standard: would Tom Peterson have a chance of winning? Too frequently Tom didn't have a ghost of a chance. Recently I decided to create an award that, when all votes are counted, Tom should win. Worthy Composer Who Doesn't Stand a Chance is the award's name, or, The Peterson, for short.

But don't vote for Tom Peterson. He just died.

Elections have been won by dead people before, including Mel Carnahan, Missourian who defeated John Ashcroft, his living if not lively opponent for a U.S. Senate seat in 2000. But as a general rule (Carnahan excepted), electing a dead person is a bad idea.

So don't vote for Tom Peterson. Besides, you don't know enough about him. It's no shame. Tom was a composer, not a publicist. How could you know that Thomas Elliot Peterson was Seattle born, a trombonist in the Youth Symphony, studied at the Mozarteum and Vienna Academy beginning in his late teens, and obtained a doctorate at the University of Washington, writing his dissertation on The Music of Carl Ruggles? And I'd be surprised if you knew that Tom taught applied brass, theory, harmony and composition at Seattle University, at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana, and privately in Seattle including a few years as a civilian instructor for members of the northwest Seattle Fort Lawton Army Band. Aside from sporadic performances of a few of his pieces, he lived a solitary musical existence in Seattle, not associated with any institution for the past thirty-five years. Who knew? You might not even be aware that Tom became a Frog Peak composer a couple seasons ago. Then, on December 26, 2005, a few months shy of seventy-five round trips, Tom died.

If you promised Tom your vote he wouldn't promise anything in return except a glass of beer. It would be good beer, most likely a double bock from Germany. Maybe you'd meet at Bill's Off Broadway, or that raucous punk bar on Jackson, or the solicitous Coastal Kitchen, or the Athenian Inn at the Market, where one time Tom gazed out the window at mist darkened Post Alley down to ferry lights on Elliott Bay and said, as though it were enough to build a life around, "I *like* this view." Or perhaps you'd wait for him some rainy night at the inexplicable Sun Ya bar where they served Optimator, and where Tom was surely the only patron who ordered it. You'd wait for Tom, and here he comes, as always in his useful dark raincoat covering his eternal suit jacket, face alive at the sight of you, left hand raised toward you in recognition, still clutching the newspaper he used as umbrella (free at any trash receptacle or park bench), right hand clasping a ten year old University Bookstore plastic bag, protecting his pencil score you'd soon spend some beers looking at.

Tom bought the first round. That way, after a second round paid for by you, Tom could take the

lead in extending the evening. “Oh come on, let’s have one more, how ‘bout it. Here, I’ll buy.”

From his bank account Tom made a daily withdrawal. He always paid cash by the round, never built up a tab. This practical budgeteer knew from meal to meal, or beer to beer how deep or thin were the ranks of the folded green reinforcements in his wallet.

Beer led Tom to some fine music once.

“Dave, do you remember the Old Mill Tavern? On second avenue? Well, it wouldn’t surprise me if you’ve never been there. Something of a dive. A sailor’s joint, with a rather unrefined clientele. But oh well, I knew the owner, and sometimes he would buy a round. A cavernous place. Usually there weren’t many patrons. Kind of a lonely spot to have a beer. Not the right atmosphere for, let’s say, convivial drinking. There was this long bar, the longest I’ve seen outside of one saloon in Billings. A couple of pool tables in back. But the main room, it felt like you could hold a convention. Just lots of long tables. Chairs.

“Well anyway, one blowy spring night, raining of course, it was in about, hmm, 1970, and I was feeling blue because a famous Welsh miners’ choir was performing that night at the Paramount. I loved that music. Male chorus, every singer from the mines. I couldn’t get a ticket. So instead, that night I walked from my room—I lived at the Central Hotel then—down the hill to the Old Mill. Jerry, the owner, was there, which was fortunate because I didn’t know any of the other half dozen characters in the place. Nor would I have wanted to. Hmm. So after a couple beers I said to myself that I’d better be getting home. Just then the tavern door flew open and about a dozen rain drenched fellows streamed in. And in the next few minutes more men came until pretty soon the place filled up. Men in tuxedos. And even before they all had a beer in their hands, they sang. Wouldn’t you know, it was the touring Welsh choir. After their concert at the Paramount I guess they did what any self respecting Welshman would do, go find a beer. They drank and sang until the Old Mill closed. I stayed, too, of course. I got my concert after all, and then some. I guess it pays to drink beer.”

Good beer lost out to good tea in Tom’s last years. Preferred venue was a block down and a steep hill up from Tom’s Bush Hotel one roomer, at The Tea House, Panama Hotel in Seattle’s International District.

(The International District is known as the I.D. When my wife, Julie, first met Tom he required a ride home. I asked Julie to drive him.

“Where?”

“I.D.”

Several days later Julie told me that when they got into her car and Tom told her he lived on Jackson Street she was relieved. She thought I wanted her to drive Tom to Idaho.)

(Don’t get the wrong impression about Tom’s living conditions at the I.D. Bush Hotel. It was a

hotel in name only. The Bush's old glories had given way to dereliction by the time Tom moved in in the early 1980s. The spacious lobby was nearly bare, and the desk clerk had checked out years ago. In preparation for my first visit to his fifth floor room at the Bush, Tom told me to take the elevator. Which, he added, sometimes doesn't work. Residents languishing in the lobby followed me, only their eyes moving, as I walked across the lobby and entered the elevator. Thick metal doors closed slowly. I pressed the button marked 5 and the lift lumbered into action. Seconds later the car slowed as if to stop at another floor, then stalled completely between three and four. I stood still, smiled weakly, listened above the banging of my heart, gauged if there might be air coming from anywhere, inhaled consciously, perspired, pushed 5 five times, and wished for a phone. When I pushed a red button an alarm bell sounded. Repeated iterations of the bell brought footsteps and two Spanish speaking male voices, which paused, then retreated. A silent minute later they returned. Between the elevator door and its frame, six or eight inches above the floor, suddenly there came stabbing a chef's knife's gleaming blade. Had I been standing by the door I would have been skewered. I watched in flabbergast as whoever was on the other side of the door, apparently about shoulder height to the floor of the elevator, tried to pry open the door with the cutlery. I wondered if I should hope for their success. Eventually they withdrew their blade and I was rescued by someone who knew how to get the elevator moving again.)

Tom was a time waster. Surely you don't want to give away your vote to one of those. He spent hours walking to no place in particular. If asked, Tom named walking as one of his hobbies. His other hobby, he responded to an inquisitor one night at dinner, was eating exotic meats. This is partly explained by his years in Montana, where most of Tom's faculty colleagues were hunters. Too, living in the I.D. for his last twenty-five years, Tom frequented Asian cafes that served stewed chicken feet, eel with garlic, shark fin soup, and sea cucumber. "How about fish head soup," Tom might ask at dinner, "say, with scallions, tomato and ginger? Or what about, let's say, fish lips in broth. Hmm?"

Tom and I wasted time together. Did we ever! Sustaining beverages accompanied us as we knocked off the hours with our talk of counterpoint, Aas Bock, J.S. Bach, brass playing, bus service, Ruggles, Ives, Hans Leo Hassler, Seattle history, Brahms, notation, Ibsen, and *choucroute garnie*. Our conversations, like Tom's walking, went everywhere, nowhere. What shameless, wasted time we shared, fearless in the face of silences that would have left any goal driven conversation wrecked.

Have I said that Tom would not have wanted your vote, anyway? At least he wouldn't court it through his music. He bristled at the word "accessible." Two words he loved were "substance" and "effective." A worthy composer was one who "had something to say." After hearing a new work that was all show and no go, Tom would growl quietly to himself and then, gently: "I don't think he had much to say."

When Tom headed to his daily appointment with the muse, his mind took the stairs two at a

time. He composed with clear, energetic intent. What he once said of a little speech he gave in Anne Focke's honor could apply to his music: "I said what I wanted to say."

Have you ever knowingly cast a vote for a quarter-tonist? Here's how Tom arrived at twenty-four to the octave. Like Schoenberg, Tom's old world antecedent, and like Ruggles, his U.S. reflection, Tom developed his own approach to dissonant harmony, and applied it consummately. In his early forties Tom came up short trying to express himself with his old pitch vocabulary. He purchased two battery powered mini Casio keyboards, cheap, but just what he wanted because they were tunable. In his hotel room, with the door locked and the volume low, he tuned one keyboard a quarter tone higher than the other, then physically placed it above the lower pitched instrument so his thick fingers could touch any combination of the tiny black and white keys. In such a way, hunched over runt synthesizers, Tom taught himself to recognize the quality of any two intervals sounded between the two keyboards, and gradually worked his way into three and four pitch harmonies. Vishnegradsky, Haba, Ives and Carrillo enriched his listening repertoire. He read extensively on his new found subject, purchased a scientific calculator for figuring ratios, puzzled over the best way of notating twenty-four to the octave, and began composing afresh.

Tom's interest was not in quarter tones as gimmick; he built a whole harmonic and contrapuntal theory around them. Aware of a recent resurgence in just intonation at the same time he started thinking in quarter tones, he was not bothered by the well-temperedness of his new palate. For Tom, all systems of tuning had creative legitimacy. Twenty-four fed his imagination for the rest of his life.

Though a mere twitch of commotion, and not enough to disqualify him for The Peterson, Tom's closest brush with success came in the late 1970s. He received an NEA composer fellowship, and shortly after that a commission through King County Arts Commission, enough approbation to keep him going. His inclusion in the Frog Peak catalog was the next most cheering, ennobling event in a long, unknown life.

About Tom's music there are a few things I'll say. Tom's pieces hit the ground running and impress with their sustained ideas. His counterpoint is impeccable. I listen to his String Quartet with admiration, caught up in his extended thoughts. The first work of his I heard, the Trio Sonata for Flute, Clarinet and Bassoon, introduced me to his trademark conversational rhythmic phrases, instinctively formed to blot out bar lines. Tension builds smartly in what few quarter-tone pieces of his I heard; he manipulates his expanded pitch arsenal to gain maximum dramatic effect. "Cannon Beach," the brief song Tom wrote for Ann Obery (who performed it tirelessly and with affection), is pure Tom—knotty, dissonant, lyrical, long wearing. The demanding monophonic counterpoint of "Design on B-A-C-H," written as part of Tom's treatise, *Playing Trumpet in our Time*, has been neatly tackled in its trombone version by, among others, Stuart Dempster and Toyoji Tomita.

Tom had been a player, and apparently a good one. I only heard him play trombone once, just to try out an instrument he was curious about. But he played soprano recorder smoothly, sweetly. Some evenings, as I played piano accompaniment, Tom fingered Bach chorales and Ives songs on the recorder, and one time, a few weeks after I bought a copy from the half price bin of a local sheet music store, we thrilled our way through Ruggles "Toys."

I think it was because he was such a good player himself that Tom expected much of anyone who took on his music. Tom's pieces challenged performers. Technical dares that enhanced the spirit of a piece were the spinach of a growing musician. To overcome obstacles of a rhythmic, fingering, phrasing, and breathing nature was the mark of dedication to art as far as Tom was concerned. Difficult passages, when confronted with hard work, possessed curative powers. Yet I would never say Tom tried to write abstruse pieces on purpose. It's just that his music required concentration and dexterity to compose, and he assumed as much from the mind and body of the performer.

In all Tom's pieces he balanced careful planning with an explorer's sense of curiosity. The painter Kenneth Callahan said about his own paintings that his best work occurred when he stopped trying to illustrate what he already saw in his head. Tom composed like that. I remember him describing surprise, even awe at how a composition took on a life of its own. Following the lead of a piece once he started writing it brought out a bubbling excitement in Tom, as though he were a researcher on the brink of a breakthrough.

If it affects how you vote, there are aspects of Tom's music I don't warm up to. His pieces veer toward the fiercely dramatic. Tom's sense of form draws on oxford shoe classical style. There's no dismissing an old-fashioned heft to his tensions and releases. Too, he couldn't begin to understand Cage, and what Cage posited as Satie's form-driven-by-factors-other-than-harmony legacy, which seems to me vital to understanding much new composition. Tom was a Western culture chauvinist, and to the best of my knowledge harbored no interest in music from other traditions.

Personality? Character? Tom was brilliant, charming, witty, a conversational regaler. For a dinner guest there's never been a surer ticket. He was also stubborn, private to his own lasting disadvantage, mechanically incapable in a comic way (he never mastered how to put a cassette tape back in its plastic case, or how to attach or release a seat belt in a car), and not good at any composerly task besides putting mind to music and pencil to paper.

So what. Those traits fade in the genuine light of Tom's enthusiastic, lonely perseverance, his bid to apply rigor to quarter-tone writing, and his titanic, detailed understanding of Western music through the first decades of the twentieth century. For thirty years he was my deep source of history.

In my reminiscing about Tom I realize that, if you're a composer, you might be tempted to give

your vote for The Peterson to yourself. That's okay. I understand. If, like Tom, you write and make music for pleasure and for the exploratory intrigue of the task, and in the process don't get much notice, you qualify. We all hold hands with our varied forebears, the intrepids and the joyful tryer-outers who warbled and woofed in differing states of anonymity. Like most of us who can't not compose, can't not make music, Tom collected, weighed, studied, and reconciled the musical pebbles within his reach, enfranchised them with his touch, then tossed them into the big pool. The ripples are small, but they spread a long way, last a long time.

David Mahler  
pgh 1.24.06  
rev. 4.13.06