

views: A Musical Coming Out

As I wrote in these pages a few years ago, I didn't come out until I was 57 years old. Recently I realized that this had a quite profound effect on my life as a composer as well. In the second half of the 20th century, composers of what some call "classical" or "art" music were expected to be aligned with the *avant-garde*. Mostly this meant composing twelve-tone or chance-like music and creating works which one could be sure an audience would not enjoy. I solved this problem by establishing my reputation in the field called electro-acoustic music where I felt a lack of expectations and where I was quite sure that my audience would consist of a small but appreciative people interested in "alternative" music.

Having been raised by an old-school Russian musician who was my step-father, my first love was always the Russian "romantic" composers such as Borodin, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninov. But when I came of age as a composer, I had to hide this love in order to be accepted in the community of "modern" and "avant-garde" composers of my day. I expressed my romanticism in secret just as I hid my homosexuality. Few people knew of my romantic pieces and in truth, there

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were not many of them.

It was about the same time that I was willing to admit being gay that I started to compose the most beautiful music of my life. This was almost exclusively piano music composed for Russian performers and played only in Moscow. Until recently I have not shown this music to American and European colleagues and fans. I was quite sure they would not understand why I had composed this music, in the same way that they would not understand someone who was married, raised children and then quite late in life thrown over the façade of respectability.

I do not believe that it is considered respectable to be gay in most any part of the world. Those who think otherwise should travel outside Vermont, outside the United

States and Europe to see how little comprehension and how much fear still surrounds homosexuality. But in coming to know the lives of gay composers and performers, most closeted but some not, such as Tchaikovsky, Ravel, Vladimir Horowitz, et. al, I have come to believe there is nothing in their compositions and performances that would indicate their sexual preferences. "Queer studies" may be popular and relevant in literature and perhaps the figurative visual arts, but if one's music does not use words, there is nothing I can find in the musical sounds that can convey sexuality, politics or anything specific except feelings. Musically, the love of a woman for another woman is indistinguishable from the love of a woman for a man or a man for a man.

The best part about coming out as a gay man was the unexpected benefit of making me unconcerned about what others thought about my life. It made me free to be the kind of composer I always was and wanted to be. A great gift, even late in life. ▼

Jon Appleton is a composer living in White River Junction, VT

views: Home Is Where I Am

Daddy went to sea in 1942. "Why?" I asked. "To win the war," my Mom said. Dad left Mom and me and my little sister to my grandparents for care. I was seven.

I remember walking into a second grade classroom in Rhode Island and staring at the blackboard. As a refugee from New Jersey I only knew how to print. This blackboard was covered with lines and squiggles that were totally incomprehensible, just as moving from a home I'd been born in to a mill town called Woonsocket was incomprehensible.

My grandfather carried me out of the first Rhode Island home in his arms. He had arrived just in time to save us all from carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty heater.

After that we moved three times in two years. In 1944 my daddy was discharged, and we started the trek back to Jersey. First we lived in his brother's unfinished garage on Long Island. It was here I learned to love the sound of rain on a bare roof. Then we moved to his sister's summer cottage in Belmar, New Jersey. It was here I learned to love the smell of salt and the sound of waves crashing on a beach. I remember, though, standing under a bare tree in a schoolyard refusing to enter one more new school. I remember getting sick on the school bus every day.

In 1946, right after my

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brother was born, we finally returned to Kearny, N.J., where the whole trek had begun, and the circle was completed.

If you were to ask me to describe any of these homes, I could tell you about the docks behind empty houses where I would sit with my feet in the water and dream. I could tell you about going down long, long stairs to a muddy river bottom and feeling for clams in the silky mud. I can tell you about playgrounds, empty lots, and woodlands that no longer exist.

But I can't remember any kitchens, living rooms, back doors, or where my sister and brother slept. Home had become, not the houses, but me. Where I was, that was home. I wasn't about to trust wood and brick and roofs. They were simply something you left behind whether you wanted to or not.

As an adult my name was on the deed for a house in New

Mexico, a split-level in Pennsylvania, a converted barn in Vermont. Ownership was as incomprehensible as the blackboard in the second grade. How could you own something that was only yours for a little while? As far as I could see, houses and land belonged to themselves and let someone live in them for however long they stayed.

I did live for a time in a beautiful apartment owned by a lover who assured me this was my home. Just as I started to believe her, she decided she didn't really mean it, and that was that. Unlike me, she did believe in ownership. This time I didn't have any money and it looked for a while as if I didn't have anywhere to live, and that's how I discovered the true meaning of home.

Home is a place no one can see. It resides deep inside me. It is where I feel safe. There is always a light burning in the darkness, there is always a welcoming voice, there is always a fire burning in the fireplace. The air I breathe in this home is supplied by my own Self. It allows me to be anywhere on this planet, and be home. ▼

Lynn Martin is the poet-author of Visible Signs of Defiance (Out of the Kitchen Press) and an AIDS Prevention Specialist at the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont.

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