

On more than one occasion, Michael Tilson Thomas has used the word “wacky” to describe my music. Composers usually blanch at such attributions—nobody wants to be captured in a single word—but I can live with “wacky.” It is not a common adjective, does not end with “ism,” and clearly the rhyme with my last name personalizes it. Moreover, since “wacky” is not an established genre, I feel it incumbent upon me to refine the definition of the term, in case it enters the scholarly lexicon. So in addition to the words “[slang], eccentric, or irrational,” I would add:

Wacky (wak´i) 2. Weird but with a sense of humor. In music, suggests material of a quirky and offbeat quality, with a mercurial continuity .

The material in my music—the tunes, chords and textures—tend to explore fringe modes of consciousness rather than brand-name emotion or logical thought. Generally speaking, these fringe modes are alert and lucid as opposed to trance-like. Often it is the unlikely combination of otherwise simple elements that transcends and confounds familiar patterns: the beginning of *Waffling (sic)*, the second movement from **Eating Greens**, uses an ostinato, a Christmas carol and few party favors to form a cacophonous celebration. In *Puffe (Tuck and Roll, 4th mvt.)* a wheezing chorus of cheap harmonicas emerges mysteriously and comically from a receding haze of violin sonority.

There are plenty of things that are just intrinsically *weird*, no matter how they are combined, like the detuned violin solo in the *The Title Is Almost As Long As The Piece Itself (Eating Greens, 4th mvt.)*, the exotic melody for trombone, piccolo and tuned cowbells at the end of **Lost and Found**, and perhaps the mere idea of an electric guitar concerto.

Another *weird* aspect of my music is my propensity to steer the music toward terrain which the listener did not foresee from the beginning. For me, it is best if the discovery is not inevitable, but rather feels a little lucky: the result of the fortuitous combination of a few plausible steps—like the serendipitous steps that must have taken place to connect a field of grain to a plate of French toast. I should emphasize, however, that I aspire to explore surprising *continuities* rather than non sequiturs. Nevertheless, in terms of classical paradigms, I suppose this trait would put this music in the category of comedy rather than tragedy, where a single characteristic or event leads to an inevitable destiny.

Greater thinkers than I have stumbled at the task of explaining humor but my best guess, as it pertains to my music, is that it lies in the relationship of the music to the physical world: *rhythm* in the largest sense. I think a lot about momentum, inertia and even gravity. Allowing the music to get stuck and tip over, lurch headlong, tumble with limbs akimbo, as well as move fluidly, gives it a “road-runner” cartoon kind of physicality—a fantasy, but not completely unhinged from Newton’s laws of the physical world.

This sensibility is manifest in all of my serious pursuits. As a young adult I was a freestyle skier. My ideal run would have me careening down the mountain, arms and legs flailing, interrupted occasionally by surprising moments of grace, and somehow end up at the bottom in perfect balance.

There are other aspects of my background that probably help to locate where I am coming from. I blame almost everything on my parents and my upbringing. For example, I have not managed to escape my father's sense of humor; he relished a risqué double entendre, especially if it would derail the pretensions of pseudo-sophistication and snobbery. His motto was "Speak like the people and write like the king." Both my parents were children of the depression who, as middle class U.S. government employees, traveled the world and educated their offspring as only aristocracy could have done in the 19th century. I was born in Germany, started school in England and lived as far afield as Guam before settling in northern California in the late sixties.

Speaking of California in the sixties, I was too young to be a bona fide hippie but my two older brothers were on the front lines. They, without setting out to do so, not only led me to composition but steered me to a particular sensibility. I have vivid memories of being 13, when they were 23 and 28 respectively, and being enlisted by them to provide musical accompaniment to their LSD explorations. They would drop acid and I—the designated driver of sorts—would play the guitar for six to eight hour stretches. I have no doubt that my sense of music's role in personal, psychological and spiritual exploration, as well as my predilection for psychedelic images and journey metaphors, were hatched in these sessions.

What I don't blame on my upbringing, I blame on the guitar. I imagine that I would fit within the institutions and protocols of classical music better if I played a "real" instrument. In my mind, I am working in the tradition of Mozart and Stravinsky, exploring all that *pure* concert music can be. But my past, present and future is checkered by the fact that the sound of the electric guitar is like mother's milk to me and its iconoclastic milieu, between avant garde experimentalism and libido driven vernacular, was my grade school. Even in the two pieces on this disc that do not include electric guitar, its influence is felt in the approach to orchestration and in the musical attitude. Before the twentieth century, the only guitarist to become a major composer was Berlioz . . . enough said.

The influences and sources of inspiration that are more specifically germane to the music on this disc are eclectic. **Tuck and Roll** is *about* the electric guitar. The guitar plays most of the time and the orchestra (in spite of the fact that the same orchestra could readily render an authentic performance of a Brahms Symphony), welcomes, embraces, amplifies and idealizes the electric guitar. The title comes from a type of leather upholstery used in American muscle cars made well before the oil crunch of 1973. The overstuffed black leather, tucked and stitched to form rolls, is associated with cruisers, hoods and, in my mind, endless nights bathed in the green glow of the dash lights pursuing perilous freedom and unabashed hedonism as an antidote to existential nausea. I am drawn to the dark yet playful spirit it symbolizes, and the vague suggestion of gymnastic maneuvers is welcomed as is the machismo . . . it is an electric guitar concerto, after all. The way the orchestra extends the guitar seems related to the way these cars enhance the personae of their drivers.

The piece also ended up being influenced by the Latin music scene of Miami, the base for the New World Symphony. I spent quite a bit of time down there getting to know the orchestra, and I am sure that the percussion writing and some of the grooves and tunes reflect that.

The title for **Eating Greens** was taken from a painting I bought in the French quarter of New Orleans at an African art store. Leafing through a stack of canvases by Margaret Leonard, *Eating Greens* immediately caught my attention. I really liked it but remember asking myself if I *should* like it. The scene was a three-generational African-American family seated at the table for a meal. There is a big, iron stove and some shelving in the room, but not much else except wallpaper: wallpaper with giant strawberries as big as the human heads, connected to vines that threaten to take root in my living room. Each plate at the table has a pile of greens and a piece of what I take to be cornbread. The settings are thoroughly furnished with silverware, yet everyone is eating with their fingers. The colors are shamelessly bright crayola colors. The perspective is wildly askew in various ways in different parts of the painting. My description sounds like a hodge-podge, yet somehow a single, distinctive personality emerges that touchingly considers domestic themes: religion, food and art.

A few months later, I went to the Matisse exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I was familiar with his work through prints and admired the marriage of clear, formal principles and playful spirit, but the originals were a revelation. Up close, you could see the pencil marks intended to guide his cutting in the big cut-out works; he continually missed the lines. I imagined him, a grown man, sitting in his studio with a huge pole pasting construction paper on the wall. In spite of the cultural gulf between Henri Matisse and Margaret Leonard, I see a spiritual similarity between them. I would describe their work as deeply playful.

Speaking of “deeply playful,” Thelonius Monk has been an inspiration to me in recent years. I am tickled when I hear him stumble through some scale that in someone else’s hands would be a cleanly executed, rhetorical gesture. In Monk’s hands, it is the stumbling that is important, not the scale. There is a touching but complex irony hearing a sentimental legato ballad strained through Monk’s quirky, all-thumbs style. The ballad takes on a compelling reality, rather than a practised, artistic, metaphorical form of abstract expression. Those things informed **Eating Greens**.

Lost and Found is a snappy five-minute toccata and fanfare for orchestra. Come to think of it, this disc contains all the ingredients for a traditional symphony program: concert opener (**Lost and Found**), concerto (**Tuck and Roll**) and large symphonic work (**Eating Greens**). Wacky . . . but in the traditional sense.

—STEVEN MACKEY