

# Two Writings for Gaudeamus Muziekweek 2013

## (I) A Response

NOTE: In the summer of 2013 I was asked by the Gaudeamus Muziekweek (Utrecht, The Netherlands) to become one of the panelists for their seminar entitled "Crisis?!? This is how I keep composing..." The prompt, shown below, seemed to be charged with so many things to be discussed. Since it seemed impossible to be allowed to fully articulate my points in mere 50 minutes, especially as there would be other panelists, I decided to write a response to the prompt.

Many thanks are due to Michelle Lou, who kindly read the original manuscript and made suggestions for improving the text. - YO

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*Hard times, but that doesn't stop composers from writing music. But their lives and work are certainly affected by the current economical crisis. How do composers from hard hit countries make a living in 2013? Where do they get money for their music? And: does the crisis influence their work? Do they write different music? In this panel we'll talk about the problems and the creative solutions composers find to keep on composing. With a keynote speech by Thanasis Deligiannis.*

### Part 1: My life as a composer

*A talk with composers from different countries about how they live their lives as a composer. Do they make any money with composing? Or with other musical talents? Or do they make money outside music? How is the situation in different countries hit hard by the crisis? And what are their expectations for the future?*

*Duration: 50 minutes*

### Part 2: Composition as a comment

*Composition is a form of art and art reflects on society. So how do composers reflect on the crisis in their work? Do they do it with their compositions? How? A keynote by XYZ and discussion by composers.*

*Duration: 50 minutes*

*Format: experienced composer delivers a steamy keynote of 15-20 minutes on this subject. Preferably someone who was active during the eighties crisis, possibly "Actie Tomaat". Discussion with some composers, young and old in a discussion, reflecting on the keynote. Can be 1, 2 or 3 who were in panel of part 1, preferably at least 2 or 3 new ones. Audience participation.*

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In seeing the recent economic downfall around the world, the issue of financial crisis and how it affects composers, particularly composers of new music is exceedingly imperative as I prepare to finish graduate school and enter into a weak job market and thus an unknown future.

Rather than attempting to address these questions with my own situation, I would like to ask a slightly different question. I find the title of this seminar, "Crisis?!? ... " very appropriate. After all, what kinds of crises surround us? Not only finding a living wage to support a life, but also a life in music itself feels increasingly out of reach. The source of this is political and economical, things which can seem out of our control to change. But in fact, I sense that there is something else also at stake. What is more important for me to speak about at this moment is: Why do we compose? There exist not only such crises that are externally imposed such as lack of funding, but those that are existential in nature. I believe that if we can answer for ourselves the value of composition, then the external will not affect it. And we will then find for ourselves the answer to how one continues to compose regardless of their financial situation.

I cannot offer any career advice. If anything, I would be the one who needs this kind of advice. Instead, I hope that I can raise some critical questions in order to further the ongoing discussion of our lives as artists in a society where the ontological meaning of arts has shifted from the expressive depth of humanities to the plastic, immediate satisfaction of trivialities. Our integrity as artists is being circumscribed by the pressure to become entrepreneurs. Sure, we may become entrepreneurs of our own music; let us dream big, after all. However, how can we match the act of "seeking money" for our enterprise without compromising our artistic integrities?

Concerning the questions underlined in this seminar, I recall a piece of advice that Japanese composer Toshi Ichihyanagi, a protégé of John Cage, once told me. He said: "In this world where each profession is highly specialized, it is imperative that one be able to do many things." In the case of composers, we should be able to not only write music, but also to perform, to conduct, to teach, and to write articles. Doing so would not only diversify the lives of the composer, but in turn, this diversity creates positive impacts from one activity to another. In other words, as Roland Barthes says in his "L'empire des signes," assuring the "circulation of signs" is very important for keeping our lives in motion, and deepening the qualities of life. Pursuing multiple activities such as this will inevitably and positively feed upon one other. For the artist, banality and calcification are the worst enemies to creativity and movement. Thus, I aspire always to find openings that lead to previously undefined spaces for expression that are fresh and that can provoke yet more inquiries and more motion.

I have learned quickly that, in a society where the role of artists is marginalized, I find that I have little power to change such dynamics of structure. But I am not completely powerless. I could use that little power to continue to write the music that I believe in and form meaningful relationships with those who encounter it with open interests. My work, comparatively speaking, is not performed as much as many other composers of my age in the United States. I am well aware of the fact that my ideologies in music have nearly nothing to do with the capitalistic notion of success. If I allow the slippery slope of the idea that more performances, awards and accolades equal more success, then I fear I will lose the sense of self-awareness in the sea of egotism, and the music that I believe in writing.<sup>1</sup> I am concerned with the notion of self-discovery through composing. Composing takes on a philosophical question, "Who am I?" Composing is a process in which I become increasingly aware of myself, or even realize some psychological, or subconscious aspects of mine that were previously not known to me. This inward exploration of self is then dialectically turned outward to address collective aspects of life, yet another facet of human nature.

My teacher, Fabien Lévy, has very beautiful words. He says that it is the composer, not others, who is the first audience of his/her own music. I would add that the composer is the toughest critic of his/her own music. If we cannot please the toughest critic of all, how can we then please *others*? If the toughest critic is not pleased, we could then be lazy, or cheat to ourselves by forgetting about him/her and writing music to please *others*, such as festival directors, an imagined audience or whomever. But if we seek to reach transcendence in our music, how could we possibly be cheating? I think that composing music that follows its own path and not others is difficult, because it is not a style exercise. It does not become easily categorized. There is not a definite answer, solution or path either, but we have to continually create and mold the discoveries. As this is my choice, I know I must accept that my music may always be scarcely performed yet still continue to work. But this "go the harder way" mindset gives the vitality for arts to continue and thrive in this world, because when we are dealing with the music that has more than a millennium of tradition, there would not be quick-fix solutions.

I am very fortunate that I have the opportunity to pursue related activities. I teach. In fact, this is how I am able to live these days while finishing up my doctoral studies in the United States. I conduct ensembles whenever the opportunities arise. As I have mentioned before, my performance calendar as composer is almost always empty. This relatively infrequent amount of performances of my music, however negative it may sound, has brought me an invaluable lesson. It allowed me to spend a good amount of time, not only writing out my ideas on manuscript paper, but also to prepare them in such a way to better present them to the performers. As much as I am very conscious of my compositional ideas, I am equally concerned with "packaging," just as how Japanese sweets are very often scrupulously packaged. Just as much as I spent time on putting notes together, I am also aware of the psychology of performers. The better the notation is presented, the better the working relationship will be. This is not simply a matter of business to me. It is a matter of being human; to be kind, humble, and thorough. This is an ongoing process to be improved. My ideal is to be at a point that I would have the ability to present a work in

which my ongoing musical ideas and the skills of presentation are enjoined at the highest level possible.

The fact that I was born in a very small city in the Northern part of Japan, where it was very provincial, I believe gave me a strong desire to see more, what was not there.... to see the invisible, to move outside of my comfort zone. Now that I am living in New York City, the urge to see the world is becoming more alive. Daniel Vezza, founder of the online series, "Composer Conversations," recently stated that my music is performed more in Europe than in the United States. This is true, and I have been making efforts to reach out to the very location where Western Art Music began. I have found that this audience is generally more open towards more difficult music. And I desire an audience that is critical. In other words, I do not believe in provincialism. Just as my life has taken me from a small town in Japan to one of the busiest cities in the world, I intend to make sure that my music, too, continues to gaze at the world at large.

In a way, the inextinguishable desire to "say that which cannot otherwise be said," has been the driving force of my life as a composer. Fabien Lévy has always insisted on this, that composers have "something to say." In fact, because of this desire, I am able to try to find other means to support my living, when my music does not earn me even enough to pay half the rent. Just because I know I have to. I do not recall an instance when it was the other way around. I would never modify my musical ideals in order to pay the rent. We have only one chance in this lifetime and although we are facing an uncertain future, why not at least dream big, or to quote Lévy, "be crazy?" To dream and act upon it, is perhaps the key to finding freedom in a world filled with constraints of all kinds.

Crisis may indeed affect our lives as composers, but crisis equally signals the beginning of the new chapter. A former colleague, who had his own personal crisis, had a critically important dialogue with Helmut Lachenmann, who told him exactly this. Only at the epicenter of the crisis can one then look forward to the new departure in life.

A final thought: Japanese philosopher Shizuteru Ueda begins one of his books as follows: "Very often we are so self-conscious yet we are hardly aware of anything around us. And even if we reflect upon such a way of being sometimes, depending on the way we reflect upon ourselves, it can become a challenge to be our own selves."<sup>iii</sup> To us composers, this is a warning, because the act of composing itself does not guarantee us to be ourselves. To find ourselves in the large river of music has always been a challenge. But now, it is even more dire a challenge, where composers feel the urge to connect with social media, where information is saturated and we get caught up in trying to keep up in many ways than one. It is true that social media is changing the way of life, and human beings must somehow adapt. However, I would argue that there is a significant difference between passively accepting such changes, and critically examining and evaluating their worth, possibilities and consequences. Walter Benjamin, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," would show the latter attitude with photography and films. He, at the same time, warns us that the danger of such new technologies, often latent in the face of convenience, exists.

Without such watchful minds, we might as well become robotic composers. If we try our best to answer the question: "Why do *I* compose?", which may not always have the same answer, I believe the *how* follows.

Yoshiaki Onishi  
New York, August 2013

## (2) Keynote Speech

NOTE: The following text was delivered on September 5, 2013, at the seminar: "Crisis? This is how I keep composing..." held at Museum Speelklok in Utrecht, The Netherlands. I was asked by Ewout van der Linden, moderator of the seminar, to prepare a five-minute keynote speech for the second part of the seminar, "Composition as a Statement."

Thank you, Mr. van der Linden, for giving me the privilege of becoming the keynote speaker for the second part of the seminar today.

As many of you may know, I have written a response to the general question for this seminar, which you can read on the Gaudeamus Muziekweek online. In that, my main point was that aside from the financial crisis, we are also equally facing the aesthetic crisis. That is, in our times, capitalistic thoughts are eroding the aesthetics of classical music. Grave confusions abound in today's society; There have been composers who feel compelled to write types of music just so that the music generates incomes, or worse yet, those who think that such music is far superior to music that does not generate incomes. Thus it is important for all of us to consider that the financial crisis that we face is only a fraction of the entire image of the human crisis.

The questions that Mr. van der Linden prompted me to answer in the keynote speech are: (1) "Should or should not crisis influence compositions?" and (2) "How do you feel about compositions reflecting the crisis?" Those two questions are similar to each other, but are differently nuanced. I would like to briefly respond to these two questions.

The first question: "Should or should not crisis influence compositions?" I personally do not know of any good pieces that are not influenced by crises. If you are an avid reader of Heidegger, in the mere first few pages of the "Introduction to Metaphysics," he makes this point painfully explicit. He writes:

[...] burdening is one of the essential and fundamental conditions for the arising of everything great, among which we include above all else the fate of a historical people and its works.<sup>iii</sup>

It is possible that a piece of potent music may not have the trace of crisis that we audiences could readily feel. However, I would argue that in such music, the spirit of music is dialectically turned from the crisis. It is most likely that the music undergoes a kind of crisis still, but as a result of distillation, the element of crisis is sensed only latently.

I had a similar conversation about this with a friend of mine here in Utrecht two years ago. I asked him if different places that he lived would affect the way he writes music. He thought for three seconds, and then he responded, no. To me I understand this as a solid sense of determination that he demonstrates in his compositions, and that his metaphysical space is well developed. However, I would argue that it is only possible to create such a solid sense of concentration after being affected by some kind of crises, whatever the kind may be. Thus, retrospectively speaking, his music too has a particular relationship with crises.

The second question: What do I think about music reflecting crisis? To this question, an analytical reading of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony by Slovenian sociologist Slavoj Žižek comes to my mind. In the article entitled, "Ode to Joy' Followed by Chaos and Despair," Žižek proposes the idea that Movement IV of the Beethoven Symphony – "Ode to Joy" to be precise – as an "empty signifier."<sup>iv</sup> What remains of the Ninth Symphony is the composer's diligent trace of writing. As the long history erased the significance of contextual meanings in the Symphony from an immediate level of perception, we are able to posit whatever the meaning we would like into the composition, even if that meaning may run against the true, inner intentions of

Beethoven, which we have no way of knowing.

Why am I recalled of the Žižek reading? Because this means that the composers' intentions in their music do not necessarily correspond to the integrity of the works. Composers may well say that the compositions are affected by, and make the statement about the crisis that they have faced. However, it does not mean that the composers could forego compositions' musical integrities. As the Beethoven Symphony shows, that diligent trace of writing itself is the musical integrity in its crystalized form. Lowering the musical integrities could lead to yet another, graver crisis. As classical composers, falling into this vicious cycle is something we must avoid at all costs.

I do not mean to offer solutions to the crisis that we face today. In fact, who could ever give such solutions? But in the given logic, I speculate that what we could do for the best is to endure patiently. If we are concerned about our survival through the incoming crises, we have to go above and beyond the crises, and make sure our music does the same, just as so much classical music of the past centuries has still been remembered. To create something *meaningful* and *substantial* that withstands the test of time...whatever these two adjectives mean to each composer, the compositional focus should be placed on the ever-expanding horizon of musical possibilities.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> For discussion of balancing the self, self-awareness, and non-self, readers who read Japanese are strongly recommended to refer to: UEDA, Shizuteru. 『折々の思想』“Ori-ori no shisô” (Thoughts now and then) (2010) by Tōei-Sha, Kyoto, Japan. In the first chapter of this book, he discusses his quintessential philosophical idea, “Double-being-in-the-world,” the post-Heideggerian idea that strongly reflects the anxieties that Ueda felt by witnessing the imbalance of self-awareness thereby turning itself into the egotism.

<sup>ii</sup> Ueda, Shizuteru, et al. "Ten Ox-Herding Pictures - The Phenomenology of Self." Chikuma Shōbō. Tokyo, Japan. 1994. Page 17. Translation by the author.

<sup>iii</sup> Heidegger, Martin. Introduction to Metaphysics. Translated by Richard Polt, et al. Yale University Press. New Haven, Connecticut. 2000. Page 12.

<sup>iv</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. 'Ode to Joy,' Followed by Chaos and Despair. New York Times. December 24, 2007.