

CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL COLGRASS

How did you start in music?

I was raised in a small town, Brookfield, Illinois, which was absolutely devoid of music, dance or theater. Movies were my culture. At age 10 I saw drummer Ray Bauduc in a movie play "Big Noise from Winnetka" with bassist Bobby Haggart and I was mesmerized. I hounded my father for a drum, and when I got it I immediately played the rhythms I heard Bauduc play in that movie. I soon formed my own band, the Three Jacks and a Jill, and started my career as a self-employed musician. I traveled into Chicago to hear the big bands and imitated every drummer I heard. Jazz was my only ambition up to age 19.

What happened then?

I went to the University of Illinois and studied percussion with Paul Price, who was just starting the percussion ensemble as an accredited course in universities. But I was a bad student academically because I was playing a jazz band six nights a week.

How did you start composing?

Price invited me to a percussion ensemble concert in last ditch attempt to get me to be a serious classical music student. After the concert he asked me what I thought of it. I arrogantly told him I admired the students' playing but that I thought the music was "terrible." These were works by Varese, Harrison, Cage, Cowell, and the other giants of early percussion composition. He took a long look at me and said quietly, "If you don't like what you heard, why don't you try your hand at it." I was thunderstruck by his suggestion because I thought you had to be dead to write music. He showed me some scores and I immediately dived into my first piece, "Three Brothers" for nine percussionists. We performed the work soon after it was completed (8 May 1950). Then it was published and recorded, and has become a percussion classic, of all things! I've been writing ever since.

What's it like to win a Pulitzer?

I have mixed feelings about awards. It feels good, but I also know that when I win a prize, two or three other composers who are equally deserving didn't win, and probably would have with a different jury. An Associated Press reporter phoned me all excited to inform me of the Pulitzer. He said, "Give me your absolutely spontaneous response to winning." I thought about it and said, "To me, prizes are like buckshot, they might hit anyone standing in the vicinity." He was silent a moment and then said, "But aren't you pleased?" Still absolutely spontaneous I said, "My parents will be pleased. They've never fully understood what I do."

How did you start giving your Excellence In Performance workshops?

I was a free-lance percussionist in New York City from 1956-67. I played with everybody - the New York Philharmonic, the Met, American Ballet Theater, the original West Side orchestra on Broadway, Gunther Schuller's concerts and recordings with Dizzy Gillespie and the Modern Jazz Quartet. I'd be running day and night from a rehearsal, to a recording, to a live television broadcast - run, run, run. One night I was walking down West 57th St. dressed in concert attire carrying my briefcase of sticks, and suddenly I stopped and said to myself, "Am I going to the concert or coming from the concert." I turned around and looked behind me, west toward Carnegie Hall, to remind myself that I had actually finished and was going home. I laughed

about the incident as I continued on toward the IRT subway. But then I asked myself, "How could you play a concert with a great orchestra and forget about it ten minutes later?" I had become numb and realized I had to do something about it - get off the treadmill and somehow retrieve the spirit and spontaneity of creativity and music-making.

A little voice inside me said "study acting," which was crazy. I was 35 years old and in the middle of a successful career as a top player in New York, but I followed my instincts and took lessons from Bill Hickey at the HB Studio. Then I studied theater directing, and mime, and fencing, and voice, and ballet and modern dance. The Rockefeller Foundation got interested in what I was doing and gave me a grant to continue this work in Europe. So I studied with the Tomeshevsky Mime company, clown training with commedia del arte actors from Milan and physical training with the Grotowski Polish Theater Laboratory.

After a year of all that, I was a changed person, renewed. My composing broadened, I opened up as a person. I wanted to communicate with people, relating the arts and including the public in the artistic process. That's when I started to give workshops for performers, which grew in scope to include people of all professions. I finally wrote about the workshops in a book called *My Lessons With Kumi - How I Learned To Perform With Confidence In Life And Work*.

Why didn't you ever take a university job?

I like universities, but the Demon gets itchy when I'm in an academic atmosphere for too long.

Who's the Demon?

The Demon is my creative part, the part that writes music and words. I often visit universities as guest composer for a few days or a week. I love to work with students, give workshops, coach my music and share ideas with the teachers. Then the Demon tugs at me and says, "Let's get out o' here." He doesn't want to analyze art, he wants to create it.

You mean you can't be creative at a university?

Some people can, but most composers complain that the academic atmosphere is restrictive. Maybe it's all the other stuff you have to do besides teaching - committee meetings and so forth.

What advice would you give to a young composer today?

Pick the right mate. Composing is too hard a life to live alone. I never thought I'd get married, the Demon saw it as an interference. Then I met my wife, Ulla, in Denmark. We had dinner and she asked what it's like to be a composer in America. I said, "A composer is not very important, like a doctor or lawyer, or especially a senator." And she said, "I think a composer is more important than a senator." I laughed and told her she just happens to like music. And she said, "Oh, no. The way I look at it, there will always be a senator from Illinois, but there won't always be a composer from Illinois." Suddenly the Demon says, "Who is this lady?!" We were married a little over a year later. That was 32 years ago.

So it was her attitude that made the difference?

That, and her practicality. I decided to make a living exclusively from composing, which meant I needed full time and privacy to compose. Not many women would tolerate such a life. She helped me work out the many details that made that dream possible. She didn't care if we had

status, or a nice car, or a position in society. She was raised in an atmosphere where art was a prime value.

After living for 18 years in New York City why did you move to Toronto?

When our son, Neal, was age five we had to think about schools. We wanted to raise him in a metropolitan area that also allowed him be independent, not guarded all the time. Professionally, I needed to live on the eastern seaboard, because that's the center of culture in North America. Then we discovered Toronto, which is about an hour by air from New York, Boston and Chicago. In fact, it's south of one-fifth of the United States. We tried it, liked it and stayed. It's truly a people city.

Who do you write music for, yourself or the public?

I write for the musicians. They have to play it and comprehend it, so I see and hear it from their standpoint. I was a player for many years, so I identify naturally with the performer. Coming out of a jazz background as a musician, composing and performing are almost one act to me. In fact, for many years I didn't think of myself as a composer, but rather as a performer who was providing material for my colleagues - especially in my percussion pieces, which were my first compositions.

Is the public important to you?

I certainly hope listeners enjoy my music and I make every effort to explain it and write clear program notes. I love to do pre-concert talks and to meet the public in post-concert chats. Some composers may think of this as pandering to the public, but I call it communicating. I'm especially interested in children and inspired by them, and often go into the schools and show them how to write music. I also correspond with children, when they write and ask about being a composer.

What's the hardest thing about composing?

Going the extra mile to make a piece the best it can be - cracking the nut to get that little bit more that makes a piece great. Let me give you an analogy. I ran on a track team in college. In March the best sprinters were already running the hundred meters under 12 seconds. In another three weeks they'd be near 10 seconds. Then the real work started: it took a month or more to shave it down to 9.8 or 9.7. The winning times would often be only a few hundredths of a second faster than the others, and those times were achieved by the athletes who were willing to put in the gut-wrenching work to shave off a tenth of a second. The same principle applies to creative work. To write music is not difficult if you're gifted. But to flush out and refine your conception to the point where it penetrates the consciousness of others in a permanently memorable way requires a quantum leap in effort. If, as Blake said, "The devil's in the detail," you can magnify that a thousand-fold for composing, especially for a symphony or a concerto.

Why do you do it?

Because it's my nature, I'm born that way. As Ulla said when she was interviewed in the WGBH-CBC documentary called, Soundings: The Music of Michael Colgrass: "It's like living with a third person in the house. There's Michael, with whom I want to live, then there's that other curious being who must produce music to exist."