

SASHA AMAYA INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL COLGRASS

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COMPOSER INTERVIEW

SA What do you want to hear in music?

MC I want to be transported. I think a piece of music should be like a good mystery story, where the composer is the detective who presents materials rich in conflicting elements, and then proceeds to resolve the mystery. And I expect all this to be done with a variety of skills, giving me solutions, but then, just when I think I have the answers, sending me again in a new direction where my curiosity is piqued even more. The music should be so compelling that if I were standing I would not walk on until it was finished.

SA How do you approach writing a new composition? How do you decide which themes are those which deserve representation?

MC To me a piece of music is like a non verbal play. The instruments are the characters and the themes are the personalities of each character. The themes define the difference between the instruments. For example, a theme might be masculine (aggressive, angular, intellectual) or feminine (gentle, lyric, emotional), and two such contrasting themes would hold the potential for a kind of musical love story. Good themes are clear, succinct and have intervals that suggest many possibilities for development, especially if they suggest contradictory elements -- like tonal-atonal, or major-minor -- which makes characters interesting and calls for a resolution.

SA What are your expectations for the performance of your work?

MC I always expect top performances and I attend rehearsals with a clipboard, make very specific notes, and read these to the musicians and conductor. I do what I can to guarantee that the performance is good, because performers need help no matter how experienced they are. And it's all in the detail.

SA What do you feel your job is as a recognized composer? What responsibilities does this title have?

MC My first responsibility is to the performer, and the performer is responsible to the listener. In this way the composer, performer and listener form a triangle in a three-way constantly interchanging communication. All three are necessary to create a musical event. The purpose of this event is to honor not just the music but the process of human creativity. And not just the composer's but also the performer's -- because a piece of music is not complete until it is interpreted -- and the listener's, because a good listener is a participant whose energy is reflected back to the performer and therefore enhances the performance.

SA Are there any (Canadian) composers who have influenced your work?

MC I can only say that I might be influenced by any piece of music I hear if it's good, and that might include composers from any country.

SA Which moments in your career have you found particularly rewarding?

MC That's a gigantic question! I have literally hundreds of moments that have inspired me and have just finished a book of anecdotes telling about them. You'll have to read the book when it comes out.

SA What would be an ideal musical project for you?

MC Every project is ideal because I only take the ones I really want at any given time. I make my living exclusively as a composer (I never took a teaching job) and have been writing on commission for over 50 years. But I always manage to get myself commissioned for something I would have done anyway had I not been paid for it.

SA What might you be pursuing if not music?

MC Music is the only thing I can conceive of doing full time because I need -- truly need -- to create. As French writer Albert Camus said: "I write for the same reason I swim, because my body needs it." If I don't write music for a period of time I begin to feel physically uncomfortable and then mentally at odds with myself and the world. Put in the positive, writing music is my way of calling out to the world with full energy, like a baby when it first comes out of the womb. A creative artist never stops crying out. To whom? To whomever is listening.

SASHA AMAYA is a Canadian writer whose contributions have been published in G.love, Guitar Review, Soundboard, Classical Guitar Magazine, The Winnipeg Free Press, The Uniter, Stylus and Ciné-file.