

THE DIVERSE, DARING COLGRASS APPLAUSE

Article about Excellence In Performance; By Dana Nasrallah

During Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Michael Colgrass' five-hour workshops, it's not unusual to see the noted composer of "serious" music propped upside down on one shoulder.

Or perhaps Colgrass will lead participants in an exercise in which they make strange beeping or gurgling noises in an attempt to create a unique musical notation. Activities like these have elicited raised eyebrows from the staid and proper classical music establishment.

"In 1968, I wrote an article in The New York Times which they called 'A Composer Who'll Try Anything Once,'" Colgrass said. "There was a picture of me standing on one shoulder, and I think a lot of composers, when they saw that, thought it was undignified."

The Pulitzer Prize-winner communicates with words, physical movement and, of course, his music. Colgrass has been a professional musician for more than 30 years, 20 spent exclusively writing commissioned music.

He has written articles for The New York Times, Christian Science Monitor and Canada's Music Magazine. And he supervises workshops in which participants use special physical training to conquer performance problems.

So, if he's so willing to conduct seminars, coach both artists and the general public and stand on his head, why does Colgrass refuse to talk about his current work-in-progress?

"To speak about a piece of music while it's being written, before you've finished it, would be something like a detective speaking about a case before he's found out who's done it," Colgrass said. "A piece of music is very much like a whodunit. I don't know how it's going to come out, I just know what goes into it."

"I'm listening to it and listening to what it wants, and it'll only tell me under very, very private circumstances. If I went off and started talking about it or boasted about it, well ... in the first place, I'd be talking about something that I wouldn't even know about, and I think my subconscious would have every right to say, 'Okay, Michael we're working together here on something and you haven't heard it out yet and you go blabbing about it. Well, we've lost our interest.'"

Works-in-progress are the only taboo subject for Colgrass. In his lectures and workshops, he addresses a variety of subjects that affect personal performance. Colgrass' unorthodox workshops, which anyone can attend, are directed toward performance confidence and excellence.

Included are exercises using the Grotowski method, which trains the performer to direct his attention away from himself while anchoring concentration. The Grotowski method includes a series of movements such as somersaults, shoulder rolls, shoulder stands, headstands and slow motion walks.

Other processes include Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) and self-hypnosis. Colgrass' basic principle is that mental states correspond with physical states, and the key to body control lies in mind control. Grotowski training, NLP and self-hypnosis help the mind and body work together to excel under high-pressure circumstances.

Colgrass, who admits his creativity depends on constant deadlines, is no stranger to pressure. His compositions are commissioned far in advance for a set performance date, before which rehearsals, program printing and other arrangements must be completed.

He tells the story of a piece he wrote for the Joffrey Ballet, which had been rehearsing a dance to a Ravel accompaniment. When authorities confiscated the Ravel accompaniment for copyright violations, the Joffrey was left without music. Colgrass wrote a new score for the ballet overnight, and it was performed for a matinee audience the next day -- April 1, 1966.

"I didn't know if I could do it, but I thought I would try," Colgrass remembers. "I just pushed some kind of button in myself, and went into such a deep state of concentration, wide awake all night and the next day. I was revving the engine."

Colgrass also believes his teachings can be used to help gain confidence for people outside the arts. He holds about 20-25 workshops annually throughout the United States, Canada and England. The workshops are open to the general public. For example, a session at the University of Akron included a priest, a nun, a hair stylist and a teacher.

"I think we tend to label people in all professions," Colgrass said. "We tend to stereotype people. If a person's an accountant or a lawyer, that means they're not a creative type, but if a person's a painter or a composer, that means they're creative."

"Well, I've met some painters and composers who are not very creative at all, they're just Xerox copies of their idols," he said. "And I've met some business people and people outside the arts who are very creative and inventive."

Although music critics' opinions are divided about Colgrass' maverick ideas, the critics and the public share an approval for his music. Colgrass has created music in an array of forms, from sing cycles to jazz works to musical chamber theater.

In his 1969 composition *The Earth's A Baked Apple*, he set music to a poem he wrote about contemporary urban life. In *The Winds of Nagual*, written in 1985, Colgrass created a wind ensemble work as a musical fable based on the writings of Carlos Castaneda.

In recent years, much of his work has been for orchestras, including the Minnesota Orchestra, the Toronto Symphony and the New York Philharmonic.

Colgrass is a man who has forged his own unique niche out of the modern music scene. He writes solely on commissions in a time when most composers rely on university teaching jobs for support.

His independent streak can be traced all the way back to his childhood in Brookfield, Ill. Colgrass decided to become a musician when he saw a jazz band in a movie.

Though his sister took obligatory piano lessons, no one in his family was naturally musical, nor did they take music as a profession seriously.

Nevertheless, Colgrass bought a drum, taught himself to play and formed a band. At 13, he took hour-long bus rides into Chicago to see the greats of jazz music perform. In order to be noticed, he drew large pencil portraits of the musicians and presented his rendering to the jazz artists.

Colgrass idolized these men, and asked them questions about music and their work. One of these musicians, Louis Prima, encouraged Colgrass to finish his academic education, so Colgrass completed high school and attended the University of Illinois.

At the University of Illinois, Colgrass studied classical music and started composing. After graduation, he moved to New York City, where he worked as a free-lance percussionist for the New York Philharmonic, the Modern Jazz Quartet and in shows, including the original Broadway hit music West Side Story.

But being a free-lance musician didn't nourish Colgrass' creative desires. He began to feel like a cog in a machine, albeit a musical one.

Colgrass' second phase of exploration began one night in 1967 as he walked home from a Carnegie Hall performance. As he walked along the Manhattan sidewalks, he had a memory lapse and couldn't remember if he had already played or was on his way to perform. Colgrass' life had become a series of dispassionate performances of other composers' works -- and the creativity behind Colgrass' talent was aching to emerge.

Colgrass left New York and traveled to Poland to study with the Jerzy Grotowski Theater Laboratory, an experimental theater group which attracted attention in the 1960s for its theories in mind-body correlations for performers. Since then, he's earned a living exclusively as a composer.

He has received numerous awards, including a Rockefeller Foundation grant, two Guggenheim awards and in 1978, the Pulitzer Prize.

"I make my living as a composer," Colgrass said, "and these workshops are an alternative to get me out of my cubbyhole, my ivory tower.

"It's kind of rare to make your living as a classical composer, and most composers teach for a living. I think a number of the teachers suspect that if you make a living composing, you must be selling your soul or compromising."

For Colgrass, adapting to being a successful, in-demand composer involves a lesson he learned as a youth, when he'd give famous jazz musicians his sketches to attract their attention. As he spent time with the noted musicians, he learned that his idols were human, with personality qualities and faults.

"There are very talented people, but they may be very deficient in the human side," he said. "My values have always been that the kind of person you are matters as much, or even more, than any special gifts you have. The art you make out of your life is the real artistic challenge."