

## LETTER TO A YOUNG COMPOSER

*New York Times*

### *Catch-22 for Composers: You Need Another Job to Support Yourself*

The composer of so-called serious music is perhaps the most neglected of all artists today. To begin with, his potential audience is minuscule. Then, too, the chances of having his works performed are severely limited. Record sales are most unlikely and public recognition and acclaim are all but out of the question. And so, not surprisingly, avant-garde composers often stick together and commiserate.

In the following exchange of letters, a young composer named David Maslanka, an assistant professor of music at the State University College in Geneseo, N.Y., and holder of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, sought the counsel of a noted, older colleague, Michael Colgrass, the New York composer and lecturer.

*Dear Mr. Colgrass:*

I have listened to your *As Quiet As* and feel a certain affinity with its musical language and its esthetic premises. My intuition suggests that you, possibly more than other people, have wrestled with the question I am about to ask.

Why is it that you go on writing music? The answer, obviously, is that you love it, but as a composer among composers I feel myself to be a shrub in a forest of trees. My voice is lost and will stay lost except for an accident of fate.

As a composer among people, I feel an oppressive indifference not only to my possibly obscure art (it seems clear enough to me), but to the musical and, indeed, the intellectual experience as a whole. I have dealt with the problem essentially by ignoring it. Have you found any better answers?

Sincerely,  
David Maslanka

*Dear Mr. Maslanka:*

I think the most important thing a composer must do is decide if he is a composer. That doesn't mean he has to decide if he's good, but, rather, if he's that funny and rare kind of bird who has to sit on branches and sing. It's a difficult decision to make because once you've committed yourself to it most people will think you're irresponsible, this includes your parents and even your best friends, including the musicians, because we are not, in fact, supposed to be composers.

What we are expected to do is teach music and compose in our spare time. The Doctor's degree is supposed to be our real symphony, the only qualification that counts with many people. It's like a union card. Once we attain that, we are expected to join the academic community and develop a reputation by composing on the side. Since teaching (and the committee meetings that go with it) is so demanding, there is no spare time - or what there may be is filled with the wrong thoughts. So instead of composing we write treatises for music journals, and enter into the publish-or-perish syndrome. Each of us tries to come up with some

idea or method so we can gain the status of other great composers whose methods have become a basis for teaching, as Hindemith's and Schoenberg's have.

Now, all of this has nothing to do with composing. Composing is finding what you are musically and being it. It takes time to find it in yourself, a lot of work goes into that, a lot of living as well as writing. Once you get a finger on what really makes you different from others you start really composing for the first time. The feeling is immensely satisfying. I think it is the deepest fulfillment an artist can have. What this means is that you've taken on what e. e. Cummings calls "the awful responsibility of being yourself."

So the first and most important thing to do is arrange your life so that this search is possible, whatever that may mean to you. They don't tell us about this in music school, so it's a rude awakening to encounter it out of a clear blue sky, because what it means, in effect, is enduring a life of insecurity. This is the dilemma, the Catch-22 of the artists: You can't be secure as an artist unless you're free to work and find yourself, but the life necessary to that kind of work is one of economic insecurity.

But this is true only for a while, because as you mature and find ways to live, to make money, to discover what your needs are, you become more confident as a person and as an artist. This basic human confidence is important. Because, after all, though you may potentially be a great composer, you may also be only a good composer or a very good composer. All these are valuable, so you can't answer the question about your own value by deciding on the degree of your artistic merit - you have to first decide your value as a person. That must be your base in life, and once that's right then everything you do will be right, for you.

What also follows from this is something I consider very important - the kind of friends and close relationships you have. I think being with the wrong people (wrong for you) can have the most depressing effect on a person - devastating for an artist. I have hundreds of acquaintances, but I select very carefully those to whom I would express my innermost thoughts. I respect myself and won't tolerate for a moment the kind of negative and deprecating attitudes that are common among so many composers. In fact, I spend very little time with composers, or other musicians, because when I'm not composing I want to talk about other things and get outside myself.

I see the composer as a person not separate from life and community but indigenous to it. How to bridge the gap that has developed between the artist and people is the biggest challenge I know, but I find that the more I reach out to people the less indifferent they are to the artistic experience. So the responsibility to overcome indifference is mine, too, and is a way to keep me from becoming indifferent, which is the deepest guilt an artist can feel.

Therefore, I don't believe it's an accident of fate that separates one composer from another, but an act of will. You decide what you want and need and then set out after it, do or die.

Sincerely  
*Michael Colgrass*

**NOTE:** In the 25 years since this exchange of letters, David Maslanka has become a successful composer, and now makes his living from composing.