

Michael Gordon
The Accidental Music Lesson
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In a way, this is a tale of two cities.

This past November I went to my hometown, Miami Beach, for a performance by the New World Symphony of my orchestral work, “Gotham,” a three-movement symphony that takes the city of New York as its subject. It is part of an ongoing project of “film symphonies” that I am creating with filmmaker Bill Morrison to capture the aura of cities.

My family moved to Miami Beach from Nicaragua when I was eight years old. I grew up not far from the art deco building on Lincoln Road that houses the N.W.S. Back then, Miami didn’t have much to offer a culture-starved teenager and at age 17 I left, eventually ending up in New York City. I’ve been returning to Miami Beach regularly to visit family and I’ve seen the city’s deteriorating Art Deco buildings transform into the ultra-hip South Beach of today.

Along with the rise of South Beach came the birth of the New World Symphony, an orchestral training academy founded by Michael Tilson Thomas that has turned the area into a Mecca for young classical musicians. This trip home for me was a bit surreal — returning after more than 30 years for my first professional date, and returning as a composer.

When the N.W.S. discovered that I was from Miami Beach they asked if I would speak to students at Miami Beach High — my alma mater. This got me thinking about my high school music teachers. I was amazed to see that the popular guitar teacher, Doug Burris, was still teaching there. I had the chance to chat with him and we spoke about the school’s former orchestra director James McCall. When I was in 11th grade I had nervously asked Mr. McCall if I could write for our high school orchestra. He turned to me and said, “You’re not only going to write for the orchestra, I want you to conduct it as well.” And I did. It was a fabulous opportunity for me.

Visiting Beach High and thinking of Mr. McCall started me thinking about the other music teachers who impacted my life in ways they never knew.

Florence Kutzen, my piano teacher, endured countless unprepared lessons. At age 10 I started distracting her from my lack of preparedness by showing her piano pieces that I had composed. It worked.

Once, at my last piano lesson before heading off for vacation, I asked Mrs. Kutzen what her plans were for the summer. Her reply: “Michael, musicians don’t take vacations.” I filed this line away in a special part of my brain, an informal collection of “accidental music lessons.” My interpretation of Mrs. Kutzen’s words

has changed through the years, like a Talmudic discourse that is argued from different points of view:

- 1. Musicians just don't ever feel quite right going an extended period of time without playing their instrument.*
- 2. Music isn't a job that you punch in and out of. It's an obsession, a calling and your purpose in life.*
- 3. Musicians don't make a lot of money and you're not going to be able to afford a vacation anyway.*

With my compositions encouraged by Mrs. Kutzen and Mr. McCall, I asked my parents to help me find a composition teacher. Through a family friend they found the composer Francis Simon, who seized the moment in my very first lesson and “performed” John Cage’s 4’33”. I was stunned. I had started lessons with Mr. Simon for practical advice — like how to write correctly for the oboe. I didn’t realize at the time that my music teachers had opinions.

These accidental lessons weren’t the lessons I’d thought I was supposed to be learning, but they might have been the most important ones.

After I left Beach High I forgot all about the symphony orchestra. My compositions became focused on smaller, amplified groups devoted exclusively to playing newly written music, and I swore off the symphony orchestra as an out-of-date, past-its-prime mode of musical expression. But in 1999 I was encouraged by John Adams to write a piece for orchestra. That concert, which Adams conducted, included the premiere of his score for the Peter Martins ballet “Naive and Sentimental Music,” Charles Ives’s Fourth Symphony, and my own new work, “Sunshine of Your Love.” The mysterious power and beauty of the orchestra spoke to me. I was hooked.

At Beach High I stood in the auditorium with 800 or so restless teenagers, talking about the upcoming performance with the New World Symphony. At the Q & A one teenager stood up and said, “Your music doesn’t sound classical at all.” He compared my music to both heavy metal and film music and called it “experimental.” That made me smile. For most people, “classical” is the musical equivalent of Shakespearean English. It’s wonderful to see “Hamlet” but no one wants text their friends in 16th-century lingo. As a composer today I have always felt that my music has to have meaning in the vernacular.

I was also happy because I thought that for this student and those who came to hear “Gotham,” maybe hearing my music, and its connection to “classical music” was one of those accidental lessons.

The New World Symphony performed “Gotham” along with music written by my longtime friends and colleagues David Lang and Evan Ziporyn. When I was

growing up I couldn't have possibly imagined that a concert like this would ever take place in Miami Beach and that I would be part of it. A few blocks away and 35 years ago I was dreaming of being a composer. James McCall, Florence Kutzen and Francis Simon were preparing me for a musical life. Those preparations, both intended and accidental, set me on the path that lead me to New York and then, eventually, back to Miami Beach. And so here I was, suddenly, in the city of my youth, a homecoming of sorts, presenting a work about the city I have now made my home. It was a rare moment for these worlds, past and present, to collide.