

What Kind of Music Is This Anyway?

By MICHAEL GORDON

The wonderful guitarist, Mark Stewart, who is a member of the [Bang on a Can All-Stars](#), but who also plays in Paul Simon's band and on the film scores of Elliot Goldenthal, says "I play three kinds of music: popular, semi-popular, and unpopular." Mark calls my music and the music of [Bang on a Can](#) "semi-popular."

My good friend, the well-known composer David Lang (who along with Julia Wolfe and I founded Bang on a Can), calls our music "post-ugly," a reference to the dissonant musical notes of the modernist or atonal composers who preceded us by a generation.

I used to like to say that I write "strange" or "weird" music, but now, for the sake of simplicity in social situations, I simply tell people when they ask that I'm a "classical" composer. Nine of ten people don't know how to respond to this, and there's usually an awkward moment in which they process this information trying to find something to say.

I have always felt uncomfortable with the word "classical." It sends an instant message to most people that you are involved in something *other*. And, vainly, I am very aware that classical music has the squarest image on the planet. A bigger problem is that my music is not what most people think of as classical music. It doesn't sound like Mozart, it is not genteel, will not serve as pleasant background music at a dinner party, and it can not be used to sell a Mercedes. (A passport control officer at Kennedy Airport once told Julia Wolfe that he thought all classical composers were dead.)

If you are an aficionado of contemporary classical music you probably have had similar experiences explaining to your friends and co-workers what kind of music you listen to. For those who are confused, the question that might come to mind is, "Why would you want write weird music?" Or more simply put, "Why would you want to write music that most of the world doesn't listen to?"

I'll try to answer that here.

Excerpt from "Decasia,"
Michael Gordon,
composer. ([mp3](#))



Perhaps it is a blessing and perhaps it is a curse, but "normal" music doesn't hold my interest for very long. I may like it, but it doesn't engage me. I may admire it, I may

enjoy it, but I can't listen to it for sustenance. For sustenance I need unusual music. It doesn't matter what style or category, but it has to jump out at me and say, *You haven't heard me before, so listen up.*

I wasn't always attracted to strange sounding music, mostly because I didn't know it existed. But when I was 15, I was given a record of music by [Elliott Carter](#), the New York composer who's highly atonal and complex music is intensely energetic and challenging. It is true that I was shocked when I put it on my stereo and I did think it was the ugliest thing I ever did hear. But I also was intrigued and after dozens of listenings I became convinced that there was something to it.

As a young boy growing up in Nicaragua I had already started to compose songs and short pieces for piano in the classical style. Later in Miami (early 1970s) I would pour through the bins of the original Specs record store in Coral Gables and buy up whatever was in the bins marked "New Music."

That was the beginning of my exploration into contemporary classical music. The journey went from Carter to [John Cage](#), back to the European modernists and eventually to the American minimalists. All this highly charged experimental music must have gone to my brain in some way because I suddenly became very focused. (O.K., let's say obsessed.) It became my goal to figure all this music out, to make some sense out of it, and to make musical creations of my own that I actually wanted to listen to. This last part is key, because one of the reasons I write music is that I'm trying to create the music I want to hear. Or put another way, I imagine music that doesn't exist and I want to hear it, so I try to write it.

Although so much of what I heard at 15 was a mystery to me, I did understand this one thing: the music that made the greatest impact was written by composers who had an individual style that was uniquely their own. They had somehow found a way to express themselves that no one else had found.

There are, in my categorization of things, two types of music: music you've heard and music you haven't heard. The music that exists in the world already is music that you've heard by virtue of the fact that it has already entered into the public consciousness and is accepted as a musical type.

New music, that is, really new music, tends to shock many and excite a few. The riot at the premiere of Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" is now legendary, but most really new music causes a shock of some kind.

It might surprise some to realize that many of the great composers of the classical tradition were the leading experimental figures of their time. Beethoven, now in the minds of Madison Avenue a worthy companion to the elegantly dressed Mercedes Benz set, was an outrageous and radical figure. Beethoven's music was considered bombastic, abrasive, and crude. Fortunately for him he lived in a time period when audiences were just beginning to crave the new. The entire 19th century became a period of great musical innovations that played out in front of an increasingly large and non-aristocratic public, giving rise to a "popular avant-garde."

Beethoven's appearance on the world stage was bigger than the music he wrote because he shifted the dynamic between the composer and society. Until Beethoven the composer served his master — the patrons — and the master ordered the creation of music much the way one would order a new suit from a tailor.

Beethoven let it be known for all time that it was the composer who was the master. By the early 20th century the stage had been set for Stravinsky, who in his twenties took his first big opportunity to create the most experimental works of his career. The shift not only represented how totally the composer had broken away from the patron-servant relationship, but how much the purpose of music had shifted from functionality to art. Functional music was used for something — a church service, solemn occasions, for parties and dances. Art music had no useful functions, and none were demanded of it.

When Beethoven upped the stakes for the composer — he or she was now vying for immortality — he also upped the downside risk. When there was a patron or audience to satisfy there were boundaries to what was acceptable as music. But when the composer ruled, and when it became his or her aim to be a *titan*, an *art deity*, it also became possible that the titan composer could write a music that no audience wanted to listen to. In the 18th century every composer could be a Baroque composer, but in the 20th century, not everyone could be a titan. By the time the second half of the 20th century rolled around it became accepted that the composer wrote music only for a few well informed listeners.

When all of this entered my consciousness in the early 1970s there was a raging battle going on. This battle, between the European modernist composers (uptown) and a group of American individualist composers (downtown) was not one that I was old enough to participate in.

In fact, although I loved the music of the minimalists — [Steve Reich](#), [Terry Riley](#) and [Philip Glass](#), adored [Conlon Nancarrow](#) and [Harry Partch](#), was truly stimulated by the concepts of Cage and became a convert to the music of [Morton Feldman](#), I also listened to and admired the music of the modernist composers, especially Carter, the stochastic music of Greek composer [Iannis Xenakis](#) and the elegant and delicate creations of [Gyorgy](#)

Ligeti. If I had to choose I would have without question sided with the downtown school. I found the modernists were totalitarian in their belief, misconceived in my opinion, that the point of writing music was to show off how smart you were. Or put another way, that being able to show how smart you were in a piece of music meant that it was good. Not only was the downtown school more expansive in its ideas and concepts, they also began to reembrace the misbegotten audience by reintroducing the now forgotten idea that music, in order to be good, needed to actually sound good.

However, all of this was not my fight. It was a fight that raged among the generation that preceded me. What was important to me, and I think to my generation of composers, was that composers in all these camps were all searching for something new.

When I was in music school the prevailing discourse was that there was no audience for this music and that there was only one way to go — academia. Julia, David and I challenged that assumption. Inspired by the Kronos Quartet and the composer ensembles of Reich and Glass, we launched the “First Ever Bang on a Can Marathon” in 1987. Our aim in 1987 was to build an audience, and we had outlined a lists of dos and don’ts that we put into action: no program notes, no composer biographies, no intermission, no advertisements to classical music audiences, an alternative non-concert hall space and an open bar (!).

We wanted to send a simple message: this music is being made *now*. If you read books by living authors, if you see dance by living choreographers, this is the musical equivalent.

Things have changed since 1987. People’s ears have changed. Many of the sounds introduced to the world through the classical experimental tradition have entered into the public’s ears. I still don’t know what to say when people ask, “What kind of music do you write?” — but I do know that when we show up in Champagne Urbana or Perth or Paris or Catania or Singapore that we usually have a full house of people eagerly expecting to hear, well, something they’ve never heard before.