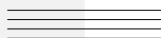


A B O U T   T H E   C R E A T I V E  
P R O C E S S



L U K A S   F O S S

The word *creative* creates trouble. Let's say I'm composing something and someone enters my room unexpectedly. What do I say? "I am working." Work is what we do. Who creates? Women as they give birth? God, when he created the world? How presumptuous to apply that word to writing music.

Often the word *creative* is coupled with the word *genius*: "creative genius." What is genius? Another suspect word. Arnold Schoenberg the composer said, "Talent is the ability to learn, genius is the ability to develop." Developing is difficult. Our daily lives throw obstacles in our way. To develop one needs inner peace of mind, faith, courage, and belief. Above all, there has to be passionate involvement in one's work, not just industriousness. Bach supposedly said, "Anyone who works as hard as I do, can do as well." If that is true, genius is the ability to work hard. Certainly, the composers we revere were all hard workers. Mozart wrote so many works in his thirty-five years that it would take a long lifetime just to write out the notes. We literally do not know how he did it.

To me, Mozart is our Shakespeare, the one who wrote the most psychologically baffling music. He combined ideas that no one else would have thought of putting together. Anybody can put things

together that belong together. To put things together that don't go together, and make it work, that takes genius like Mozart's. Yet he is presented in the play (and movie) *Amadeus* as a kind of silly boy whom the gods loved. It is interesting to note that until *Amadeus* came along, Mozart was seen as a rococo court composer. As Charles Ives put it, "Mozart was someone who wrote music for nice people." The *Amadeus* legend traded one cliché for another. Mozart the court composer of elegant rococo music gave way to Mozart the silly composer, a bit retarded, a bit of a moron, whose great music came out of nowhere into his infantile brain.

Why do we trade one cliché for another? Why do we pigeonhole and label an artist? It is a sure way of missing the important, the contradictory, the things that make him or her unique. If you read the truly infantile letters Mozart wrote to his little cousin, even at age twenty-five, you may believe the *Amadeus* legend. But this is only one small side of Mozart's complex mind. At the same time, he wrote a letter to his father about death being his "companion," profound words, anticipating Rainer Maria Rilke. To understand Mozart's contradictory qualities would indeed be to understand genius. I'm dwelling on this because many people are still clinging to the Hollywood idea of a genius, say, Beethoven walking in the midst of a thunderstorm. There comes suddenly the great melody, the inspiration. We would never do this to a scientist. We would not imagine Einstein walking through a thunderstorm and suddenly the Theory of Relativity appears to him. If we know better about scientists, why are we so naive about artists? Because art is supposed to be emotional and science intellectual? I don't dare postulate about science, but I know that it takes both emotion and intellect in order for art to happen.

It is obvious that anything a scientist discovers or invents is based on previous discoveries and inventions. The same applies to the arts. Invention does not fall upon a blank mind. The artist falls passionately in love with art that already exists. This is the first step. Usually, he or she is still a child when that occurs, and the child's immediate desire is to "do it, too."

Most people think an artist tries to be original, but originality is the last thing that develops in the artist. Nor is the artist concerned with expressing himself or herself. That may be why I've always taken issue with certain tenets of "progressive education,"

which are based on the idea of getting children to express themselves. You give a child a pencil and say, “Do something, do anything. Express yourself. Create.” Well, what are children going to do? They will take the pencil and pick their nose. They do not want to express – they want to learn. The first thing children want to learn is how to walk. They are not interested in inventing original things to do with their legs. Here is the child, still horizontal, supine, and he or she sees people walking. “Wow! That’s what I want to do – walk!”

I have a funny theory. When I went back to visit my native Berlin after World War II, I noticed that the only thing I really remembered from my childhood Berlin days was the shoe store. Could it be that shoes are particularly important to children? They symbolize standing tall rather than lying helplessly, looking at grown-ups towering above. Then, one day, the child stands up and gets to wear shoes. Shoes may well be a symbol for becoming a member of human society at last. What I am trying to do here is debunk the myth concerning self-expression. I began composing because I wanted to write music that is like music I love.

For years that may mean imitation. Then, one day, it is like a door opening, and a new thought comes in. Why not try this instead. Suddenly I am doing something original, almost in spite of myself. Even at this point I do not give up being influenced by what I love, by the music that has made me a musician. But I make it my own. This is a wonderful English expression that exists in no other language I know: “to make something one’s own.” Stravinsky probably did not know this expression when he said, “One must always steal, but never from oneself.” Right on the mark. Why make something my own that is already my own? Stealing from oneself is indulgent, and one doesn’t learn anything new. If I steal from another source, I enrich my vocabulary.

Yes, influences are enriching, and they can be found in every work of art, even the most original. Musicologists and critics always bring them to our attention. They’re proud to detect the influence of one composer on another. Little do they realize that detecting an influence is only the first step toward really interesting research, namely: What does the artist *do* with the influence? That is why the analogy of stealing does not work. With a thief, we want to know how much money he or she stole, and from whom?

With the artist it is not how much he or she took from whom, but what the artist did with it. The fact that Stravinsky used the classics as a major influence is obvious. What is interesting is how he used them, how he turned Bach into Stravinsky. I strongly suggest that we play down basics like who influenced whom and instead study the way the influence is transformed. The prerequisite: love. If one uses music that one does not really love, then one will not succeed in making it one's own.

There is an interesting paradox here: by immersing ourselves in what we love, we find ourselves. We do not lose ourselves. One does not lose one's identity by falling in love. The paradox is most striking in the performing arts. Does the actor stop being himself as he becomes Hamlet on stage? He doesn't. The greater his acting, the more likely he becomes himself in the act and *finds* himself. So does the pianist when she immerses herself in a Beethoven sonata. Through love we find ourselves. That is why we study masterworks. It's mysterious; I cannot really explain it. It is the element I miss in electronic music – no performance, no loving immersion. Maybe that is why I was never particularly drawn to electronic music.

As I said before, there is no recipe for an idea. A change of mind implies a door opening, an idea, an inspiration. Most artists have experienced the creative block. We get stuck in our work. We beat our head against the wall, and eventually the wall will yield. Perseverance, and faith in the impossible task are essential ingredients. There is a piece I wrote many years ago called *Echoi*, where I literally became ill from the frustration of not being able to find the solutions I was looking for. I thought at one point that not only would I be unable to finish the piece but that I would never be able to write another one. I began to have blurred vision, symptomatic of possible brain damage. Fortunately, it was all psychological. And after three years of painstaking work, I finished *Echoi*. I remember playing it for my friend Leonard Bernstein. "Good Lord, Lukas, this sounds like your last will." Ultimately, *Echoi* turned out to be a breakthrough. For the next ten years, I walked the paths opened by the insights and discoveries the piece brought to my music. Sometimes there's no shortcut. One just has to go through the ordeal. I remember John Cage saying, "Lukas, you still suffer when you compose? I don't suffer anymore . . . HA, HA,"

and he laughed that wonderful Cagian laugh. Well, he was much too Zen to suffer, and I was much to Western not to suffer. Suffering is certainly no guarantee for good work. The suffering genius is another one of those nineteenth-century clichés.

Are there contemporary clichés? Yes – *charisma*. It is often equated with personality. Wrong. These are two different concepts. You can have one without the other. Personality is essential. It is in every work of art. When the Maestro walks on stage for a performance and has charisma, everyone is convinced that he has personality. I find that charisma is merely a form of showmanship. Movie stars usually have it. A politician has to have it. That is what fans want from stars and people want from leaders. They feel let down if the object of their admiration turns out to be a normal person. Hence politicians and performers acquire charisma. Fans demand it. Let me tell you how you acquire it. Step 1: Learn how to sell what you are about. Publicity and hype will do it. Step 2: Learn to believe your hype. When you succeed in that, you will walk on stage as if you are God’s gift to whatever you are doing, and lo and behold, you have acquired charisma.

The greatest artists I have known did *not* have it. They walk on stage the same way they walk to the bathroom; determined, in a hurry, nothing charismatic, nothing vain, nothing vainglorious. Their eyes do not sparkle when they greet you. On the other hand, I remember when I met the conductor Herbert Von Karajan, his eyes did sparkle charismatically, like electric lightbulbs. Once I was having tea with Stravinsky in the Russian Tea Room in New York when a famous Russian dancer came over to our table. When he left I said to Stravinsky, “Isn’t he charismatic?” “Yes,” said Stravinsky, “charismatic, and a little stupid. But a little stupidity goes a long way.” I wonder if I have made my point about the difference between charisma and personality? It is actually possible to have both. Just like it was possible for Mozart to be retarded in one way and incredibly profound in another. It all has to be put in the proper perspective.

Back to the tricky issue: What is great music? Great music does not just make me feel good. It means something. It makes us understand. It makes us happy. Feeling good is okay. Folk music, rock music can make me feel good. So does minimal music. I remember performing a minimalist piece I like together with a

great piece of new music that I love. The minimalist piece made me feel good; the great piece made me feel enriched. What is the difference? When the minimalist piece was over, I woke up from feeling good. It is like a drug. When the drug wears off, you're as miserable as you were before, whereas a true work of art leaves you enriched. One has been introduced to a new meaning. One understands something that one didn't understand before.

When I realized that, I had an idea: Why restrict oneself to drug-like, hypnotic repetition? True, life is repetitious. Every day is similar: we get up, we have breakfast, we work, we have lunch, more work, sleep, and so on. Yet every day is different as it carries us on through life eventually to death. Why not compose a piece that is repetitious like life – in other words: repetition, yes, but coupled with development, change, eventually moving on to another realm. My piece “Solo Observed” attempts to do just that. It starts out with a repetitious twelve-tone motive, and ends up tonal – quasi-pop. It changes style. How dare I? Everyone knows that changing style is forbidden. But it does it gradually, so that one is not aware of the change. Or, I could argue: it is not a change of style; it is a change of technique. Style is personality. Style and technique are often treated as one and the same.

Earlier I said, “The more *influences*, the richer our vocabulary.” Now let me add, “The more *techniques*, the richer our vocabulary.” Why should an artist restrict himself or herself to one technique? But many artists do. They say, “I am a minimalist” or “I am a twelve-tone composer” or “I am a neoclassicist.” Of course everyone should use whatever technique he or she wishes. But I find it is infinitely more challenging to use many techniques – often in the same piece – and, yes, make them my own. The resulting music is more challenging. One is more likely to want to hear the piece again. I believe that the only criterion for making an intelligent evaluation for a piece of music is, Does it make you want to hear it again? The piece that merely makes you feel good rarely demands more than one or two hearings. But when something enriches you, you can hear it again and again, as it reveals different aspects every time. For that reason it does not go out of fashion.

Let's say Romanticism went out of fashion, as it did in the 1920s. That did not bother Beethoven aficionados. One does not have to think of Beethoven as Romantic. One listens from another

perspective. He can be seen as a structuralist, a dramatic classicist. Similarly, when Romanticism was back in, it did not imply that Bach was out. One just realizes that his *St. Matthew Passion* and many of his arias are Romantic indeed. One discovers the other side of the coin, another view of the same godhead.

Concepts like Classical and Romantic are segregated far too much in our textbooks, like intellect and emotion. These two concepts are not mutually exclusive, except in sick people, where one mushrooms at the expense of the other, which is a sign of mental disorder. In the healthy, and even more so in art, one enhances the other. In the best, most passionate works of art there is great intellectual complexity. That does not make the work less emotional. On the contrary, Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* for string quartet is passionate, at the same time it is the most cerebral work imaginable. Here is a myth that cries out to be exposed. Things are not *either* emotional or intellectual. In life, maybe; in the arts, no.

We've examined quite a few concepts like passion, intellect, and truth. Let me add another: courage, an essential ingredient in view of the impossibly elusive creative process. Think of the courage you need to produce a work of art when thousands of masterworks already exist to satisfy the art lover. It takes courage to add your own invention to all that past achievement. Betsy Jolas, a composer, was on a plane looking at her manuscript when the stranger next to her asked, "Is this music that you are looking at?" "Yes," she replied. "Did you write this music?" "Yes." "Oh, I thought music has already been written."

Sometimes composing feels like a foolish undertaking. How can one add significantly to all that has already been created? Why invest thousands of hours of work, often reaping no rewards, no applause, no interest? As a conductor (assuming all goes well), you get applause after three days of rehearsals. As a composer, you may have to wait until you are dead. On the other hand, you're less vulnerable to criticism as a composer. When the critics give a performer a bad review, it is like a jury verdict. No hope for appeal. That is the power of the media. You can cope with this as a composer because the work exists. It is written down. It is an object to be rediscovered. It will speak for itself the next time it is performed. You are not at the mercy of the media to the extent that you are as a performer.

Actually, composers should be their own severest critics. If I have a premiere and I like what I hear, I'm on cloud nine. Never mind what the audience thinks or what the paper says the next day. Neither does it matter what they say if I dislike what I hear. Even the best review will fail to cheer me then. Today, however, composers often regard the media the way Haydn and Mozart may have regarded the princes. Those were the tastemakers of the time. If you were not supported by the court, you did not really exist. Today, many artists feel that if they aren't supported by the media and aren't on television, they don't exist. This is a real danger, causing the artist to spend much valuable time "image building."

Here is one more concept I wish to debunk, after debunking (for better or worse) notions such as creation, genius, inspiration, style versus technique, emotion versus intellect, self-expression, inevitability, and charisma (which is related to image building). The worst thing you can do to your work, and your ability to work, is to worry about your image. Image building is a form of self-exploitation that is dangerous. It means one is no longer *developing* (that prerequisite to genius). Image building is the opposite of learning. Goya – age eighty-nine – wrote, "I am still learning." The creative process cannot happen without a passion for learning. Yes, real artists continue to learn – to the very end.