

2021

You and L.A. Will Love Each Other

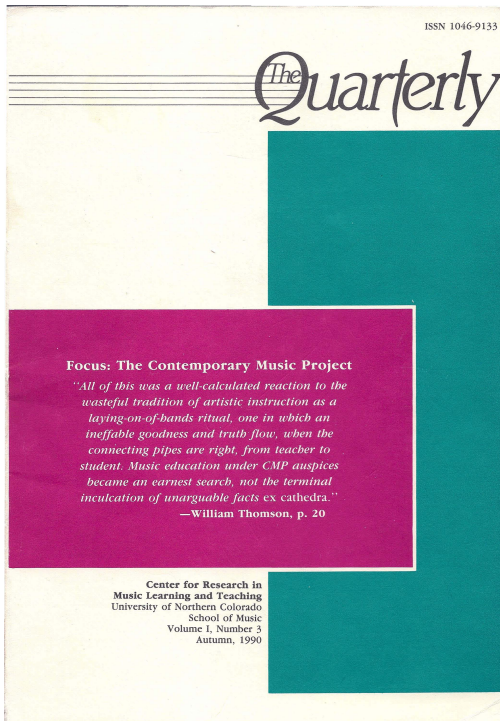
Peter Schickele
New York, New York

Follow this and additional works at: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme>

Recommended Citation

Schickele, Peter (2021) "You and L.A. Will Love Each Other," *Visions of Research in Music Education*: Vol. 16 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol16/iss1/24>



Title: You and L. A. Will Love Each Other

Author(s): Peter Schickele

Source: Schickele, P. (1990, Autumn). You and L. A. will love each other. *The Quarterly*, 1(3), pp. 29-31. (Reprinted with permission in *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 16(1), Summer, 2010). Retrieved from <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~vrme/>

It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning and continued until 1997. The journal contained articles on issues that were timely when they appeared and are now important for their historical relevance. For many authors, it was their first major publication. Visions of Research in Music Education will publish facsimiles of each issue as it originally appeared. Each article will be a separate pdf file. Jason D. Vodicka has accepted my invitation to serve as guest editor for the reprint project and will compose a new editorial to introduce each volume. Chad Keilman is the production manager. I express deepest thanks to Richard Colwell for granting VRME permission to re-publish The Quarterly in online format. He has graciously prepared an introduction to the reprint series.

You and L.A. Will Love Each Other

By Peter Schickele

New York, New York

As a composer I learned my place early on in the game. The music department at Swarthmore College when I was first there was so small (one professor, one major) that each year a few professional musicians from Philadelphia were hired to come out and perform student compositions. Some of those concerts had traumatic moments. Once, playing in front of the entire faculty and student body, the cellist in a

“I had the temerity during one of the rehearsals to suggest a different phrasing to one of the pros. She lowered her violin, turned to me and said icily, ‘We usually prefer it when the composer is dead.’”

string trio got lost at the beginning of the slow movement and remained one measure off for the rest of the movement (what do you say when people come up afterward and tell you how much they liked it?). What I remember most vividly was the time I had the temerity during one of the rehearsals to suggest a different phrasing to one of the pros. She lowered her violin, turned to me and said icily, “We usually prefer it when the composer is dead.”

By the time I had graduated from Swarthmore and the Juilliard School of Music, I knew that this was not an isolated feeling. Indeed, this feeling is so widespread that it is an axiom that you can't make a living writing so-called serious music. So you teach, copy music, accompany dance classes, or go into business and try to arrange your schedule so that you have as much free time as possible for composing. It's not surprising that many (though certainly not all) twentieth-

century composers envy the church and court composers of the Renaissance and Baroque eras; not only were they paid to write music, but the music they wrote was used—it wasn't stuck away in a drawer and never performed. Obviously, holding down an official position involved artistic limitations which sometimes must be stifling, but working in a vacuum can have its limitations too.

Since I have always enjoyed writing with specific performers in mind, the Ford Foundation program placing a composer-in-residence with a secondary school system interested me right from the start (1959), particularly since I knew that a year later I would be an ex-post-graduate looking for a job. The completed application form was to be accompanied by a set of performance tapes and a list of works; I decided that I would send not my “official” list of works (pieces I would like to see performed again in concert conditions) but the complete list, the whole works, including tiny pieces written at parties (“Fanfare for King Mike the First,” for two oboes, bell, and dried pepper pods), pieces too filthy to perform publicly (“Lewdus Tonalis”), and living room operas (“The Battered Bride”) whose libretti were so immediately topical that their audiences were necessarily limited to the friends and relatives of the people about whom they were written. The object was to demonstrate to the selection committee that I had a great deal of experience in writing for whatever was available, and the result was that I was accepted and assigned to Los Angeles with the remark, “You and L.A. will love each other.”

Working Composer

The year I spent there stands out as a unique time in my life for several reasons. Most important, I was a working composer,

by which I mean to imply not only a financial condition but also a sense of continuity. Since Los Angeles has over a hundred high schools, three of the most musically active were selected for me to work with; two of these were in an upper middle-class area and the other was in a racially shifting neighborhood, about half Negro and half white. At one school I wrote for the chorus, at another for the orchestra, and at the third for chorus, orchestra, and band. I came in at the beginning and sat in on their rehearsal periods for a while, to see what was strong and what was weak, and to get to know the students and the teacher. Then I wouldn't show up for a time, until I had finished their piece, after which I would be around in various capacities during rehearsals.

It was not the same as being commissioned by some performing group or institution to write a single work for some special occasion; as a working composer, I was writing pieces for ordinary musical occasions, and when one piece was finished and in rehearsal, I went on to the next. When an individual or organization decides to spend the money to commission a single work, the piece usually has to be some kind of big deal, which is too bad, because some of the world's most beautiful music is unpretentious in scale and gesture, and the "important work" syndrome tends to rob contemporary music of an atmosphere in which to develop a sense of charm.

At Los Angeles I wrote not only a big splashy piece for two choruses, band, and string orchestra, but also two prayers for chorus that take about three minutes to perform. The first piece was done at the gala final concert of the school year, while the second was simply used in an assembly. One of the reasons for the success of the program was that there was never any attempt on the part of the Ford Foundation, or the Music Educators National Conference which administers the program, or even the citywide superintendent of music to decide what kinds of pieces ought to be written—this was left entirely up to me and the teachers with whom I was working. Therefore the fear that I may have had when I applied, that

if chosen I would spend the whole year writing for nothing but the standard groups, proved to be totally unfounded. For one of the schools, I wrote a piece for orchestra and a piece for solo violin, four flutes, four French horns, four trumpets, and timpani. A small cantata for girls' chorus was accompanied not by piano, but by bass clarinet and marimba.

Of course there were limitations, aesthetic as well as technical; yet the most crucial responsibility of the composer in this program is to avoid writing down to the supposedly low level of high school students. Actually, their level is determined by what their teachers demand of them, and it has been spectacularly demonstrated that high school students are capable of performing (and liking) music that is technically and aesthetically much more demanding (and rewarding) than the bland, all-purpose medleys ground out by the music-for-schools industry.

Simpler Aspects

So I simply concentrated on developing the simpler, more direct aspects of my music—aspects that had existed before but which now became emphasized at the expense of complexity. Never, however, did I write music that I wouldn't be glad to have performed in professional surroundings, and, as a matter of fact, the small cantata was sung on a program at Carnegie Recital Hall at the same time that it was performed in a Los Angeles high school. And when I compare some choral settings of e. e. cummings I did just before going to Los Angeles with another choral piece, "After Spring Sunset," commissioned by Smith College and written exactly a year later, I'm struck by how different the choral writing in "After Spring Sunset" is from the earlier piece, and how much more personal it is. Although the Smith piece was considerably more difficult, its language was a direct development of the language I had been using in my pieces for high school choirs.

Except for a few rehearsals (I conducted some of my pieces, coached and played in others), I had no day-to-day schedule to keep, so I had as much time to write pieces "on my own" as I would have had as a teacher; during the 10

months I spent in Los Angeles, I wrote nine pieces (most of them less than 10 minutes long) for the three schools in which I worked, and about the same number of nonschool pieces, including three commissioned works. I even discovered a P. D. Q. Bach concerto.

Another thing which made the year unique was the fact that I had virtually no friends in Los Angeles when I arrived, and I made very little effort to change that situation. This was a personal decision, of course—I know other composers in the program who jumped right into the social whirl. I was still single, and I just decided that since I would probably never have so few nonmusical concerns again, I might as well concentrate on music alone.

It didn't work all the time, of course, but when other things were done depended as much as possible on how the work was going, and as little as possible on social commitments made in advance. For the same reason I refused to take any private students. The stipend I received from the Ford Foundation, though not luxurious, was perfectly adequate (it was then \$500 less than the current \$5,500); there are extra allowances for family and travel, and the school system received some money for copying and reproducing music, although, come to think of it, I wouldn't have gotten through the following summer without that Smith commission. (I must admit that most of the credit for that situation should go to the car I had, a 1955 Lemon; at one point, you couldn't shift gears without the aid of a broomstick, and a few months later the convertible top ripped off while I was driving along in the rain.)

It was certainly a good year from my standpoint, and I think it was from the standpoint of the students, too. I was pretty good friends with some of the kids, and several of them had told me

that they hadn't liked my piece when they first started rehearsing it, but that by the time they performed it they really dug it. This made me happy not only because I get happy when people like my music but also because it represented a real broadening of musical tastes—they certainly had never played (or probably even heard) pieces like mine before.

One of the few serious musical difficulties I remember involved a teacher who couldn't conduct five-four time. The kids loved the piece and could do it perfectly when the teacher went to the back of the auditorium to listen to the balance, but every time the teacher conducted, it fell apart. All the teachers I worked with were good; they got a lot out of the students and were completely open-minded about musical ideas that were new to them. But when it came to technical difficulties (which are usually rhythmic), the kids could almost always go as far as their teachers could lead them, and sometimes farther.

The composer-in-residence program is now bearing fruit, with some school systems hiring composers on their own; perhaps some of the teacher-training programs that are being set up will bring results too, giving teachers a technical proficiency to match their awesome patience and inexhaustible energy. Actually, I'm amazed that high school teachers are as good as they are, when I recall incidents like sneaking into the boiler room with a teacher so that he wouldn't be seen smoking a cigarette or being told by another that the school system had responded to Sputnik by adding six minutes to the school day. But don't get me wrong—I love Hollywood. □

Copyright © 1966 by The New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission.

Call for Manuscripts

The Quarterly, the music journal devoted to the consideration of issues that concern all who are involved with the learning and teaching of music, invites the submission of scholarly manuscripts for review by the National Board of Editors and possible publication. For complete Guidelines to Contributors, see page 80.