

No Exit: a conversation with composer Chris Neiner

by Mike Telin



This weekend, No Exit continues their series of concerts featuring world premieres by Robert Honstein, Victoria Cheah, and Connie Converse. Performances are on Friday, April 14 at 7:00 pm at Heights Arts and Saturday, April 15 at 7:30 pm at Kent State University.

The program also includes the world premiere of Chris Neiner's *Time Machine Hyperboles*. I caught up with the Cleveland-based composer by phone and began our conversation by asking him to expand on his composer note, where he says: "...it's a long title for a short piece, but it captures the underpinning duality of the music and its non sequitur behavior."

Chris Neiner: The piece has two distinct types of music. One is very fast — kinesthetic and rambunctious. The other is the opposite — very slow and drawn out, fragile and quiet. Going back and forth between the two is almost like a movie with jump cuts between different kinds of music.

Mike Telin: *You do compare it to Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey.*

CN: I created a storyline which is my personal interpretation from watching the film — going from point A to point B and seeing how Kubrick makes that a trippy experience. There's also the idea of, what if we don't have to go from point A to B?

This piece is a one-of-a-kind in my repertoire. Writing for *No Exit*, I knew I could do something outside of my comfort zone. That was my goal because I knew they would be supportive.

MT: It's scored for flute, bass clarinet, percussion, violin, and cello.

CN: Yes. I wanted to write a piece without piano. I have a piano background and most of my music includes piano.

“Outside my comfort zone” also included trying different harmonies. And the percussion is interesting in that it’s a mix of primarily found instruments — a glass bottle, a flower pot. I usually write for more orchestral percussion. My goal was also to incorporate more sounds — sounds that maybe I have shied away from in the past.

MT: You teach composition at the Aurora School of Music. What are the age groups?

CN: I’ve worked with students from age 10 to 65.

MT: What does the first lesson look like?

CN: Let’s go to lesson two. I think that composing is kind of like creative writing with sound. With writing we talk about characters, story, motives, setting, time of day.

I always think of harmony as being like word choice. We can say that someone walked or ran, and those can be two very different types of sounds. So I try to get a student to understand what their story is, and we work to bring it out. From there we get into more cerebral topics like form and balance.

If a student is doing a lot of cutting and pasting — not in a minimalist way but just doing it to make something happen — I’ll compare it to eating pancakes every day for a whole year. You’d get bored. So we talk about how you could add chocolate chips. Especially with younger students I’ll use different, more tangible metaphors that they can relate to, like movies.

In this case there’s Kubrick. I also wrote a piece for Stars in the Classics called *Serenade for the Ghosts*. It’s based on Wagner’s progressions for sorcery in the Ring, but also Bernard Hermann’s music for Hitchcock films.

So I always like to go back to some cultural reference rather than talking about how this A major chord becomes A minor. I’ll talk a lot about the inspiration because that’s always easier to grasp.

MT: When did you start composing?

CN: I was always interested in creating. In kindergarten I was paying attention to the layouts of buildings. Then I'd build them with Lego. I started writing music for animation when I was thirteen and I've been doing that ever since. But everything has always moved toward some form of creation.

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