

Roger Doyle

Work Makes Me Happy.



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Composing music makes me happy. I do as much of it as I can – pretty much every day. I never really stop. As the years go by I'm composing more and more. This must be due to the realisation that there is not an endless amount of time left to get it all done as I get older; but it is also that I just enjoy it so damn much. In fact now I'm composing more than ever before.

The music comes easily, partly due to the fact that I'm trusting my intuition more and more – what would probably be called 'right brain' activity. Whilst working, the right brain seems to say: 'Leave this to me. I know how to do this. Put your hands on the keyboard, try that against that'... and so on. I have a small home studio and compose at the computer. I get lucky time and time again. I drag and drop a sketch from an earlier fragment into a new piece and find that it slots in as though it was made for it. It often can magically be in the same key. I close my eyes and play some chords that are just what I'm looking for. The result of this is that I regularly will let out a yell of surprise, glee and amazement at how chance has once again shown the perfect solution. With the window open I sometimes wonder if the neighbours will call the cops at my outbursts. I feel as though if I don't feel the excitement whilst composing a piece, then you the listener won't feel it either.



There are times when I am overwhelmed by the lucky co-incidences I experience while working – so much so that I know what the expression ‘an angel at your elbow’ feels like. It’s like being a magician that doesn’t know how the tricks work. The whole thing is such a delight.

That’s the right brain. The left brain says: ‘That’s amazing. How the hell did you come up with that? That’s going to take me weeks to go through, refine and make technically good’. ‘Not my problem’, says the right brain. And so it goes. Weeks and months go by. I am an endless reviser, in the sense that I keep going back relentlessly and finding maybe a flaw or a moment where things aren’t quite working. Many artists will leave it at that and think that that is as far as they can go with that piece and go onto the next piece. I don’t do that. I get a piece of music to a certain level and the right brain steps in and says: ‘Don’t ask me what it is, but it still needs something else there’.

I chase down all the little annoying things (you fix one and three more appear), and because I work mainly with electronic music, in what’s called ‘fixed media’, like a film-maker, painter or sculptor does, I shape and mould pieces until they are ‘finished’ and ready to be released into the world on CD, download/streaming etc. (I also perform in concert and for theatre which is not fixed media). Pieces can be ‘finished’ many times. I enjoy the revising part just as much.



This way of working I call 'saturation revision'. Left brain territory, spurred by right brain nagging. Relentless, but I'm very happy with the result. It means that I can listen many years later to pieces of music I've composed and really enjoy them. Too much, as some of my friends would say. It's embarrassing. I like to think that any suggestion of improvement you might make whilst listening to a piece of my music, is something I already tried and it didn't work.

My music has many points of view. Some pieces can make you laugh out loud (the fictitious radio station broadcasting from the Tower Of Babel), others are deadly serious (The Ninth Set). Some reach out to you, others need you to reach in to them. Some are inscrutable and alien-like and others seem to invite you to exotic imagined cultures. To anyone who asks: should music be approachable, I say: 'yes, sometimes'; or should it require some attention and effort from the listener, I say: 'yes, sometimes'. Should it be challenging and even disturbing, I say: 'yes, sometimes'. Should it be entertaining... 'yes, sometimes'. But none of these all the time, preferably.

I am reminded of something the British composer Harrison Birtwistle said in an interview he gave in Dublin a few years ago. He said that the first thing that happens as you sit down to compose is that the great idea you had didn't work and that the act of composition is what happens after that moment. Everyone has ideas, and they are not enough. They need to be chased down, thrown out if necessary, or reworked with just their shadow remaining.



I was asked recently what advice I might give a young composer. I used to tell my students in Trinity where I taught a course on electro-acoustic composition: 'Get obsessed. If you don't have an obsessive streak in your personality, get one soon'.

By this I mean that you can become drawn in and entranced with music and its processes as a young person, and that what begins as a deep fascination, over time, can turn into an obsession. And you should allow this to happen.



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***Roger Doyle** is known for his pioneering work as a composer of electronic music. He has worked extensively in theatre, film and dance. Recent work includes an electronic opera HERESY and a soundtrack for an imaginary film, for orchestra.*

He is a member of Aosdána, Ireland's state-sponsored academy of creative artists and was recently elected to the higher honour of Saoi within Aosdana, presented to him by the President of Ireland. He is working on his 30th album.

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