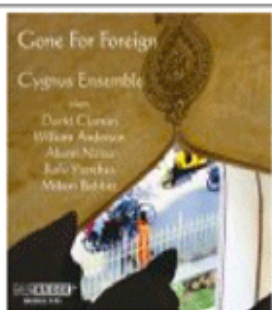




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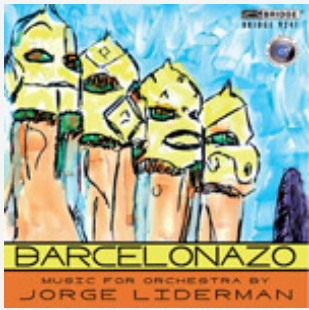
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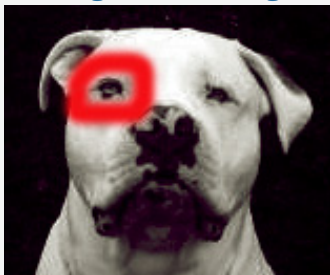
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We Are All Amaranth



James Combs, composer... Ah, where to start?... I met James years ago, in our formerly-shared hometown of Seattle. Truly a “regular-Joe” in person, giving little hint of the ornate wheels spinning underneath. An anecdote on James’ [blog](#) seems a perfect illustration of the man and the work:

A Minimalist Experience

A boring Sunday, really not so much different than any other Sunday. March 16, 2008, I went for a drive to run some miscellaneous errands. My wife informed me that we were in some need of household items which could be purchased at the nearest store. So heading to the store on this boring Sunday, I am ever increasingly slipping slowly, steadily, into a trance state while driving. I am sure it was not unsafe, and I believe there is a name for it. Highway hypnosis. The condition where you arrive at your destination while not recalling much of the way there. I remember arriving at the store that boring Sunday and noticing the parking lot was quite full. This pulled me out of my trance to an irritating degree. Not finding one parking spot, my wife decided to run in and get the couple of items and I would simply drive around the parking lot until she made her way back outside. So I started driving steadily, cautiously through the parking lot which went in a round about. The first loop, I was concerned with looking out for other cars, but I have to say by the time I made it to my second lap I was really feeling the track, memorizing all the angles. By the time I hit the third lap I was steering around vehicles and halting with expert dexterity for crossing traffic through the parking lot, the track. I can’t remember what lap I was on when my cell phone rang and woke me up from my hypnotic state. It was my wife wondering why I kept driving past her, waiting outside the front of the store.

Self-taught, James writes smallish, fairly static, elegant and polished yet absolutely irrational piano pieces. Pieces from another century’s drawing room – though that century could only be invented in the here and now. Maybe if we overlaid glass slides of Chopin,

Satie, Stravinsky, Feldman, Glass, Eno, then maybe... Each small piece has the quality of a **Mark Ryden painting**; antique poise and luminescence recalled in a disturbing dream from just last night. James makes no claims to intrude on Brian Ferneyhough's turf; yet for all their simplicity these modest piano pieces show the most wonderful intuition for line, sonority, weight and color, all at just the right moment. I suppose we could call the pieces "etudes", but what they teach would be philosophical rather than technical. There's also a kind of deadpan humor, a bit of Buster Keaton or even Steven Wright ("I went to a restaurant that serves 'breakfast at any time'. So I ordered french toast during the Renaissance.") running through the whole ethos. So what kind of music is this? Again, I'll let James explain:

"Classical" ... The meaning of this word pertaining to music obviously is defined as a musical form. So what is this meaning? Ask any average guy and he would probably say "like what Mozart and Beethoven composed." Hey, he would be absolutely correct. I mean, there was an age long ago termed the "classical period." This period was defined not only within the music, but paintings, architecture, poetry, etc.

So if you ask the average "Joe" what contemporary classical is, they might scratch their head and reference ? I mean, most likely. And that's the problem. Is rock a period? Is jazz a period (I know about the age, but we're talking music)? The term "classical" is a definite problem. It links the past to the present under false pretenses. Imagine Philip Glass or Steve Reich being asked "what genre of music to you compose for?" They answer "impressionism." That is if we swap out the word classical in favor of the word impressionism, both a period so would it matter?

Does the use of the word classical as a blanket definition of all eras of this form in turn form a bias within academia and elitists? Meaning, to pick classical as the word might say to some that the era of classical itself is the most relevant to every genre. Here in Seattle our "classical" radio station rarely strays (some might say deviates) from the baroque, classical and romantic eras. I would bet that to be the case for every metropolitan city around the world.

Do you want a solution? Take out "classical" as the definition of all periods in aforementioned music and replace with "amaranth." An unfading flower.

I compose amaranth music. I compose amaranth music in a contemporary style.

James first self-produced CD release, *Charmed Elixers*, is available now on both **CD Baby** and **iTunes**.

Posted: May 7th, 2008 under [Click Picks](#), [Composers](#), [Contemporary Classical](#), [Piano](#), [Recordings](#).

Comments: 10

Comments

Comment from **Matthew Pierce**

Time: May 8, 2008, 9:21 am

It comes down to instrument. I play the violin. If you ask the "average joe" to associate a musical genre with my instrument, what do you think he will say? Next step is further genrefication. I play "rock" violin, "jazz" violin. Fighting the genre battle is a useless waste of time and energy. Let reporters and critics work out the language, it's their job. Right now they are flailing about try to hammer down what to call Barak Obama's constituents.

Comment from **robert berger**

Time: May 9, 2008, 10:09 am

What you say about classical radio stations rarely playing anything but "baroque, classical and romantic" music may be true of many of these stations, but WQXR is an exception.

There is no lack of it there, and they even play music by the likes of Adams, Glass, Torke, Corigliano, Harrison and other living or recently deceased composers, if not Carter and Boulez etc. Their programming is extremely varied, and does not only feature the same old warhorses. You can hear many interesting rarities from all periods, and you can hear this station anywhere through your computer.

Comment from **Brian Vlasak**

Time: May 9, 2008, 10:21 am

When people ask me "What type of music do you write?", I usually reply with the answer: "[Music] you would never hear on the radio." When pressed, I'm compelled to reply with "Contemporary art music." When pressed even further and asked for examples, I'm usually at a loss and fall back to something along the lines of "[Music] that would be performed in a recital hall." The questioner usually is satisfied with that answer and pretty much drops the subject or replies with: "That's really cool, neat" etc... and then ask for the website, which I happily give them.

Of course, there's always my favourite reply of "Well, what do you hope to do with that?" The answer to that is the obligatory "I work in a restaurant; we [composers] had to learn how to wait tables in grad school, as well as how to compose." 😊

Comment from **Steve Layton**

Time: May 9, 2008, 11:46 am

Taking your cue from all the actors out there, eh Brian? 😊

One reason I'm struck by James' "amaranth" suggestion is that it doesn't recycle any of the old art or music terminology. And it applies neutrally to the whole spectrum, Josquin to Beethoven to Xenakis to J.L. Adams. It's elegant — and a little cheeky, too...

Comment from **mars webbens**

Time: May 9, 2008, 2:32 pm

Wikipedia: Aesop's Fables (6th century BC) compares the Rose to the Amaranth to illustrate the difference in fleeting and everlasting beauty.

A Rose and an Amaranth blossomed side by side in a garden,
and the Amaranth said to her neighbour,

"How I envy you your beauty and your sweet scent!

No wonder you are such a universal favourite."

But the Rose replied with a shade of sadness in her voice,

"Ah, my dear friend, I bloom but for a time:

my petals soon wither and fall, and then I die.

But your flowers never fade, even if they are cut;

for they are everlasting."

Thus, in John Milton's Paradise Lost (1667), iii. 353:

"Immortal amarant, a flower which once

In paradise, fast by the tree of life,

Began to bloom; but soon for man's offence

To heaven removed, where first it grew, there grows,

And flowers aloft, shading the fount of life,

And where the river of bliss through midst of heaven

Rolls o'er elysian flowers her amber stream:

With these that never fade the spirits elect

Bind their resplendent locks."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in *Work without Hope* (1825), also references the herb, likely referencing Milton's earlier work. (ll 7-10 excerpted):

Yet well I ken the banks where Amaranths blow,

Have traced the fount whence streams of nectar flow.

Bloom, O ye Amaranths! bloom for whom ye may,

For me ye bloom not! Glide, rich streams, away!

Comment from **Eric Lin**

Time: May 9, 2008, 6:19 pm

<http://www.wqxr.com/cgi-bin/iowa/air/playlist#1805>

Robert, I think you're giving them too much credit. WQXR is anything but adventurous. Take a look at the playlist for the day...the only thing that's remotely close may be the Lou Harrison. But that's about it.

Comment from **robert berger**

Time: May 10, 2008, 3:08 pm

I still disagree with you about WQXR.They play all kind of interesting things by a very wide variety of composers. You never know what they will program next.I guess you haven't seen all their playlists.And you do hear challenging pieces on their taped broadcasts of orchestras such as the NY Phil. and Chicago sym,etc.

Comment from **Joseph Benzola**

Time: May 11, 2008, 12:11 pm

Ah...James Combs. Thanks for the update/article Steve. I remember James quite well and the arguments that we used to have at mp3.com over 10 years ago. Oh the memories.

Comment from **Michael G. Breece**

Time: May 12, 2008, 3:38 am

Yea, I tend to just say "art music" or "modern art music" or "modern classical" or "modern classical art music with a cherry cut by a rusted razor blade on top" though really when speaking to a true "average Joe/Jill" it's more like "weird shit that you might hear in a horror movie" that one gives them the best impression of how most of THEM (those miserable rat scourge PLAGUES! OFF WITH THEIR HEADS) would interpret OUR works of GENIUS...more than anything (it's what most Joe's and Jill's refer to as being "modern classical art music" anyway, so screw it, no skin off my prick - that was already taken as a baby - ps: FUCK YOU DOC! YOURRRR TURRRRN). But, I digress... I dig James Combs' piano work in a similar way that I do Satie's (Layton comes up with the yums-yums, so I won't even try to touch that = "Each small piece has the quality of a Mark Ryden painting; antique poise and luminescence recalled in a disturbing dream from just last night.").

Comment from **J.C. Combs**

Time: May 22, 2008, 8:26 pm

Thanks Steve Layton and S21 for posting this. FYI: I have now switched my name to J.C. Combs from James Combs as I found it impossible to not get clumped in with the very talented rocker out of California. Some of you might have noticed that if you visited the iTunes link.

Cheers,

J.C.

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