

George Hufnagl Interviews James Romig

Tuesday, January 19, 2010

The Rundown	
Name:	James Romig
Location:	Western Illinois University, Macomb, IL
Role:	Composer, college professor
Last Project:	<i>Glaciers</i> , for orchestra
Website:	www.jamesromig.com
Quote:	"Don't compromise."

In Fives:

What are five timbres/sounds/instruments of which you cannot get enough?

Flute in its lowest octave
Single, plucked strings (harp, cello, guitar, etc.)
Piano above Middle C
Vibraphone, struck or bowed
Stewart Copeland's hi-hat and snare drum on early Police albums

Name five resources (equipment, people, etc.) without which you could not live (figuratively speaking, of course).

Libraries (both for their collections and for quiet places to work)
Dictionaries (English and foreign-language)
Olive oil
U.S. and Canadian National Parks
The Interstate Highway system

If you could speak with your five-year-old self, what would be one thing about your work now that would impress him/her/you? What is something you would find very interesting he/she/you wouldn't?

My five-year-old self would appreciate the rhythmic vitality of much of my work (and he'd also be thrilled to know that I have my own drumset). On the other hand, I doubt that my five-year-old self would be much interested in the harmonic aspects of music that interest me today. My Fisher Price "xylophone" was certainly colorful, but it wasn't chromatic.

In Fours:

When beginning a new project, what would you work to complete within four hours time?

I don't worry about actual time when I'm working, and I certainly don't impose limits or deadlines. I daydream and imagine pieces for weeks (or months, or years) before writing anything on paper. When I do, finally, start writing things down, if there's still more to do after working for the first four hours, I'm a very happy composer.

If you could categorize your work into four food groups, what would they be and why?

If I assume your use of the word "work" to be a verb, then the four categories would be Imagining, Generating, Reacting, and Editing. If I assume your use of the word "work" to be a noun, then the four categories would be Sparse, Dense, Solo, Ensemble. As with actual food, the individual groups really only become interesting when they're combined with each other on the same plate.

What are four parameters of writing/working (e.g. timbre, rhythm, form, etc.) of which you are consistently conscious? Please explain.

Form, Harmony, Repetition, Variation. Every gesture—no matter how large or small—is a part of the overall form, and of the overall harmony. A composition comprises iterations that must be repeated and varied, but no repetition should be too obvious, and no variation too unrecognizable. It's a fine line to walk.

In Threes:

What are three things that consistently surprise you in working with music/audio?

I am consistently surprised by the all-encompassing inventiveness of Bach, by the generosity of contemporary-music performers (especially percussionists), and by how much I enjoy loud rock music while driving a car.

If you had to choose between the following three free items, what would you chose and why? A new instrument (if so, what), A 3-day recording session at the studio of your choice (if so, which studio), A performance of one of your works by a major ensemble (which work and which ensemble)

I am fortunate that a number of intelligent, skilled instrumentalists have chosen to perform my work over the years. These performers—many of whom are dear friends—have truly made my work their own with insightful, imaginative realizations of what I’ve put down on the page. It would be nice to have studio time to make definitive recordings of these collaborations. I don’t have a studio preference as long as it’s near a good Thai restaurant.

If you had a third arm to work, what would you use it to do?

The third arm could hold a burrito

In Twos:

Finish this rhyme with a phrase that describes you: two, four, six, eight...

“...it’s probably better if it doesn’t rhyme.”

Is it form over function or function over form? Briefly explain.

I honestly don’t see much difference.

In Ones:

Please describe a project on which you have always wanted to work.

I don't know much opera and I don't often listen to it, but I'd like to make Bret Easton Ellis' "American Psycho" into a fully-staged production with an enormous orchestra.

Please describe one project that served as a pivotal change in the development of your skill set.

It seems that most every project requires a radical re-thinking of everything. The latest ones always seem the most tumultuous. Clear trajectories in one’s creative evolution are only discovered in hindsight, and—for me, at least—change tends to happen more linearly than pivotally.

If there were to be one thing in music/audio that you wish more people would try, what would that be?

I find myself wishing that more composers would take more chances. At conferences and festivals I hear a lot of very competent music. I enjoy and appreciate almost all of it, but at the end of the day I wonder why I don't remember more of it. I know many of my composer colleagues personally: they're incredibly bright, undeniably talented, and tremendously well-trained. So I sometimes wonder why so much of the music they're producing is mid-tempo, scored for Pierrot quintet or its subsets, and lasts 9 minutes. But hey, I'm probably just as guilty of this sort of thing as anyone else. And aren't most criticisms subconsciously self-directed?