

## EDWARD TOP / Pluralist Music Composition, a Manifesto

During the time immediately after WWII composers felt the urge to start from point zero, reinventing every parameter of musical composition, and incorporating traditionally non-musical sounds into music. At a time when the world was broken after the war, this formed the ground for a new beginning.

More than three generations later, young composers cling to the alienated avant-garde forms and ideas of fifty years ago. But working in a style that was once modern and progressive is just as conservative as writing in the style of Liszt or Wagner, composers who were considered modern in their day. The music of the 1950s is the avant-garde of your grandfather, just like radio was his home entertainment. We can enjoy his music—it is still controversial, shocking, and new—but only because we can place it in its time period. To be contemporary we need something else. The following points are written as a critique and an alternative.

1. **Exaggeration of contrasts and extremity on all levels creates bracing art.** A work should reflect the dark corners of reality: it is a representation of intense human anxieties, and as such should grab the listeners by the throat, thump them in the stomach, and slap them in the face. This is only possible when the inner strings of sensitivity are made to vibrate, producing a super reality of utter beauty and utopian perfection. These opposites amplify each other creating an intense interference on to which the musical structure imposes balance.
2. **A work should be accessible to more than its creator and a closed circle of insiders.** Rather than being secretive about the private experience behind the notes, a composer should aim for a delighted group experience. Very few disciplines are able to convey a sense of collectiveness as immediate as music.
3. **The only way forward is to reinterpret what lies behind.** The present is the balance between the past and the future. Awareness of history and tradition, of knowledge gained over time, is fundamental to building the new.

4. Too many composers portray their work by dictating clock time—an incomprehensible artistic motivation. Inevitably, time moves forward as a performance of a musical composition elapses. **However, for the listener, memory and expectation affect the experience of the composition so that it moves slowly, fast, backwards and forwards, or even simultaneously. A composition should make conscious use of this idea of time.** Memory can be used as a medium through the implementation of quotations or stylistic features of familiar music. It is the balance and conflict between the familiar and unfamiliar that creates a riveting work.

5. **Matching the inner logic of the work, there has to be a purpose for shock.** Shock is relative. The shock of a possible gesture making use of extended instrumental techniques may seem nonsensical or unnecessary when used on its own (in a conceptual sense). But, when placed against an opposite force in the larger context of a work, it may amplify the meaning of this context. Shock will only be perceived as such when it is meaningfully anchored within the comprehension of the work.

6. **The musical language of a work, however new or unique, should always remain communicative.** When concepts for a particular work are brought forward through a newly invented incomprehensible language, the work loses all meaning. This is even truer for a work that is based on such a language alone.

7. To communicate to the audience the *intentio auctoris*, the composer relies on a meticulously drawn up score, the *intentio operis*. In the tradition of the modernist era post-WWII, many composers today write over-complicated scores. However, the score is a means to an end, not the end itself nor to feed the vanity of the composer. It is not very useful to write scores without notes. In music, the performing artists are the mediators between the *intentio auctoris* and the *intentio lectoris*, the listener. **The composer should be aware of the limits of notation.** Even when the work itself is complex, the score should not be overcomplicated, i.e., unnecessary bar changes, note and chord clutter, and rhythmic complexity where notation could be simplified. It is to the advantage of the work if the score meets certain practical requirements.

8. **The composer must be present during rehearsals and talk to the musicians to have his ideas realized as precisely as possible.**

9. **I am looking for a pluralist ideal with multiple narratives within a work.** Unlike conceptualism, where one idea is presented and remains relatively unchanged throughout the work, in my pluralistic ideal, one idea is merely a point of departure. One or more ideas spark a chain reaction of compositional procedures, e.g., development of the ideas into musical language, development of material, processes of certain instruments or voices to generate and/or perform this material, voice leading, instrumentation, etc. Even the final procedure of the chain reaction, the performance by musicians, is a sine qua non in this process. In conceptual music, especially in happenings, non-musical elements might be elevated to the same status as musical parameters without being or becoming musical during the end stage of live performance. A listener requires intellectual interpretation in order to make sense of a conceptual work, a process that stalls the musical stream of consciousness. The strength of pluralistic music is its capacity to let the listener be enraptured by the work. This is possible because a musical flow of subliminal association, expectation, and recognition replaces intellectual interpretation.

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overleaf pages 132-37:  
a three-page excerpt from Edward Top's *aliquid stat pro aliquo*