

## COMPOSER INTERVIEW

# Compositional Credos and Performance Perspectives: An Interview with Carl Vine

*David Pereira*

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*As members of the ensemble Flederman, cellist David Pereira met composer/pianist Carl Vine in the early 1980s. Their musical collaboration and friendship has continued unbroken since that time. In this interview David invites Carl into a little literary self-revelation that exposes something of his fine intellect and extraordinary sensibility.*

**You have only thirty minutes to live, and you are obliged to listen to one of your own compositions, played definitively. Which one do you choose and why?**

This is a tough and thoroughly intriguing question that is hard to answer. I suspect however, being a hedonist at heart, that the answer would be my *Choral Symphony*. There are moments in the work that give me enormous sonic pleasure, but I have yet to hear a 'definitive' performance (when I wasn't conducting). Also, if I've really got to go, then I think it's only reasonable that I take a sixty-piece orchestra and a fifty-voice choir with me.

**Same end-game scenario, but you are obliged to listen to someone else's composition.**

I'm beginning to wonder why I'm being forced to listen to music in the last half hour of my life when there are so many more enticing alternatives. If I were too weak to object, I'd probably listen to Ross Edwards's *Symphony da Pacem Domine*, just to see if it's really as good as I thought it was. As the work runs just over twenty-nine minutes, that leaves me fifty-six seconds to clean my teeth and brush my hair (just in case)!

**Considering the concept of a definitive performance, as a performer, what is your view of being 'true to the score'?**

Performers have an obligation to find, within themselves, the finest expression of the composer's original intention. In classical music, this means researching the appropriate period, and wading through the myriad possible interpretations that have been made since the work was written to find the one (or the combination of different ones) that seems the most appropriate for them.

The same principle applies in modern music. One might expect the process to be easier, but there have been so many conflicting schools of composition and performance in the last twenty years (let alone in the last hundred) that it is probably harder.

**So now as composer, how much of music is interpretation, and thus left to the performer?**

I try to make my scores as self-evident and transparent as possible, and my general philosophy is that no interpretation is required: just play the dots. Interpretive possibilities, however, are virtually endless, as are schools of interpretation. If I write a specific tempo, I expect that direction to determine the absolute speed of the music. Not that I expect performers to be simple automata, but however they may bend and sway the material, it must still adhere to the basic pulse that I have prescribed.

On the other hand, some of the most rewarding musical surprises I've enjoyed involved musicians making choices in my music that directly contradicted the instructions, but managed to produce compelling performances that I had never envisaged. So, I'm human after all.

**'Composer's intention' perplexes me. Must I care? I could argue that composers have adequate opportunity to make their intentions clear by creating the score. Must a score be a performer's altar of sacrifice to a composer's intention?**

If a piece of music belongs to anybody, surely the composer has the greater claim? When I finish a new work, it is not some amorphous cloud of floss that needs to be pushed into shape by a musician. It is a perfectly discrete architecture, colour and design that only awaits the breath of life. The thing is not entirely inflexible, but allows enough variance to reflect the personality of the performer. To me, the word 'interpretation' was purloined in the early twentieth century (mostly by performers of Russian Romantic music) to ensure that not one rhythm is ever played correctly, and that no two successive notes should ever have the same dynamic.

**I credit the performer's right and responsibility to try to get a score to sound as good to themselves as possible, even if the composer is around to criticise personally. Doesn't 'breath of life' underestimate the richness of choice-making that performers' creativity explores? Could you see a score validating its worth partly by being able to sound wonderful in a wealth of different ways?**

I now remember why I try not to talk to performers! My previous responses are an over-reaction to many years of hearing appalling performances that have been justified on the basis of 'interpretation.' I don't deny that a worthy piece of music can tolerate a wide range of performance choices, and thrive in many of them. I also agree absolutely that the innate and refined musicianship of a good performer must be encouraged and applauded, and such performers are always my first choice (if I have one). In the experience of my own music, however, the finest musicians have always come closest to realising the music's original intention. The problems start cropping up when interpretation is viewed as a technique *applied* to a composition like spak-filler or industrial veneer, rather than as a method to discover the greatest potential already lying within the music.

**What consolations do you find to be effective as a writer of (relatively) unpopular music?**

The correct term is un-'popular', and it is not relative, but absolute. Modern 'serious' concert music speaks to around a tenth of one percent of the general population. It is a specialist enterprise that still manages to survive the common expectations of a sustainable marketplace. That is the consolation. This is somehow a magical activity appreciated by a tiny number of people. We are told continually that the most significant components of our social fabric are commerce and its continued growth, but here is something that defies every economic rationalisation to continue giving reflection and pleasure to a financially unsustainable market.

**Then what are we, if neither wayward sect nor elite?**

Wayward sect would be a more accurate description, except that it assumes that conformity is both essential and preferable. Audiences for new art music are, by virtue of being small, an elite by definition, but the negative implications of the word are lost on me. I think I prefer the notion of a small club which openly welcomes any who are interested.

**Perhaps it would solve more than one problem to refer to serious music listeners as specialised or expert in a particular field? But what is their difference from elite audiences for Eminem? Is it so easy to differentiate Bach from Eminem?**

I have been unable to find any evidence whatsoever of genius in the work of Eminem. But that part of the question is irrelevant. Let us assume that truly brilliant popular music exists. It would appear to fare no better in the market place than truly appalling popular music. The primary determinant of success is the advertising budget of the recording company, not (in general) the quality of the material.

As I have said already, I see no problem with the word 'elite' in describing audiences of modern art music. They need neither expertise nor specialisation, just a willingness to listen and discern musical merit on its own terms. In that respect, they are identical to imagined fans of our mythical genius popular musician, except they must expend infinitely greater effort seeking their goal.

**How do you explain the link between much great art and its unpopularity?**

Surely art becomes great only after it has become popular? There is traditionally a gap of many decades between the penury that normally accompanies art's creation and the riches that accompany the sceptre of greatness. I see no dichotomy here, only confusion between the function of art when viewed as a contribution to cultural wealth or when viewed as a marketable object. The rest is advertising.

**You surprise me! The nexus between greatness and wealth is fragile, more fragile than that between greatness and worth.**

I was really commenting on the entire notion of great art. Is this an important ideal? Who endows works of art with this honour, and how does it alter either the work itself or our attitude towards it? Most people would not dispute that the Mona Lisa is great art, but at what point does Jackson Pollock's Blue Poles become great? When its purchase price exceeds five million dollars, or when it is encased in glass and surrounded by armed security? I feel that the notion itself adds nothing to our appreciation of art in any form, but thankfully the

idea of great music seems to remain very comfortably as an entirely personal matter not requiring common public approbation.

**Is it helpful to raise as a potential criterion of greatness the extent to which a music might matter (I know that why something matters is as subjective as Truth itself)? If so, does the music generally performed at, say, Musica Viva Australia concerts, matter in an identifiable and differentiating way?**

'Mattering' sounds to me pretty much the same as 'greatness' in this context: an entirely relative and subjective issue. As Artistic Director of Musica Viva, I believe that my greatest duty is to insist on music that matters to me. Trying to second guess what matters to an audience is fruitless. The only way I know to maintain integrity is to adhere to one's own beliefs and loves. If I don't consider the artists, and the music they play, as the finest examples of their kind, they don't perform. This is unashamedly subjective.

**Turning to your own compositions, it would be fair to say, as for any composer, that they vary in quality. Thinking about the best and the worst of the music you've composed, what might have inspired either, and how accurate was your own assessment of their quality at the time of writing?**

I'm certain that I've never set out to write a bad piece of music; they happen entirely on their own. As a composer, the impetus is always the same: to create something unique that, in one way or another, reflects my experience of life, and that might offer others an experience they would not otherwise have had. Some of the risks I take in composition—expanding my own boundaries—involve a type of simplicity that can border on the banal. This type of risk has the greatest potential to produce unexpected epiphanies as well as bad music. By the time I've finished a composition, with very few exceptions, I am convinced that it's not very good. Sometimes I've been correct.

**Even Rome may fail to please if one is so spent upon arrival?**

There are some decidedly gruelling aspects to the process, and by the point of completion, I've examined and re-examined every moment with such strong magnifying glasses that the work no longer holds any surprise. Music without surprise is like life without music.

**Has special occasion or other extra-musical association tended to educe your better or worse music?**

I have written exceedingly little music without commission. The only two that spring to mind are *Five Bagatelles* and *Red Blues* for solo piano, which top the best-selling list of my current catalogue. I don't believe they are my best music, but there is certainly a dearth of good miniatures for piano, and such short pieces are the bread and butter of teaching institutions.

**Does the size of the commission make a difference?**

The commission fee tends to be linked to the size of the instrumental combination: symphonies pay better than duets but, on a per-hour basis, certainly work out cheaper. Otherwise I believe there is a fairly even spread of good and bad content across all genres, ensemble types, styles and fee-levels with which I've worked.

**Which music do you wish you'd never written and why?**

You're really pushing the bad side aren't you? I suspect my most glorious failure was also (and most thankfully) the least noticed. I wrote a fanfare for Australia Day some years ago that was premiered for the Prime Minister and an audience of dignitaries on the 26th of January. I wish I hadn't written it.

**The fanfare violated which of your aspirations?**

It contained some lovely moments, but also some that simply didn't work. There is no sense of 'accumulation' of effect through the piece, and its totality is somehow considerably less than the sum of its parts.

**So is it horrible existence being a composer in Australia?**

If that were the absolute and total sum of my existence, then, yes. Fortunately I have a life.

**In which country would composing be more appropriate?**

The global village is with us, and there may be no better place. Several countries in Western Europe have enjoyed much greater acceptance and social positioning of new art music, but the government support which created this situation is, for the most part, now being reduced to levels equally as poor as here in Australia.

**Enough of the bad side, then. What has been the relationship between your best work and critical approval?**

My own opinion of my best work is as subjective as anyone else's. The work that currently enjoys the most evident (third party) critical approval would have to be my first Piano Sonata. It took me around four years after completing it to decide that it was really very good. The level of public approval the work now enjoys took a further six.

**Have you written compositions whose effect on listeners almost eclipsed your most optimistic hopes?**

On at least a dozen occasions I have attended performances of my music at which the response from the audience has left me speechless, in a positive way. That's all I hope for.

**In such a moment, could you feel prophetic? Might you feel yourself to have been transcended by your own composition?**

Humble and thankful are the best words to describe the feeling. Moments such as these remain, like music itself, transitory and fleeting. I've been doing this long enough now to know that tonight's applause is tomorrow's damning review, and I take all response to my work seriously only on a much larger timeframe. Perhaps in my dotage, when I can't remember how I created this stuff, and if there is some work that has endured sufficiently, I may feel that the composition itself has been greater than *my* self.

**The Book of Ecclesiastes persuades us that 'all is vanity.' Do you have a ready response to this proposition?**

As a teenager I believed I would shatter the world with the bold originality of my composition. Remnants of this emotion followed me for many years, but I hope to have finally set the follies of childhood aside. I write music. Some good, some bad. Some I like, some I don't. Some

touches others in ways I had not anticipated. 'All' here is only a totality as parable. The rest is humanity.

**I am not sure I understand. This passage reminds me that what I most fervently do is not justified by its permanence, as it has none. I often think that the calculation of the 'permanence' of the work of composers, painters, writers, is inaccurate and functions poorly as a *raison d'être*, though temporarily it may confer superior status.**

I can see you're fixated on the transitory nature of art, and of music in particular. If, as I believe, art serves an important social function, that function is to contribute to our understanding of ourselves and to our sense of community. That the experience is transitory doesn't reduce its significance or the longer term of its effect. I don't understand Bronze Age Middle Eastern philosophy nearly well enough to know precisely what the Preacher in Ecclesiastes was driving at, but if he implies that we should take no pride in our achievements, then he was wrong. The only wisdom I take from the phrase 'all is vanity' is that seeking permanence is futile (and the quantum scientists agree with me).

**Many composers have attributed their inspiration to the Almighty. Their task and their skill was to transmit but not to spoil this divine music. There is humility in this view of the composer's purpose.**

There is also hubris in the assumption of speaking on behalf of a higher force. I am a humanist, and believe that God lives within each of us. The most exhilarating moments in the compositional process for me have been the occasional discovery of an entire passage that I have no discrete recollection of writing. Either I write better when asleep, or God is watching, though these suggestions are obviously not mutually exclusive.

**Having 'no discrete recollection of writing' is an extraordinary statement! What are its implications?**

I feel at such times that either some nameless external force has used me as a conduit, or that I have released myself from immediate mental control of the process and allowed a subliminal part of my brain to take charge, so that it operates autonomically through the writing techniques I currently possess. As a humanist, there's no reason to assume that these two options aren't identical.

**What power does music have?**

It is an art form that exists only as a passage of time, and only in the ether. It contains no verbs, nouns or visual images. It has the power to make us weep and to feel exhilarated.

**What about the power to transform people?**

Some music contains that power for some people. When listening to music by other composers, I have experienced several such epiphanies, and I now know of many other people with such experiences. This is one of the reasons why I now feel confident that the creation of new music is a valid endeavour.

**Would you rather describe your work as a growth process or merely a process of change?**

Neither. Music deals with the most subtle of experiential phenomena. The only thing that matters is the auditory experience, whether or not that leads to either growth or change.

**I'm still curious whether the procession of your compositions is more street parade or pilgrimage.**

I'm not sure I understand what you're getting at. If you're asking whether I prefer circuses or High Mass, I normally try to include a bit of each into my music. Some aspects of music appreciation contain a spiritual component, while others are purely sensual. I would always opt for religion with sensuality.

**I mean, if you acknowledge change over long time to your style, content and technique, for example, is such change growth towards a goal (known or unknown), or just change?**

Ah! So you're not asking about the music itself, but rather about the progress of my technique. My goal is always to construct perfect music. I have dreams of this music. It is perfectly balanced, exudes life and vibrancy, possesses a unique character and its purpose is unequivocal. There may be some long term path along which my technique is developing, but I'm not aware of it, nor care much about it. With each new failure to create this perfect music, I know a little more of how I might reach the (unattainable) goal.

**If you were forced to place yourself tenth on a chronological list of great composers who are your most logical antecedents, starting with J.S. Bach, who make up the rest of the list?**

1. Bach
2. Beethoven
3. Brahms
4. Mozart
5. Beethoven
6. Debussy
7. Bartok
8. Stravinsky
9. Carter
10. Varèse

I have found useful points of reference in all nine of these truly great composers, and often find myself either measuring my work against one or all of them, or else looking to them for inspiration. Of course, such an arbitrary limit (must it be only nine?) does no justice to the extraordinary wealth of musical thought that any of us can draw on in our daily lives.

**To return to my opening questions, compositionally speaking, would you be content with your achievement were you to die today?**

I don't think my best music lies behind me. I feel less certain and knowledgeable now about composition (and about life) than ever before, and still believe that every new work is going to be better than everything I've done previously. The 'use by' date has a while to go yet.

**Life and composition have become more mysterious than before. It is a reward for keeping on. Perhaps you enter a 'late period' prematurely?**

Late periods traditionally start in a composer's seventieth year (if I last that long). You'll have to wait another twenty years to find that out.

**If you had to proscribe three things to remember when composing, in all seriousness, what would they be?**

There are, of course, rather more than three. Here are three that I might consider to be the most important:

1. It's nice to be clever, but music that is only clever is no substitute for real communication. So you can write a perfect canon at the 7th in forty voices, but what does it signify?
2. Humanity is supreme. Revel in beauty, love, loss, despair, torture, pain, and all the things that make us what we are. You don't have to 'paint' any of these things in music, just revel in them.
3. Considering the first two points, the single most important thing is technique: an intimate knowledge of and familiarity with the materials at your disposal. Your technique must be so innate that you can transcend it at all times to achieve the first two.

**Carl, thank-you for your generosity. Would you like to make a closing statement?**

I've never been asked such a well considered—and occasionally bizarre—set of questions about writing music. Some of my responses are thoughts that I have had for many years, but never had the opportunity (or inclination) to share with others. Thank you, David, for that opportunity.