

# OBVIOUS TO THE POINT OF VIRTUAL TAUTOLOGY

by Mark Zuckerman

*A talk delivered at Princeton University's celebration of Milton Babbitt's centenary, on September 18, 2016 in Taplin Auditorium at Princeton University.*

*"The issue of 'science' does not intrude itself directly upon the occasion of the performance of a musical work, at least a non-electronically produced work, since—as has been said—there is at least a question as to whether the question as to whether musical composition is to be regarded as a science or not is indeed really a question; but there is no doubt that the question as to whether musical discourse or—more precisely—the theory of music should be subject to the methodological criteria of scientific method and the attendant scientific language is a question, except that the question is really not the normative one of whether it 'should be' or 'must be,' but the factual one that it is, not because of the nature of musical theory, but because of the nature and scope of scientific method and language, whose domain of application is such that if it is not extensible to musical theory, then musical theory is not a theory in any sense in which the term ever has been employed."*

So goes perhaps the most extraordinary sentence in all of music theory, written by the most extraordinary composer whose 100th birthday we are acknowledging here today. To my mind, this sentence exemplifies essential characteristics of Milton Babbitt—the man, his prose, and his music: candid, categorical, cerebral, challenging, charismatic, charming, clear, clever, colorful,

compelling, complex, and consequential, to use but a dozen adjectives beginning just with the letter C. Milton would be the first to point out that the choice of C is arbitrary (though by convention it's regarded as corresponding to pitch class 0), as is the lexical ordering of the list. That the list has 12 members pays homage to the compositional system that was Milton's musical laboratory.

There are those today—including those who should know better—who trivialize 12-tone composition as a superstitious obligation to count up to 12. As the music on today's programs demonstrates, the 12-tone system provided Milton Babbitt tools for expressiveness, drama, wit, and gracefulness; tools he wielded with unique mastery.

Moreover—as the sentence of his I read at the start shows—while Milton could certainly count up to 12, he also tirelessly made the case for what counts in music. We see this not only in his more technical articles, like 1965's *The Structure and Function of Musical Theory* I've quoted from, but also the article for which he is probably most famous (or infamous): "Who Cares if You Listen?", appearing in the February, 1958 issue of *High Fidelity Magazine*. What he says in this article has particular significance for our commemoration today, here at Princeton University, Milton's headquarters.

The literature is littered with writings by people claiming musical or cultural erudition who never get past the provocative title. They completely ignore the context in which the article appeared and misconstrue the sensible arguments

it makes. Instead, they rail against a supposed aloofness they find unseemly in a composer, all because the composer had the temerity to expect that people treat music with the same level of intelligence they treat anything else they consider important.

Let's set the context and review these arguments. It may be difficult today with our abundant digital media for us to fully appreciate the impact of the long playing phonograph record, commercially introduced in 1948—just 10 years before "Who Cares if You Listen?"—which gave rise to a new kind of listener: the audiophile, passionate about sound and the listening experience. *High Fidelity Magazine* came out in 1951 to cater to audiophiles and their enthusiasm for high-quality music and audio technology.

1951 was also the year that RCA, which manufactured audio equipment as well as made records, developed the Mark I synthesizer. Part of the goal was to produce note-perfect, high-fidelity orchestral recordings (with the side benefit that RCA could avoid paying live musicians). Folklore has it that in the focus groups RCA assembled to compare recordings made by live orchestras with those made with the Mark I, 75% of the audience couldn't tell the difference. Needless to say, Milton would be interested only in the other 25%, and these would be the likely clientele for *High Fidelity Magazine*.

But he was also interested in the synthesizer, though not at all for the reasons RCA originally built it. So when, with the aid of a Rockefeller Foundation grant,

RCA installed the Mark II synthesizer in Prentis Hall at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center in 1957, Milton set to work inventing a new sonic vocabulary—utterly different from what the RCA engineers had imagined—with a virtuosity that has yet to be matched. We'll be hearing some of this work later.

Milton always claimed that "Who Cares if You Listen?" was not his title, but the editors'; yet this does not obscure the fact that he wrote it for people who cared very much about what they heard, how they heard it, and how it was created. In the same issue of *High Fidelity* is an article about an avant-garde audio technology, "The Promise of Disc Stereo."

However the title was arrived at, the editors introduced Milton's article sympathetically: "Wherein a contemporary composer, who is also a trained mathematician, puts it to us straight: if purely experimental science, innocent of practical aim, is worthy of public support and approval, why is not also experimental music—however little it may convey now to listeners? We think his case is a good one." Milton's case consists basically of 3 points (though not in this order):

He condemns the undue influence of musical dilettantes, who he submits are useless, at best, or at worst, actively harmful. In his view, they perpetuate romantic yet unrealistic myths about the world of music and engage in uninformed, imprecise chatter that is accepted as meaningful musical discussion. We can probably include in this chatter many of the hostile reactions to his article.

He speculates that composers writing highly specialized music would attract niche audiences of highly specialized listeners. This was particularly shrewd, given his readers, who spent fortunes turning their living rooms into ideal listening spaces and collecting esoteric

music to play there. What better source for potential recruits? Given the current ubiquity of individual listening devices with personalized playlists, and today's proliferation of niche musical markets, we should credit Milton with prescience.

But most important, he argues that composers ought to be provided with environments where they can develop their art free from commercial and social pressures—and free from any compulsion to pander to dilettantes or engage in self-aggrandizement. He proposed the university as the ideal setting for this—and labored to make the Princeton Music Department such a place. Among other things, he was instrumental in establishing the Ph.D. degree in music composition at Princeton. His contribution to Princeton is an important and often overlooked part of the legacy we are celebrating today—and why Princeton is the most appropriate venue for this celebration.

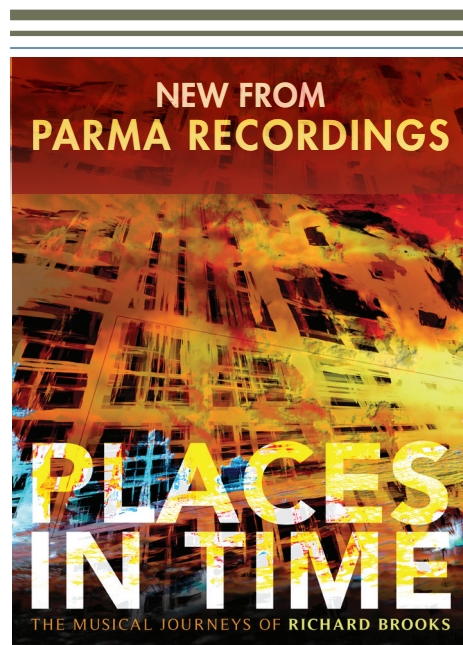
Milton's ideal for a university music department supports a wide variety of composer career paths, not just those limited to conventional notions of success. It engenders a sense of community where mutual support and unfettered exploration are the principal aims. As many of us here can attest, Princeton's realization of this was a model incubator for musical learning and artistic inquiry.

Milton would be the first to applaud composers achieving popular recognition and winning awards. But for when those privileged composers need respite from the politics and capricious fashions of the competitive musical world—and for those composers whose ambitions or aptitudes do not include engaging them—if they are lucky enough to be able to take advantage of the kind of sanctuary Princeton provides—at whatever institution—they should credit Milton Babbitt for his vision, his courage

in advocating it, and his dedication to making it a reality.

As Milton said in completing the quotation with which I began: "This should sound neither contentious nor portentous, rather it should be obvious to the point of virtual tautology."

Today's exciting programs are the result of a collaboration between the Composers Guild of NJ and the Princeton Music Department. My name is Mark Zuckerman, and as a Princeton graduate alumnus, former member of the Princeton music faculty, and student of Milton Babbitt's, it's been my privilege to serve as the Composers Guild's liaison with the Princeton Department for this event. On behalf of the Composers Guild, welcome. I want to acknowledge the Department Chair, Wendy Heller; the Department's liaison to this event, Juri Seo, who curated this evening's concert; Henry Valoris and the Concert Office staff; and the many participants in today's programs, whose love and respect for the music of Milton Babbitt are testament to his enduring legacy.



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