

## ***Fair and Balanced?***

Music, more than any other art form, defies literal interpretation and in fact any kind of meaning that is outside its own frame of reference. As a composer, I've sometimes found the disparity between musical and literal comprehension rather frustrating, but most of the time I smugly shrug my shoulders and proclaim that music's defiance of literal interpretation allows it to tackle deeper and more universal subconscious meanings that words or graphic images can't even hint at.

Of course, titling a work sometimes helps give people clues about whatever literal interpretation a composer had in mind, but of course these titles are frequently what is communicating that message, not the actual music. It seemed an appropriate musical response, in this year of mixed political messages, to do something else entirely with titles. Rather than revealing a political commentary underlying my music, the overall title and individual movement titles of *Fair and Balanced?* for saxophone quartet describe how the music is actually put together. Although, admittedly the mantra-like motifs used throughout and the brevity of each movement—three are either barely a minute or only slightly longer—are inspired by political commercials and sound-byte "spins" in the media. There are also a few "subliminal messages" hidden in the metronome markings. (In the final movement quaver equals 270, the number of electoral votes required to win the American presidency; whereas earlier on, crotchet equals 57, which bias hunters might reasonably assume is a reference to Heinz.)

Since 1998, "Fair and Balanced" has been a slogan for the conservative-leaning FOX News Network who have even sued liberal-leaning political commentator Al Franken for using their patented phrase in the subtitle of a book he published last year. (Perhaps I should be afraid of a lawsuit here as well.) With *Fair and Balanced?*, I have attempted to create music that is just that. Scored for saxophone quartet, an ensemble as equally matched as a string quartet, the four movements of *Fair and Balanced?* treat the four members of the saxophone quartet equally (for the most part, hence the question mark) and present musical material in which the 24 tones of the quartertone system carry equal weight. The departure point for each of the movements is an interval that cycles the entire gamut of the 24 tones of the quartertone scale.

In our commonly used system of 12-tone equal temperament, only the semitone and its inverse, the major seventh (B to C or C to B), and the perfect fifth and its inverse, the perfect fourth (C to G or G to C), cycle the entire 12-note scale. (The other 12-tone intervals only circumnavigate part of the scale, e.g. major thirds return to the original pitch after completing an augmented triad {C, E, G#(Ab), C}, minor thirds do the same after completing a diminished seventh {B, D, F, Ab(G#), B}, etc.) The ability of fifths to cycle the entire scale (e.g. the circle of fifths) is one of the secret ingredients for modulations in music dating back to the Baroque.

With a 24-tone scale, however, there are a total of four intervals and their inverses which cycle through all 24 tones: the quarter-step and its inverse the quartertone-flat octave (C to C+ or C+ to C); an interval which divides the perfect fourth exactly in half and lies halfway between a major second and a minor third (C to D+), and its inverse which is a quartertone flatter than a minor seventh (D+ to C); the bluesy neutral third which lies halfway between major and minor, and its inverse, an interval halfway between a major and minor sixth (C to E- or E- to C); and finally, the interval halfway a perfect fourth and a tritone (C to F+) and its inversion, an interval halfway between a perfect fifth and a tritone (F+ to C). This interval halfway between a perfect fourth and a tritone is indistinguishable from the 11th partial in the overtone series—it's within 1/100th of a semitone which is well below the threshold of human hearing—and is an interval that is so commonplace you can hear it sometimes when a refrigerator is humming or when you finger an ascending scale on a recorder without making an adjustment to flatten the fourth. The four movements here explore these four cycles, in turn.

The first movement, "Remaining Neutral," while seemingly describing a political stance is really just explaining a piece of music cycling the entire 24-tone scale in which all the chords are neutral triads (containing a 3rd that falls halfway between major and minor). Likewise, the second movement, "Seeming Partial" similarly exploits the 1/2-sharp fourth whose proximity to the 11th partial was explained above. "Uncommon Ground" is just that, a ground melody in the uncommon time of 5/4, a personal favorite, harmonized as a chorale exclusively with uncommon-sounding chords derived from the interval that divides the perfect 4th in half, chords which give Hindemith's once revolutionary chords built on 4th, so loved by jazz pianist McCoy Tyner and many others, further possibilities. Finally "Incremental Change" exploits a riff that slowly ascends by transposition up the shortest of possible steps, a quartertone. Here the baritone saxophone takes center stage, implying that change must start from the bottom before it can reach the top. Perhaps this is political music after all!

The first movement, "Remaining Neutral" was composed to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the PRISM Saxophone Quartet, a group that has navigated the neutral ground between composed and improvised music through innovative concerts and exciting recordings. They asked for a one-minute composition, which "Remaining Neutral" is, but other ideas emerged, as they inevitably do, hence the four-movement *Fair and Balanced?* "Remaining Neutral" received its world premiere from PRISM on November 19, 2004 at Symphony Space in New York City where they subsequently premiered the complete *Fair and Balanced?* on May 20, 2005. Since then, they have performed *Fair and Balanced?* around the country and have recorded it on their CD *Dedication* (innova 800).

—Frank J. Oteri