

Musical Architecture and Recursive Systems

October 30, 2009, Revised 2022

Michael Davidson

Published by Elastic Recordings 2022 (ER)

Wow, what a title. Sounds so official and serious. The reality is I'm a total science geek and enjoy reading about such things, exploring their use as metaphors for my creative process. What do I actually mean? Another good question.. Not so sure myself.. Let's see where this takes us.

In an organic sense, I like to think of a composition as a piece of musical architecture. This metaphor will eventually break down, but I want to see how far I can take it. A good composition or song has a strong idea at its core that is inherently simple. Without this simplicity nothing can be built upon it. I don't mean it has to be simple by the literal definition i.e one chord, a trite melody or a predictable rhythm. Oftentimes, taking simplicity too literally can yield a less than satisfactory end result. What I mean by simple, is that it is clearly and eloquently presented, and can act as a vehicle for creative and improvisational growth. It may be that the most clear way to present a compellingly simple idea is through one chord, but another idea may be best expressed in its clearest form by something which appears more complex.

I think a danger is to have a specific idea of what simplicity is and relate it to a style. One element of this concept is the notion that a pop song is inherently simple, or the idea that a pop song is based upon a certain type of simplicity which cannot be achieved in other 'styles.' Someone could consciously try and write a song in a specific style with a preconceived notion of what simplicity should be, and end up with an idea laced with ambiguity and confusion, far from being simple in the positive sense. I think the notion of style can be a drain on the energy that should be put into clarity of thought and flow of ideas.

Without this clarity, a song is just a structure with no foundation, and as hard as the interpreters try and bring it to life, it will inevitably implode. Simplicity is clarity, and has nothing to do with style. It is embedded in a process of growth and evolution, and without it there is no impetus for musical transcendence.

When I'm engaged in the process of writing a song, I'm very conscious of that initial idea and first understanding it on a high level before shaping it into a foundation. I have to look at it from many different perspectives, reflect on its contours and embrace its essence. The idea can take many shapes and branch off into multiple songs. One clearly stated idea can yield a number of compositions as it provides an opening for growth and change. Through the shaping process certain vehicles are less effective for presenting the core material, and they fall to the background or link up with another idea at the core of some other piece. This process requires an openness and commitment to fully explore a concept and consider it from different perspectives.

Along the way you may find multiple ways to represent these ideas, some appearing with what seems like effortlessness, and others hidden within deeper layers of meaning. I mention this because this process is at the core of my creativity. A posture of openness and the viewpoint that as a composer you are merely finding flexible shapes to represent clear and beautiful ideas and feelings, and not to get attached to these shapes, is very important to me.

The moment I get too attached to one idea, the process is interrupted or ended. That is not to say that you should not focus on a specific interpretation of the material as this is also essential, but that we need to realize this focus is still part of a larger shape, a larger body of work, of energy, of clarity and expression. Along the way beautifully crafted structures emerge, yet unlike those built of stone these structures continue to be flexible and evolve over time without decay.

I'm committed to this process of growth or evolution, and sometimes I like to think of it as a recursive process with mutations. You start with a simply shaped, clearly articulated idea which within it has an elegant code for something, who knows what exactly. Then your mind begins to layer things upon it, almost as though they are copies of this original idea. Yet as these copies come in contact with other thoughts and streams of consciousness they change ever so slightly. Over time, and through reflection these slight changes add up, and the copies continue. [When I discuss time, it is relative. Intervals of this process can happen in what feels like days, hours or even a lifetime but ends up actually being a lone moment, or vice-versa. Things happen along the way in different intervals of time, but that is insignificant] What started as a tiny but clear fragment, has become this beautifully, yet spontaneously and organically crafted piece of consciousness, or root system that has become a song.

This process compounds, and along the way songs/compositions make their way into the world should you choose to share them. Yet, these songs are nothing more than a bi-product of this recursive process; the real joy is in the process. Each little piece of

this journey, (say a song) has some of the process embedded within. When someone plays the song the imprint of this process might show its face, bringing a quality of spontaneity and life to the air that has nothing to do with style.

A great song has a process built into to it, providing the architecture for communication on some level, and just pure and simple passion and excitement.

At least that's what I think,

Michael

p.s. check out the writer Douglas Hofstadter and the book I am a Strange Loop. Also check out The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams. I love these books.