

# **Ekumusic**

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Over the last 20 years I have gradually developed a way of creating music that requires a multi-faceted approach to engagement. The standard notation mechanisms and methods of transmission that were a part of my formal training as a composer are inadequate for some of the work I am doing now. Earlier in my life as a composer I was committed to the notion that the composer and the performer are separate entities, but gradually I came to realize that for me that dichotomy inhibits and restricts the kind of sonic expression I often find most compelling. (I have not entirely abandoned that traditional arrangement. For certain communities of musicians and especially with larger ensembles a specific, detailed notation method is still the best approach.)

I have also come to realize that while specific stylistic vocabularies are a necessary part of a given cultural heritage and an important aspect of music pedagogy, my own creative work now often resists those specific vocabularies and is best expressed in a more open format that allows for an ecumenical incorporation of various musical grammars, cultures, and the aesthetic and practical needs of the musicians.

I have gradually moved to a state of Ekumusic.

I could not have arrived here without 30 years of a thorough study of Jazz, Western classical music, Hindustani music, and the American Experimental Tradition. (I have also delved into Balinese music and Ghanaian drumming, though not to the extent of the other areas.) I respect the traditions and grammars of these artforms, and I still create and perform music within those specific genres/histories/cultures, but those are separate concerns from my Ekumusic.

The central issue here really is one of oral versus written tradition. Most of the music created across the globe and in the entirety of human history has been through the modality of oral transmission. Certainly, in my own case, oral traditions have been foundational to my life as a musician, with Jazz and Hindustani music. I have invested tens of thousands of hours into learning those musics from the masters of the art forms, and performing

and teaching that music. I feel deeply connected to the oral traditions of Jazz and Hindustani music. But I also connect deeply with the notation-based traditions of Western (Eurocentric) classical music and the American Experimental Tradition, which I have also been fortunate enough to learn from the masters of those traditions as well. Indeed, this is typical for percussionists, but even as my study of music has expanded beyond percussion into composition, singing, and electronic music, I have maintained a balance between notation-based music and oral traditions for the entirety of my studies and career.

Thus, some of my Ekumusic is notated, some is not. One may engage with it in various ways. Some may want to start with the scores, in which case I would recommend familiarizing yourself with the Ekumusic notation key. Some may want to engage through my recordings, which are easy to find on various digital platforms, as well as videos of my music, also easy to find on digital platforms. Others may want to explore my work through a combination of listening/looking/thinking/experimenting. Notation may take many forms as a means of creating music. My recordings are as much compositions as anything written on paper and interested musicians may engage with them as such. In the spirit of oral transmission, the best way to learn some of my music is by learning it from the recording. In fact, for many of my compositions that is the only way to learn it.

Most of my music resists easy categorization, primarily because it fills a need for me to explore new sonic territory, much of which is through conscious or unconscious multilingual exploration of trans-idiomatic musical grammar. The holy grail of speculative fiction (aka “science fiction” or “fantasy”)— which has had a profound influence on my artistic outlook— is the Sense of Wonder, often explained as an overwhelming experience of awe awakened when one encounters worlds and perspectives that are completely new and force one to reevaluate one’s fundamental understanding of one’s place in the universe and the most pressing existential questions that concern us as a species and a civilization. My interest in various world music traditions and my passion for traveling, as well as exotic pet husbandry and ultra-endurance sports, various forms of avant-garde art, and more are all an expression of my obsession with the Sense of Wonder.

What is essential in my Ekumusic is the *needs* of an artist/community. Community members (composers, performers, educators, listeners, administrators, presenters, et al) who engage with my music do so because

it fulfills a similar need that they have, a need to explore, a need to experience a Sense of Wonder, and to be contributors to the outcome of the work, for aesthetic or practical reasons or both. Their sonic insights are compatible with mine, indeed, we might say the work is incomplete without their creative contributions, or, perhaps improved by their creative contributions. I find that many times a Sense of Wonder is enhanced through meaningful collaboration.

The marimba is my primary mode of communication sonically and most of my recordings reflect that, but any of my recorded “marimba compositions” may be realized on any instrument or combination of instruments, including electronic and digital expression. The fact that they are not all written down on paper does not mean they are not compositions. They are indeed compositions—fixed in time through recording techniques and extensive software manipulations of materials. This is nothing new. After all, people have been composing electronic music for over 100 years. What is perhaps a little different is that I invite other musicians to engage with them and perform them and make them their own. I view my recordings as *both* finalized, fixed works of sonic art, and also conduits/maps/suggestions/inspirations for other creative musicians to collaborate. For musicians trained solely in the Western classical tradition (as it is unfortunately taught in our era) this may be unfamiliar, but indeed they are compositions that you may perform, provided you do some work to learn them. (For musicians trained in Jazz or other oral traditions of music this will be more familiar.)

Thus, a woodwind player (for example) may start with one of my recordings and through transcription, sampling, personal shorthand notation, improvising, or other means, move to a position of being able to perform it themselves. Gradually this musician will arrive at a version of the piece that can be performed, and this version of the piece may be self-sustaining, or it may be wrapped into another piece of mine that has space for it. The level of specificity with which a musician chooses to engage with my recorded compositions is up to them, depending on their aesthetic and practical needs. Their engagement might range from a note-to-note transcription to a very loose interpretation of the basic materials, or perhaps playing my recording as a backdrop for their own performing/recording. My Ekumusic is inherently modular and flexible and I encourage musicians to explore combinations and arrangements of the music that fits their needs.

Most of my Ekumusic can be found on my “Explorations” recordings series, widely available on my Bandcamp page and streaming platforms. The compositions that have been notated are listed on my website and are available by contacting me.

(A note on my Super Marimba music. Super Marimba is not exactly part of the Ekumusic universe. Super Marimba is a more specific vocabulary/grammar, primarily informed by Jazz and Hindustani music, with echoes the American Minimalism tradition. The science and art of *alap* is of primary importance in those pieces, even if abstracted out from the more specific cultural vocabulary of Hindustani music. The science and art of *kaida/palta* and other Hindustani drumming processes is also foundational to that music. My Super Marimba compositions may certainly be realized by other people—indeed I have notated a few of them as marimba ensemble pieces—but I prefer that the specific notes/textures/rhythms/mood be retained, with some understanding and sensitivity to the nuances of Hindustani music, Jazz, and American Minimalism.)

So long as I am on this planet one can easily reach me if one has questions about Ekumusic or my other work. And if someone is exploring my music after I have left this planet then I only ask that they approach my Ekumusic with seriousness, and if they do that, then I am confident that the result will be transcendent. I trust your creative spirit, and I welcome it in collaboration with my own, in whatever dimension of space/time that takes place.

—Payton MacDonald