

*Address given to the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Alumni Council
of the Wisconsin Alumni Association
at the Great Hall of the Wisconsin Union
of the University of Wisconsin-Madison
on July 20, 1997
in acceptance of the 1997 Distinguished Alumni Award
presented by the GLB Alumni Council/ WAA Board of Directors
in recognition of achievements as a composer and a performer;
first recipient who has distinguished him or her self in the arts.*

I am very thankful and very touched by this honor. This brings me back after more than twenty-five years to the place where my becoming a composer and a gay man coincided.

Coming out in Madison in 1971 was a very special experience. There was a support system here of friends and colleagues that was welcoming and loving and which I still feel is rare anywhere. I've lived in New York City now for twenty years, and as exciting as that might seem, it is sometimes difficult to find a comfortable place in the gay community to just be who you are without having to define yourself in very specific ways. In *HX*, a New York-based weekly magazine, I recently counted 140 groups that are listed as "activists," "political," "gender," "health," "religious," "professional," "social," "sports," and "support." Every conceivable variation upon variation of sex clubs, discos and bars is there – from a variety of S & M nights at The Lure to dancing until dawn at Twirl, a new state-of-the-art techno disco bar with wide-screen computer graphics, go-go boys, and alcoves where you can go online and connect to gay porno web sites. There are gay listings of cabaret, art, music, theater, dance, readings, restaurants, travel, and on and on.

The fact is, I was spoiled by Madison. It felt natural to come out here. I remember that there were two bars: The Pirate Ship, which was just off the Square, and The Back Door, on Park Street, where on any one night you could find a mixed crowd of men and women, where Russell and I would dance with Cathy and Kate to the music of Patti La Belle, and everyone felt equal, and it all somehow felt very right and very innocent.

More importantly, newly made friends immediately welcomed me into the community, and the friendships that evolved endure and continue to provide me with encouragement and confirmation. I met Jess Anderson at a birthday party where he was playing a Beethoven sonata. He is at once a musician, poet, linguist, reviewer, computer genius, among many other things, and it was Jess who introduced me to everything from the music of Elliott Carter to how to deal with the ebb and flow of relationships. He is one of my best and closest friends, and he continues to be a mentor and source of inspiration, musically and humanistically.

I met Ron McCrea when he was working on the Gay Liberation Front, and he taught me, through his brilliant and insightful writings and courageous actions, how to be an active, political presence in the world, gay or straight. And I met Russell Merritt with whom I shared a partnership for ten years and with whom I still have a deep, affectionate

and soul-filled friendship. As a couple in Madison we always felt very affirmed. Jess and Ron and a host of other friends, gay and straight, along with the liberal atmosphere of the campus, helped make it possible for Russell and me to share a real and meaningful life together.

My guess is that this community still welcomes, supports and loves its gay, lesbian and bisexual students, faculty and staff. I was very happy and encouraged to hear about the founding and success of the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Alumni Council under the auspices of the Wisconsin Alumni Association that recognizes the importance of having such an organization as a real part of the University community. In the early '70s in Madison, there were few gay organizations, including the Gay Liberation Front, which was devoted to political action, as well as the Gay Center, a meeting place on Johnson and N. Hamilton. Today, besides the GLB Alumni Council, I am glad to hear that there are also a number of other very active groups, including the Ten Percent Society, the United, and the Madison Aids Support Network.

In the letter I received in May from the Council announcing this award, Co-Chairs Tammy Baldwin and Howard Street mentioned that the Board of Directors was particularly moved by my statements in the liner notes of the first volume of *Gay American Composers*, a compilation of music by living American composers who identify themselves as being gay. I wrote: "I am very fortunate to have grown up in the late '60s and early '70s in the midst of the anti-war and gay liberation movements on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. 'Coming out' seemed like the most natural thing in the world to me. I didn't have to fight for my sexual identity and have always felt strongly that the way I choose to live my life and write my music – as a full human being with a variety of concerns – is the most powerful and personal political statement I can make."

At first I wasn't sure that I wanted to be on the recording. It would mean revealing myself as being "gay" in a public way. I was also concerned about the cover of the CD which displays a beautiful, buffed, half-naked, sixteen-year-old Italian call boy named Fabio, clearly a commercial, marketing device that was meant to appeal to a broad gay audience. Part of the struggle of being an artist is wanting to be universal, not to limit your audience. Where does one's sexual orientation fit in? I am many things, and "gay" is one of the things I am. It is part of a composite that defines my life and my work. Being able to announce that to the world is very important.

Announcing it is also very complex as my own history with the one piece on the gay CD shows. The work is called *Incitation to Desire (Tango)*, for piano, written in 1984 as part of the *International Tango Collection*. When I first wrote the piece, I wanted to dedicate it to my partner at the time, but he asked me to remove his name from the score because he didn't want to be "out," fearing that people would use his sexual identity against him. And twelve years later, when I was writing the liner notes for *Gay American Composers*, the pianist, Anthony de Mare, who recorded it and who is one of my best friends, was hesitant about being outed for the first time on this recording. We finally agreed on the following statement: "The work has been performed by numerous interpreters, including two fine virtuoso pianists who also happen to be gay men, Anthony de Mare and the late Yvar Mikhashoff." Today Tony and I laugh about the phrase "happen to be gay," and

now he admits that he welcomed this public recognition of his sexuality. “There is a certain element of empowerment in letting people know who you are, that it’s part of your work,” he said. “After that I realized that I had no issues with it.”

When the recording was released, I was interviewed by phone by *Time Out New York* magazine. The interviewer quoted me as saying: “For me, this compilation is the first time in my life that I’ve been publicly out. There’s something very exciting about that. I wonder if it’ll mean a new level of openness in my work.” What I found myself remembering was that as a kid I loved listening to recordings of George Gershwin, classical music and Broadway musicals. I would close my door and dance around my bedroom. I found solace in being by myself and listening to music. Some people think that the music of gay composers reflects feelings of aloneness, nostalgia and wistful loss because of the isolation that many of us felt when we were young.

I started writing music at about age nine but stopped when I was sixteen because my family wanted me to become a lawyer. During freshman registration in 1966, I stood between Old Music Hall and the Law School, at the bottom of Bascom Hill, and wondered what to do. I was 17, and felt I had to opt for pre-law. When I was 22, having skirted law school by involving myself in English and Italian literature, I started writing music again, but in a new way. And that same year I also came out.

My music was at first abstract and atonal, but always lyrical and dramatic. Today, if forced to describe it in words, I would say it is also “sensual,” “open,” “intimate,” “visceral.” And those qualities are sometimes even recognized by critics!

Usually I don’t pay attention to what critics say, either pro or con. In fact, Anne Lamott in her book, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, quotes a friend as saying that “a critic is someone who comes into the battlefield after the battle is over and shoots the wounded.” But I was pleased when in 1985 a reviewer in *Musical America* favorably covered the premiere of *Tight-Rope*, an opera I wrote with director/librettist Henry Butler to celebrate the renovation of UW’s Old Music Hall. He described the work as “intensely moving” and “a remarkably human account of a man’s search for identity, and the risk involved not only in the discovery, but in being true to the discovery.” I have always felt, as I myself have written, that “writing music is a continual process of awareness – of self and of trying to make an intellectual and emotional connection to the world.” In other words, I always find myself on some sort of journey.

At the moment I am beginning work on a new musical theater piece for Opera Ebony, a New York City-based black ensemble. I am writing both the text and the music based on an experience I had in 1969 when I was a student at the University of Bologna. The entire action takes place on a train that travels from Athens to Bologna with stops in Albania and Belgrade. The characters include a black American GI, a black South African, two white American students, and a Yugoslavian train worker. The point of the work will not be specifically about race, but about the ongoing struggle of individuals to unmask themselves and connect to one another.

I have been reading quite a bit this summer in order to begin sketching character profiles for this work. For instance, in order to get a sense about apartheid, I've been studying Mark Mathabane's two remarkable books, *Kaffir Boy* and *Kaffir Boy in America*. In the second book, Mathabane's friend, Nditwani, says: "We all have to fight the struggle in our own way. Some have to use guns. Others must become doctors and teachers and lawyers."

I didn't become a lawyer. But I did become a composer and a teacher. I tell my students at Sarah Lawrence College that life and art are about confronting struggle and self-discovery. They are also about being open to flashes of inspiration, unexpected moments of fun and joy, and beauty.

I am grateful for all of my gay and straight friends here and am especially thankful for all of my friends on the Italian and Music faculties who set a standard for teaching that I have tried to live up to – particularly my advisor, Silvano Garofalo, who encouraged me to enroll in the Conservatorio di Musica "G. B. Martini" while I was in Bologna in 1969 and invited me into the graduate program in Italian Literature the next year; and Les Thimmig, who, in 1972, saw one of my first attempts at writing music again and said "What the hell are you doing in Italian? You're a composer!" and was instrumental in my gaining admission to the graduate program in composition. A circuitous path, but one that I have followed without regrets and with great blessings.

This Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Wisconsin is, therefore, a particularly meaningful affirmation of my journey. I am honored to be included on the GLB Alumni Council roster of recipients, and extend to all of you my heartfelt thanks.

Chester Biscardi
July 1997
New York City