

**D A N  
B E C K E R**

**A M E R I C A N  
C O M P O S E R**

*by* **K Y L E G A N N**



**“Process music” was, in the 1960s, another term for minimalism, but the two didn’t really cover the same territory. Minimalist music (to venture an inadequate thumbnail definition) was music that restricted itself to few pitches, clear logic, and a steady pulse. In a “process piece,” some gradual transformation, such as two lines at slightly different tempos going out of phase with each other, or gradual addition of notes to a lengthening repeated phrase, shifted your attention from the immediate notes to a larger perceptual level. Often, as in Steve Reich’s *Piano Phase* and Philip Glass’s *Music in Fifths*, minimalism and process piece were identical. But some minimalist pieces, like Terry Riley’s *Persian Surgery Dervishes*, were not based on a process, and one could argue that there were process pieces that weren’t minimalist—say, James Tenney’s *Chromatic Canon*, based on a slowly growing twelve-tone row.**

Process music pretty much fell by the wayside. The post-minimalist generation picked other things to develop, such as tonality defined by scales, and rhythms shaped by number patterns. But in Dan Becker’s music, you can still hear that fascination with process. His conventionally notated music is usually quite fast, and very tricky to play for that reason, but his pieces creep from idea to idea at a snail’s pace. A Becker chamber piece seems to vibrate fixedly in space, while ever-so-slowly rotating and changing colors.

Becker is the artistic director of Common Sense, a collective of eight composers who have banded together bicoastally—in San Francisco and New York—to find strength in unity. (I’ve written about Carolyn Yamell and Becker’s wife, Belinda Reynolds, in these pages. The others are John Halle, Marc Mellits, Melissa Hui, Ed Harsh, and Randall Woolf.) Their strategy is original and effective. Like aliens in a sci-fi movie scouring one planet after another for resources, Common Sense approaches an ensemble, raises money to commission all eight members, plays and maybe records the pieces, then moves on. They’ve worked so far with Alternate Currents Performing Ensemble, American Baroque, twisted tutu, and the Meridian Arts Ensemble, and they have future arrangements with the Albany chamber orchestra Dogs of Desire and the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble. This way, when one Common Sense member gets a commission, they all do; a mini-repertoire for each group’s instrumentation is suddenly created, and the hit-and-run technique prevents ensemble fatigue for any one group. Smart thinking.

Becker is the guiding force. What’s interesting to the critic is that while the eight composers differ in musical personality, they are close stylistically, creating the impression that a new mainstream may be evolving in American notated ensemble music. All could be called post-minimalists, by which I mean their music has rhythmic momentum, deals with tonal or at least diatonic textures, and is more continuous than abrupt or mercurial. While minimalism was a formative force for their generation, none writes simple or obvious music; Becker in particular brings an intricate technical sophistication to what used to be the rather straightforward technique of gradual process.

His most gradual piece may be *A Dream of Waking*, for violin and piano (2003). Both instruments spend the entire first two pages in the little space between F and B in the treble clef, yet the music is neither monotonous nor predictable. Piano and violin are often but not always in energetic unison, building up phrases by note repetition and rhythmic displacement, the atmosphere is expectant. More traditional out-of-sync processes operate in his *Five Re-Inventions* for computerized Disklavier, which playfully reconstructs piano inventions by Bach via

virtual hands at slightly different tempos. Becker admits a fascination with maps and grids, and his 1994 composition for ten instruments, *Gridlock*, seems emblematic of his approach. This is a busy piece, whose trap set gives it a certain vernacular flavor. But it moves from harmony to harmony slowly, through rhythmic techniques that are intricate, subtle and lively.

This use of rhythm to enliven a static group of pitches has become a basic, almost *the* basic, American musical technique. We inherited it from Aaron Copland after he stole it from Stravinsky, and it crops up in places as diverse as Roger Sessions’s twelve-tone technique, John Cage’s prepared piano pieces, and John Adams’s orchestral tone poems. What Becker brings to it is a level of detail, always evolving rather than remaining static, that keeps the listener from ever quite noticing how his transformations happen. When Becker’s denied that detail, his American roots can suddenly appear. Orchestra music these days is usually more conservative than the same composer’s chamber music (the dearth of rehearsal time makes most composers hold back on their rhythmic tricks), and the brass passages in Becker’s *Uprising* for orchestra (1999) show an almost humorous affinity for mid-century American composers such as William Schuman, Roy Harris, Paul Creston—not that there’s anything at all wrong with Schuman, but who expected this suave post-minimalist to have The Great American Symphony in his veins?

Likewise, *S.T.I.C.* for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano (1995) can sound like the quirky, changing-meter sections of *Appalachian Spring*, though a little abstracted. That grid in Becker’s head is of sixteenth notes, and his relation to the meter is never as bouncy or obvious as Copland’s. Despite its tonality and immediate likability, this is very sophisticated music. My favorite piece at the moment is his *Fade* for flute, vibraphone, piano, and cello (2003). Slow, luscious, tonal, it lulls you into thinking that it’s also repetitive; but actually nothing ever repeats. The changes of pitch and key, the unisons and just-missed unisons between the flute and piano are calculated with hair’s-breadth accuracy. Becker’s music is made not with a broad brush, but with a fine-point pen—and indeed, if there’s a flaw in Common Sense’s multiple-career strategy, it’s that it seems to discourage long pieces by any one member. But those will doubtless come. For now, Becker and his small army are cutting an impressive swath through the American musical landscape. ■

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