

# BRENT MICHAEL DAVIDS 2 0 0 2 INTERVIEW

by Patty Talahongva



## WHEN AND HOW DID YOU DEVELOP YOUR INTEREST IN MUSIC?

I'm not sure exactly when. I know I started doing little piano pieces at age 8, I have a cute one pasted into my childhood scrap book. it's funny, all the stems are too long and shoot out in awkward directions, not at all like written music should be notated. I started officially composing at 16. I wrote a piece for concert band that lasted about 3 minutes long. It took me an entire summer to write it, all the parts too, for about 40 instruments. I conducted it as well, and made a mistake... I gave the downbeat too fast (the beginning start of the music) and no one was ready, half the band did not even have their instruments up to their face ... so I had to turn around, apologize to the audience that the clunky splat they just heard was MY mistake, not the band's. Then we started again, and it all went great ... a funny start to a long career.

## WHY CLASSICAL MUSIC? WHY NOT COUNTRY WESTERN MUSIC?

I'm a product of television and radio, just like everyone growing up in Chicagoland. I heard all kinds of music, stevie wonder, the temptations, lawrence welk, bob marley, beatles, stones, new york philharmonic, marching bands, piano recitals, church choirs, and movie soundtracks. I was "well exposed,"

haha. Anyway, out of all this music, I heard something that was not so familiar to me once, and it fascinated me more than anything I'd come across before. I heard a recording of "Black Angels" by George Crumb, written for electrified string quartet. What was so cool about it, was that it sounded like what it's title suggested. For example, there is a section called "Night of the Electric Insects" that sounds exactly like that, the strings play very high wispy buzzy sounds, and it sound exactly like Electric Insects. This sound effect-style music was not haphazard or sloppy, it was highly crafted music, and I was thoroughly intrigued. I simply HAD to figure out how Crumb did that, I had to see a score, and hear it again and again. And I did. I've since learned many many techniques for from my classical training ... it's a different way of thinking about music and how it's put together, than country western or any improvised or memorized way of composing songs.

## HOW MANY OTHER NATIVE AMERICAN COMPOSERS ARE THERE?

In the states, there are about 5 classically-trained Indian composers, and a few others that have some training in related fields like piano or choral performance and also compose. Dr. Louis W. Ballard (Quapaw/Cherokee) is our seasoned veteran, he was writing symphonies when I was in diapers, and is very active still. We need more composers though. It seems that there is a big lack of awareness about classical music creation in the Indian communities, and very few non-Indian composers have the foggiest clue what it is Indians do in music as well. Mistakes are being made all the time, simply from ignorance. Opportunities to create some very exciting things are being wasted every year, because the venues and presenters who are commissioning new "Indian" works are not seeking out Indians to compose them, and are also not seeking out experts in the musical field to help guide them. So we end up with new so-called Indian works created by another non-Indian composer. I like the idea of collaboration better anyway, if presenters want to create Indian works than it's best to get real Indians into it, even as collaborators, so that both Indian and non-Indian creators

can have an opportunity to grow in cultural awareness and musical understanding. It's much better to start out with a collaborative model to begin with, and then advertise the finished work as a collaboration, not as an "Indian" work. It's more truthful and culturally more accurate.

## WHAT INSTRUMENTS DO YOU PLAY?

I started on piano at age 8, but quit several years later cuz I hated it... haha. It taught me to read music though, in both treble and bass clef, so for that I am extremely thankful for those gawd awful piano lessons. But I started trombone after that, and played bass trombone and tuba all through high school and into college. Then I went through analog and digital electronic music, and learned several percussion instruments. And then finally started to invent my own instruments out of anything I could find.

## HOW MANY COMMISSIONS HAVE YOU DONE?

Oh man, I cannot count them all, seriously. I've been at this now for 26 years, and have composed in many different genres, not only written music. Much of the music I've composed exists only in recordings, and some of my clients prefer recorded music to written music, such as ballet companies, modern dance companies, and film/video makers, in addition to radio themes, and all that. So I have a recording studio, as well as a drafting table, to be ready for any project coming my direction, written or recorded. I can estimate that I might compose up to 3 or 4 large works per year, in addition to many smaller themes and recordings ... it all adds up after 26 years I know that.

## WHAT TYPES OF MUSIC? BALLET? SYMPHONY OPERA? CHOIR?

Oh yeah many many types ... orchestra, various chamber ensembles, ballet, modern dance, choir, solo voice, avante garde, electronic music, folk, rock, blues, techno, radio themes, soundtracks for film and video, and any other combination of these types. I've written for most instruments that anyone might mention, and a few that no one has

ever heard of before until I show them my creations. For the Indian world my two most visible accomplishments are the theme music for "Native America Calling" radio program, and some of the music for Sherman Alexie's new film "The Business of Fancy Dancing." My more visible accomplishments in the classical music world are pieces I've written for the Kronos Quartet, Joffrey Ballet, National Symphony, Miro Quartet, Dale Warland Singers, Phoenix Boys Choir and many others. I've also collaborated with several great writers as well, including Joy Harjo, Susan Power and Marcie Rendon.

### WHAT IS THE "STATE OF NATIVE MUSIC" AS YOU SEE IT TODAY?

Oh, I'm not sure I can judge that, too close to it I suppose. I do see cool things happening in the areas of "electro-acoustic" music, where electronic devices are joined in some fashion or another with live instrumental or vocal performance. As for the commercial world, it is -- as it always was -- I think, cranking out the same basic stuff over and over, and asking us the consumer to gobble it up. Every so often I hear something new and interesting to me, but most of the stuff I hear is simply a variation on a theme of something I've already heard. I'm a sponge that way, always wanting to hear something that fascinates me as much as that first George Crumb piece did when I was 16, something that I cannot figure out and must investigate it in order to really know it. But I think the music that has the most meaning to me, is music that is shared and comes with a powerful cultural voice. This idea of creating cultureless "music for the sake of music" is an idea that I no longer have much tolerance for. There are composers out there, that see their creation of music as something devoid of any culture influences and is simply a true "high" quote-ART-unquote, and this idea is bunk. In fact, the whole notion of "high art" and music without a specific cultural root, came from the western European mindset, and it is by its own nature a byproduct of the culture that says music is cultureless. Western eyes can present the idea that we can objectively know something, like music, without

subjective influences, but this is simply a lie. There is no such animal as objectivity, everything is subjective, even things we take as fact. It is mostly theory, created by a culture that regards theory as fact, and music as objective. In the end, all these facts, and theories, and music are resultant byproducts of their culture, just like Indian music. If a culture tells itself that music has no culture, that is what it will believe. American Indian cultures say that songs are alive, and voice how we are truly related to each other and the "others" including earth and animals... and we create the world to behave as we speak of it. So, I suppose my real awareness of music is that songs are a way that we voice our meaning to each other, and together we create the medley of our world.

### TELL ME A LITTLE ABOUT POWWOW SYMPHONY?

"Powwow Symphony" is my attempt to combine the heart of a traditional powwow with the heart of the classical music world. For years I've been using two examples, the symphony and the powwow, to illustrate the differences existing between those two. Take the symphony orchestra -- all the performers all dressed in black to avoid individual players from being noticed, so that the audience will focus primarily on the "sound" being produced. The western emphasis is on the pure sound, like round open "bel canto" singing, we're not supposed to notice the players, but simply listen to the sound in an audience that is clearly separated from the performers on stage. In a powwow, these rules do not work. Powwows are designed to encourage participation as individuals all coming together to be noticed and heard; and not just in sounds, but also in food, jokes, laughter, dancing, snagging, and any other form of relating to each other and the earth. There is no emphasis on producing pure tones, in fact there is no Indian 'standard of pitch' reference at all, no Indian "A-440" ... unless it were something like "AaaaaaeeeeEEEEEE - for Forty Nine" haha. So what I did was create a Symphonic Powwow, with dancers and a powwow master of ceremonies (M.C.) right next to the conductor and orchestra. The whole work is an attempt at creating a powwow for the concert hall, to loosen

things up a bit in there, and maybe encourage more Indians to go see symphony music being played. I also like how the usual "concert-goer" is introduced to a powwow in a way that is more familiar as well. When "Powwow Symphony" comes to your city, go check it out!

### WHAT SORT OF FEEDBACK HAVE YOU RECEIVED FROM THE PERFORMANCES?

In Albuquerque we got a five minute standing ovation, with hoots and hollers. Really. It was so long on the recording that I simply had to time it, and see the exact length. All the audiences have loved it so far, the latest being at Phoenix Symphony Hall in Arizona. The critics did not "get it" of course, trying to figure out why I would have an M.C. talking during all the "real" music ... but everyone else loved it. I was aiming to let the heart of a powwow loose in the concert hall, and to blast open the stuffy stereotypes of music existing only as "sound" in all its purity. I love the M.C. talking and joking while the orchestra plays. It's more holistic and more an actual life event rather than simply being music.

### WHERE AND WHEN WILL IT BE PERFORMED NEXT?

There are a few orchestras that are considering it, for performance. I hope that Powwow Symphony has a long and fun life, that's another reason I wrote it -- to survive long after I am gone. If all goes well, you might be able to see it on your TV set! Cross your fingers!

### ANYTHING ELSE?

Be sure to check out my web sites: [www.brentmichaeldavids.com](http://www.brentmichaeldavids.com) and [www.mnartists.org](http://www.mnartists.org)

### ANY CD'S?

A couple CDs are in the works, including an all crystal flute and guitar CD, and another CD of several film and video soundtracks. Check out the web sites for the most current information about that.