

I imagine that it is easier for writers, even fiction writers, to locate whole chunks of their own life experience in their work. They can recognize a situation, even actual dialogue, adapted from daily life. Music is much harder to pin down; life is ground up so finely that it is hard to say where ideas come from. Nevertheless, I'm quite curious about what in my nature and life experience, leads me to make the musical choices I make.

Although I consider **Animal, Vegetable, Mineral (AVM)** to be "pure music" – music without a text or program – I can recognize the influence of skiing on the piece. Most of **AVM** was composed during the ski season of '03-'04 and I was obsessed with skiing very steep slopes covered, whenever possible, with very deep snow. Skiing "Steep and Deep" terrain has it's own peculiar rhythm. First of all, you have to hike up and traverse out from the top of the chairlift in order to access the serious pitches and untracked snow – you have to "earn your turns." The descent often begins with a leap of faith into a chute from a cornice or boulder and then a few quick and desperate turns in order to scrub speed from the jump. Then you settle into a funky rhythm of not quite regular arcs; in the movies and magazines you see perfectly regular 's' curves but the slopes I'm able to access without a helicopter have rocks and trees that must be accommodated; better that they only impact the rhythm of the turns and not my helmet.

Generally speaking, I think **AVM** is informed by the sense of serious play that I get from skiing. It is a sensual and exhilarating sport with dire consequences for missteps. Joy and fear commingle as a matter of course.

The first and third movements of **AVM** are long through-composed pieces unfolding from a single core gesture, where, like a ski run, everything is sort of the same in the sense that it is always going down yet always encountering different terrain. One thing tumbles into another, a constant discourse between precarious and playful with tight squeezes opening out into open bowls. "Graceful " never described my skiing or musical styles but "joyous", "athletic" and "intense" ring true in both somehow.

In the first movement the core gesture is the dramatic plunge from high to low. The tone is serious even portentous, and it is not much of a stretch in musical hieroglyphics to interpret that gesture in terms of being perched on the end of a boulder, peering down a steep, funneled couloir, steeling ones nerve to take the plunge while at the same time visualizing the scramble for balance and control after the landing. The movement is relentlessly insistent on this gesture, but in ever changing harmonic terrain and myriad versions of the landing. One of the appealing quirks of the saxophone is how its sound changes from thin, pinched and oxygen starved in the very high register to robust, thick and reedy in the low register. This plunging gesture performed by saxophones reminded me of a bellowing hee-haw of a Jackass and that image informed the development of the idea.

The opening melodic theme of the last movement represents a more articulated and measured descent. This melody was actually the first thing I composed for **AVM**. It has a periodic but not quite regular rhythm of short-long-long, short-long-long, etc., where the longs all have ever so slightly different lengths. The short note that begins each unit is set as a large downward leap. I recognize this mode of falling, combining quick

plunges and more gradual, controlled steps, as an archetypal steep skiing gesture. Once I started working with it, the not-quite-regular rhythm started to sound like the chatter of an enthusiastic but slightly off kilter machine (which could also be applied to my 48 year old body while skiing). As I pursued this image by doubling the melody at an odd interval and adding some noise in the form of a growl, an undeniable power-tool persona emerged.

The second movement is a set of variations on a melody derived from the harmonies of movement 1. The grace notes, 6/8 meter, the somewhat heroic tone, and the drones, all are references to actual bagpipe music but at the core of all this is the same preoccupation with plunging saxophone lines. I remember exactly what made me think of bagpipes.

I was very serious about skiing until I injured myself at age 19. I didn't ski for 25 years and just took it up again in the past few years. My return to skiing felt like a return to my roots not only because of my youthful passion for the sport but I've always felt like I was born to ski and it always came easily to me. This all led to me considering what my musical roots are. I've long acknowledged my indebtedness to rock music of the 60's and 70's but I started to wonder about the music of my Scottish ancestors – the Bagpipes. Whether or not it is in my blood, I love bagpipes and the thought of saxophones channeling bagpipes resonated with possibilities.

Because the material for this piece was invented during the 30 days I spent skiing in Utah and Wyoming, “Steep and Deep” was the working title during much of the process. Its funny how things work out: a plunging gesture suggested by skiing, when rendered on the saxophone sounds like the “hee-haw” of a jackass. This led me to think about other “voices” that might be in the saxophones lexicon and got me thinking more in terms of the elemental qualities of saxophone sound in terms of its real world analogs (bagpipes, machines). It is as if I set out to write a novel set in an alpine ski resort and decided to make the main character a Scot who grew up on a farm and is now on vacation from a factory job.

Because each movement adheres rigorously to its single mode/theme/voice the piece became less about movement and skiing and more about the sound of “stuff” – flesh, wood and metal, **Animal, Vegetable, Mineral.**

I love the part of composing when the music takes on a life of its own; it is no longer confined to gravity. Composing literally means putting together. It rarely involves inventing something from a vacuum but rather the process of bringing together shards of life experience with musical preoccupations informed by the music that one loves to create something personal and new.

-Steven Mackey

**Zajonc/Valenti Management | PO Box 7023, Ann Arbor, MI 48017 | (800) 650-8742 | (734) 769-2911
www.zvmgmt.com | zvmgmt@aol.com**

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