

What Is the Sound of An Artist Taking Action?

By Molly Sheridan
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In the countdown to the '04 American presidential election, it feels as if the country is holding its breath.

Already overburdened by the complexity and tragedy of many recent global events, our eyes are turned to the war of rhetoric playing out between two candidates, both of whom claim that they are the only way to keep/get this country on the right track. But the Right lies, they say, and the Left is wishy-washy. We have been advised by all sides not to trust the media, but a 24/7 news cycle has heightened our awareness of the world—Sudan, Iraq, Chechnya, bullets, bombings, starvation, and worse. Feeling overwhelmed and without recourse, we now face the nightly news with a kind of numbness, tragedy distilled down to the abstract "human cost"—as if it's a line item on the world's GNP spreadsheet.

The Dixie Chicks may have been the first musicians with enough fame to catch the cameras of CNN, but artists of all stripes have been compelled to speak to recent events. Perhaps not since the AIDS crisis rocked our community have composers been so collectively galvanized, absorbing the world around them and creating work that reflects that sensitivity.

With that in mind, I sat down with composers and performers making work that directly comments on the issues before us. Their perspectives are much larger than an election or a political party. History tells us they are often our Cassandras, the first to point and shout, "Look here! Wake up! Pay attention!" They do us that service; it is then our responsibility to listen.

I began this inquiry with two CDs in hand that had greatly impacted my thinking. The first was Phil Kline's *Zippo Songs: Airs of War and Lunacy*, a song cycle that illustrates the horrors of war via phrases soldiers inscribed onto their lighters. The work connects to present events with a prelude that draws its text from the speeches of Donald Rumsfeld. Juxtaposed in this way, it's hard not to muse on all we still have not learned from the history of war.

Also compelling was *In What Language*, a collaboration between jazz pianist/composer Vijay Iyer and spoken-word artist/poet Mike Ladd that confronts the "non-neutrality of transit" for travelers of color. Iyer, the son of Indian immigrants, found himself attracted to the power of improvisation as a means of expression.

Iyer says he hears in jazz a "history of resistance and struggle...of people daring to create in spite of obstacles around them and that's what's inspired me all along. The idea of daring to use your imagination to that degree when you come from an oppressed community is actually in itself a political act."

The week the Republican National Convention was in full swing in Manhattan, Iyer and I met up to speak about being a civically engaged artist.

Molly Sheridan: Though *In What Language?* may be the most concretely so, political statements are not something new to your work. You have said, in fact, that your music is meant primarily as a form of address. In your experience, what are the unique strengths of music, and specifically jazz, to accomplish this?

Vijay Iyer: To me, jazz is a history and a kind of zone of discourse; it's not really a kind of music. The elements of that history that are most articulate have to do with improvisation as a form of dialogue, interactivity that is embedded in this music. It's really just the sound of people listening to each other in real time, in a very engaged and active way. There's something just so symbolically powerful about that act of coming together, listening to each other, and responding to each other—having a sustained conversation. That's what you're hearing.

Molly Sheridan: It's a very different thing from using words per se, but would you say it can have a similar effect?

Vijay Iyer: Well, in some ways it speaks louder than words because you're listening to people taking action. The music that I create as a composer is music that takes advantage of that possibility. I try to create occasions for people to be themselves and listen to each other. You're setting these events in motion that are exploding with meaning, meaning that's more than you could possibly have come up with yourself. Placing those perspectives in dialogue is what's really exciting about making music to me; you have to meet people half way and you have to stretch to understand them and you learn from each other.

Molly Sheridan: In some ways it seems that artists are collectively responding to current world political conflict in ways they haven't since the Vietnam war or the AIDS crisis. Do you feel that?

Vijay Iyer: It's clear that at some level it's somewhat fashionable to wear your dissent on your sleeve. There's all this money being poured into documentaries and nonfiction books about the administration and all of a sudden those are best sellers. But I think it's important to realize that there are certain kinds of people who never have a choice but to dissent, certain communities are always framed as oppositional.

I have a friend whose cousin is a dentist and he's Pakistani-American. He wasn't arrested; he was detained, for several months after 9/11 for no reason [other than] because he's a businessman and an educated man from Pakistan. Somehow the sense is that it's the educated people from these countries who are actually the threat. I feel that these kinds of stories are not really being heard today. You kind of have to dig beneath the surface of the Michael Moores. A lot of information comes my way just because I'm South Asian and am connected to these communities. I hear about stuff that I don't think will ever make it to the mainstream and these are the sorts of things that should be given more voice.

Molly Sheridan: How do you balance that with being a composer and a musician. It seems almost like you've also taken on the responsibilities of being a journalist.

Vijay Iyer: [laughs] You don't really need to actively engage in this stuff; you could just make music that makes you happy and that sounds pretty, get a nice article written about you. But to me that is kind of missing the point of what it means to be American, or just to be human and be connected to people and the world around you. One thing I can do, particularly as someone who's privileged enough to be a public figure is really speak to people and place this experience inside their bodies and inside their minds. That's this really important opportunity. I just don't think it should be wasted. That's my take on what it means to be a composer. You're making stuff for the people around you and you're trying to reach people who may not see things your way.

Molly Sheridan: But aren't you more frequently speaking to people who already hold similar views?

Vijay Iyer: Really you're reaching people in ways you don't realize and your stuff is heard around the world in ways that even get beyond what you intend. I don't know that it's necessarily so many more people, but it's not just people in my neighborhood or people who go to Tower Records. They read about me in India Today in India. That's 1 billion people I could reach. That's when I really feel this sense that if so many people have the chance to hear what I have to say, this is not the time to hide.

Molly Sheridan: I want to talk a bit about the Republic in Ruins performance you'll be involved in during the Republican National Convention here in NYC. Why is it important to you as an artist to be involved in that?

Vijay Iyer: It's giving me the chance to intersect with a certain scene that's a little bit new to me. These are mostly performers in the classical or new music world. I have some overlap with that but not a whole lot and it's interesting for me to see how that community organizes themselves around issues because in general a lot of these people aren't playing their own music so it's really about selecting repertoire that articulates what they want or else it's about, as in this case, constructing this larger event to bring people together to foster dialogue, which to me is totally valid as a strategy.

I also think about placing music directly in a certain context. I don't know if you know Horace Tapscott. He was this great pianist and bandleader in Los Angeles. He was leading this large group called the [Pan-African Peoples] Arkestra and when the Watts riots were happening they went out on a flatbed truck with the whole big band and a piano on it and sort of scored the Watts riot. So actually placing your music in the space where something is happening in your community, that's really powerful. That says something more than a title can or some sort of subtle dynamic or the internal logic of a composition can. It's really about that notion of taking action with your music that I admire and continue to explore.

Putting work into context is exactly what vocalist and concert presenter Haleh Abghari is looking to accomplish. Her recent performance piece Republic in Ruins (an evening of artistic "call and response") and the 2003 event she organized, Breaking the Silence: An Evening of Music and Discourse for Peace and Democracy, were both offered as a venue for classical musicians and audiences to meet and speak to issues not usually associated with a night in the concert hall.

"I found that we all shared the same concerns and complaints and the same political issues were on our minds but, especially in classical music, there is no direct tool to get involved in this sort of dialogue," explains Abghari. "It seemed like everyone wanted to get involved but there was no way and everyone was so frustrated. I thought, why not create a space for this voice, for this community of musicians, for them to have a space to step forward and voice their concern and be active citizens. No one is going to do it for us, so we'll have to do it ourselves." Abghari was already involved with Mouths Wide Open, a political consciousness-raising group of artists and others who got behind the performances. The Nation Institute co-sponsored both events.

Molly Sheridan: What personally compelled you to produce these concerts?

Haleh Abghari: I have no personal political aspirations, but I was born and raised in Iran until I was 15. There was a revolution there in '79—it was a bad government already but then a really bad one came in. My whole family tried to get out to come to a place [in the U.S.] where there's a better quality of life and more freedom and just a more reasonable political/social situation. But I see the same resonances, the

same kind of propaganda, the same symptoms that I saw in Iran being propagated here. It really bothered me and I found that I couldn't just focus on my own work. Just seeing the same parallels was pretty frightening because it's on a much larger scale—it's a much more powerful government.

When I did *Breaking the Silence*, one of the most interesting parts was invisible to everybody else—my personal conversations and emails with all these musicians. We were all talking on a level that we usually don't. We share the same concerns and there's common ground but there are a lot of different shades within that. I tried to make it as broad as possible so everyone felt comfortable stepping in and feeling supported. I'm not looking for agreement so much as dialogue.

Molly Sheridan: When you first approached people like Fred Sherry and Todd Reynolds and Derek Bermel, what was their reaction to the idea?

Haleh Abghari: I didn't know what the turnout would be, but I actually got overbooked immediately. I would ask one person and they would give me ten more names! Up until two days before the show, people were contacting me. I even had someone show up at the concert with their instrument wanting to play. The response was overwhelming and I was not expecting that.

Molly Sheridan: With *Breaking the Silence* I even noticed that there were a number of artists listed in the program who were not actually on the program but who wanted to be part of the experience.

Haleh Abghari: The purpose was to make our work relevant, because everyone has the same things on their mind, but how do you do it? My goal was to get as many voices on that stage as possible—not even playing whole pieces, just movements, segments, just have their voice heard. And the fact that it was classical musicians doing it, in a way that gave us access to talk to some people who would not be so receptive to the stereotypical hippies and anarchists, but they see people with violin cases getting involved and that made them curious.

Molly Sheridan: Taking off from there, how do you make abstract work, drawn from the past and present, relevant in this circumstance?

Haleh Abghari: No one was in their element in a way, everyone was kind of stretching, but it was exciting. You hear the news and you kind of become numb to it—it's kind of abstract too. What really made an impact on people was the attack on the World Trade Center because it was right here. When war is happening away from your home and you just see edited versions on TV the impact isn't as deep. So for us it was important to get rid of that filter, to bring that conversation into the room and create a deeper experience for the audience. You have the expert commentary of journalists and those who speak from experience and you juxtapose that with art and music and performance so that it's not an abstract notion.

Afterward, there was time for the audience to mingle and talk. There was one speaker who probably created more controversy than anyone, and there was a great dialogue around it. I was quite happy about it. Sometimes the harder conversations are the more important ones. If our goal was to give room to different voices, then we did that. Maybe not everyone agrees with what is said, but it should be heard as opposed to denied.

Republic in Ruins ran for three nights at Washington Square Church in New York during the Republican National Convention. Composer Derek Bermel was among the participants. "I wanted to get involved with groups that were having a political impact," says Bermel. "It just so happened that there were these folks who were artists of one type or another who were involved in [*Mouths Wide Open*]. I decided instead of

just being frustrated I really wanted to actually act. I joined with the purpose of doing some political work unattached to performance, but then we began to scheme about something we could do that tied in with the RNC."

As Republic in Ruins came together, music that could lead up to the entrance of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse was needed and Bermel offered his work, Resignation to Alarm, re-scored for violin, cello, and clarinet.

Molly Sheridan: Do you think then as an artist and as a person with those sensibilities that you can have an impact on this situation?

Derek Bermel: I think as a person, yes. I'm intending to go register voters. Probably the biggest problem that we face in this country is that people don't vote and that needs to be rectified. I feel that the direction in which the federal government has been moving is quite dangerous and that doesn't just go for the war in Iraq, that also goes for the eroding of civil liberties, the expectation, for example, that we can keep prisoners in any way we want without accountability. Even the Supreme Court has declared that to be unconstitutional, but we've been doing it and we continue to do it.

It's more than just in the States. In Holland there's a conservative trend—they're cutting all sorts of arts funding, putting much more into the military. The artists are getting fed up there. I was there two weeks ago and Louis Andriessen had written a protest piece which was performed in front of all these government officers during a press conference. That kind of surprised them!

Since I live in New York, people have asked how much of an effect I can have doing this. I wasn't sure; I had been organizing people to give out literature near tourist sites, in order to try and help non-New Yorkers make informed choices. Then I started to realize that I was having an impact that rippled way beyond New York. So now my attitude on that has changed; I believe that activism is important anywhere it exists.

Molly Sheridan: When you're speaking about these things through art, is it to be taken in the same way as work that you do purely out of artistic inspiration?

Derek Bermel: The one piece I've written which was a direct response to what was going on was a piece for a family concert for narrator and orchestra that I did for the St. Louis Symphony called The Sting. It was about a bear attacking a beehive. I won't go into the details, but I wrote the text myself and that was my way of working out a response to 9/11, and invading Afghanistan and Iraq.

Molly Sheridan: When you look back now, how do you react to it?

Derek Bermel: Well, it's eerie because the way I felt then I feel even more now. Basically, the lesson of that story was that violence begets more violence and that the cycle doesn't stop. It was hard to make that into a children's piece because the lesson was kind of grim, but ultimately I think it's something that children really understand.

I fear that history is getting lost on us here. Of course everyone pulls their own lessons from history just like everyone pulls their own lessons from the Bible. It means whatever you want it to mean to suit your own views.

The Republican delegates had left the city and life had largely returned to normal when I paid a visit to Phil Kline. The upcoming election, however, was still very much on his mind.

"It's like this war of rhetoric right now that the Right has such a command of," he tells me. "They've got this whole John Wayne thing going which is that inarticulacy is good. Somebody who cares but does it in words of more than one syllable or actually puts sentences together is therefore suspect because they speak too well. It's like an across the board attack on intellectuals. I hesitate to say artists but I guess that includes us."

As with many of the composers and musicians I spoke with, as passions rose sometimes words failed. "I'm working on my inarticulate thing," Kline says with a smile when he looses his train of thought. "Wait until you hear my new music. No melodies, no harmonies, sub- melodies, sub harmonies. It will just be blunt gestures that just slowly push the audience toward thinking something."

"That's the new art," he suggested with a wink.

Molly Sheridan: Zippo Songs opens with a prologue drawn from Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon briefings. I'm curious, as you were creating it, how the juxtaposition and the intersection of Vietnam and the Rumsfeld text felt to you? Theory goes that you need a certain amount of distance on an event to comment effectively, but you were doing both at the same time.

Phil Kline: While putting together that piece, I wasn't trying to make that connection. I was trying to just take the evidence that is the lighters and the poems on them and just treat them—well, this is an impossible word to use—but objectively; to just look at the emotion in it, the language in it, and treat it at face value. I realized as I started that I couldn't write a piece about Vietnam, I could only write a piece about those words. In that sense, I wasn't making or trying to make a political statement but rather an emotional or dramatic statement.

When I got to the end of the project, that's when I kind of got tricked into making it political. It was just a practical consideration at first because the Zippo Songs are kind of short for an evening's presentation. I realized, if nothing else, I was going to need more to make an album. I saw the Zippo Songs as kind of a journey, a spiritual progression which ends in some sort of metaphysical disappearing or death. I was looking for statements from White House people or Army people from the '60s who could send these souls off on that journey to hell or wherever they're going, but I couldn't find anything interesting. I opened up the back page of the New Yorker and I saw the famous quote, "As we know there are no knowns" from Rumsfeld. He has a very interesting way of speaking. He's sort of a speech artist in his own way and he's the opposite of George Bush. He likes to put together these long, elastic, never-ending sentences, these wonderful ellipses of confusion. I realized, well, if I do this, I'm clearly making a connection; people are going to see it as a connection. It wasn't that I meant to, but when I saw the possibility, I realized, well, yeah, why should I avoid making this connection—it's probably pretty apt. It was kind of serendipity in a way.

Molly Sheridan: What about the next step after the piece is finished? I'm thinking of Zippo Songs and Vigil, the public walk through New York that you organized after Sept. 11 that had participants playing your ambient tape piece on boom boxes. How does the effect you anticipate mesh with reality?

Phil Kline: Their reactions often surprise me. With those outdoor pieces, they always expand in a way that I can't anticipate—the sense of community and the warmth and the cooperation. It was kind of a release for all of us. I didn't have a whole lot of time to put it together, maybe a week, but it helped keep me busy and my hands occupied. We were out there on the street that Saturday night. When we started coming down Fifth Avenue and got to the intersections, we encountered some policemen. They asked us what we were doing and then they cleared every intersection for us for the next half mile. They just rode along on their motorcycles and stopped traffic.

The length of the walk had us end up in Washington Square, and we sat with our boom boxes and ended the piece there. None of us had any idea that when you looked up you saw the space—the empty space [in the skyline] was right there. And there's nothing you can say.

Molly Sheridan: Zippo Songs is a more structured concert work, of course. How does that performance and the reaction compare?

Phil Kline: Somehow if you get a piece where the idea has room to expand, a piece like that can take you somewhere. If you start a piece and you don't know where you're going, I think it can take you further than if you start a piece by knowing exactly where you're going because then it will just go there, whereas otherwise it will go places you don't expect. That's the way I'm most comfortable with writing, plus it's a lot easier to not know. [laughs]

Zippo Songs is kind of a weird idea, and it might even be a credit to the fact that the idea came pre-Bush in the late '90s and then it was written while the Iraq War was gearing up. I thought it was going to be complex, nightmarish, like Vietnam movies, that kind of darkness and confusion. Then, when I started writing the music, it ended up being kind of light and clear, which made another kind of sense to me.

The idea communicates in a kind of subtle way, it's sneaky and subtle. It's not an anti-war piece in any conventional sense. I could easily imagine soldiers in the most noble war ever fought having written the same things on their lighters...well, maybe not quite the same things because Vietnam twisted people's heads a little bit. But it's just a piece about war. I don't even think of it as an anti-war piece, it's just that when you see a lot of messages that have to do with pain and death and loneliness, well, it's not exactly a pro-war piece.

Molly Sheridan: The Dixie Chicks got a lot of attention after their infamous Bush slam, but saying something in our community, what kind of larger impact can you expect to have or is that not a consideration?

Phil Kline: It's a tough question to answer. I have to say, I've heard some stuff and I've seen some stuff that has some eloquence, but I haven't seen Bob Dylan coming up through the ranks. Nobody's writing the next "Masters of War," that I can tell, songs that could change your life on impact. So maybe this is 1958, maybe we're more the gentle folk singers who are beginning to raise our guitars and maybe the really mean, angry truth-teller is a few years down the way. I don't know if it has any impact right now, at least I question that it does. Maybe it will have impact at another time, like the music of Kurt Weill has a lot of impact on me and the words of Bertolt Brecht, and that's already 80 years old. Also, we're not just delivering a message, we're also doing what we do—what I'm doing is for me, too, and my own sanity.

Once again you've brought me down to total inarticulacy trying to figure out what all this means. I feel like I'm not angry enough. I should be really raising that hammer. Hey, maybe one of us will real soon. I have a feeling that as far as the pain and the anger and the alarm in the music, we probably haven't heard anything yet, because I think a lot of us are just beginning to wake up. Who knows? A lot of people's eyes and ears are wide open right now and they should be wide open, so we're going to hear stuff and we're going to hear other people shouting to say, "Wake up!"