

PIANO IMPRESSIONS FROM ANOTHER DIMENSION



Ruminations, October 2006
Neil Slade

Today I received a very nice email note about *Piano Impressions From Another Dimension* from a listener, saying that he had bought this CD collection of piano pieces from me many years ago, and hardly a day had gone by that he had not listened to it. He said he got something new out of it every listening, and it never failed to have a positive effect on his mind.

I mention this, not to pat myself on the back (although this is a unavoidable pleasant consequence), but to illustrate how odd it is for me to be on the other side of this kind of thing...

Usually when I find an album that I really like, really *really* like I will listen to it constantly over a long period of time, hundreds of times, and I will saturate my consciousness with the music to the point where I can hear it in my head—without the physical CD playing, without wearing my headphones.

It's very strange and granted quite gratifying to hear someone doing the same thing with my own music.

If you ask most musicians, they typically don't listen to their own recordings very much after they are through recording them. The creative mind is inherently anti-narcissistic. If you focus too much on yourself and what you've done, you don't go anywhere— you get stuck in a feedback loop and you stop growing.

It is different when you place yourself in another universe, listen to or immerse yourself in another's work, because in this way you expand the boundaries of yourself.

Ideally, this is what one's artistic education should be about, and so it was for me growing up, first listening to Bach as a seven year old— playing Fugue in G Minor for my little friends on my plastic GE record player... “Hey listen to THIS!” Then as a teenager, listening to Frank Zappa's 1950's doo-wop put-on, *Rubin and the Jets*, as well as his bizarre Edgar Varese inspired *Lumpy Gravy* orchestral instrumentals and timeless *Burnt Weeny Sandwich* piano solos.

Even when I watched TV I was tuned into the actual musical content of the soundtrack music of *The Avengers*, or *The Man From Uncle* as much as the story and good looks of Emma Peel as anything, to the point of transcribing the music and using it for my junior high school band performance tests, unlike everyone else who simply played a tune out of their music book.

For all of my formative years I found myself on an entirely different plane than all of my best friends who thought the Grateful Dead was the pinnacle of musical delight. Thank goodness.

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To the surprise of many, the piano is considered a percussion instrument by musicologists because the mechanics of it involve hitting strings with little felt tipped hammers. The sound of a piano, however, is a universe of its own, and for hundreds of years has been the favored tool for composers of all kinds of music.

The variety of expression of the piano is great, and perhaps unsurpassed by any other instrument. Okay, well, this is a very subjective statement, probably objected to by anyone who plays anything else- but in western European cultures, and more recently embraced by Asian culture, the piano is the undisputed king of musical instruments, eclipsed only in popular music by the electric guitar, which fills a much more narrow niche in public acceptance. The fuzzy toned distorted guitar certainly reigns in popular mass media along with the back-seat drums and bass, but historically it still does not occupy the predominance that the piano and its predecessors like the harpsichord has for hundreds of years.

However, many a young child has been guided to piano lessons by unsuspecting parents, who before long learn to regret their fantasy that “my child will love music”. My suspicion is that there is a something like a 92% rejection rate of by kids who are coerced to the piano for a maximum length of two weeks before the novelty effect wears off. After that, the piano becomes a dusty piece of furniture relegated to become a very expensive cat claw sharpener in the corner of the living room or destined to be forgotten in the basement along with other forgotten trinkets of mostly lesser volume.

For me, this was not the case. My mother obtained our piano for \$50 when I was no more than three feet tall. It was a 1890’s Kohler and Campbell upright console that had the perfect tone to play honky-tonk or ragtime music, and yes, it was a real U.S. hand made Kohler and Campbell before the name was adopted by a Taiwan manufacturer a hundred years later.

I tinkered around with it a little bit here and there as a tike, and then our family moved 1700 miles west from New Jersey to Colorado. By my mother’s foresight, we took the piano with us. She also had enough sense to not make me take piano lessons after I vomited after my second lesson from a bout with the flu, and took that discharge as an omen that perhaps I was not meant for regular prescribed study. Instead, she was content to let me wander into the converted garage and let me plunk away as my imagination and interest freely dictated. Not so with my alto saxophone, because that was a much more substantial investment of \$365 and I was duly chaperoned to the music store every single Saturday of my life until I graduated from high school. Amazingly, I did not learn to resent or hate the saxophone, probably because of the revolving door of private instructors I had- a new saxophone teacher every single season, most of them providing me with a combination of musical tutorage and psychotherapy.

By the sixth grade I was composing little ditties on the ivories (and this instrument had real yellowed bone ivory keys donated by some unsuspecting elephant, likely like “Take It Away, A Way Way Way.”

As I grew a little older, the concept of playing in an ensemble grabbed hold in my neural network, perhaps with the lure of groupies and popularity, and before long I was “jamming” with friends in the basement, and making up piano and violin duets with my best friend Robert Kennedy (yes, that was really his name). Eventually, I did gravitate to a ukulele, mimicking the then popular novelty singer Tiny Tim, and then on to emulate Zappa with first a Mexican made \$10 guitar, and then a three pickup Kay electric guitar that I foolishly tried to refinish into destruction years later.

But the piano was never very far away, lurking in the shadows of my awareness, teasing me with its possibilities now and again.

When I finally chose music as my LIFE, enrollment at the college music school demanded that I know at least a rudimentary level of piano proficiency. And boy, did I grab that bull by the horns with relish, mustard and ketchup.

I started out in the beginning piano level class at college, where students took group lessons and everyone plugged in with headphones to electric Wurlitzer pianos- hated then for their plastic construction, bouncy keys, and toy-like tone, but now coveted as highly prized jazz instruments, and heard on such 60’ s classics as Joni Mitchell’s *Woodstock*.

I found that I had a real interest in the piano, undoubtedly from exposure as a little kid from my mom’s classical records, and then through to my father’s interest in jazz, and then on to Zappa’s use of keyboards. It provided me with identity. I took to it like a duck takes to stale sliced bread crumbs thrown to it by little old ladies at the park. While most beginning piano students would play just enough to get a passing grade on this antiquated warhorse of an instrument, I practiced far into the night, and living at home often I was frequently reprimanded by parental units trying to get some sleep.

Within months after entering college, I began to compose music at any opportunity I could, including taking my tape recorder and manuscript paper with me to the local VFW’s Lotus Room during our family dining out for Chinese food.

My interest in Zappa’s music led me to some very unusual contacts, including with one young fellow my own age who actually lived with the man in Los Angeles for a short time, and who gave me a copy of Zappa’s hand written manuscript for a piano solo piece I had been listening to on my record player on his album *Burnt Weeny Sandwich*.



Eventually I memorized this composition, and after being told it was “inappropriate” for piano performance class by an anally retentive professor, I got my revenge one day anyway at my teacher’s own recital when I was asked to check out the piano in front of a full audience before the official program. I sat down to uncover and prepare it for the performance, and before anyone had a chance to chase me off the stage, I performed the entirety of the piano introduction to *The Little House I Used To Live In* before a packed house.

Throughout my college education in music, I continued to develop my compositional toolkit, and the piano was my main weapon of choice. Before long, due to my unquenchable desire to create, I was actually teaching piano years before I graduated, as well as playing piano in front of willing as well as unsuspecting audiences for actual MONEY.

By the time I graduated from college I had already formed a few different bands playing primarily bizarre instrumental music, and regularly adopting the Dada (anti-art movement from the early part of the 20th Century) habit of naming things in the most non-conformist manner. My bands had names like Free Dirt (you would think of my band any time you saw one of those signs on the side of the road), Elmer Fudd and The Rocks (my friend’s brother conducted us with a carrot at one performance), or Denver Sewage Treatment (hey, you’ve heard of the band Chicago Transit Authority, right?) But the story of my bands is another universe, a tale I will spin at another occasion.

As far as piano goes, the independent dexterity I developed in all ten fingers very quickly came in handy --- oh, a pun.

My very first job out of school was with the non-profit entity Artreach Incorporated. They hired me out to teach music and art workshops all over Metropolitan Denver, as well as provide pure entertainment at every conceivable place including nursing homes, schools, community centers, head injury clinics, and psychiatric hospitals. The pay was \$200 a week, and I set my own schedule. It was a dream job for a 25 year old graduate with no real desire to work.

Imagine the surprise of 85 year old seniors when I announced that my next number would be an original composition entitled “Thousands of Large Hideous Bugs”.

I continued with Artreach on and off part time for ten years, but quickly settled into my own private music teaching career after a brief yet tortuous trial in the arena of public school teaching. I would spend the next twenty five years teaching piano lessons, along with saxophone, flute, clarinet, and guitar. One day I sat down and calculated that I had probably engaged in something like 25,000 music lessons over this period of time.

Of course, teaching music lessons was something I never considered as my occupation, but rather a way to pay the heat while I was developing my artistic career as a professional musician. Along the way I met and became an assistant to brain researcher T.D. Lingo, and wove my knowledge of brain self-control into my performances and promotion. Eventually it would be this additional brain “stuff” that would catapult me into public awareness, and allow me to actually have a career based in large part on my music.

* * *

From 1975 onward to the present I continued to compose and record music of all shapes and sizes, but the first real attempt at a professionally produced album using genuine high technology recording equipment was my album of solo piano compositions, many of the pieces written right at the germ of my involvement with 88 keys during college. This was to become *Piano Impressions From another Dimension*.

I had been noticing the music of George Winston at the time, and how much fame and attention he was getting, and thought, “Hey, I can do that.” In actuality, I found George Winston rather boring and uninspiring except for the fact that he was making money playing solo piano. I went to one of his concerts and found it very tedious and lethargic. Both my friend and I could hardly keep our eyes opened for the duration. Yawwwwwwwwwwn.

However, I appreciated the concept. Make noise on a big wooden box with keys and get paid. Since I had done quite a bit of composition for solo piano at music school, I had more than enough material to put together a decent album, and I used everything, just like the Native Americans who understood the value of all the parts of a Buffalo. The first piece on the album, *Dimension #28* was actually the first piece I had ever written down in music staff as an “official” music composition for piano.

As a kid I had done a lot of song writing, but it was piano classes at college that inspired me to actually start writing down and composing “serious” music.

The titles, as non-conformist as the compositions themselves, were mostly subject to the influence of Zappa, who had a real penchant for unusual and humorous song titles. He tended not only to write music that deliberately went against the grain, and flew in the face of commercial appeal, but his song titles reflected this rebellious attitude as well.



For me, *Dimension #28*, was actually titled *Blahness #28* for twenty five years. It was only when I began selling my music on the internet that I modified a few of the song titles so I wouldn't commit marketing hari-kari in a market that didn't understand my sense of humor quite yet. Other titles that were slightly modified from the original for example were: *The New Variations of the Dildo Waltz*, became *The New variations on the Dodo Waltz*, not to offend anyone, *Opus Infection* was made a little more positive and less offensive and became *Opus Infarction*.

One piece 7-26 was written as an anniversary present for a fellow whom I have lost total respect for recently, and I've re-titled it *It's My Song Now*. Yes, it is possible to change the past.

Albeit, the pieces were rather short by radio or standard classical composition standards. Many of the pieces I had modeled after early Bach classics from the notebook for Anna Magdalena, and these were naturally brief and relatively uncomplicated pieces initially designed for students. Despite their diminutive nature however, as it turns out, many of these pieces are the most famous and

best loved compositions by the general population in all of the Bach catalog - so I had good models for eternal glory.

For many years I performed all of these compositions live in whatever live performance situation I was granted. Most notably was a solo performance of the entire album (and more) at the Gerald Ford Amphitheater in Vail Colorado one summer evening before a full audience attending their concert series.

Surely this audience was used to much more commercial music along with their Vail cocktails, both classical and/or pop offerings. But not only did I serenade them with this eclectic selection of strange and bizarre harmonies, melodies, and rhythms, but at the show I also instructed the entire audience how to “click their own amygdala forward” and turn on their dormant frontal lobes while they were munching on Wendy’s Hamburgers. They liked it too. Amazing.

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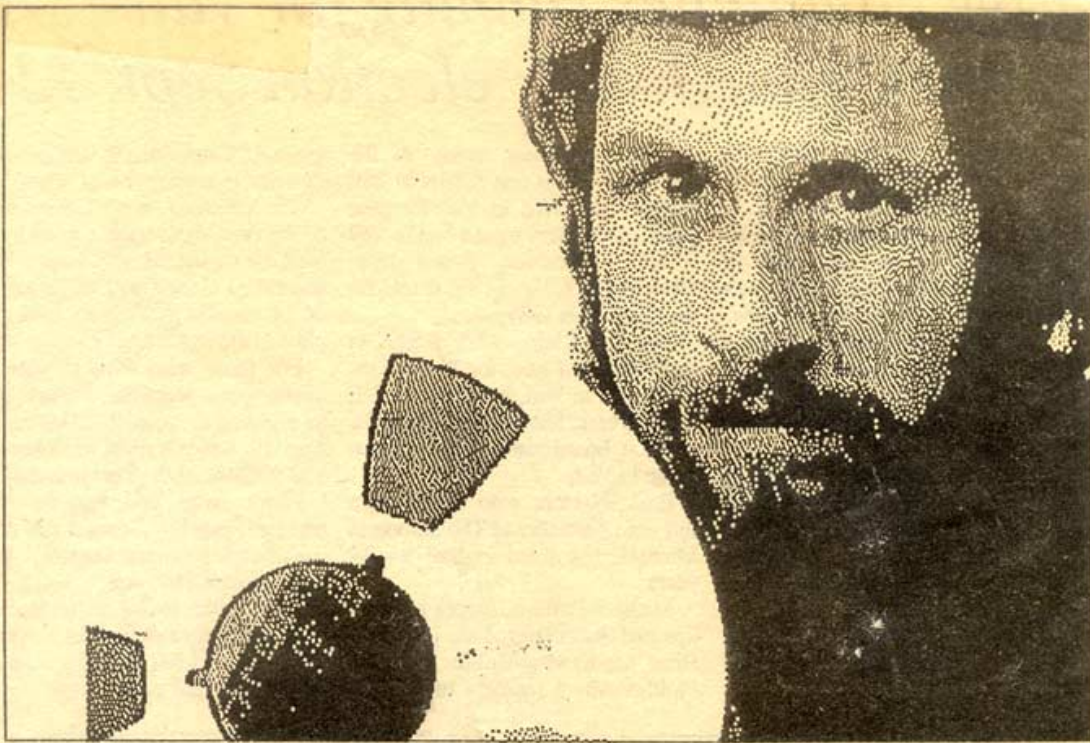
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Emmy Award nominee Neil Slade, who will perform at 6:30 p.m. tonight at the final Hot Summer Nights concert series at Ford Amphitheater, says his music is designed to create feelings of well-being in people, increase intelligence and creative ability, can help achieve a nirvana experience, and sounds better the more you listen to it.

Emmy nominee Neil Slade set to perform 'Mind Music' tonight

By Randy Wyrick
Daily Staff Writer

Emmy Award nominee Neil Slade will wrap up this summer's Miller Genuine Draft Hot Summer Nights Concert Series tonight at 6:30 p.m. with a free concert in the Gerald Ford Amphitheater.

Slade's concert will feature what he calls "Mind Music," and he performs on synthesizer, flute, and saxophone, playing mostly contemporary jazz.

He was nominated for an Emmy for Best Musical Score.

Slade has done extensive research in neurology and says his music is designed to manifest pleasurable body sensations, dramatic increases in intelligence and creative ability, pronounced feelings of well-being and har-

mony, and even psychic ability.

"Inside every human brain is a part called the amygdala," explained Slade. "Researchers all over the world have proven that stimulation of this part of the brain can result in a transcendent experience."

Slade cited several studies proving that stimulation of the amygdala has cured symptoms of schizophrenia, and turned violent criminals into positive members of society.

The amygdala can be triggered through electricity, music, or even by thought processes through the brain's frontal lobes.

"The purpose of Mind Music is to help people learn about the amygdala," said Slade, "and help people learn how to click their own amygdala forward into action."

Most popular music, said Slade,

activates only the primitive part of the brain that processes only old information presented in repetitive fashion. As humans evolved, their brains became capable of processing new information through more creative stimuli.

"Most music has a descending scale of appreciation, the more you listen to it the less you like it," said Slade. "My music has an ascending scale of appreciation, the more you listen to it the better you like it."

The music has been associated as an integral part of meditation and reaching higher states of consciousness without the benefit of drugs.

"The music is the physiological connection between these higher state of consciousness," Slade said. "Given enough time and practice, it can help people achieve a nirvana experience."

I recorded *Piano Impressions* over a period of several studio sessions, on a gigantic nine foot long Baldwin concert grand piano, in a studio room the size of an airplane hangar. Improvements were made to the original recording around 2002 for the CD version of the album. I went back and re-equalized the original master tape as well as did a bit of noise reduction, which has made a substantial improvement over the original duplications I offered when the album was first issued in 1982.

In any case, when I delivered the first copies to Denver's most notable and respected classical music record store, *Music For All* in the ritzy Cherry Creek North shopping area, the owner told me that the album was a substantial improvement over any of the George Winston albums they carried, and I found this to be a rather pleasant affirmation from someone who made their living knowing about music.

Original artwork from the first cassette release:



Release of the album garnered me my very first media coverage, both in the local newspapers and on our classical music radio station, which occasionally played pieces from the album, and also gave me my very first radio interview. I was interviewed on the same program over a lunch with my co-guest Phillip Glass. My association with off-center creativity was launched.

Although I only sold very few copies of the album for the first fifteen or so years, eventually I established a reputation via my interviews on the nationally syndicated Coast to Coast AM radio show, where literally millions of listeners became familiar with my work through my talks on creativity and brain science. I have been fortunate enough to build an audience who has learned to appreciate all the different kinds of music I have produced throughout my life, including this album of very anti-commercial piano solos.

The general public is so insulated from a variety of musical expression and language in the mass media that most people are almost never exposed to the kind of pieces found on this album- and thus my album title, *Piano Impressions From Another Dimension*, seems entirely appropriate.

What I find intriguing, is that although the mass media and commercial interests offer such a ridiculously narrow slice of musical expression on radio and TV, including satellite, that would never ever play this music, most people who hear the album find it very interesting and pleasant to listen to under a variety of listening situations from walking their dog, to taking a hot bath, to running around the neighborhood, driving, painting their garage, to sitting and just listening and that's all, to whatever. I've even used many of the pieces on the album as a portion of the soundtrack to my film to excellent effect (well in *my* opinion anyway....)

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Continued...



PIANO IMPRESSIONS FROM ANOTHER DIMENSION

Dimension #28, Giraffe Music, Interruption, New Variations on the Dildo Waltz, CME, Opus Infection, Lewdus Preludus, Garbonzo Bean Waltz, Fugue In Z Minor, Dimension #29, Big Deal, 7-26, The Ameoba's Hairpiece, Miss White, Piece of My Artichoke Heart, Fight All Traffic Tickets, Glenn Gould Memorial Breakfast Drink, My Money Is Gone.

Here are a few brief notes on a few of the pieces representative on the album—what I can remember about them twenty five years or more after their creation....

Dimension #28

Originally titled Blahness #28, it is either my first or second written down piano composition (It's either this one or The Ameoba's Hairpiece). The piece started as a single line of music (the right hand part) to which I then added a counterpoint in the left hand, both heard together on this track. At the time I was thoroughly steeped in the music of Frank Zappa, often atonal, so it was the weirdest melody I could come up with—the idea was to put together the most unlikely combination and series of notes, a melody for Plutonians perhaps.

A short time later I developed it further (Dimension #29) by adding inner harmony parts, and to my delight, it sounded quite nice. Over the years, the melody and harmonies of #28 and #29 sound perfectly normal and pleasant to my ears. I guess you get used to weird stuff after a while and it becomes “normal”.

Giraffe Music

I had studied some of the music of Robert Starrer in college, which had a fun yet strange somewhat bizarre and comic quality to it. This piece, named after my girlfriend's favorite animal, the giraffe (probably because she was rather tall herself), reflects that lilting and physically off-kilter, slightly comical animal. The piece also incorporates a number of time changes, rather than being in a steady 4/4 beat, it wanders around, and reflects my interest in un-conventional time signatures.

New Variations on the Dildo Waltz

The title of this was dumbed down to “Dodo” waltz for commercial purposes for many years. It is still one of my favorite pieces, which I have orchestrated for various instruments, and played live for decades in different incarnations. It is modeled after a Frank Zappa composition, the Uncle Meat Variations, from perhaps my most favorite of his records, Uncle Meat. The idea here is to play a repeated harmonic progression (a series of four or five chords that cycle) and to provide a fluid changing melody line over each cycle of chords. The harmony I use is a less conventional one of “fourths” where the chord has an impressionistic and modern quality, as opposed to the more traditional type of chord built on “thirds” such as we hear in nearly every bit of western music. Thus, it has a somewhat oriental flavor to it, similar to the type of harmonies favored by Debussy at the turn of the century.

Opus Infection

For those with a musical education, this is most obviously my impression of the kind of easy Bach or baroque counterpoint compositions studied by piano students. What you have is independent single lines occurring simultaneously, one in the treble right hand part, the other in the bass left hand. This is different from melody and chord, or the type of “rolling” repetitive accompaniment found in many Mozart compositions and later music. The title is just my reflection on the word “opus”, used in describing many musical pieces—but “o-pus” reminded me of something oozing instead—so there you have it. Not that I find this piece unpleasant or oozing—but, there’s my rebellious non-conformity at work again.

Garbonzo Bean Waltz

This piece came as a result of a class assignment- we were suppose to construct a Rondo, which is a specific type of musical form A-B-A-C-A-D-A, where you have one repeated theme (A) with slices of other material inserted in-between the repeated theme. After I first handed in my manuscript, and received a “D”, I went back in protest to the professor and explained that despite my unconventional melodic and harmonic content, I had in fact followed the form exactly as prescribed--- and my grade was raised to an “A-“.....

Oh wait..... that's not this piece. I'm describing a piece I wrote called *Thousands of Large Hideous Bugs that Came Out of the Dead Tree Trunk* – after a dream I had one night. Sorry, this is just another counterpoint composition.

Fugue In Z Minor

As one progresses in musical skill, you begin to tackle more complex compositions- a typical student moves from the two part counterpoint illustrated by Opus (above) to three and four point or more counterpoint where multiple melodic lines intersect. Bach was the master of such compositions, and his pieces are for advanced students and dedicated musicians. However, at this stage of my composing career, I was just starting to explore multi-part counterpoint, and this was one of my earliest, and admittedly brief, but satisfying ventures. What you hear is the initial theme stated by the right hand, a mere five beats of music, then restated by the left hand lower down, then restated a third time played by the inner fingers of both hands combined. This is developed through the piece, not strictly as in a real fugue by Bach, but with a fair amount of latitude. Of course there is no such key as “Z Minor”, of course!

Glenn Gould Memorial Breakfast Drink

Glen Gould is perhaps one of the best known classical piano performers ever, as much known for his extraordinary talent for playing impossibly complex Bach compositions as he was for his eccentricities. For example, he would sit in front of the piano at what most others would consider an uncomfortably low slung chair and perform, often humming along audibly with the music.

Thus, in my bit of tribute, listen carefully to my own humming along, out of key and time, near the end of this.

Also attempt to decipher the meaning of the title—I'll give you a hint—the piece is a type of Latin dance which name resembles a drink once known to be consumed by the astronauts in space.

My Money Is Gone

Simply a reflective piece inspired by a slow guitar composition by John McLaughlin during his Hindu/Indian music period, with a title suggesting my *meditation* on my bank account after I finished paying for my recording sessions.

-Neil Slade
Denver, Colorado
October 2006

