My Dark Materials: The Music of Depression

By KEERIL MAKAN

“A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,” wrote Coleridge in “Dejection: An Ode,” a poem about the paralyzing melancholy he suffered most of his life, which might be diagnosed today as depression. “A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,/Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,/In word, or sigh, or tear…” The irony of these lines about a poet who is too unhappy to write is, of course, that we find them in a long, sustained poem. A friend shared these lines with me because a similar paradox is at play in many of my compositions, distant as they are from the work of the Romantics.

That state of lifeless gloom that Coleridge and so many other poets have written of has been part of my life, and my composing, for years. The act of composing is in a dynamic relationship with my emotional life. As a result, my compositions are informed — sometimes quite viscerally — by my depression. Listening to the progression of my work over the past decade provides a sonic map of my journey from darkness to a place of relative openness and light, a transformation made possible through self-care and mindfulness meditation.

An example from 2003 makes the point: In my string quartet “The Noise Between Thoughts,” (Listen to an excerpt) the brutal physicality of the piece, its deconstructed instrumental technique and its replacement of consonance and dissonance with noise were directly influenced by my experience with depression.

(All audio samples are from works composed by the author.)

The one benefit of depression for me is that it can act as a goad, pushing me to search for something new — new feelings rather than depressed ones, new sounds rather than those with which I am too familiar. If while composing I become afraid of the music I am writing, I know that I have arrived at the extreme place where I want to be. When fear arises, I’ve reached the threshold between the known and the unknown. If I’m able to continue composing while tolerating the fear, I will be writing music that is new to me.

Composing puts me in touch with my emotional life in a nonverbal, physical way. When I compose, I am usually working with live sound. I improvise with musical instruments and the computer. This physical connection with making sound bypasses the wall that, while depressed,
forms around my emotions. There is a direct link between my emotions and my musculature; improvising on an instrument is a conduit between the fragile self I am protecting and the outside world, a form of communication that I trust more than words. Ironically, music relies on the fundamental similarity between myself and others, a similarity that my depression rejects. The physical connection I have with making sound can be ecstatic, a welcome relief from more familiar states of anguish. Making music momentarily undoes my paralysis; it is outside the world of perfection and failure.

In 2006 and 2007 my music began to change. Up until that point it tried to convey what I was feeling, but focused on extreme, often negative, emotions. This approach to composing had an element of self-inflicted violence to it. I had to experience more and more extremely depressed states to generate music that scared me. Yet at around this time, without any conscious effort on my part, I felt myself shift away from depicting my own painful emotions toward conveying ones I’d prefer to be feeling. I can only think that a survival mechanism came into play. I couldn’t keep going to the well of depression without doing damage to myself. Some part of me desired stillness. There had already been elements of stasis in my music, but it was the anxious stasis of paralysis, not the openness of stillness. There is a fine line separating paralysis from stillness. It’s a question of relaxing into experience, instead of pushing against experience. Looking back, maybe the stillness I was seeking already existed in my life; it was the container in which my emotional life existed.

I started to understand that something better was possible than the state of depression I had been living with for so long. The beginning of my 2007 string quartet “Washed by Fire” (Listen to an excerpt) exhibits this stillness, outside of the progression of time. Later in this piece a sense of joy emerges, which at the time frightened me. In this case the fear I felt while writing this piece, which I associated with successful composition, was the fear of showing things about myself that I didn’t want to acknowledge, either to others or myself. I was afraid to show unguarded joy.

There is also a seasonal aspect to my depression, and in the fall of 2007, as it began to intensify again, I decided to do something about it. I was put on antidepressants and started seeing a therapist. In an early meeting with my therapist, the idea of meditation came up, and I pursued it. Six years later I still try to maintain a meditation practice. Two key lessons at the core of meditation are to cultivate nonjudgmental self-love and to be open to all experience. When feelings arise, let them arise. Don’t push them away, but also don’t cling to them. Sometimes I cling to depression because it’s familiar.

I think any artist who suffers from depression fears treating it because it will change their art. Since I had been drawing my creative energies from my interaction with my depressed emotional state, what would happen once I started treating my depression? Would I lose the
qualities that defined my music? Since I discovered meditation, and the forms of self-acceptance that the practice fosters, my perspective has changed: stillness instead of paralysis, immersion in a given mood instead of grasping after one that’s out of reach. This psychological change has not changed my musical materials, but rather charged them with a different energy.

The 2007 percussion solo “Resonance Alloy” (Listen to an excerpt) — the first piece I wrote while undergoing treatment for depression and starting my meditation practice — explores the subtleties of the sounds of metal. I don’t think it is about emotional states, which isn’t to say that it’s cold, but that it is about something else, our physical experience of sound and time. I’m not trying to push or pull sound; in this piece, I’m working with the fear of just letting sound be. It has been my most divisive piece with audiences, since it requires a letting go of musical expectations and a complete openness to sound as it happens. So far it’s my favorite of the pieces I’ve written.

I don’t entirely know what “Becoming Unknown” (2009) (Listen to an excerpt) is about. It’s so strange and yet as I get further away from the piece it seems to speak to me more and more. I don’t perceive a logic to the flow of ideas; we are in unfamiliar territory with unknowable rules, a place where things arise and then pass away. Nothing lasts for very long. Newness of sound or feeling is no longer sought after as a relief from the sameness of depression. The fear of the unknown is gently observed until it disappears. Meanwhile, the familiarity of the sonic materials in “After Forgetting,” (Listen to an excerpt) from the same year, makes me uncomfortable. Once this discomfort is dissolved, a whole new world of emotion opens up. Layers of sound interact with raw pulsation, conjuring feelings ranging from excitement to despair. The emotional narratives of both of these pieces reflect the open, gentle approach to experience that would not have been possible before treating my depression.

A couple of years ago I started writing an opera, an adaptation of Ingmar Bergman’s classic film, “Persona.” (Listen to an excerpt) In the film, Elisabeth, a successful actress, retreats from her life, and turns to silence as a response to the world and her depression. Her nurse, Alma, finds Elisabeth’s silence too much to bear; as the story progresses, the construct of Alma’s personality begins to crumble under Elisabeth’s silent critique. Although Bergman claims that working on “Persona” saved his life, the depiction of the impermanent nature of identity was cause for existential horror in the film. For me, gently embracing the flux inherent in our personalities is what saved my life.

I’ve never faced such a difficult compositional challenge as writing this opera, both in terms of the scope of the work, and the emotional demands the material placed upon me. The fear around creating this piece was overwhelming at times. The emotional extreme of depression, balanced with an acceptance of all experience no matter how painful or joyous, has proved to be the most fertile place for me as an artist.
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