

On music's role in saving the world



Composer Christopher Tin on composing music about the climate crisis, how being open about his creative process transformed his work, and structuring a satisfying album.

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As told to Jon Ieland, 3589 words.

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Your previous albums have been optimistic about humanity—documenting cultural diversity or the pursuit of flight. With the *Lost Birds*, you're looking at human-caused species extinction. How does that theme pair with your previous work? And what do you want people to feel about humanity coming away from this album?

While it does fixate around the loss of biodiversity, I really do want it to end with a message of hope. The current plan is to end the album with a setting of Emily Dickinson's poem, "[Hope Is The Thing With Feathers](#)." I think the way that it ties into the rest of my catalog is that, yes, I do emphasize the optimism of all these things that we talk about. There is an infusion of hope that I like to put in towards the end of each of these projects.

I mean, not only do I like to end on a musical high note, but literally, if we're not painting a picture of something that we can aspire to as a people, then why do these projects at all? It's very easy for those of us who are concerned about a lot of the issues that we're facing these days to get lost in the negativity.

But I do think that the role of musicians, and maybe particularly my role as a composer, is to offer at least glimmer of hope, if not an outright solution to things, which I don't think is necessarily music's role. I think at least some sort of feeling of optimism left with the listener is a powerful thing.

Where are you finding hope in looking at the current environmental crisis?

You have to look pretty far to find a hope. But you know what, for me, the optimism lies in the engagement that the younger generation has with these issues. We may have screwed it up, or we may have been ineffectual in fixing the mistakes that the previous generations have left us, but it's my hope that the younger generations—everyone from my two and a half year old toddler to the kids who are just becoming voting age now—have fully embraced these issues and understand the gravity of it all. It seems like they are. I do get the sense that it is very prominent in their minds and their conversations. Maybe you have a better glimpse of whether that's actually the reality or not. But it seems like the youth really care about this.

I would say that they do. There's certainly a lot more motivation and recognition of the stakes of the problem in a more honest way amongst the younger generation. Given that you've done a number of compositions for video games, have you found that you've connected with a younger audience for your work than most composers?

Yeah, I definitely think so. I mean, when I have concerts, the demographic skews much younger than your typical

classical music concert goers, which tend to be older and season ticket holders...that sort of thing.

What I've found, and actually a lot of my colleagues who work either in film scoring or in game scoring have found, is that when we have concerts of our work it tends to be packed with kids. And they are very excited to be there. And maybe with some of them, it's their first time actually going to a classical music concert at all. I think that's one of the strengths that I have, and my colleagues have, working in film and video games and other multimedia. It's an art form that really does appeal to the younger demographics.

If you can bring those younger demographics into the concert hall, which is traditionally ruled by the older classical music listeners, you're finding a new audience for classical music. And that's what classical music is always trying to find, a new audience.

I think the conventional wisdom with classical music presenters and organizations is that something happens when people turn roughly 40, and they start listening to classical music more. It's kind of this discovery. There's always this talk about classical audiences dying off. Well, they're not necessarily being replaced by 20 year olds. But people are constantly turning 40, and those people are the ones who are discovering classical music for the first time.

So there is this pipeline, after you've listened to all the music that you listened to in your wild twenties and thirties, then you've discovered the classics. And then you start going to concerts.

I think the real trick is if you can get people excited about new classical music when they're younger—that's the real trick right there. And that's what I try to target as my audience, people who are looking for an entry point into the classical world.

Have you found that your public documentation of the creative process, which you did quite beautifully with *To Shiver The Sky*, is a practice that helps you connect with that younger audience? What is it that you get out of that process of being very open about the whole creative process with your audience?

Well, it's two-fold. For one, yes, I do connect more with the audience, it brings them closer to the process. And in a way I think music consumers and fans these days expect that of artists. It's no longer a world where an artist can just hide behind the record label, every once in a while do an interview, and they can just be reclusive. We're in a much more forward facing, engaged world right now, mostly due to social media.

So that's really one of the ways where I've been able to cultivate an audience of listeners and frankly Kickstarter supporters. Building that community is very important to me. And I find that each of those members of my community are really the strongest ambassadors for my music. I mean, they're the ones who get out there. They're the ones who phone into radio stations requesting that my music gets played. They're the ones coming to my concerts. They're the ones telling their friends about my music. And they're the ones performing my music in their local choirs and symphony orchestras. I mean, every fan is basically an ambassador and a partner in a way. So that's reason number one, why it's great to have this engagement with the base.

But the second reason is really creative on my end. It helps me to hone my ideas by talking about them. It can be ideas as granular as talking about chord progressions or how to write a piece of music. Or it could be as macroscopic as my thoughts on the state of classical music these days, or my thoughts on how artists should engage with the broader public on issues that they think are important to them, such as the loss of biodiversity, climate change, all of this.

I find that if I want to talk about musical things and I just want to hone my own ideas about what it is that I find wonderful in music, then teaching music is a great way to do it. And earlier this year, I hosted my first online composition masterclass. It was totally free, I invited people to submit, we did it over zoom. It was great. But it gave me a week of solid reflection on my own musical principles, which I was then able to distill for the students. And that was a really powerful exercise for me personally.

Likewise, I have lots to say about the broader classical musical world and trends in music and how artists should

be constructing their projects to discuss issues of importance to the world. And being able to talk about those through Kickstarter updates, or even just social media posts, is a helpful tool personally for myself. So it really works for me. It may not work for every composer.

Historically, we tend to be a reclusive lot, and we don't talk a lot. But I happen to be one of these rare people you can stick in front of a webcam, I'll just kind of rattle on for hours.

Do you get burned out on it at all? Does it become, at certain points, something where you dread having to put on a smile and talk to the camera? Or do you find that it gives you energy?

It gives me energy. It really does. I find more that I am drained by getting off of the zoom calls than I am by being on them. After I get off a zoom call, I'm just like, I don't know what to do with myself. I'm extroverted in that way.

I find that the social media thing, the most challenging thing about it is just handling the different interfaces of all the different platforms, formatting video for this platform versus this platform. I mean, the mundane details of being a social presence is what I find the most frustrating. The actual communication of ideas feels very comfortable and natural to me.

You said you'd crystallized your ideas of how an artist needs to engage their audience in social issues as part of teaching class. What is that approach? How do you think an artist in your position needs to approach their audience around these things?

It's a tough one. It's a tough one. Because I know my audience is actually very international. And I know it is, if we're talking about the political spectrum, it covers the entire range. I mean, just due to the inclusiveness of the topics that I address in my music. It just happens to be this big tent of different people with different philosophies.

I try to be measured in the way that I talk about things. I often want to use stronger language, maybe more dire language about what I think the state of the world is. But I often have to remind myself that what I'm also trying to present here is not just a regurgitation of the problems that we face, but possible solutions. Or if not solutions, at least a certain sense of energy that will encourage others to find the solutions.

I don't necessarily think I'm ever going to be the person to solve whatever crisis that the world is facing. But I'm hopeful that my music will empower somebody somewhere to be that person to tackle some of these humanitarian crises.

And that's really what I think music does well. I think music isn't necessarily the art form where you lay out all the details of a particular issue and you explore them and you make a compelling argument. It's just not constructed that way. We don't appreciate music that way.

Music is one of these art forms that's more emotional. If you do it the way that I do it, it's more something that will give people a sense of something, of hope or optimism or empowerment that will encourage people to rise to the occasion, to become a better version of themselves or to tackle these issues that maybe they'd been hoping to tackle. That's what I think my role as a composer is—the support role, in a way.

So are you crafting an album like this with the emotion that you want the audience to feel in mind, and then composing musical structures that you think will create that emotional state within people?

Yeah, very much so. We got our composer bag of tricks. That's just the craft of composition. I mean, the artistry of composition is picking what it is you want to talk about. And the craft of composition is finding the most effective way of actually saying that.

I do want to impart a sense of loss, of mourning. And I want to impart this sense that, at the end of it, not all

hope is lost. That we can do something about this. That we can actually address these issues.

What happens in the middle is still yet to be determined. But it is very important to me that the music transports people into sort of at least sympathizing with the plight of these birds and by extension the plight of our planet. It does have that element of wanting to sort of humanize what this loss of biodiversity will actually mean to us. Because it's actually very important.

Just like the canary in the coal mine, the way that birds dies, it's a harbinger for the way that we might make ourselves go extinct. And it's a very, very important issue, where the stakes could not be higher. Literally the stakes of what this is, they cannot be higher than the widespread eradication of all life on our planet. I mean, come on.

Isn't it worth trying to do anything about that? Any little thing. The stakes are very high. Now that I'm a father, too, I just feel those stakes even more.

To create this emotional experience for the listener, your albums have a strong arc to them and structure to all of the pieces that are within the album. Is that something that you plan meticulously beforehand? Or does that emerge as you start the journey of composing the pieces and that arc develops as you go through the process?

It actually tends to be a little more formulaic than one might realize. All my albums sort of start and end in the same place. They all start under the same key, there's often a reprise of the theme that we started off at the beginning, at the very end. About two thirds of the way through the album, there's this moment where there's a soprano solo, and it's just a string orchestra. The second track usually has to hit pretty hard because I don't want to be the person who writes the first track that hits hard and the second track just sort of lets you down. There's a bit of a roadmap that I adhere to when making these projects. And that's me being a little bit artistically conservative in a way. And also just sort of relying on what I like as a listener of music.

These are enormously expensive, extremely time-consuming projects to put together. And I tend to play it safe on the structural side because of that. I think that in my own work, the time for crazy experimentation is in shorter form content. That's where I like to explore. I don't like to commit myself to enormous three year long, quarter million dollar budgeted projects and just say, "I'm just going to make it up and come up with something completely wild and different from the get-go."

And not to mention, this also loops back to creating a community, the way I look at my Kickstarter backers, and the way that I look at my fan base in general is, it's sort of like the patronage model of the 17th century, when some baron somewhere would sort of fund my artistic endeavors. But I just kind of had to make sure that that noble person actually liked what they heard. I think about having a fan base in similar sorts of terms.

I do want to bring my audience along for the ride. And I want to make sure that the ride is one that they appreciate and understand and can accept. And there will be moments when I push the envelope, but they will all be couched in such a way that I won't be disappointing my core fans.

Have you gotten any pushback at any point from your fans as you go through this process?

What I've discovered is that, first of all, I love my fans, and they're the best fans in the world. I sometimes get push back like, "This album, I hated it. But I love you anyway, so I'm going to support your next one." Stuff like that. It's actually very rare. Most of the time, I'd say 99% of the time, all the feedback is warm and generous. Sometimes there are people with specific gripes, and I totally hear their gripes. But generally speaking, I feel a strong connection to my community.

And I feel that a lot of them have a strong connection to me as well, just as a human being, not necessarily as this artist, this vague abstract concept of a composer or something. But somebody who actually chats with them on social media and stuff like that. So I do feel a strong bond to my community. And credit to Kickstarter, a lot of that bond came through the last Kickstarter I ran, when it really literally brought me face to face with a lot of my fans.

Did you have this relationship with your audience prior to that campaign? When did you figure out that being in this relationship with your audience was something that helped your practice, that gives you energy, and that you wanted to do? Because it's an unusual relationship for a composer.

I think it is. I mean, most of us tend to be rather reclusive. The idea of getting on social media every day and talking about your life or your creative process or sharing pictures of your family and stuff like that, it's just not natural to us. We are not by nature performers. By nature we are the behind-the-scenes people.

I discovered this when I launched the first Kickstarter for *To Shiver The Sky*. The fact that that the Kickstarter did so well, and so many people backed it, gave me the first indication that I actually had a passionate fan base out there. Before I didn't really know it. I wasn't terribly active on social media. I would get fan mail, but I thought everyone did.

So, when the metrics on that first Kickstarter campaign came out and showed me just how many people I had who followed me and were willing to back me and where they came from and the fact that they were scattered all around the world, that excited me. I'm sort of a loner, I don't have a ton of friends. I have some close friends, but I'm not actively going out there and being social all the time. Suddenly it was like, "Wow, there are thousands of people who really like what I do. And they want to meet me and interact." And I just thought, "Well, this is fun. I'm the cool kid now. This has never happened to me before."

So, honestly, running that first Kickstarter completely reshaped the way I think about everything in this business. My social media, my interaction with fans, and my public engagement with fans. I'm going to be doing more albums now because I've found this wonderful way for my community to help me make these albums. It's been a revolution in my own artistic world really.

Has it changed the way that you view the success of these albums by having this relationship with the audience?

I only define success for an album on the creative merits of that album. So I think in *To Shiver The Sky*, I'm very pleased with how it turned out. I think I did a very complete, unified, cohesive and sophisticated production with some very detailed orchestral writing. And frankly, I think it was a very powerful narrative that I managed to transform into a musical concept. So I feel very good about the album.

Whether it gets more radio airplay than some of my big hits, that's another story. But at the same time, the important thing is that I don't ever look back and think, "Oh, I cheated myself there." Or, "I took the shortcuts or I didn't do the hard things."

To Shiver The Sky was all about doing the hard things. And I feel that I did them. And that's why I feel like it was a good album. I really poured every ounce of my being into it. And I have no regrets about any of it. Whether or not it gets played on the radio all the time, that's out of my control. But I really did put every ounce of passion I had into it.

Christopher Tin Recommends:

Grande Domaine Kona Coffee by Koa Coffee: this is ridiculously good, but ridiculously expensive coffee. We splurge for it maybe once a year, then feel guilty for spending so much money.

Milton's Himalayan Salt Crackers: we love these crackers, so much so that I tried to get a T-shirt with their company logo printed on it. They're versatile and go great with cheese, but mostly we'll just demolish them straight from the packaging.

Whole Foods 365 Brand Organic Sauerkraut: I love having sauerkraut with my breakfast, especially mixed in with potatoes. My brand of choice is the humble Whole Foods 365 brand, which has the right amount of punch, with a softer texture.

Kalles: I'm a huge fan of this Swedish cod-roe seasoning. It's not for everyone-you can't be turned off by food

products that you can find in Ikea, or that can be squeezed out of a bright blue and yellow tube. But I love it on my eggs.

Luphia Matcha Chocolate Almonds: I just like these. A lot.

Name

Christopher Tin

Vocation

Composer

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