

## **Re: correspondence from well-known composers**

No personal computers then, of course.

Since even typewriters could be scarce, or time-consuming to use, most folks wrote letters in longhand.

And they took time to write well, to communicate, because...well, because that was the way of the world then: slower, more considered, more personable, more respectful.

Somehow that makes these letters seem more valuable now.

They embody their times AND their authors - each a great artist in his own way.

**Robert Palmer** and I butted heads a few times during the years I studied with him - I'm afraid that's what I tend to remember about him most easily - but he was perhaps the most complete musician I've ever known.

He could sight-read just about anything...and well.

Could do intricate 5-part counterpoint in multiple time signatures in his head, I'll wager.

A true intellectual, well-versed in everything, and a really deep thinker / innovator about composing and music analysis.

Perhaps an American version of Nadia Boulanger?

Even though Palmer had such a complex and comprehensive understanding of all things musical and artistic, he also had enough poetry in his soul to write some very attractive, very humane music.

I know that he later wished he'd given greater sway to his inner poet, paid more attention to promoting himself - and that makes me a bit sad, because I always found him to be a sympathetic character.

And I learned more from him than from all others combined, I think.

The times that he and I really connected - when he let down his guard and allowed me to be a bit less his student, a bit more of a colleague - well, I still treasure them.

Some examples:

**(1)** At the end of one of our composition lessons, when he launched into a spirited approval of the Allman Brothers' Band as great stewards of the traditions of counterpoint and polyphony.

**(2)** We once had an extended conversation about Bartók.  
It began in the hallway outside the music library.

I, a complete novice - just getting to know the canon - had remarked to Palmer that, of all the early 20th Century greats, Bartók was impressing me as the greatest.

To my surprise, Palmer immediately (but good-naturedly) "shooshed" me (indicated that I should stop talking) - and then motioned that I should follow him into his office.

We walked in, he closed the door, and then explained that it might be risky to say things like that in public places at Cornell!

*(One can only imagine what awkward encounter(s) of his own had engendered that feeling - still, I wonder if it reveals something of his feelings about the reception of his own music?  
After all, Bartók was clearly one of his own heroes.)*

Palmer then told me of the time he actually met Bartók in person, at a post-concert reception. He said that Bartók seemed "incapable of small talk".

That, and other observations Palmer and others have made, cause me to wonder if perhaps this otherworldly genius was actually "on the spectrum"?

I'm afraid that my letter from Palmer shows his less personable side, but still - a great man (despite himself, sometimes), a great artist, a great composer.

Of all the "academic establishment" composers of the time that I met, I would count him as the MOST underappreciated - and very unfairly so.

*[Quick aside: in his letter, he mentions some class I missed / some work I didn't turn in.*

*Here's the story (it's funny...and a bit telling about him):*

*At the end of one particular class, he asked us all to attend an additional, special class he was giving that weekend about Gregorian counterpoint - with lots of singing!*

*As he polled the room (in his old-school academic mode: "Mr. Smith? Miss Berk? Mr. Gray?"), I told him that I had to beg off - BECAUSE I WAS GOING TO BE MARRIED THAT DAY!*

*Well, incredibly, that didn't seem to register with him.*

*I mean, there were no congratulations, no momentary smile - nothing; he simply moved on to the next "Mr." or "Miss".*

*I doubt that he actually thought I was lying; I think he expected "Yes, Sir" from everyone...and nothing else computed!]*

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June 13, 1977

Mr. Jack Gray

Dear Jack:

I have gone over your average several times. Your class average was near the median point, within the B+ range. Your exam, which counts a fifth, brought the grade up to the B+ to A- division. Since I do this with a calculator it is pretty accurate.

The reasons were 1) three papers which I never received and thus figured in as no credit and 2) a relatively poorer performance during March and early April in which the grades ranged from C+ to B+ with a couple of exceptions.

Since you were generally good about handing in assignments this was a bit hard to understand but I am not of the opinion that a graduate student needs to be reminded about late or missing papers.

I feel that you were less interested in the course until the latter weeks when some of the things, which I had indicated were valuable, became increasingly apparent to you.

I have never been, and am not now a person who responds to pressure about grades, nor do I feel that you are necessarily applying any. In all fairness your average was close to the border line and I feel that I might have recognized more fully, within my discretionary areas, that you did improve considerably during the latter part of the course and on the exam.

I will therefore change the grade to an A- and I will be happy to discuss this if any further clarification is needed.

Sincerely,



Robert Palmer  
Professor in Music

RP/e  
cc: J.Hsu