



Interview with Ken Elkinson

by Edward Weiss

Ken Elkinson saw his musical dreams come to fruition when he released his debut CD of original piano solos in March, 1997. Entitled *Midnight Conversation*, Ken's CD finds its roots in Pennsylvania at Muhlenberg College. It was at Muhlenberg that he found many comforts and sources of inspiration; its artistically-minded, close knit community and close proximity to New York City helped shape Ken's outlook and composition. More info below.

Edward: How Did You Get Started Playing New Age Piano?

Ken: I started piano lessons when I was 5 studying classical. I ended up competing on the junior classical circuit - but grew tired of it. I then switched to jazz and pop study in high school. In college I took some classes in composition and improvisation, and I guess that is when you could say I started playing New Age piano. I feel the music contained on all four of my CD releases is a combination of all my different backgrounds - but it does tend to get classified as New Age.

Edward: What Inspires and Informs Your Music?

Ken: I know that people won't believe this - but I am not really inspired by anything specific when I write my music. My writing tends to be across the board, from very upbeat stuff to very melancholy. I do hear a lot of other artists say that when they are sad, they write better stuff. But for me, mood does not really come into play. I don't see a beautiful sunset and then write something happy about that.

Conversely, if I am sad over losing a good friend - I don't write something downbeat. I generally take ideas - sometimes I hear melodies in my head, and then sit down and work them into songs. I also listen to a ton of music, from bluegrass to rap to pop to gospel. I draw from artists I like, but am always very careful to make sure I am never ripping anyone off.



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Edward: What Is Your Method for Composing a Piano Piece?

Ken: As I said, I sometimes have ideas or thoughts in my head, and then sit at the piano. The large majority of the time, I record everything I play using a Mini Disc player. That way, if I come up with something I like, I can go back and review it. Unfortunately, there are probably a lot of workable ideas that I have not had the time to further pursue. Once I come up with a line or theme, I expand it. Some of my songs are very structured, and some others are more free form.

Most songs come very quickly, or I agonize over them for months. There does not seem to be very much middle ground in terms of time it takes me to compose. However, I generally know once I have "hit it" and am comfortable with what I write. There is always that unknown of whether an ending could have been different - but I generally do not go back over and over and change things. I am off to the next project.

Sometimes I listen to something I have written in amazement that I came up with what I did, sometimes I am appalled at the trite nature of what I have composed. In general, I try to make my stuff as unpredictable as possible, but still melodic. It is hard to explain in words - but take this example. When you hear a chord, your brain goes to what the next chord you would expect. When I write, I try to make it a different chord, not the one you expect, but something that surprises the listener so they will say, "I did not expect that, but it sounds great." It probably does not always work out that way.

Edward: Do You Get Blocked Creatively, and If So, How Do You Get Past It?

Ken: Absolutely. Sometimes I hear the next chord of a composition, and I just can't place it. I go over it dozens of times trying different chords, and it drives me crazy. I usually don't abandon stuff - as I don't like to leave unfinished business. To get past it, I usually put it aside and work on other things. Then, I will go back to it with a fresh mind, and I often find it works.



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Edward: What Advice Would You Give To Aspiring New Age Pianists?

Ken: The advice I would give is that make sure you are playing for yourself, and not because someone is forcing you. My parents never made me practice, they used almost a reverse psychology on me. It gave me the attitude, "I will show them." Make sure you find a teacher that will let you play what you want, not what they want. Also, don't get caught up with the fact that there are a lot of people playing and composing in the New Age style. Come up with your unique take, and draw inspiration from wherever you feel comfortable. If you are not enjoying it, then move on to something else!

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