

This year, PMP grantees paid particular attention to the emerging composer. Alongside world premieres by giants such as George Crumb, Terry Riley, Sir John Tavener, and Christian Wolff were commissioned pieces by their lesser-known counterparts. But when I set out to interview emerging composers Richard Belcastro, Stratis Minakakis, Mike Holober, and Yevgeniy Sharlat about their work and careers, a peculiar problem presented itself: it is difficult to say what, exactly, the term “emerging composer” means. There are a few common assumptions: emerging composers are talented, full of promise, on their way to bigger and better things. But on the whole, we seem to define the phrase through a process of negation—it’s much easier to say what an emerging composer isn’t (rich, famous, dead, Beethoven) than what an emerging composer is.

## “I Dwell in Possibility”:

### Emerging Composers on Composing

BY WILLA ROHRER

The slipperiness of the term suggests something about the current climate of “serious” music in America—and, more specifically, about its audience. Unlike emerging Hollywood starlets, Top Chefs, or hedge fund managers, emerging composers are not discussed on television, occupy no clear-cut economic class, and have no unified audience or single professional association to evaluate or comment on their progress. It isn’t necessarily burgeoning fame and prestige that marks one as “emerging,” nor the number or size of grants, prizes, and commissions one receives. (In fact, *Meet the Composer’s Basic Guide to Commissioning* includes this ominous-sounding coda: “All fees are negotiable. There is a composer for every budget.”) But before we can understand what it means for Belcastro, Minakakis, Holober, and Sharlat to be “emerging composers,” we must first understand their stories. Where do they come from? And more important: where do they hope to go?

**RICHARD BELCASTRO** grew up in a small farming town north of Sacramento. From an early age, he was drawn to many kinds of music. “My first concert experiences were Guns N’ Roses and MC Hammer,” he laughs, “so it was already varied back then.” As a child he also enjoyed early do-wop, Elvis, and Buddy Holly. One grandfather loved playing Chopin for Belcastro; on the other side of the family, his grandparents “were into Italian folk songs.”

Belcastro began writing rock music in junior high, but he didn’t begin to compose seriously until he was an undergraduate at UC Davis, where he received a B.A. in music. Belcastro’s intention then was “to learn to write a better rock song,” but he “veered off course and ended up doing a lot more interesting stuff.” He went on to receive a Master’s degree in composition from Brandeis University, working with a group of teachers that was “about as eclectic” as his musical tastes.

He moved to Philadelphia to pursue a PhD in Composition at the University of Pennsylvania, but a year later realized that he and Penn were ill-suited for each other, and decided to leave school altogether. In 2002, he and another young composer, David Laganella, founded Chamber Music Now!, a new music organization that presents contemporary (and unconventional) chamber works, often by relatively unknown composers—including Laganella and Belcastro themselves.

In addition to freelance composing—and composing, presenting, and producing for Chamber Music Now!—Belcastro has a day job: assistant director for Education & Community Partnerships at the Philadelphia Orchestra. His professional experiences have taught him how difficult it can be for other young or obscure composers to have their music heard.

“A specific challenge for me,” says Belcastro “is that I did not end up taking the academic route.” And thus, the benefits that come with being part of a university—time off, networking opportunities, access to guest artists who would perform his work—were not available to him. “I had to figure out how to make [those benefits] on my own, which is very difficult when you don’t have the connections. I think that is sort of what Chamber Music Now! was for me—it gave me those opportunities that being in an institution, like any university, would have.”

Time to focus only on composition is what Belcastro does not have, however. “I’m always jealous when I talk to my friends who are in academia and they have their two to three months off in the summer and they’re composing away every day.” He mock-whimpers, “I long for that!”

But working outside of the academy has advantages, too. “The freedom that comes with this is that I’m not tied as an artist to any kind of school of thought... it won’t effect my job if I do something funky,” he says. “If I write something crappy, that’s a whole other issue—but trying something new, I feel very free to do it, and to just have fun writing music.”

Fun is indeed one of the governing principles of Belcastro’s writing. His music, which fuses elements of rock, jazz, pop, and classical, can seem at once structured and antic, thoughtful and free-wheeling. Belcastro began experimenting with genre partly for the thrill of getting away with it; as a student, he “loved fighting” with “certain professors who were very strict on what you do and don’t do where genre crossing is there.” But more than the desire to push boundaries, the way in which he employs genre comes out of a deep respect for and love of music, whether it is “silly, complex, playful or serious.” And there



**RICHARD BELCASTRO**

(B. 1976, CALIFORNIA)

COMMISSIONED BY CHAMBER MUSIC NOW! FOR “SPOKEN,”  
A PROJECT THAT PAIRS FOUR COMPOSERS WITH FOUR POETS

is nothing haphazard about the end result: “Though you may start in one place and end some place very different, along the way you didn’t feel that you were being pulled. You were just being led,” he says.

The process of deciding where to go in a piece is, for Belcastro, more important than where he begins. “I’ve always been a firm believer that composition is not about what the idea is, but how you work with it. And that one of the more fun challenges in writing is taking the most odd, the most difficult idea you’ve got, and making it work.”

But how does one convince other people that those ideas are worth listening to? In regards to self-promotion, Belcastro says, “I think everybody’s in the same kind of situation: you have your product; if it’s quality, someone will see that, [but] is there a way to expedite this process? I don’t know, but I’m trying everything that I can for myself.” For Belcastro, technology is a part of that effort: he broadcasts his music via podcast and makes samples available for download on his Web site. “I have a podcast that takes 15 minutes to put together, and probably another hour to post into enough directories to get people to listen to it, and I think last month I had about 3,000 hits on it. And it’s like, ‘All right, well last month 3,000 people listened to my music. I don’t know if they liked it, but at least they listened.’”

When **STRATIS MINAKAKIS** was seven or eight years old, he began writing music in secret. "I was studying piano at the time," recalls Minakakis, "and I must say I wasn't liking it very much." His father, Dmitris Minakakis, was a "strict theory teacher" who wanted Stratis to master the basics of performance and theory before attempting to create his own work. "Finally around the age of 11," he says, "my dad and I had an argument about some Rossini pieces that [he] loved and I hated. And I said that I can write better than that... that's how little I knew at the time."

Minakakis showed his father what he had been working on, "and from then on he was encouraging"—so encouraging that they began to study composition together, despite the fact that Dmitris Minakakis "did not believe in

teaching composition" in the way that one teaches other disciplines.

While in high school, Minakakis enrolled in the Atheneum conservatory in Athens, where he continued his piano and theory training. He came to the United States to attend Princeton University, studied at Julliard with Claudio Spies ("a tremendous influence, a wonderful man, a wonderful musician"), and then received a Master's degree in Composition from the New England Conservatory. He is currently completing his PhD in Composition at the University of Pennsylvania—but after that, the future is uncertain.

"I've never been more in love with being a composer," he says. "I wish the day had 48 hours, because [there's]

**STRATIS MINAKAKIS** (B. 1979, ATHENS, GREECE) COMMISSIONED BY CHAMBER MUSIC NOW! FOR "SPOKEN"



Above: fragment of a sketch by Stratis Minakakis, courtesy of the composer

just not enough time to do all the things—you know, write, read new things, play the piano, go to the library. But I'm also very preoccupied about how to make a living as a composer doing composition. So it's a balance between the two, and my biggest challenge now is the fact that I'm 28 years old, I've been financially independent for a number of years, but it's close to the time where I need to have a real job, and I'm trying to figure that out. So that's a kind of anxiety that I think a lot of my colleagues share."

And yet, for Minakakis, success as a composer has little to do with how much recognition he gets, or how widely his music is performed. "I want to write one piece that's extraordinary and have it performed by the best ensemble, and that's that." Having been busy with commissions since the age of 17, his main focus has been artistic growth rather than self-promotion. "I write music that will allow me to develop, music that will open for me a window into the future. In this respect, all of my works are kind of anticipating the next work, and never recycling the previous work."

During his two years at the New England Conservatory, Minakakis worked 50 hours a week to support himself. Though it was challenging, he calls this time "the most productive of my life so far," because it forced him to learn to make the most out of every spare moment. He wrote on trains and between lessons, simply because he could not imagine doing anything else. "That's the basis of what I do: this enormous love for this thing," he says.

Although some of his pieces seem to reflect an interest in Greek traditions—"Ek Vatheon" for example, is inspired by the tradition of Northwestern Greek lamentations—Minakakis is ardently committed to his position as a contemporary composer writing contemporary music. "This is 2007," he says, "and I belong in 2007." For Minakakis, live arts must engage the modern world rather than piously regurgitate the past. "This super conservative, super apologetic music cannot be the only thing that is out there. Composers of my generation cannot just say that. We cannot apologize to the public that

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wants to go to classical music to digest a wonderful meal that they've had before."

As for his own work, he says, "I like musical lines that defy gravity... Through structure, through very detailed, very carefully planned out structure, I can give an idea of freedom, of complete plasticity in sound and form." Minakakis compares his forms to the image of a boat approaching an island shrouded in morning mist: first only the outline is visible, but as the boat gets closer, the shape becomes—or appears to become—clearer. "It seems that the object comes closer and closer and elude it. And this eluding I find more attractive."

While he was beginning his piece for Chamber Music Now!, a sudden tragedy occurred: the poet with whom he was collaborating, Sandy Crimmins, died of a heart attack just a few days after delivering her final text to Minakakis. He and the Philadelphia arts community are still recovering from her loss. But Minakakis considers the poem, called "Philadelphia Fire," to be "a wonderful work," and plans to use Crimmins' text to explore "the dialectical relationship of the ensemble to the narrator." At the same time, Minakakis is also interested in examining the political and aesthetic dimensions of silence in this piece, a preoccupation that he feels marks a "fundamental difference" from his other works. "There is nothing more terrifying than silence, or things that happen at the margins of sound, where it's between noise and sound... in this work, and in this last year, I find for myself that shouting and whispering are more expressive than singing... These quiet moments are so much pregnant with meaning."

At the time of our interview, Minakakis is unsure of whether he will remain in America or return to Europe after completing his PhD, but suggests that to some degree, artists are foreigners wherever they reside; emigration is also a kind of creative act. "Iannis Xenakis, an important Greek composer who lived in France, said that we the composers are all immigrants, and I like this idea of emigrating. I try to emigrate in my own work, too, from one place to another."

**IN SOME REGARDS, JAZZ COMPOSER AND PIANIST MIKE HOLOBER** is the most “established” of the emerging composers represented here. He belongs to a different generation than Belcastro, Minakakis, and Sharlat. He also appears to be in a different stage of career—he is a 20 year veteran of the New York City jazz scene, directs and writes for his band The Gotham Jazz Orchestra, and is about to release his fourth commercial recording. At the same time, it seems that he has just begun to gain wider recognition as a composer; one review of *Thought Trains*, the Gotham Jazz Orchestra’s debut album (recorded in 1996 but not released until 2004), called Holober “a dominant new force on the New York scene.”

In Holober’s view, the term “emerging composer” is particularly difficult to assign to someone working in jazz. “In the jazz world a lot of people might not know who you are, and some other people that know a lot about the jazz orchestra scene might say ‘You’re one of my favorite 10 composers *anywhere!*’ And then other people in a totally different part of the jazz orchestra scene might be like ‘Who is that?’”

Holober began studying classical piano at the age of six. In junior high, he developed a taste for rock and jazz and took up the saxophone. Holober continued with his piano training as an undergraduate music student at SUNY Oneonta, where he “met one really great teacher,” the conductor Charles Schneider. Schneider

**MIKE HOLOBER** (B. IN NEW YORK, 1957)

COMMISSIONED BY THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART FOR THE PROJECT “PHILADELPHIA PREMIERES,”  
PART OF THE MUSEUM’S ART AFTER 5 JAZZ SERIES

was Holober’s piano teacher, but functioned “kind of like a music coach.” He recalls, “I learned a lot about rehearsal technique and just being in music from him.”

During this time, he began to write tunes for the jazz group in which he was playing saxophone. He also worked frequently as an accompanist for Schneider, and spent summers as a rehearsal pianist for the Glimmerglass Opera Company. In 1983, he received a Master’s in Music from Binghamton University, where he also conducted the jazz band. There he met Al Hamme, the head of the jazz program and “another person that I truly owe a lot to. He just stuck me in a jazz quartet and said ‘Figure it out.’”

Holober did just that. In 1986 he moved to New York City and began an informal but rigorous apprenticeship in the city’s jazz scene. “It was just a slow process of meeting people, going to sessions, practicing, word of mouth,” he says. Evidence of this process can be heard on over 30 recordings that feature Holober as a sideman.

During those formative years, he met musicians who would later become members of the Gotham Jazz Orchestra, the 17-member big band that he directs, plays in, and writes for, and who will perform his Philadelphia Museum of Art-commissioned piece, “Hiding Out.” His love and respect for these musicians has served as a major source of inspiration for his composition. Holober explains, “If I don’t know who I’m writing for, then in my head I’m writing for the Gotham Jazz Orchestra. Like if there’s a piece that’s commissioned for a group and I don’t know the people in that group, I’m just thinking about the guys in the Gotham Jazz Orchestra. And that’s very specific to the orchestration and the mood and just motivation, too: to kind of put a face—and a personality—with the notes, because most of the guys in that band, I’ve known most of them for like 18 or 19 years.”

The idea to form a band came about during the early ‘90s, when Holober was a student at the BMI Jazz Composers workshop (where he now teaches with Jim McNeely and Mike Abene). Holober said that “I was getting a bunch of my music played by bands in New York, and a few people said, ‘You should get it together and record this music!’... And then I just asked a bunch of my friends, we played a couple of gigs, and then

the record came out, and we’ve been playing since then.” His small group debut was *Canyon* (2003); *Thought Trains* (2004) was the first Gotham Jazz Orchestra album. A new GoJo record, *Quake*, was in production at the time of our interview.

When asked what kind of experience he hopes to create for someone listening to a Gotham Jazz Orchestra performance, Holober reflects on what it felt like to be in junior high when “you get a new Beatles record... and you listened to this same thing like 60 times, and you’re still not bored with it. And whatever that thing is about it, that it makes you feel good, that you get something out of the music—without analyzing what you’re listening to, or knowing *anything* about what you’re listening to.”



Though part of what makes Holober’s music so powerful—and what has garnered it acclaim—is its harmonic and structural sophistication, Holober feels that music must contain more than “just a list of good ingredients.” Instead of trying to prove how knowledgeable he is in his writing, he says, “I’m just thinking about ‘what’s someone that doesn’t know what they’re listening to gonna get out of this?’ Is it going to make them want to listen to it again because it just vibed them well?”

At the same time, however, he stresses the importance of understanding how jazz works and what its history means. Holober has been teaching for 25 years; 17 of those have been spent at the City College of New York, where he is currently an assistant professor. “It’s been a blessing... [Having] a full-time job in New York City in a jazz department is just an amazing blessing, but it’s really motivational, too... The student level at City College is very high.”

One of Holober’s difficulties is “having a lot of interests and being spread thin. I tend to go in waves of being a piano player and being a composer and being a teacher.” Because Holober’s identity as a composer is bound up with his identity as a musician, finding time to devote himself fully to both is important. When discussing how he balances playing and writing, he says self-deprecatingly, “Well, I always keep one thing in a shambles. I’m either like, ‘can’t write’ or ‘can’t play.’ Which isn’t quite true, but I definitely feel better at the piano when I’m practicing every day.”

Artist residency programs have been vital to Holober’s productivity as a composer. He wrote “Hiding Out,” his Philadelphia Museum of Art-commissioned piece, while a resident at the UCross Foundation. He also considers himself fortunate to have been a fellow at the MacDowell Colony four times and the Corporation of Yaddo twice. During those residencies, he says, “I wrote two entire [pieces for]

large ensemble groups, like 70 minutes for big band, 60 minutes for a slightly smaller band, and then a couple of other commissions for jazz ensemble... those dedicated 11 weeks could easily have taken six or seven years of normal life at home.”

Looking back on all of the music he’s written, Holober notes, “some of that was commissioned for a pretty good fee, and some of that was commissioned for almost nothing—but I’m glad I wrote all of it.” He adds, “A lot of big band writers, we’re doing it almost just to keep on the scene and be involved in some of the bands that we write for.”

“In jazz it’s like, ‘Hey, can you write us a chart? It pays 500 bucks!’ Yeah, cool, if you guys are playing it!”

“I HAVE MANY MISGIVINGS ABOUT MY MUSICAL EDUCATION,” laughs Yevgeniy Sharlat. His first serious attempts at composition took place at the Academy of Moscow conservatory, but he began his intensive—and in his mind, “irrelevant”—musical training at the age of six, when he took up violin, piano, and music theory.

Though Americans often assume that the Russian system of musical education is superior, Sharlat feels that his true “musical awakening” did not occur until after he left Moscow to attend the Curtis Institute of Music, where his composition career began in earnest.

What made him decide to leave? “It seemed like there was very little interest in what I was doing among my peers, among my teachers.” In fact, he adds, “my violin teacher tried her best to hinder all of my efforts in composition as much as she could. And my theory teacher plainly told me that I should just stop doing it right there. And I think that they were really doing me a favor by saying that, because there was not a chance that I could become a composer

orchestra’s performance one of the best of his work to date. If Sharlat had been at a more advanced stage of his career, it might never have happened—as a professional composer, Danielpour couldn’t afford to write the piece for free, but as an unknown student composer, Sharlat couldn’t afford *not* to write it for free. In this extraordinary opportunity also lies an extraordinary irony: it would appear that the only way for Sharlat to have his music played in his native Russia was to move 4,754 miles away.

Sharlat received his M.M. and M.M.A. from Yale, where he is currently a PhD candidate. He feels fortunate to be in a Composition program that awards degrees based on professional rather than academic work. “I see a lot of composers lose touch with reality in doctoral programs, doing academic work and losing focus and falling into obscurity.”

This fall, Sharlat makes the transition from being an adjunct instructor to a tenure-track professor at the University of Texas at Austin, which he calls the “ideal place for composition.” When an adjunct professor, he found dividing his time between teaching and composition almost impossible. The quality of his students, however, made up for some of the difficulty. “They stimulate my work. They fuel my creativity, just as I try to fuel theirs.”

tion informs his work, Sharlat sighs, “Well, everything I do is derivative. I’m so in love with the music of the past, much more than with the music of the present. It seems that there is no shortage of composers that I supposedly emulate... I used to be ashamed of that. But I’m not anymore, because ultimately I believe that all work is derivative, even the most avant-garde of avant-garde.” One of his goals is “to clarify what I’m trying to do to the audience and to the performers,” which he feels “takes the greatest effort.” Ultimately, he says, “I’m concerned in creating a structure, a building, that doesn’t fall down, doesn’t lean” and can “be contemplated with pleasure.”

Sometimes those structures come purely from his imagination, what he calls “abstract” works. But sometimes he finds inspiration in extra-musical materials: drama (while a student at Yale, Sharlat worked as a composer and music director on several theater productions) and literature (such as the work of German author, composer and music critic E.T.A. Hoffman, one of Sharlat’s “gods”).

“In a way, in my idealistic reality, I believe that music is about communication. And I must factor in the audience in this situation: what is it that I want the audience to hear?” But because the message that he delivers is ambiguous (“since I myself don’t really understand the

out that he is, of course, incapable of saying whether or not he is truly emerging because “that would suggest that I stand outside myself.” Mike Holoher paraphrased a John Corigliano interview in which Corigliano asserted that everyone is emerging until they win a Pulitzer, even if they’re 70 years old when they win it. Yevgeniy Sharlat offered a helpful interpretation of the phrase (composers “who are being heard but have not yet found their niche”), but added gently, “I try not to concern myself with labels that are applied to me.”

Richard Belcastro pronounced the term “cute,” and believes that it legitimately describes a stage in his career. But he also asked a series of pertinent questions about where the boundary between “established” and “emerging” begins: “Is an emerging composer a talented student who’s just about to leave academia and start trying to have a career? Is an emerging composer someone who has had five or less major performances? Is an emerging composer someone whose commission price hasn’t exceeded \$2,000 yet? Is a faculty member at a university who is 60 years old, had five major commissions still emerging? Or is it an age thing that changes it?”

Considering his own career, Belcastro said, “All I know is that [there are] a lot of opportunities and things that I



YEVGENIY SHARLAT (b. 1977, Moscow)

COMMISSIONED BY ASTRAL ARTISTIC SERVICES FOR THEIR 15TH ANNIVERSARY CONCERT SERIES, WHICH PREMIERES WORKS BY SHARLAT AND PAUL SCHOENFIELD

Yevgeniy Sharlat,  
photo by  
Andrius Zlabys

with any degree of renown or getting performances or being even acknowledged by anybody in Russia.” Sharlat attributes this in part to the extraordinarily elitist musical climate in his home country, where Great Russian Composers are regarded with a quasi-religious fervor. In Sharlat’s experience, the Russian classical music establishment doesn’t “want to see many composers—they just want to see a god, two gods, three gods.”

When he arrived in the United States at the age of 16, however, he found “rich opportunities” awaiting him. At Curtis, those opportunities included working with supremely talented music students. Curtis also provided Sharlat with an unforgettable commission: to write a piece for the Chamber Orchestra Kremlin, Pavanne for 18 Strings, which the orchestra premiered in the Great Hall of St. Petersburg. The conductor of the Chamber Orchestra Kremlin had originally asked Richard Danielpour, one of Sharlat’s teachers, but Danielpour instead recommended Sharlat, who agreed to write it *pro bono*. (“Every opportunity arises out of some kind of contact,” Sharlat notes, a statement that Belcastro, Minakakis, and Holoher echo.)

When Sharlat found out about the project, he says, “I was overjoyed. And I consider it to be my first really important request to write music.” He also considers the

Sharlat is optimistic that finding time to compose will get easier this year, when he will have a lighter course load. Given the two-pronged path for composers in America—teach or don’t—he considers the choice to make a living as a professor to be the best for his creative development. He explains, “One of the goals of mine is to try *not* to create many works, to be very prolific. And if I were to freelance, it would be necessary for me to become prolific.” He says that instead of having to settle on a method of writing in order to produce many works, “I want to discover a new world with each new composition.” Though he respects and admires those who seek to support themselves entirely with their writing, “that takes a lot of effort and work and stamina and resistance and tenacity, some of which I think that I lack. I prefer not to have to work on many projects, but just devote my attention to one.”

Sharlat calls his commissioned piece for Astral Artistic Services, Piano Quartet, “one of the most genuine works I’ve done.” He is particularly eager to hear his piece played by the “intimidating performers” from Astral, including his Curtis classmates Andrius Zlabys, Pavel Ilyashov, and Anton Jivaev, for whom he enjoyed writing music while a student.

When asked about whether the classical music tradi-

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message”), Sharlat says, the endeavor is reminiscent of Ionesco’s play “The Chairs”: an old man wishes to deliver a message to the audience, a message which he has been preparing his entire life, but doesn’t feel up to the task, and instead hires an orator to deliver the message on his behalf. Unfortunately, the orator is mute, and resorts to scribbling incomprehensible marks on a chalkboard in front of the audience. Sharlat says, “That’s how I hear sometimes, that’s how I feel sometimes as a composer.”

But Sharlat contends that despite these difficulties, “Ultimately there is something that is communicated, even through these mutterings and strange symbols on the chalkboard. Something gets communicated nevertheless, because people come to me and say that they’ve been touched, and that they want to come back and hear it again, even though what I heard was far from what I originally intended.”

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#### IF AN EMERGING COMPOSER COMPOSES IN A FOREST...

All of the composers featured in this article were pleased to be considered “emerging,” but understandably reluctant to indulge my (most) inane question: what, if anything, does the term mean to you?

Stratis Minakakis finds the term flattering but pointed

would love to have happen that far outweigh what has happened so far. So I consider that to be very much emerging.”

But can “emerging composer” refer to more than the state of one’s career? What if “emerging” also suggests an attitude toward creation: a need to evolve, to never grow complacent, to be always, in Minakakis’ words, “emigrating” from one place to another in one’s work, in search of new sounds? Or to commit, like Sharlat, to writing less music so that one can “discover a new world” in each piece; or, like Belcastro, to refuse to stop having fun composing; or to never forget how it feels to love a song so much that you listen to it 60 times in a row, like Holoher?

Perhaps rather than merely describing a state of striving, “emerging” is an approach worth striving for in its own right. Minakakis adds, “I’d like to write music until the day I die... the only promise I can give to anyone, especially myself, is that next year will be different, hopefully better than this year. So, in that way I am looking forward to being continuously emerging.”

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