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Alex Shapiro

by Kyle Gann



As sheltered a life as I've led in the obscure shadows of the new-music world, I have never before met anyone with a bio like Alex Shapiro's. One way of looking at it is that she used to be successful—and gave it up. That is, she worked in TV and film, and used to make a living off her music. She wrote the score to the Timothy Bottoms family film *Horses and Champions*, and she's done projects for Sony Television, the Turner Broadcasting Network and the American Film Institute. She was a recording booth supervisor for the *Star Trek* TV series. Go to her slickly produced website, www.alexshapiro.org, and she'll treat you to mp3s of her title music for the TV shows *Most Wanted* and *Courthouse*, and for the television documentary *Behind the Scenes at People Magazine*. (I would have thought I could write this column the rest of my life without ever making a reference to *People* magazine.)

And it sounds just like what you'd expect from TV: snappy, upbeat, gotchy-attention tunes in technicolor production. Shapiro has tech skills and style information that most classical composers can only wonder at. She's made jazz arrangements and written pop songs. And nine years ago, she walked away from that life to enter the cloistered, unremunerative world of the classical composer. She got tired, she says, of massaging producers' egos, and she wanted complete creative control. It wasn't an illogical move; in earlier years she'd studied at Juilliard and Manhattan School of Music with Ursula

Mamlok and John Corigliano. The question isn't so much why she writes tons of chamber music now as how she got sucked into such a commercial detour in the first place.

This unusual background has given Shapiro a lot of chops. We know what we mean when we attribute "chops" to a saxophonist or bass player, but the term turns awfully vague when applied to composers. What it means here is a close familiarity with a wide range of instruments, and the ability to do things with them you wouldn't expect. For instance, I was quite taken with her piece *Bioplasm* from her new CD, *Notes from the Kelp* (on Innova, and more about kelp later). Listening to it while going about my business, I gathered that it was a large ensemble piece for exotic percussion, voices, winds, maybe even electronics. Imagine my surprise, upon looking at the score later, to find that it's merely a flute quartet! It starts and ends with a calypso-like texture of booming alto and bass-flute key clicks (those were my imagined hand drums), and has sections in which the flutists hum and sing while playing. And since there are passages of growling, pitch-bending techniques in low register breaking into suave glissandos in both directions, it's easy to see how I was so completely fooled.

The other result of Shapiro's unusual background is her complete lack of ideological affiliation. Trained for infinite versatility, she can write any kind of music she wants, and she writes only what she

wants. Nowhere does one run across a hint of minimalist influence, or serialist, or neoclassic, or postmodernist, or jazz, or for that matter TV or film music. It's all just Alex Shapiro music, which is not, however, to say that it's all closely unified by style. In contrast to the concept-based brilliance of *Bioplasm*, her *Current Events* for string quintet is deeply Romantic in an almost early-Schoenberg way, while her Piano Suite is thoughtfully atonal, imagistically dissonant in a way that brings Carl Ruggles to mind. Her website includes a disclaimer that "Stylistic diversity shouldn't cause a composer to be taken less seriously," and her music makes that argument well. All the same, she might well be warned that, in a music world in which many composers try to brand themselves through stylistic uniformity, listeners might find her difficult to pin down.

If there's a unity here, it is more programmatic than procedural. Shapiro lives on the ocean, on Washington State's San Juan Island, loves it, and lets you know about it. Not for nothing is her CD titled *Notes from the Kelp*, and she seems to be practically dripping with seaweed in most of her photos. *Current Events* is a punning title about the sea, whose ultraromantic Adagio is marked "Gazing at the still tide pools." A movement of the Piano Suite bears the slogan, "Adrift at sea; a distant foghorn signals hope...." A climax is marked "The storm arrives." The centerpoint of Shapiro's personal kaleidoscope of styles is an inwardness

that relates to a specifically aquatic form of nature-worship. Her music is at its best when it seems to be musing, reminiscing, meditating on a vast liquidity—as it almost always is.

Appropriately, one of her most remarkable works is simply entitled *Deep*, written for contrabassoon and electronic soundtrack. There is nothing "bassoon-y" or even soloistic about it. The electronic timbres are so mystically sepulchral that they fold the contrabassoon into themselves, and you really have to watch the score to be sure what the soloist is playing and what's on the accompanying sound track. The piece broods with a slow wandering that seems formless, yet it does keep returning to motives archetypal enough as to pass by unmarked. And the sound production is so superb that you could pass the piece off as a really outside-the-box pop record, like a long-lost Brian Eno track. Surely this is the best solo contrabassoon piece ever written—though I admit I make the claim never having heard another one, that I can recall.

In lieu of an instantly recognizable idiom, Shapiro has tremendous technical skills, a deep connection to nature, and an engaging and articulate personality that has gotten her multifariously involved in the new-classical-music world that she had left behind for a while. She gets more performances than any one person could attend, and despite her nature wonderland she's socially inclined, a frequent presence on the Sequenza 21 website. She came roaring back from the commercial world we almost lost her to, and is making this new composer's life as active and exciting as the one she left behind.

Composer Kyle Gann is a professor at Bard College. His latest book is Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice, and his music is recorded on the New Albion, New World, Lovely Music, and Cold Blue labels.