



21ST CENTURY MUSIC

OCTOBER 2010

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21ST-CENTURY MUSIC is published monthly by 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, P.O. Box 2842, San Anselmo, CA 94960. ISSN 1534-3219.

Subscription rates in the U.S. are \$96.00 per year; subscribers elsewhere should add \$48.00 for postage. Single copies of the current volume and back issues are \$12.00. Large back orders must be ordered by volume and be pre-paid. Please allow one month for receipt of first issue. Domestic claims for non-receipt of issues should be made within 90 days of the month of publication, overseas claims within 180 days. Thereafter, the regular back issue rate will be charged for replacement. Overseas delivery is not guaranteed. Send orders to 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, P.O. Box 2842, San Anselmo, CA 94960. email: mus21stc@gmail.com.

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Prospective contributors should consult *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), in addition to back issues of this journal. Copy should be sent to 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, P.O. Box 2842, San Anselmo, CA 94960. e-mail: mus21stc@gmail.com. Materials for review may be sent to the same address.

INFORMATION FOR ADVERTISERS

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An Interview with Alex Shapiro

TOM MOORE

Alex Shapiro is a Pacific Coast composer of acoustic and electroacoustic chamber music whose works are performed and broadcast daily across the U.S. and the world. Published by Activist Music, her music can be found on more than 20 commercially released CD's.

I spoke with Alex Shapiro via Skype on March 15, 2010.

MOORE: Please talk about the music in your family -- parents, uncles, aunts...

SHAPIRO: I think it was an enormous stroke of luck to be born into a family that adored the arts -- not only music, but visual arts and ballet and literature. Because I was an only child, born and raised in Manhattan, one of the greatest places for the arts in the world, I was able -- as though it was naturally part of everybody's normal life, which only much later did I realize was not the case -- to avail myself of all possible forms of art, and often the most exquisite representations of them. And theater as well, of course. There was nothing I didn't do, there was nothing my parents were not interested in. Contemporary music was not a great love of theirs -- my father's interests pretty much stopped at Bartok. He was really into Mahler, and that was life-changing for me -- to this day I am a huge Mahler fan. He also liked Bruckner, who was the "lesser Mahler" in a lot of people's minds, but my father really liked Bruckner, so I heard a lot of his music when I was growing up as well. My mother was an amateur flutist who never performed, because unfortunately she suffered from terrible stage fright. It was a passion that she pursued for her own enjoyment, which is an interesting and positive role model. Even though I am a working composer, the message that I try to get out to everybody is that all of us are artists, and the art is viable and important, whether you are making it public or not. It's self-expression. When I was growing up, it was wonderful to see my mother ardently practicing for hours a day, as a student of John Wummer. Her tone was really magnificent -- she had a gift. The only contemporary pieces she would play were Density 21.5 of Varese, and there was a Persichetti piece too. She said that it was not so much that she loved the music, but that it was fascinating and a great challenge. Most of what she played was Baroque -- a lot of Telemann, a lot of Mozart. Once I was about 11 or 12 I would save my baby-sitting money (I would get a modest allowance from my parents -- five dollars a week, or something), and I was able to buy tickets to things. At the time, the Metropolitan and the New York City Opera standing room tickets were about three dollars. I would always dress really well -- let's say I was fourteen by now -- and I had become an opera freak. I'd get my three-dollar standing room ticket, and inevitably (I was by myself, since no other eighth-grader was geeky enough to want to go with me), there would be a single vacant seat in the orchestra, which I would very calmly snag once I had determined that it was going to remain empty. This worked particularly well when I would go to see more modern operas like Lulu, because invariably there would be a little old lady running out of the theater after the first act. Very rarely would I have to stand through an entire opera. I perfected this, and did it at all the theaters, and so was able to enjoy New York as a teenager for very little money. Later on, my first boyfriend -- we were the only two composer-geeks in the whole high school -- also loved opera, and we would go together. At the same time I was hanging out at the Blue Note, the Vanguard, and other jazz clubs, many of which have closed by now. And, the rock clubs like CBGB's and Studio 54. I had very eclectic tastes and availed myself of everything. I think that my early background is reflected really strongly in my music today.

MOORE: Was your family also from Manhattan, or had they come to New York from somewhere else?

SHAPIRO: My father was an only child who grew up in Manhattan, and his parents also were both born in Manhattan, but their parents (my great-grandparents) were immigrants from Poland and Russia. My mother, who's an identical twin, grew up in Ridgewood, New Jersey. Her mother was born in Florence, Italy and emigrated to the United States when she was a small child (three or four years old). Her father's family was originally from Ohio, and fought for the North in the Civil War. They were originally German.

MOORE: Were there musicians in earlier generations?

SHAPIRO: I think I am the first musician and first professional artist of any kind in my family. However my grandparents, and especially my father's mother, adored music. During the Depression, she would save her nickels and dimes in a jar, and buy orchestra seats, as front-row as she could get, at Carnegie Hall. She did this on as regular a basis as she could, to go see Heifetz and Rachmaninoff -- all the greats of the time -- back in the thirties, forties, fifties and onward. She was an enormous fan; she'd always go backstage to the green room and get her program autographed; I now have many of them on my wall. There's definitely a lineage there, since her love of music created one in my father, and was then passed on to me. This is why I have such strong feelings about kids who are raised in environments where so many of the schools are no longer offering music and art classes. If children don't grow up in families that love the arts and play classical music and other genres on a regular basis, I worry about how they will get their love and affinity for it.

MOORE: I have talked to a number of musicians, internationally-known musicians, who got their start in the public schools and would not have become musicians otherwise. They will tell you that those programs don't exist anymore. Please say a little more about your passion for opera, since that is not something that you credited to your parents.

SHAPIRO: Neither one was a big opera fan. Both of them simply tolerated it. I don't know where I got my passion for opera from, other than the obvious reason for those of us who love it, which is that the first time that I was exposed to it (and for me, it was La Boheme -- what a great first opera -- to this day I still recommend it to people as a first opera), I was so bowled over by the spectacle, the drama, the costumes, the lighting, and the music that it made a really big impression on me. That was something that was just mine -- I don't have memories of going to operas with my parents. I just remember sitting there awestruck by myself. The funniest thing to me is that my composing career has not gone in the direction of opera and choral music. In many ways I would have been the most likely suspect to immediately become an opera composer or a choral composer, because I also did a lot of singing. I had a pretty strong alto voice -- it wasn't so beautiful, but at least the pitch was really good -- and I was a great section leader. I had a lot of excellent opportunities, singing with the Juilliard Choir and the Manhattan School of Music Choir and the Aspen School of Music Choir... I had a lot of opportunity to sing, in Alice Tully, at Carnegie Hall, at Aspen. And yet I only have one choral piece in my catalog so far. I think I have another choral commission coming up, but I find it ironic that I didn't go in this direction -- I ended up doing so much chamber music and electronic music.

MOORE: American music-making seems to be divided into various niches, or tribes. If you write for a contemporary music ensemble, they are not going to ask you for a choral piece, and vice versa. The boundaries are rather rigid. Once you start down one track it may be difficult to move to another one.

SHAPIRO: Those worlds -- choral and instrumental -- are very different worlds. You may know a lot of people in the instrumental world, and have no connections in choral music. Same thing with the concert wind band world, which I am just starting to enter fairly seriously. A couple of years ago, out of the blue, I got my first wind band commission from the US Army, and now I have two more wind band commissions that I am working on. It's interesting how these worlds are segregated -- different players, different conductors, different everything.

MOORE: Scott Lindroth, here at Duke, has a very successful piece for wind band, which has been recorded multiple times, but it's the only such piece in his catalog. And likewise, there are many wind band composers who would never be performed by So Percussion or the Cygnus Ensemble... Please say a little about how you got started as a composer, rather than as an interpretive musician.

SHAPIRO: The first answer would be that I wasn't talented enough to be an interpretive musician. I was a very ardent pianist, and still am, but knew pretty early on that I didn't have what it took to be a full-fledged concert performer. I did get up to playing concerti, but because I enjoyed playing the music, not because I thought that I would have a career doing it. I was lucky to come at things backwards, because I didn't start out as a young pianist, I started as a composer. I began actively composing when I was nine. The full story is that I had piano lessons for all of six months, when I was six. I wasn't practicing, I wasn't terribly applied, and my mother was wise enough to say "Alex, if you are not going to practice, I am not going to force you to take lessons." Most parents feel so strongly that their children should have a musical education that they will make sure that they are forced into it. But it turned out to be the right tack to take with me. I was destined to become a musician, but had they forced me to take lessons, it might have soured me. I stopped the lessons, but I would still occasionally sit down at the piano in the house, and having learned a little bit of how to read and write music, I found myself starting to write down little ideas. I was taking recorder class in fourth grade, and Masterpiece Theater was playing on television at the time. We all know the theme by Mouret, and I decided, on a whim, to make a four-part recorder arrangement for the class to play. By this time I had enough chops to make something legible. I brought my arrangement to my elementary-school recorder teacher, proudly handed it to her, and said "Here! Maybe the class could play this! What do you think?" She took one look at the music, and looked at me as if I had three heads, and she didn't know what to make of me. She said, "Alex, this looks wonderful, but there is no way that the class can play this." My first rejection! Thanks, but no thanks. She was a very sweet lady, Sylvia Cooperstein, at the Ethical Culture School. It was probably a halfway decent little arrangement, but beyond the capabilities of my peers. I asked my parents later that year if I could have piano lessons, and they said "Are you going to practice?" "Yes, yes!" So when I was ten I started taking piano lessons, first with the piano teacher who was associated with the school, and then after a year or so I started with a professional pianist, Marshall Kreisler, who is no longer with us. He was just fabulous, and I studied with him until I was 18. A tremendous teacher, and very encouraging. My composing career with him took off in an odd way -- this is probably not an uncommon story. I would be 12 or 13, would hit a clam in the Beethoven, and instead of fixing it, would start improvising and rewriting the piece. Of course Beethoven didn't need any help. It would horrify Mr. Kreisler, but it amused me endlessly, and I think that a sense of form and development got imbued in me as a player.

Then I started taking my first composition lessons when I was 15, in 1977, with a wonderful man named Leo Edwards, who was at Mannes. I think he is still there. He was extremely influential for me with his support and his kindness.

MOORE: What approach did you take in terms of composition lessons?

SHAPIRO: I remember that my first piece with Leo was a trio for violin, viola and cello. I still have it to this day, and can still remember it. The next year I was accepted to Aspen -- I was their youngest composer, at 16 -- and went there for two summers in a row as a student of Michael Czajkowski, who at the time was at Juilliard, heading the electronic music department. That first summer I brought the trio, and it got performed several times by a wonderful trio including Paul Neubauer -- this was back when we were all kids. It was a two or three movement thing -- it wasn't very long.

MOORE: I ask because sometimes it seems arbitrary where we start students on the historical spectrum -- why should we make them do pseudo-Mozart or pseudo-Beethoven when they could do pseudo-Hindemith, or pseudo-Xenakis?

SHAPIRO: I could argue either side of that. I think it's extremely useful to understand the baroque and classical periods, because theme and development and counterpoint are important motivators of what happens musically. The craft of how to put something together so it hangs together and makes sense, and to understand it in a way that is more obvious than studying some Xenakis pieces (not all) -- there's a lot of merit to that. I know that studying and playing Beethoven has had an enormous impact on me and how I construct my pieces, because I am so much about form and development and exposition. Conversely, what if you had someone who had never heard any Beethoven or Mozart, but only the music that has been written since 1950 -- that would be very interesting. If I am teaching composition, or guiding students, I do emphasize form and development, and I think that can be seen wonderfully in those who preceded us two or three hundred years ago.

MOORE: Stephen Drury threatened many years ago that when he had a child he would only let the child listen to atonal music, so he wouldn't be spoiled by the predigested tonal pap that everyone gets fed at age one or two. I don't know if he carried that out or not.

SHAPIRO: I would love to know, because I have a theory with regard to microtonal music. If you think about kids who grow up in countries where the music is based on microtonal scales, that's how they naturally hear -- there's nothing odd about it, because they are surrounded by that. They understand it -- whether it's the complex rhythms of India or the microtones of India and other countries -- it's their natural experience. For me growing up, my natural experience was Beethoven and Mahler and the well-tempered scale -- all of this European stuff was what I was drenched in. I have often thought that what you are immersed in growing up might deeply affect how you hear as an adult.

MOORE: I often have the impression that it is the music that people hear as impressionable adolescents that seems to be forever new for them, that shapes what is the norm for them regardless of how much older they may get. What would say was the most influential among the music that you were listening to as a teen in New York?

SHAPIRO: The answer would be "all of the above," which is my catalog is so eclectic to this day -- I have so many different voices in which I write. I think it is completely due to being interested and immersing myself in the worlds of so many different kinds of music at that age, not just jazz, but rock as well, and I loved going to dance clubs -- to this day I love to dance.

Rock music, punk music, particularly jazz fusion -- Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, Jeff Lorber, Zawinul, Wayne Shorter. Interesting crossover things -- I was just listening the other night to some of my Oregon CD's, things that I played the grooves off of when they were in LP form in the seventies. Not to mention Mahler's Symphony No. 2, over and over again. These were all influencing me -- I see those "isms" in my own work. I see where some of my stuff is coming from, whether it is groove-based, or the intervals or rhythms that I tend to gravitate toward. I still write jazz, and I write a lot of indie pop tunes. I make my living doing concert music, but I still find time to do all these other kinds of music. Maybe it's easier to say "this one piece did it to me," but it wasn't that way...

MOORE: It seems like there are musics from that period that had sequelae, and musics which seem have to vanished from the consciousness of listeners 30 or 40 years later. Is there really music which follows from the Mahavishnu Orchestra or even Weather Report from the 70's? That music seems to be completely unknown at this point.

SHAPIRO: Or it's revered but remains in its own niche because it was in fact so original, and remains original. Think of progressive rock from the late seventies -- Kansas, Boston, Genesis, Yes -- the mixed meters and really cool things that they were doing. That's the stuff that I was listening a lot to, in my room. Now I am really disappointed by rock, with the exception of Radiohead and U2, which are two favorite bands of mine, and the Police in the early 80s... but most of what we here in rock today is pretty straight ahead. I ask myself "Why did we devolve?" There's plenty of indie rock that is interesting, but it's not making it the top 40. That's a very big difference.

MOORE: Please talk about studying at Manhattan. You studied with both Mamlok and Corigliano, who are figures that come from different places in terms of style.

SHAPIRO: Yes. If anything continues to underscore the theme of my eclectic background, this is doing it. Ursula was a fabulous influence for me for her openness and kindness -- she certainly was not trying to get me to be a clone of her -- and for her interest in teaching me so well about craft and form. She had started out as a serialist, as a student of Ralph Shapey, and later in life moved much further away from that. When I was studying with her in the 80's she really wasn't doing that any more, although of course we did study it. My music was never at the time as pan-tonal as hers. I don't like the term atonal so much. She was a great teacher in that whatever you were doing, here was a great way for it to develop. Studying for a year with John, he was extraordinarily influential on the broad picture of how we create a piece of music and how it comes to life. To this day much of what I learned with him is how I actually begin a piece.

MOORE: How do you begin a piece? Does your compositional practice have to do with a narrative in which you conceive the material, and it suggests how it should be developed? Or a more structural approach in which you conceive an architecture and the details are filled in from the top down?

SHAPIRO: The answer is yes, both. Probably more the latter. A composer is always on commission for the next piece. There are times when you sit down and write your own ditty because you want to, but much of the time we are scribbling the notes that have come to us with a given set of parameters, and those parameters are almost always going to be the instrumentation and the duration of the piece. Those are two very big form-creators. You know that they need a piece that is between ten and twelve minutes, you know that it's for string quartet, or woodwind quintet, or whatever. There are different journeys that you can take the audience on within that time period.

Then my process is sitting down and thinking, "What kind of journey do I want to take them on? What do I want to communicate?" Composing to me is all about emotional communicating. That is the reason to compose, as far as I am concerned, to convey something that means something to me and my heart to others, so that maybe I will touch them and their hearts. If I know what the nature of the audience will be, I try to take them into some consideration. That doesn't mean I will write at the lowest common denominator if I am told that it is an audience that doesn't hear a lot of new music. It means I can adjust my thinking in terms of how can I tell a story to them, how can I reach out to them emotionally, and also be true to myself artistically. The same thing goes for the musicians. Nine out of ten times I know who the musicians are for whom I am writing, and can play to their strengths. I can see what kind of repertoire they gravitate toward, what they like to do, what they do best, and can take that into account. This strengthens the act of composing, because you are taking a full picture of what a piece really is into account, when it ends up in the hands of the musicians and in the ears of listeners. My process is often what John Corigliano had taught me to do many, many years ago, back in 1981. First, lie down. Try not to fall asleep, close your eyes, let some ideas wash over you, imagine the piece. For me, that means putting myself in the setting, if I know where it is going to be done, if I have a sense of the players and the audience -- it's a visualization process. Then it's opening my heart to what the message is that I want to say. What are the adjectives that would describe what I am trying to create? One of John's suggestions was to take a blank sheet of paper, and write down the adjectives and adverbs that describe emotionally what it is that you are feeling like writing. Another technique that he suggests, and I have used it many times, is to take a blank sheet, and colored pencils, and just start drawing, even if you can't draw at all, and draw what the impetus of the music looks like, express it visually, don't worry about barlines and meters and notes and clefs -- the stuff that gets in the way of our initial creative "blurt." That is so freeing -- I recommend it to everybody. As I see it, there is a constant battle between the right and the left hemisphere of the brain. When you have this great musical gesture in your head, that you just want to throw into the air -- that's your right brain. But when you need to translate it for musicians to play, suddenly your left brain has to "kick in" in order to write down what is ultimately a big math problem. We are constantly struggling so that we don't lose the gesture as you are trying to figure out seven against four, and whatever else you are hearing, how to notate this best, where the downbeat should be -- the logistics of how to get this across. The longer you can stay in the right part of the brain, the better, I think. I will take a picture, and then write rhythms, without meters, write where the accents are, and then I will go back and figure out where the natural downbeats are. It's almost like paint-by-numbers at that point, because I start to put in the notes and textures and the orchestration. It's a problem-solving process that keeps you as in tune with the emotional side as you can possibly be.

MOORE: I think you are the first composer whom I have spoken with who has spoken so explicitly about emotion and its role in structuring the piece and producing the statement.

SHAPIRO: To me, without emotion, what the hell is the point? I get angry when I sit at concerts listening to contemporary pieces, or even old ones, and I feel that my time is being wasted because someone is just throwing notes at me, and they don't have any connectivity to my heart. It doesn't have to be melodic or thematic, or any of these traditional things -- it can be as atonal or pantonal as they want it to be -- but it has to speak to me somehow. There is a lot of music out there where the composer is not connected to it emotionally, and it is just an exercise for them. I can't relate to that at all. To me, everything in life has to do with passion -- everything. If that's not being represented in my music, then I am in the wrong business.

MOORE: People who are professional musicians spend an immense proportion of their time working on craft, on technique, and there is the assumption that the emotion will come out on its own without you having to focus on it. That means that often you have performances which may be technically adept, but are musically vacant, in a certain sense. Then there are artists like Miles Davis, for whom it is all about the statement, and the craft is only about what the moment will say to the heart. But when we think about the music business in general, we are not at all explicit about wanting to tug on the heart-strings.

SHAPIRO: That is a true thing, and an unfortunate thing. I talk in these direct, passionate terms, when I speak at universities, about what students are there to do, and what, ideally, we all do as artists.

MOORE: And to connect up to the presence of film scores in your bio - for better or worse, film music is there to make an emotional statement. It's part of the Gesamtkunstwerk that reaches out for the heart in the viewer's chest, and crushes it....

SHAPIRO: I like that.

MOORE: If you look at the first scene of the new Star Trek film, the whole arc is calculated to take you to that moment where the audience member is moved to tears -- you realize that you are being manipulated....

SHAPIRO: ...but it feels so good!

MOORE: But it takes art to get to that point, a whole team and a directing intelligence to plan out what it would take to get to that moment. Perhaps you could say a little about your work in film music.

SHAPIRO: It is exactly what you just described that attracted me to working in that field, and again, it started with Corigliano. The year that I was studying with him happened to be the year that he scored *Altered States*, which is a seminal accomplishment -- an amazing score, an amazing picture at the time. I remember quite vividly going over that score with him, after he had come back from the scoring session in Hollywood. He was like a deer in the headlights, saying how amazed he was by the process, and how it was very different from conducting an orchestra on the concert stage. The score didn't look very different from many of his concert scores. A light bulb went on when I realized at that moment that film was the perfect way to get audiences to hear sophisticated music that they might not be as eager to hear in a concert hall. When you put music with pictures the heart and brain perceive it differently. I notice this with Philip Glass's music. Personally I am less fond of it when I am simply there listening to it, but just about every time I see it with pictures, it transcends. When I saw what was possible, that opened up a big door for me. I took the only class that was given at Manhattan School of Music at the time, by a wonderful guy who is a friend of mine to this day, Roy Eaton, who at the time was the head of music for the Benton and Bowles advertising agency, a major agency in New York City at the time. It was on commercial scoring. He was doing so many jingles, and knew a great deal about working to click tracks and producing, and I was really eager to learn it. That changed my life. From then on, while I was still at Manhattan, I met some people who were doing low-budget documentaries, and started scoring while I was going to school. Then I had an opportunity, when I met a producer from Hollywood, to score a direct-to-video low-budget film, but nevertheless, it was an opportunity. I went for it, and am so glad that I did, because at the time the kind of music that I was writing as a concert composer didn't really "fit in" in New York, which still had the downtown/uptown divide. I was doing a little of everything, as I do now, but at the time there wasn't so much of a market for it.

I realized that film and TV work would be a great way to be working as a composer who was able to write in all different styles. You have to be a chameleon to be in that business. It was the right fit for me, and I moved out to Los Angeles in 1983, and started working on a good 15 years of TV and film projects and corporate videos and CD-ROMs. Gradually I realized that it was not what I wanted to pursue any longer. By that time, around 1996 or so, the concert music world had changed a great deal, and there was much more interest by ensembles and venues in the kind of music that I liked to write than there would have been 15 years earlier. Writing film and TV music ramped my chops up in a lot of ways, it was great in teaching me how to work efficiently to a deadline, and giving me a sense of self with that, because when you are in school, or at least when I was in school, the student might have written 15 or 20 minutes of music in an entire year. We were all coddled -- we could be working on a piece forever, working out that little four-bar phrase for two weeks. It was very indulgent. Then you get into the real world. For my first Hollywood-level low-budget project, I had ten days to write and produce 20 or 25 minutes of music -- not only compose it, but record it. That was as much music as I had written in the entire previous year. And I did it. You don't just sit down and wait for the muses to show up -- you invite them and make sure that they show up for work when you do.

MOORE: That seems to be the major defect in the world of academic music. Whether an academic composer can put food on the table doesn't depend on the number of measures of music he can produce in a given month or a given year. That situation privileges a lack of productivity. And the people studying in these institutions imbibe this value-system, whereas, as you say, in a more commercial environment you simply must produce.

SHAPIRO: And also in a working environment as an independent concert-music composer, you must produce. Every independent composer that I know, several of whom have won Pulitzers, is like me -- they sit down and they write, and that's how they are able to make a living. We are making the bulk of our money from commission fees, and so it is imperative that we have a number of commissions lined up, and that we deliver them on time. You just manage to always get it done. This has nothing to do with how good your art is. In fact, I venture to say that by writing in a more streamlined way, you are tuning in to your good instincts, whereas if you tweak and tweak and tweak a piece you are not necessarily doing it or yourself a favor. You could actually be "decomposing" the work, so to speak... There is much to be said for the initial impetus of our instincts, if we get to be reasonably facile at what we do. That's not to say that every first idea is a good one. Once you do get going with something, the more you can allow yourself to flow, and be in the moment with it, the better. Delivering something in two or three months, instead of two years, seems healthier to me. And it keeps bread on the table. You need to be able to produce music, like a chef produces food. A great chef at a fine restaurant is going to have oversee the making of a large number of meals, every night. And it's no different with art.

MOORE: You can't obsess over one piece to the detriment of all the other pieces you might produce.

SHAPIRO: You can't let the perfect get in the way of the good. We are trying to improve as artists. You do your art, send it into the world, start on the next piece, and hopefully the next piece will be even better.

MOORE: To compare it to the performing artist, the performing artist who is successful is the one who can get out there and do a good enough job, without being sick to their stomach with nerves in the effort to produce perfection on a nightly basis.

SHAPIRO: That's an area where I feel a lot of sympathy for performers, because it is pretty cut-throat out there. Now that there are no more mistakes on recordings, the stakes are so high. It's unfair, because what is most special, now more than ever, is that performing is unique -- you will never see this performance again -- it is this night only. People are under so much pressure to be perfect that sometimes the art can get lost. It should be a passionately enjoyable process, and that is what audiences connect to.

MOORE: Performers also many not understand that a technically difficult piece, which cost so much work to prepare, may not be the work that makes the biggest impression on the listener.

SHAPIRO: Composers need to realize that the only people hearing a new work who actually know "what the notes are" are the performers, and you the composer. The rest of the audience has never heard the piece before, and may not hear it again. What the audience hears is the arc, and mostly what they will hear is the emotion of the music as conveyed in the performance of the musician. That is what will come across. What they care about is the impression that it makes on their heart.

MOORE: Tell me about your Opus 1.

SHAPIRO: It's easy for me to remember Opus 1, because it came at a very definitive point. I was thirty-seven, it was the mid-90's, and I had just lost the third of three consecutive composing jobs for small feature films that I had been hired to score, because each of them lost funding just as we got into post-production. One rainy day, I found myself with nothing to do, since I had cleared my calendar for these projects. I began rifling through a folder that contained some concert music pieces I had written when I was 19, at the Manhattan School of Music. I propped some of them up on the piano desk, played through them, and though they were far from brilliant, there were shards of ideas within some of the pieces that were usable, and inspired me. It was an emotional moment, because it reminded me why I had become a composer to begin with. It reconnected me with my love of chamber music, concert music, and music in general. Sometimes when you are working in film and TV that can be more craft than art -- it's a different beast. It can disconnect you from that sense of being an artist. Because I had nothing else to do with my time, I started to rework one of the pieces. I took a piano suite of several short movements, tightened it up, and the result was a 12-minute piece in five movements, called Piano Suite No. 1 -- The Resonance of Childhood. Soon after, I joined a Los Angeles composers' group: The Pacific Composers' Forum. This collective held new-music concerts regularly with wonderful musicians, one of whom was Zita Carno, the principal pianist for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, who ended up performing this piece on the Forum's next concert. It was remarkable how quickly that experience encouraged me: I wrote the music, I heard it performed live by a terrific performer with a live audience that seemed to appreciate it, with some people that I really respected in the audience... and boom. At first I continued by going back into my older catalog, taking out my Sonata for Piano, which was a one-movement piece I composed and performed while I was at Manhattan School of Music. I greatly improved on that one movement, developed the motives considerably, and then added two additional movements. Soon after there was a call for scores by a pianist in the Bay Area called Teresa McCollough. She was looking for new works to record on a CD and to tour with, and I submitted the score. Out of 300 submissions, she chose seven works, including my sonata. She toured with it, recorded it for her CD New American Piano Music, it was released, and I benefited from the snowball effect of sitting down to write a work and finding good opportunities to get it out and recorded. It was my Opus 2, I guess. Then I was asked by my talented and dear friend, clarinetist Bronwen Jones, if I wanted to write a trio for clarinet, violin and piano for two of her upcoming chamber music concerts.

There was no money, and it didn't matter because I was still building my catalog and seeking every opportunity possible. I wrote them a three-movement trio that lasts about 11 or 12 minutes. That was 1998. Then another trio, headed by Deon Nielsen Price, a fabulous pianist and composer, and her son Berkeley Price, and the violinist Nancy Roth, recorded it for their album, Clariphonia: Music of the 20th Century on Clarinet. So suddenly I had two commercially released recordings, and these three solid long-form pieces, in a fairly short time, all thanks to being unemployed. I decided, "roll up your sleeves, and write the music you want to write." Being connected with what I wanted to write was significant, and that connection and reawakening actually had begun with the last feature film I scored, Horses and Champions, for which I had a ten-piece live ensemble -- no synths at all. It was such a wonderful experience to do that score, and to work only with live musicians, because in that lower-budget world 95 percent of what I was doing was in the studio. Occasionally I would bring in players to play over tracks, but most of the time I was creating all those tracks. It all came together in the mid-to-late 90's, and by 1999 I had decided that concert chamber music was absolutely what I wanted to do for a living. My friends were encouraging, although they were skeptical whether I would actually be able to make any money at it. I am one of these village idiots who just blithely lets things roll off of me. I don't worry about it. I figure that if I do good work, and if I am loving, other things will follow, and I have a very strong sense of positive vision and positive thinking when it comes to creating my career. Now I tour around the country doing lectures on this very subject to my peers to encourage them, and I even give motivational talks to people who are not in the arts. Ultimately the sense of self-worth and sense of abundance are the same for all of us.

MOORE: Is that where the name of your publishing company comes from?

SHAPIRO: Absolutely -- Activist Music.

MOORE: How far does your publishing company go back?

SHAPIRO: About 1999 or so. I started it immediately, because I quickly had three published works. One good thing that I acquired by doing 15 years of commercial work was a knowledge of copyright and publishing, an area that many concert music composers don't always understand, because they haven't been in a world where they are actually making money directly from publishing, especially in the older days, when composers had publishers and didn't handle the publishing themselves. We are now firmly in the days of independent publishing. I credit my experience in commercial music with my understanding of how to exploit my copyrights, how to do things like sync licenses, how to own the masters of my recordings, how to own my copyrights for my scores, so that I can use that material endlessly in different ways, and control it. When I started my publishing company, I knew that would be a key part to earning a living doing this, making income not just from commissions, but from score sales and track licenses. Now my publishing sales are significant -- that's a big part of my income.

MOORE: The reason I commissioned you was because I had seen a piece of yours that had been acquired by a university music library, and been selected either by the library or by a distributor as representative of contemporary American music.

SHAPIRO: That's the point that I make to my peers, is that what composers need to understand is not publishing deals, but distribution deals. What we need is distribution. You can publish the material yourself, but you do need help getting it out there, unless you are not going to do anything else, including sleep or eat.

My score probably ended up in your university library at Princeton thanks to an early distributor of mine, most likely my wonderful friend Christine Clark at Theodore Front Musical Literature, from Van Nuys, California, who is very good at disseminating new music, especially to universities. That's key. I also do a lot of distribution myself, in pdf and mp3 form.

MOORE: How did you make the transition from people asking you for a piece, and you being happy to get it out there in front of the public, to saying "yes, I'll write you a piece, but the commission is x number of dollars"?

SHAPIRO: That's something that a lot of people need to learn to be more comfortable with. It's slippery, but everyone knows when they have gone from being at one point in their career to being at another, when you really have a professional offering. What I needed to do, first and foremost, was to develop a catalog. I didn't have any concert music in my catalog -- I hadn't written concert music for 15 years. Before I could ask anyone to pay me for what I was doing in this realm, I felt I had to have a catalog. It didn't have to be huge, but I needed five or six pieces in order to show people that I could actually put two notes next to each other. It was after I had these pieces that I began asking to be paid commission fees. You, Tom, were an early commission, and although our transaction—which resulted in one of my most performed duets, *Re:pair* -- wasn't a wild amount of money, it was important to my self-worth. The pieces I composed in 1999 and 2000 were ones that I started charging modest amounts for, in order to make it an exchange of worth -- my way of saying that this worth something, and the performers' way of agreeing. From there it ramps up. Now I am quite fortunate to be at a wonderful point in my career, where I get a good amount of money for what I do. But it took a while to get to there, and one of the things that I try to encourage my peers about is to understand their worth in the market, and that their music does have worth. The time that it takes to create those pieces has worth. It costs you money to eat and have a roof over your head while you are working on these pieces, and you have to figure out what your time is worth, in addition to your effort. It's a "what-the-market-will-bear" world out there. I often point people to Meet the Composer, a service organization that shows composers and their patrons a good range of fees for a number of different kinds of projects. It's important for composers to understand what they are worth in the real world, if their body of work and ability commands that. There are many creative ways to work with people who have smaller budgets, whether it's consortium commissioning, where you get a group of people together at much less money per, to receive a piece that they share regional premieres of, or barter systems. I have written pieces where the ensemble agreed to premiere the piece and record it, and I would own the master of a very good studio recording that I could later release on my own CD and license as needed. Most of the time I recorded with a Musicians Union low-budget project contract, and although the players would waive their hourly rate, I would still choose to pay into their health and welfare, which is very important to them. This kind of arrangement was great for the musicians, who got a new piece in their repertoire and on their disc, and was worth gold to me -- that is thousands of dollars right there. It's a matter of making sure that your time is worth something -- whatever that means to you.

MOORE: Perhaps you could talk about the genesis of a recent piece, and your approach to the style of the pieces that you have been writing?

SHAPIRO: I think the over-riding style is pan-genre, and one of emotion, which gets back to something we talked about in our chat last week, when you said that I was one of the few, or only composers that you had interviewed who talked a great deal about emotion. I am emotional. I am looking for beauty, and beauty can be a range of things. I am looking for truth, and authenticity. I am not

trying to impress anybody, I am not trying to be part of the musical literati, or part of the academic scene -- I am my own scene. We all should be our own scenes. Don't worry about fitting in, or being approved of by anybody else. Be approved of by yourself, and your heart, and then by the musicians who bring your notes into the air, because if they like it you are on the right track. The final piece of the puzzle is the audience, and if the audience likes it, and keeps coming back for more, you are doing the right thing. I lecture to a lot of university classes, and I can tell that they are amazed to hear me talking in emotional terms about music that they are studying in an intellectual way. Ultimately, when it comes to the listener, music is not intellectual; it's heart, and hopefully body -- the whole thing. My music, stylistically, is whatever it takes to elicit emotion.

There are several pieces of mine that have been important to me. Increasingly, I am doing electro-acoustic pieces, where I create an electronic track in my studio, and then add one or more instrumentalists on top of that. Two of these recent pieces have hit the nail on the head for me in terms of musical honesty. One of these is *Deep*, the last piece on the CD *Notes from the Kelp*, a collection of my chamber music which came out a couple years ago. It was originally composed for contrabassoon and electronics, and I since I've done adaptations that pair the electronic track with contrabass clarinet, violin, viola and most notably, symphonic wind band. It's a very emotional piece, and one of my most performed works, and I get the most amazing letters and comments from people about it. Another example is a more recent piece titled *Below*, that I created last year for flutist Peter Sheridan, which came out a few months ago on his Australian record called *Below -- Music for Low Flutes*, for contrabass flute and electronics. It has a major role for a Pacific humpback whale. It was hard to get the whale into the studio... *Below* is not a New-Age piece, but I came across a heartbreakingly touching whale song, and figured out a way to make it work in this piece. So the animal is a very significant duet partner with the flute. That piece is now getting out there on a number of different instruments. Adaptations can work really well sometimes. These two pieces -- *Deep* and *Below* -- are really representative of what I am seeking, which is heart, and communicating to my listeners, and making people feel something. I recently finished a *BandQuest* commission, which is a very special opportunity. The National Endowment for the Arts funds the American Composers Forum for a grant to one concert music composer a year, in order to create a concert band piece for middle-schoolers. Concert composers tend not to understand the educational market very well, and we learn as much as the kids do. The idea is to improve the quality of the repertoire, and to give them something special that is different from the usual fare they plow through in their band classes. I worked with a wonderful band in Friday Harbor, and a terrific band leader named Janet Olsen. The piece, titled *Paper Cut*, premiered in May, and it's pretty unusual: the kids play along with a prerecorded electronic track, and in addition to their instruments, they also play rhythms and timbres using printer paper! They had never done anything like that -- in the band world, there is not much along these lines, so it was great fun for me to expand the concepts of what bands can do. On the heels of *Paper Cut*, I'm now composing a large, professional-level electroacoustic symphonic wind band piece in three movements which is a consortium commission from Yale, the University of Minnesota, Ohio State University, and several other schools and ensembles, and I'm having the best time of my life. This is my niche -- bringing in the pre-recorded track to band music. My mantra is "make it matter emotionally to others" -- that is what is guiding me as I write these pieces. With the wall of sound from the track and the large number of warm bodies on the stage playing along with it, reaching out emotionally becomes even easier.

MOORE: Are there other upcoming projects that you would like to talk about?

SHAPIRO: I have a piece that was just premiered in November 2009, for ten players. It's called Archipelago, and was commissioned by the Norton Building Concert Series, and premiered by the Fifth House Ensemble (fifth-house.com). It's for string quartet, plus double bass, plus woodwind quintet. I'm creating an adaptation of my quartet, Unabashedly, for a wonderful ensemble in New York called Lunatics at Large. It's currently a flute-plus-piano-trio quartet, and I am adding clarinet and viola to it. I have a solo piano piece due in a couple of months, and I'm currently working on Brisa de Luvina, an adaptation for Teresa McCollough of my solo piano work commissioned and recorded by Mexican pianist Ana Cervantes "Luvina," that adds a digital audio track to it which includes, among other things, the voice of Juan Rulfo, the late author of the short story Luvina, reading from his own writing. There's always something different. I am getting asked a lot for electro-acoustic pieces, which makes me particularly happy, and adaptations are very popular. When we get down to budget, if people don't have the budget for a full piece, they may have a budget available for an adaptation of one that I've already composed that we think would work well for the new instruments. It takes less time, and it gets the piece out there in so many more venues and to so many more people.

MOORE: Is there perhaps a genre of music that you would like to enter that you haven't explored so far?

SHAPIRO: I am trying to figure out how to meld more of my love of jazz in what I do, but still have it stay in a concert music realm. I have a dear friend and colleague who does this really beautifully, Billy Childs, who has a jazz chamber ensemble. He's just now releasing his second album with that group. It's gorgeous stuff -- his first album won a Grammy. He and I are of very like minds and agree that there's no line between good music and good music. Nevertheless, in audiences' minds and venues' minds and for booking and ensembles, there is a delineation. I am figuring out how to break that down, especially for jazz and electro-acoustic music. I do write jazz tunes, and I really enjoy them; I just had seven of them performed when I was in residency last month at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio -- by the faculty jazz quartet, on the same concert where they featured my chamber music and electro-acoustic music. It was in the middle of the program -- concert music, then jazz, then concert music -- and it really worked. Nobody hands us things on a platter -- we have to create them. That's how this electro-acoustic band music has come along, because I took the initiative, and said, when the University of Minnesota wanted to commission something new, "how about an electro-acoustic piece?" Composers have to define for themselves what they want to do and what they want to sound like, and they create their own universe, especially now. There's no reason for there to be "no" -- everything can be "yes," because you will be able to find the people to do what you want to do. Another aspect of my musical life that has nothing to do with concert music is that last year I made a slew of indie pop music demos, which I produced here in the studio, because I can sing, play the guitar, and lay down the tracks for the bass, drums and keyboards.

Having a studio and knowing how to engineer and produce has been another gift from my past life in commercial music! So I am starting to get those out, to see if there are recording artists who might be interested. It's a very different market, and I am not interested in being a recording artist, but I enjoy songwriting.

MOORE: You mentioned your seminars on thinking positively, achieving results? How would you describe those?

SHAPIRO: Someone once called me the Anthony Robbins of new music (he's one of these well-known motivational speakers). You create your own universe, you wake up everyday and decide what you want your day to look like -- all of us have more power than we realize.

It's a matter of getting right with ourselves about what is our interest, and our passion, because the more passionate you are about something, the more motivated you will be to work really hard at it, so that it won't feel like work at all when you are doing it. It's a matter of defining that for yourself, realizing that you are not in competition with anybody else, you are only in competition with yourself, and I think that is a very different concept for a lot of our peers to embrace. Especially, to go back to academia, a lot of the message that people get is that "it's competitive out there, there are only so many opportunities, you have scratch and claw to get grants and awards" and I say "just do your best work. Don't worry about anybody else -- let them do their best work." The more of us who are doing our best work, collectively, the better for the arts in general. When a colleague of mine does well, I celebrate that. It's a matter of establishing your materials, making them presentable so that you are really proud to put them out there. If you don't have your act together, if you don't have that great score beautifully copied and ready to hand somebody, with perfect page turns, if you don't have your website looking just right, with the audio clips sounding just right, the tools aren't there. As much as you might say, "I want to do well," you are also saying "I'm not ready yet." That is something that I have observed many, many times. Once you have your ducks in a row, then the universe brings it on, because you are ready to accept the opportunities without cringing from the sheer terror of "now what?!" I try to encourage people to get their ducks in a row, and I do a lot of private, online teaching on this. I have 15 or 20 students who I work with individually to help them understand and develop what's necessary for a happy career.

MOORE: This is not something that is part of the mindset of the academic music scene.

SHAPIRO: It's so mind-blowing to the graduate students when I am invited to talk at schools, and we have these kinds of direct conversations. I am on the Symphony and Concert Music Committee for ASCAP, and ASCAP has started sending a handful of us out to do a series that I co-founded last year with publisher/attorney Jim Kendrick and composers Stephen Paulus and Jennifer Hidgon, called, the ASCAP Composer Career Workshop. We tour around the country, either in universities, or in general venues which attract a lot of composers, and we teach the nuts and bolts of building a viable career. It's one thing to be a composer -- it's a whole other thing to have a career as a composer. Not everybody wants to have a career as a composer. That's fine -- not everyone has to earn money from writing music. But if you do want to, there's a lot of information that you need to know, and a different attitude that will be helpful. We talk about abundance, and basic philosophical issues, and then get down to the nuts and bolts of publishing and copyright, about production and how to compete with what is on everyone's iPod. Getting recordings of your work is about the single most important thing that you can have as a composer, so that you can line up the next commissions. And of course, web presence. My web presence is giving me 90% of my best opportunities. I want to show people how to do that in an elegant way. We spoke at University of Chicago in November, and next month we do UC San Diego, and then in Los Angeles the day before the ASCAP Expo, a terrific gathering attended by about 2500 composers at all stages of their careers, who work in all genres of music. It's a beautiful thing.

