

15 Questions to Alex Shapiro

If Alex had a vision of her magnum opus it would sound loud, very loud! Maybe it's a good thing for our ears, then, that she doesn't and has concentrated on exploring the wonders of creating music. Besides, it's not as if we needed any further evidence to show us that she is one of America's most interesting new composers. Her works, which have been recorded by a string of ensembles and on a plethora of labels on both sides of the atlantic are ample proof of this in a time when most colleagues would be happy with a single public performance. The fact that a large chunk of her music was broadcast in an hour-long special all across the USA speaks for itself, as are title stories in some of the leading magazines of the scene. And yet, 2006 will definitely mark yet another important step forward, as she prepares the release of her first true solo CDs, featuring Chamber music on the one hand and electro-acoustic music on the other. This diversity can be found in her entire oeuvre, which offers pieces for solo instruments, duets, trios, quartets, quintets, choral works and electronic suites and has even touched Jazz and Film Music. So, to put it mildly, her schedule is busy, even though she has by now finally found a way of enjoying the sometimes hectic nature of her profession (single malt anyone?) - including maintaining a picture/sound blog called "Notes from the Kelp". And preparing for the BANG, of course!



Hi! How are you? Where are you?

Hi, and thanks for asking me to answer these questions; it's great to reflect on these topics. I'm very happy these days. I'm writing you from my home studio in Malibu, California, sitting in front of my laptop and in back of my two cats who are lounging on the piano bench, not being the least bit helpful with the pieces I have to write.

What's on your schedule right now?

Very short term: pour myself a nice single malt and return a pile of emails in front of me; Short term: I'm about to produce the final recording session in a couple of days for a track on my upcoming CD of chamber music; Longer term: I'm in the midst of finishing that CD, plus another one entirely of electro-acoustic pieces, both of which I'd love to have completed by the fall; Endless: Do you ever get the sense that there are so many projects you want to delve into and complete that you'll never run out of things on your schedule?? That's where I've been for a long time. It used to frustrate me terribly; now I've learned to accept it and I love it.

What's your view on the music scene at present? Is there a crisis?

I think that when it comes to art, the only crisis is that which is unnecessarily created internally by the artists themselves. In other words, it's up to each of us to determine what we want to say musically, and then just go ahead, use all the tools at our disposal, and say it with conviction. Worrying about the external music scene is pointless when one can create their own music scene.

What does the term „new“ mean to you in connection with music?

Purely that a particular alignment of notes/harmonies/rhythms/grunts/whatever has never before existed until that "new" piece presented all those sounds together.

How do you see the relationship between sound and composition?

Inseparable, unless one is referring to the composing we all do in our heads that never makes it out of our skull and remains silent to the outside world (oh, but what a constant racket it makes in our heads!). So much of music has to do with texture and frequencies; a piece has far more levels to it than just melody, harmony and rhythm. It lives in many dimensions simultaneously.

How strictly do you separate improvising and composing?

I've always said that "composing is improvising in slow motion," and so to me they are one and the same. I marvel at my instrumentalist friends in jazz who can come up with the most incredible music the second they sit down to play; that's a tremendous gift and speaks to a kind of freedom and immediacy of connection that many composers long for. To me, all composing is improvising because a composer is constantly seeking different solutions to progressions of sounds and harmonies. Within any given piece, we usually try several different approaches before settling on The One. Like a fine improvising performer, the trick is to stay as open as possible and allow plenty of room for the muses to visit.

How would you define the term "interpretation"?

In my line of work, I'd define it as the je-ne-sais-quoi, the groove, the vibe, the soul, the expression, the meaning, the intent, the direction and the voice that a player brings to a piece of music. And with luck, it's an original, unique one. I love hearing different musicians play my pieces because they'll always find something in the music that I was too close to ever hear. Even though my scores are filled with lots of indications of phrasing, tempi, dynamics and expression, I think of those markings just like the picture on a cereal box of the flakes in a bowl of milk, with the words "suggested serving" printed politely next to it. You can do a lot of cool things to those flakes if you put some thought into it.

Harmony? Dissonance? The freedom to choose both, none or just one?

Everything, all the time. Wheeeee! That's the beauty of where we've finally arrived in music: we can utilize every style, every voice, every approach and no longer have to cordon ourselves off into strict schools of process. Those who still do are missing the boat and depriving themselves of a lot of fun, I think. The joy of being an artist— a creative person, by definition— is that we are encouraged to break rules, not adhere to them. Why this concept has been lost on so many otherwise creative people, I'll never understand.

A lot of people feel that some of the radical experiments of modern compositions can no longer be qualified as "music". Would you draw a border – and if so, where?

I draw no borders; I see validity in every approach as long as it doesn't involve ritual sacrifices and smelly food products. That's not to say that there are very, very differing results from artistic experiments; some are unique and really have more to do with philosophy and challenging people's perceptions than they ever had to do with music, but in the end it's all a form of important expression. As with anything—books, food, clothes—no one's going to like everything,

and there are plenty of days when you're not in the mood for a particular thing. Neither makes it bad, just something that doesn't currently speak to your condition.

Are "serious" and "popular" really two different types of music or just empty words without a meaning?

I'd like to say that those limiting terms are empty words without a meaning, but our culture and environment prove me wrong. As long as music makers and music consumers insist on separating musical sounds in the air into these vapid categories, we're stuck with a very unappealing "this or that" mentality that manages to keep people away >from "art music." How in the world could there possibly be anything fun or relaxing or enjoyable about... "serious" music??! I, for one, would stay as far away from that as possible. Sounds horrible. Many of us composing these days are crossing all sorts of boundaries; I keep a passport near my workstation at all times, just in case :-). Oh, and I make sure my inoculations are current. It's going to take a little more time and a lot more PR for the world to figure out that most music is more similar than it is different. Definitions, by definition, define. And limit.

Do you feel an artist has a certain duty towards anyone but himself? Or to put it differently: Should art have a political/social or any other aspect apart from a personal sensation?

Should it? No. No art or artist should ever have to have a responsibility to anyone or anything. Is it even better when it does? In my view, yes. We make art, presumably, to communicate. Or I should say, we publish art-- put it up on the walls, perform it, record it-- in order to communicate. Plenty of people make art with no intent of communicating with anyone other than themselves, and such an artist has no duty to anyone. But if s/he expects others to gravitate to their work, and even pay money for it, then by all means it ought to be somewhat relevant and connective to others. As for politics, I personally find music-making a key way to remain sane amidst a world that vacillates between mad and evil, and I sometimes wonder what those who have no creative outlet do to vent their rage or anxiety. And conversely, I find musical expression to be the ultimate high when I want to express sheer beauty. Apparently, composing is the safest way to be bipolar :-)

True or false: People need to be educated about music, before they can really appreciate it.

Absolutely 100 percent false! This is one of the snooty concepts I rail against whenever possible. If my music isn't reaching someone who knows nothing about "how" it works, then I am a terrible composer. Period.

True or false: The cultural subsidies doled out by governments are being sent to the wrong kind of people and institutions.

That's a sweeping statement which requires more than a simple true/false response, but for the record, the answer would be "false," because who's to say who the "right" kind of people are? Art is and always will be subjective.

You are given the position of artistic director of a festival. What would be on your program?

I love concerts that mix it up and put varying styles of music together, next to each other. The blues, string quartets, pop songs, wind quintets, African drumming, musical theater, folk music, art songs, electronica, salsa... you name it, I think there's room for it, and within the same event. Over the past five years I've hosted a series here in Los Angeles called Composers Salons that does just this, and it's been a blast. All of us in music have to continue to break down the

artificial, pointless barriers that keep our work segregated and hurt players and listeners alike. It's up to concert presenters as well as radio station managers and ensembles to stop with the "serious music" and "popular music" ghettoization of sound. No one benefits from being put in a corner; everyone benefits from a communal appreciation of every kind of expression.

Many artists dream of a "magnum opus". Do you have a vision of what yours would sound like?

It would sound very loud: BANG!

Oh wait, that's a .357 magnum opus.

: -)

If I had a vision of what it would sound like (interesting mix of metaphor there), I'd have already composed it. That's what's so much fun about writing music: you just never know what's going to come out! Every day is a surprise. I love my job.

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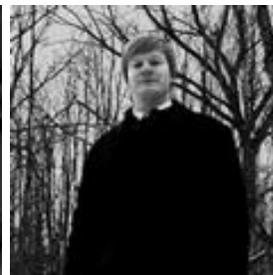
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