

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

RECOGNIZING UNDERREPRESENTED COMPOSERS IN THE WIND BAND
COMMUNITY: FOSTERING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (DEI)

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Interview of Alex Shapiro (September 17, 2021)

Joseph Bello:

I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to do this.

Alex Shapiro:

Happy to talk to you.

Joseph Bello:

Well, let me start out with my first question to you, and I don't want to ask a lot of questions that you've already talked about in the book. What changes have you seen in the last twenty years regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion in the wind band medium?

Alex Shapiro:

A lot, because when I started—let's say, using Midwest as a starting point—I started going to the Midwest Clinic in 2008, and there were not many diverse composers either attending, or represented in the repertoire. Frankly, there weren't that many composers attending, in general—not the way they are now—and pretty much almost all of the composers were White men. What I've really noticed, and I think the most significant thing, is that we've normalized diversity by making it part of the conversation. In other words, over the past few years DEI issues have been the norm to talk about. We've raised a huge amount of awareness I think, among conductors who are curating and programming, as well as with educators for that matter: for instance, what they choose to use as examples in the classroom, and things like that.

I think the changes happened once we all made a concerted effort to really start talking about diversity, and to place it at the forefront of people's considerations when they just hadn't thought about these things before. I think I used the metaphor in the book that it's like swimming in water that's the same temperature as your body, or being outside on a day when the weather is just perfect: you're not even aware of the temperature, right? And I think that's true if you're, let's say, a White male band director surrounded by all the people you know, and all the people you normally program who also happen to be White men, and you don't notice that anything's missing [*laughs*] because it just looks normal, right? I think it's only when you don't look like that, that you kind of notice...and then you want to—you know, in a positive way—bring it to people's attention. So in the past twenty years, that's what's been going on. Especially, I'd say in the past eight years or so there's really been quite a push, and it's beautiful to see. I say this in the book, I'm pretty sure, and I state on the Programming Resources webpage I started a few years ago which you may have seen, that very, very, few people are intentionally discriminatory. Most people in our field are wonderful, and it's just a matter of bringing things like this to their attention. We all need to have things pointed out to us about our blind spots, so I've found the process really enjoyable.

Joseph Bello:

I think once the rest of the field starts looking like all colors and all races and all genders, then

things will start to click. I play in a community band with Dr. Thompson in the North Shore, and I was looking around during rehearsal last week and I thought, everyone here is White. You know everyone here is White, and it is like you said: we don't really think about it because everybody looks the same.

Alex Shapiro:

That's right, everybody looks the same, exactly. Mallory and I don't know each other but...

Joseph Bello:

She needs to know you!

Alex Shapiro:

I walked up to talk to her, rather shyly, years ago at Midwest...I went up to say hi to her and maybe blurted out one, "hello you're wonderful" kind of thing, but that was it. We never really intersected, but I'm a great admirer of what she does, and I point to her as one of the role models for women on the podium in the band field. There's a number of them, as you read in the book... Courtney's chapter is great. I always saw Mallory as just getting out there and doing her thing. Ultimately, gender, race, color, sexual orientation, all that stuff has nothing to do with us as musicians. I think until we start to even things out and normalize diversity, we'll end up having to talk about it in a way that, frankly, we should never even have to talk about. It should be like, "some people like chocolate ice cream, some people prefer strawberry ice cream." That has nothing to do with what kind of a conductor or composer you are, and yet it's entered the conversation as being a huge thing, like, "oh you better make sure you've got the strawberry people, and the chocolate people, and the lavender flavored ice cream people in there." Who knew?

For me, growing up, I never ever thought about, "oh my gosh, I'm a woman (or a girl at that time) and I want to be a composer!?" It never dawned on me that this was an issue. I grew up in New York City, with progressive parents in a progressive environment, so it just wasn't on my radar that it was weird to be female and go into composing. Only after I got into it and saw what was going on, and saw other people's reactions, did I surmise after the fact, "oh, I guess this is unusual." I never thought about it. *[laughs]* I just wanted to do my best work and become excellent at what I did, which had nothing to do with anything other than talent and grit. I would say that's probably true for everybody in the field.

Joseph Bello:

Yes. Okay, my next question is which underrepresented composers do you feel are the strongest players at this time and why? Besides yourself...*[laughs]*

Alex Shapiro:

Well, I think it's interesting because I don't know everybody, I know a lot of people obviously, but I don't know everybody!

In terms of “strongest players,” you may be looking at them as composers with important musical things to express on the stage, and you may also be looking at them as activists and spokespeople. I’ve always been someone—long before I entered the band world in my mid-forties—who’s been an “in the trenches” activist. While I was living in Los Angeles and composing for film and TV, I was very active in civil liberties in the 90s: I was vice president of the board of directors of the ACLU of Southern California (a thirty thousand member chapter), and I did a lot of public speaking for them. So whether I’m active with social issues, or with marine sciences, or with the many music advocacy organizations on whose boards and committees I serve, I’ve always been an activist who’s in “the field” doing “the things.” So I tend to respond to and pay most attention to other people who I see out there raising their voices and advocating for others.

I always admire colleagues who are trying to help, choosing to be an activist in one way or another in our field, whether it has to do with DEI stuff, or music, or just bringing people into the field. Those are the ones that I look at and go, “yay;” those are the ones that I think are very strong members of our field because it’s ideal—not imperative, but ideal—when someone who has a terrific musical voice also chooses to be visible as a spokesperson for change and for broadening the scope of what the music world looks like. I think it’s easy on social media; you’re probably on Facebook, you see a lot of the usual suspects, and I would say many of them, not all of them, but many of them are agents of change, shall we say. The more visible that they are, especially the women and the people of color, the better for our field because—I keep coming back to this word—it normalizes it. No one should even have to talk about it, or think about it. It’s just like, you look at a single concert program and maybe there’s pieces by composers who are living and those who are dead, composers of all colors and genders, a variety of musical styles, and it’s just how it should be.

Joseph Bello:

I agree. Thank you. So, as a composer what do you feel is the weakest component DEI programming? What do you think needs to be done in the future?

Alex Shapiro:

Okay, the thing that first comes to mind: the thing NOT to do is to ghettoize concerts. You know: it’s February...let’s do a concert of Black composers, it’s March...let’s program only women, or whichever month we all belong to: who knows!

Joseph Bello:

Right.

Alex Shapiro:

It’s just become kind of laughable. Even though the curators creating these compartmentalized concerts are well-meaning, unless they’re including diverse composers on every one of their concerts, it’s just bad. It was actually worse years ago: I know that at the beginning of my career, back when I was doing a lot of chamber music—long before I entered the band world—it was...ugh. I resented these all-women programs that I’d be included on. I was always delighted to be included in anything because I was trying to grow my career, but I was definitely not convinced

that the most effective way to normalize women composers is to segregate us from all the other men!

Many years ago of course, people were curating for all-women concerts from a tiny subset of the repertoire. Purely statistically, if you're not programming for consistent musical excellence, but instead you're programming based on body parts.... you may not be putting together the most compelling concert. It's such an ironic mistake, because a weak concert can backfire on the participants and further propel prejudices against women's music.

These days the pool is much broader, so the quality of such a concert has a stronger chance of being better than I think it was years ago. However, I still believe that those concerts are a mistake, unless the person programming is putting a woman, and a person of color, and a three legged ferret, and whomever, on every one of their programs throughout the year. Then, if you're doing that and then also want to highlight, "and by the way, here's the music of this group, or that group," okay I'll buy that. But more often than not, it's tokenism, and it's just insulting. I can definitely speak for my peers: many of us have talked about this. Yes, it's well intentioned. But that doesn't mean it's helpful.

I remember a conductor came up to me a few years ago after I spoke about this publicly on a Midwest clinic, and he felt really quite crest fallen. He was an older White guy and a very good person, and he said, "oh you know, but, but, but, but, you know I've been doing this..." and I tried to assure him, "listen you're well intentioned, it's great, now you just need to spread it out throughout your season, not just cordon off all the non-White, non-male composers to one or two programs!" Again, people are good humans in our field; they're just not always aware. I think that sometimes they're also trying to make sort of an easy, quick fix, like, "you're right, in the past three years I haven't programmed any women...maybe one or two in three years: now I'll fix that. Here's one entire program of women. But just one."

Joseph Bello:
Right.

Alex Shapiro:
One night, one time, you know....no, no, no, no, no.

Alex Shapiro:
So, that is the biggest thing that needs to be fixed in terms of psyche and approach, in my opinion.

Joseph Bello:
I absolutely agree with you. That's kind of what my project focus is...how do we include everyone?

Alex Shapiro:
Right.

Joseph Bello:

All underrepresented composers, and I think it really needs to be done throughout a series, through the entire year.

Alex Shapiro:

We're back to that word...normalize it. When you include the music of a Black person, and a woman, and a gay person, and that talented three-legged ferret on this concert and that concert throughout your season without making a big hurrah about it, you're programming them of course because their music is terrific. That's the first and foremost thing, and they just happened to be Black, female, gay, an adorable furball, whatever. That's the way to do it, and it just means becoming more aware of the mostly living composers that are out there. I mean, obviously there are many diverse composers who have passed away, but their works are a smaller percentage of the available repertoire than those such composers who are currently among us.

And this fact raises another point that isn't spoken about very much. The bulk of the diverse composers in the band world happen to be living, which means if you're talking about diversity and living composers, you're talking about new music... contemporary music—like Alex Shapiro writing twelve-tone pieces once in a while. This is less of a problem in the band world than in the orchestra world, because the band world embraces new works far more openly.

Joseph Bello:

I love it!

Alex Shapiro:

And sometimes it'll be a really fun, weird, uptempo bop, like "Tight Squeeze," and other times it'll make you want to slit your wrists with grief, like "Breathe," one of my recent ones. When you get a living composer who's someone who may be outside of the traditional "band sound box," you know you're going to get some very new sounding music. And so part of the issue with some conductors is their fear of, or resistance to, contemporary music.

Joseph Bello:

"Oh no, I don't think the audience is going to like this...!"

Alex Shapiro:

Exactly! This is more of a problem with orchestras, which is why a lot of us don't even bother pursuing them. If they want to come to us great, but they're still not terribly welcoming to either diversity or new music— or maybe in the other order: probably new music and then diversity. Yes, there are more than a few absolutely terrific, broad-thinking orchestras, of course, that have been doing wonderful programming for many years. But the majority of them, not so much.

Joseph Bello:

Who is the music director and the board of directors, and yeah they're White...

Alex Shapiro:

Yeah, they're afraid of losing patronage. They're quite short sighted, because what they don't understand is if that patronage got a chance to hear what they were being "protected" from, they would actually like a lot of it. Because the other problem is—and this is a deeper problem with audiences in general—is that so many people literally think that new music sounds like what it sounded like a hundred years ago with Schoenberg. For some reason we're stuck...I don't know why people don't realize that contemporary music these days has every color and style and sound in the book. It's pan-tonal, it's pan-genre, it's everything. It would be so much fun if audiences knew what we were all doing here in our rooms: they would probably like it. I've experienced this firsthand when I've curated or emceed concerts of new music for older audiences. It's been a joy, and they come up to me afterwards and say, "oh my gosh we had no idea, this is so wonderful!" So, it becomes a huge failure of the person curating, whether it's the artistic director, or the conductor, or whomever when they elect not to program the music of their time.

So, there's a long winded response to what you're talking about, but we're on the same page about this, and this is all so simple to fix. Exposure: expose your audiences! You don't have to start with some challenging "nail on chalkboard" piece, you don't have to start with "Breathe" (a ten minute piece, seven minutes of which are painfully slow and grief-filled, and not necessarily going to be an audience grabber for a first time listener to new music). Don't start with "Breathe"—start with "Tight Squeeze." Or the equivalent from the catalogs of a great many of my wonderful peers!

Joseph Bello:
Right!

Alex Shapiro:

Yeah, I mean bring your audience into the fold by showing them the kind of new face of what new music is. Again, this is the reason composers love wind band: because you guys love us, obviously.

I can speak to this because I'm one of the weirder composers with a really weird catalog. In my twenty three band pieces to date, all but two are electroacoustic, and some of them really don't sound like they were written by the same person. I love that, and the thing that's so welcoming about wind bands is that they know that they're taking a risk with someone like me.

Some of my composer colleagues stay in a certain pocket; you know exactly what you're going get with them. Others of us not so much, and so for directors to consistently commission and welcome someone like me into the fold, where it's largely a crapshoot what they're going to get, (obviously I confer with them about what kind of piece they want, but beyond that...) that is such a joyous thing for an artist, and it's great for the arts to give someone carte blanche and to give a composer freedom and say, "here, do something for us. We trust you; we know it'll be interesting." I mean, that was literally how I got my first band commission: with someone wonderful saying literally that to me when I had no idea about the band world at all. And then I got hooked!

Joseph Bello:

Are you talking about “Homecoming?”

Alex Shapiro:

Yes, exactly, exactly: Tod Addison took a big risk on me. This was back in the days of MySpace, when MySpace was the Facebook of its time in 2007, and he contacted me there out of the blue and asked to commission me for his Army band at the time. He was in Virginia with the TRADOC band (this is before his subsequent years at West Point) and I wrote him back and was very honest, saying, “I’m totally delighted and flattered that you would reach out to me with this invitation, and oh by the way, my school didn’t have a wind band, I’ve never been to wind band concert, I’ve never seen a euphonium, and I have no idea what I’m doing.”! He replied with the best response ever: “that’s why I want you: because I’ve heard your chamber music, it’s really interesting, and I think you’re going to do something really interesting for band, and oh by the way, don’t listen to what other people have been doing for band.” He literally told me that when I asked him, “what should I be studying?” He emphatically said, “don’t listen to anything!” because he wanted to preserve my voice, because he saw a spark there and he figured it could be different for larger wind ensemble. I think he was right, and he opened up a whole world to me in that exchange, taking a risk on an unknown composer who had no idea what she was doing in this genre. “Go for it and see what happens.” Wow. If every conductor would do that, we would have a very happy world. And conversely if composers—and I try to push composers off the creative ledge a little bit—if composers would take more risks and feel the freedom they have, and think and hear a little more expansively...they might be pleasantly surprised. Some of them are so “inside the box,” writing pieces that sell...but pieces that sound like they could’ve been written forty years ago, fifty, sixty years ago.

Joseph Bello:

We already have all that.

Alex Shapiro:

We have all of that, and I gently say that to them when they come to me and want to show me pieces—often younger composers who are still finding their way. I’m always encouraging them to get out of whatever box they’re in—that they think they have to do their voicings a certain way and make a piece sound a certain way—I’m like, “throw that out the window, free yourself up, look for whatever that personal voice is going to be for you.” Everybody’s got a unique voice, but I think a lot of composers in the band field are still tethered to a very old sound. It’s a beautiful sound, but as you say Joey, we already have that, and we need to push the art forward. That doesn’t mean going wild and doing something weird just for the sake of doing something weird: one must find their own voice, whatever that is. I think a lot of composers are timid about really settling in on what they want to hear and what their voice is. They feel like they must keep it more contained, and that’s just not true. That’s one of the big messages I like to share with people when we talk about diversity: not only, “you are welcome, whatever you look like, you are welcome under the tent,” but also, “feel free to express yourself.” I’m in this niche, this weird little niche, and I’ve been happy in it and doing well. I mean, I’m in this candy shop where I can

create anything I want. I'm trying to get my peers to feel that same freedom.

Joseph Bello:

“Homecoming” really speaks to me because I'm retired Air Force.

Alex Shapiro:

Thank you!

Joseph Bello:

Thank you, I was in the USAF Band for almost twenty years as principal euphonium. I wish my commander knew you. I think the military music needs that opening, and more breadth there because it's so stuck.

Alex Shapiro:

What I've experienced with the musicians in all the Armed Forces Bands, they are just so amazing; you must be quite a player. That's fantastic that you did that for almost twenty years, that's impressive. Which band were you with?

Joseph Bello:

The United States Air Force Band in Washington, D.C.

Alex Shapiro:

Wow, that's very impressive.

Joseph Bello

I was young, yeah.

Joseph Bello:

My last question is more specific to grade levels three and four in the band world. What are some of the challenges writing for that grade level, and what are some of the highlights that you've had for writing for younger bands?

Alex Shapiro:

I've done a lot of that, as you know, and I love it. Yeah, well you see, you've done it on the conducting side and you know what that's about. I am not a conductor, and you have many skill sets as a player and a conductor that I don't possess. But I try to think like a conductor and educator if I'm writing for younger people. I put my “conductor/educator” hat on, and pretend to be you guys! I'm trying. I partially failed with “Paper Cut” because it was my first piece for students. Here's one thing I've since learned: don't give middle schoolers very high, top of the range notes to hold for long periods of time! The poor flutes and clarinets! I now tell them they can play those an octave lower unless they can really get the note. I just didn't know. You learn

while you're doing this. I have a secret weapon because when I'm doing a piece with an audio track, I don't have to have anybody playing in the stratosphere. I have frequencies I can create, with different timbres and different textures that don't sound like flutes or clarinets. The audio track can pick up the slack harmonically, so I can keep the students more centered. In the fourteen years, whatever it's been that I've been doing this, whatever the number is, I've seen the benefits of using tracks with a wind band not only artistically, but educationally.

I think I've gotten much better at knowing how to manipulate the balance between the live and digital elements, but I'm always challenging myself to make sure to write something as sophisticated for the kids as I would for adults. In other words, I'm never writing for them as young students. I think that students, even middle schoolers, are really sophisticated these days. The game music—some of my friends write game music—it's amazing stuff. The movie and TV music, etc., etc.—obviously kids are inundated with good music all the time, and there's no reason to dumb it down for band.

One of my biggest pet peeves that colleagues who Zoom with me often hear me sound off on, is how can it be that someone is often seventeen years old before they see a mixed or compound meter, like $5/4$ or $7/8$, or $7/4$? I mean, that's crazy. And so this past year—at the same time I was finishing my big new symphony “Suspended,” which is obviously a high-level piece—I took a little break for a couple weeks and I wrote a short piece called “Count to Ten” which is a 0.5, beginner work. It has students playing in every meter up to $9/4$, and it's totally playable. Because hey, if you can count to ten, the you certainly can count to nine.

Joseph Bello:

You know we're expected to play in all keys, so why not all time signatures?

Alex Shapiro:

And why not from the very beginning?

I understand it's hard to play in all keys as you're learning your instrument. You only have a few good notes at the very beginning, and they're not that good, but you're trying right? The one thing you already know going into day one, you know how to count. There is no beginning music student that does not know how to count, so this fear, and the limitations that it brings musically to keep avoiding five or seven... this irrational fear is what keeps everything in this god-awful plodding, boring pulse. I hate this music. I'm amazed anybody gets to the next level in clarinet or euphonium or baritone (see? I've learned about the baritone. I wouldn't have known what a baritone was fourteen years ago!). How does anybody get inspired enough playing this dreck to want to keep going, and yet they do, thank goodness. But if it were me as a teenager, I would do such an eye roll at this music. If I was that twelve- or thirteen year old in middle school band being presented with “Hot Cross Buns” or whatever, ick. But, a decent composer can use the same limited notes of “Hot Cross Buns” and make a piece really interesting.

Joseph Bello:
5/4.

Alex Shapiro:
5/4, there you go.

Joseph Bello:
Yeah.

Alex Shapiro:
So as I mentioned, this is my big crusade right now: change meters and use different meters and get people comfortable with that. I mean the last piece I did was kind of a house EDM thing called “Off the Edge” for a grade 2.5. That was just fine, it was a kind of a dance/pop track from the nineties or something, on purpose. Straight 4/4. I don't have to crusade on every piece, but most of my pieces sneak something unusual in. I've got a grade 3 coming up and I'm going to be doing something interesting and very textural and weird with it. It involves balloons.

Joseph Bello:
I can't wait!

Alex Shapiro:
It's gonna be fun, but I think the biggest challenge—well it's not a challenge to me, but maybe it's a challenge to other people— is to always respect younger players. Don't dumb down to them, don't think that they're stupid and incapable. They are capable of anything you put in front of them, and they will rise to the occasion. If you keep protecting them from 7/4 then they'll freak out when they're seventeen and see it for the first time in a piece, right? They're going to say, “we trip up on this measure all the time because we've never seen it.” But if they've been seeing it since the time they were thirteen, no problem.

Joseph Bello:
Well, is there anything else you would like to add?

Alex Shapiro:
Yeah: it's champions like you Joey, that move the peg forward—and I'm not saying that, you know, to kiss your ass. I'm saying that because it's real. When I think about the people that started me off, that had faith in me, it was band directors. And, I think that most or all of them were White guys! Ha! It doesn't matter what anybody looks like, it matters what we think, right? I've got White male friends who are sort of apologetic and feeling like they shouldn't even be speaking up on behalf of diversity, and I'm like, “no, no, no, my goodness, you absolutely should be speaking up and working with everybody else to effect change.” Change the tone and timbre of the field for the better, and that's what you're doing. That's what so many people that you and I know are doing. It's so important! We're all in this together, it's a human rights issue, and it's a

human sociological issue. It doesn't have to do with any barriers—and so you know, my colleagues and I are “inclusivity to the nth degree” in terms of whose voices are welcome. We're all fighting this fight, to make sure that the upcoming repertoire is as wonderful as the world around us. So, thank you, Joey—that's what I have to add.

Joseph Bello:

Thanks once again for all your poignant remarks and time today! I hope to meet you at Midwest!