



**Editor's note:** *This feature originally appeared in the Journal of the International Association of Women in Music (Vol. 11, no. 1) and is reprinted here with their kind permission. We found it to be thought-provoking reading, and hope you agree. Its concluding portion, discussing Alex's views of a composer's connection to audience and society will be included in the January-February 2006 edition of Sounding Board.*

## Compose, Communicate and Connect Part One

By Alex Shapiro

Composing is a lot like making love. We're trying to please ourselves. We're hoping to please at least one other person. And we are communicating. Passionately.

I compose to communicate.

I'm fascinated by the process: the arc from the first notes on the score pad, to the performers' energy in sharing those gestures, to the audience's experience of the new music. I call this the magic triangle: the unspoken relationship between author, interpreter and listener. When it's right, the music is transcended, time is no longer ordinary, and we're taken to surreal and sometimes ecstatic places. What a joyous life this is.

It is impossible to write about music, just as it is impossible to describe how something tastes. Like lovemaking, these are sensual experiences that must be experienced firsthand.

But I can write about the concepts that influence me as I compose, sharing what has been meaningful and hoping that at least a few of these ideas might resonate with you as well.

### Background

I was born in 1962 and raised in Manhattan, the quintessential New York City kid of two New York City intellectuals who surrounded me with their love for art, music and Zabar's pickled herring. My youth was spent in every museum, ballet theater and concert hall, often alone, since I knew few other adolescents with similar interests. With money I made from baby-sitting, I became adept at buying standing room tickets to the Metropolitan Opera for three dollars and then snagging an abandoned orchestra seat at the first intermission. Thanks to appearing older than my years, I spent a lot of time at jazz clubs such as the Village Vanguard and the Blue Note, and, being the 1970s, I could also be found at Studio 54 and CBGB's. The New York scene was unique, and the diversity of music I experienced as a teenager led to the diversity of how I compose as an adult.

My parents adored classical music and our apartment walls rang with recordings of Brahms, Beethoven, Mahler and the like. Music seemed as natural a language to me as English, and I began composing when I was nine. Growing up in New York gave me access to an excellent education: I attended both the Ethical Culture Fieldston School and Juilliard Pre-College, as a composition student of Craig Shuler and Bruce Adolphe. Immediately after graduation, I enrolled in the Manhattan School of Music, where I was a student of Ursula Mamlok and John Corigliano. The months between each school year were also focused: I spent my 15th summer studying composition at Mannes College of Music with Leo Edwards, and my 16th and 17th summers drenched in the wonders of Colorado and the Aspen Music School and



Alex Shapiro

## Forum Notes

### Minnesota Orchestra Composer Institute Finalists

Eight finalists for this year's *Minnesota Orchestra Reading Sessions and Composer Institute* have been selected from a total of 174 entries from 39 states. The eight selected composer are:

- J. Anthony Allen**  
(Minneapolis, Minn.)
- Mark Dancigers**  
(New Haven, Conn.)
- Matthew Fields**  
(Ann Arbor, Mich.)
- Ed Martin**  
(Urbana, Ill.)
- Norbert Palej**  
(Ithaca, N.Y.)
- Sean Shepherd**  
(Ithaca, N.Y.)
- Reynold Tharp**  
(Claremont, Calif.)
- Zhou Tian**  
(Philadelphia, Pa.)

Under the guidance of composer **Aaron Jay Kernis**, these eight will have their works read by the Minnesota Orchestra. The orchestra's Music Director **Osmo Vänskä** will conduct the sessions along with conductor **David Alan Miller**.

The reading sessions, free and open to the public, will be held on stage at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis on Tuesday, May 9, 2006 (10 a.m. and 1:35 p.m.), and on Thursday, May 11, 2006 (2 p.m.). For more information, visit the Orchestra's calendar at: [www.mnorch.org](http://www.mnorch.org).

*“Compose, Communicate and Connect” continued from front cover*

Festival. I was a composition student of Michael Czajkowski, attending master classes with everyone from Elliott Carter to Erich Leinsdorf to Freddie Hubbard. My first paid commission came that summer at age 16, from a generous and far too trusting brass quartet, as did several performances and local radio broadcasts of other new pieces. My passion and I had found each other.

In addition to discovering a life in music, I realized that the summers in Aspen exposed me to what a life in nature could be like. Between composing, practicing, rehearsing and attending classes, I took every opportunity to explore the shimmering environment. I had never seen so much sky at one time. Whitewater rafting and backpacking thrilled me, and experiencing the wilderness around Aspen was life-changing, both musically and spiritually. I moved to Los Angeles in 1983, have lived at the beach in Malibu since the early 90s. When I am not composing I might be ocean kayaking, sailing, rollerblading or downhill skiing. Having grown up as a completely non-athletic city kid, those months in Colorado unlocked a door to the joys of the physical world and to observations that deeply influence my music.

### **Connecting the Dots**

Aside from a couple of private students and a few guest lectures each year, I do not teach. But the longer I compose, the more I appreciate my own mentors. My primary composition teacher at Manhattan School of Music (MSM) was Ursula Mamlok. Ursula is a gifted composer with an enormous heart, and lessons at her home were insightful journeys of understanding form and development. Ursula taught me the intricacies of the arc of a piece and how to express myself consistently, and I absorbed her quiet tenacity.

I also had classes and private lessons with John Corigliano, who was on faculty at MSM at the time. From him, I gained some extremely valuable tools that are worth detailing here.

John taught me how to hear and compose from the deepest part of my instinct by avoiding the use of staff paper and piano until much later in the writing process. He suggested that long before touching a page of manuscript paper, I lie down, relax and simply hear – in detail or not – the piece I intended to put together. Once I had a sense of the energy and movement of the music, the next step was to pick up a blank pad and some colored pencils and create a visual representation of the music as it came to life in my head. John suggested following this free, abstract drawing by writing a narrative of what transpires during the piece, and using a list of adjectives and adverbs to guide what I am searching to reveal emotionally. Only after all of these

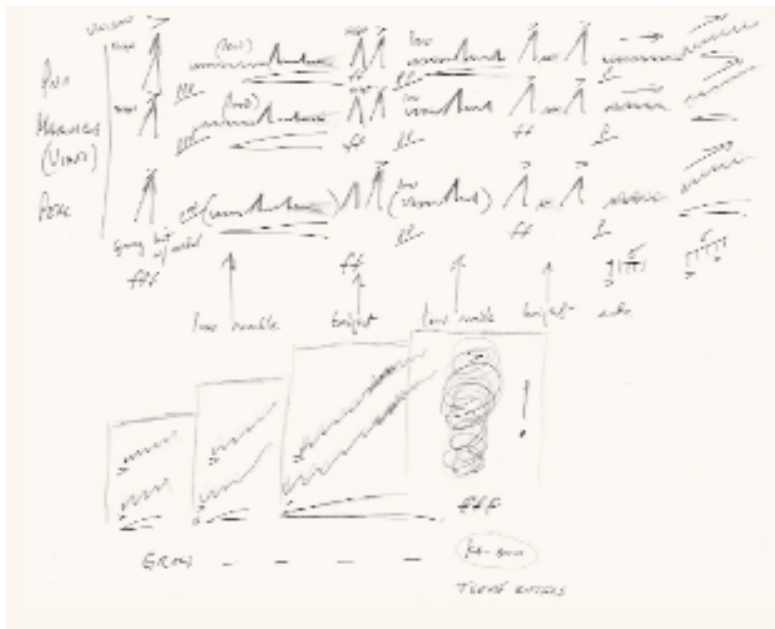
steps should I approach the keyboard or score pad and commit to musical notation. This was priceless advice, and has freed me at times when I feel daunted by the prospect of putting lots of little black dots on endless reams of paper. I have always been especially verbal and visual. I see intricate, colored patterns of music in my head as I listen, and this synesthesia may explain why these concepts so easily became part of my writing process.

There is a constant struggle between the right and left hemispheres of the brain, each working at cross purposes to the other. Traditionally, the moment one side has a Great Idea, the other side needs to notate it, thus removing the Great Idea and catapulting us into the world of the Great Math Problem. The brilliance of Corigliano’s method lies in detaching the composer from this difficult sleight of hand, allowing the right brain to take over and flow in whatever abstract way it wishes, focusing on the raw truth of the music and leaving the translation process for a later time.

These techniques proved to be essential a couple of years ago, when, in a moment of supreme klutziness, I managed to break not one, but both of my feet simultaneously, in three places. I am nothing, if not thorough. I looked like “Nancy Sinatra: The Dark Side,” wrapped in two black boot-like casts and barely able to sit up, much less walk. The timing of this misadventure paralleled a looming deadline that could not wait the several weeks it would take until I could return to my original upright and locked position. In my reclining state, I was already at step one of John’s method. I proceeded to allow my mind to compose the opening theme of a piece for piano, marimba, vibraphone and metal percussion titled *At the Abyss*, which I now view as one of the strongest works in my catalog. By the time I could sit up at my computer many days later, the drawings and meter indications I had created in bed served as a paint-by-numbers map. Knowing the details of my musical intent, I found it easy to put the notes in place.

### **Connecting with Myself**

By my second year at MSM, I had begun scoring documentaries for local cable TV shows after taking the only class offered at that time for commercial music; it was taught by Roy Eaton, music director of the Benton & Bowles ad agency. I learned about click tracks and the basics of scoring to picture, and began assisting Roy in some of his commercial jingle recording sessions. I really enjoyed the chameleon-like aspects of writing commercial music. Inspired by Corigliano’s success with his striking film score to *Altered States*, I decided that given the kind of music I write: not academic “uptown,” not minimal “downtown,” but just



*Alex Shapiro's composition "At the Abyss" as it appears in her original rough drawing.*

"mid-town," I would have a better chance of having a career in film and TV scoring than I would in concert music. I also believed that my music might reach more people through the media than on the concert stage.

In 1983 I happened to meet a producer on a trip to Los Angeles, and three months later I moved there and scored my first commercial video documentary. It was an eye-opening experience: in the conservatory, I could get away with writing a mere ten minutes of music in an entire year; we were coddled as artists. Here, in the working world, I was expected to have more than 30 minutes of music written and recorded in ten days. I was terrified of missing the deadline, wondering just how all those new notes planned to appear. But amazingly, they did, and I delivered the tracks on time. Not that the cues in question were anything close to brilliant, but they were all used and the check cleared. It was a breakthrough in my self-perception that has served me well over time as I have faced one deadline after another.

Fast-forward 15 years. I had been working steadily, scoring average, nondescript documentaries, corporate videos, TV pilots and feature films. All were low budget, most were low profile, but it was a modest living. One year in the mid-90s was particularly hard: I had been hired to score three independent films, and one by one, each lost its financing and shut down production. I went without working for nine months.

On a rainy afternoon with nothing better to do, I pulled out some old scores from my conservatory days that I had not looked at in years. A light went on in my spirit: I remembered why I became a composer in the first place. I realized that I was tired of having my creative life tethered to other people's business goals; I just wanted to compose. I began reworking an old piece from the stack, and it was performed not long afterward. Encouraged, I abruptly decided to shift my career to what I truly love, and against the warnings of some who felt I should have my head examined, I began to reinvent myself as a composer of concert music. Unfortunately, none of the music I had written since coming to Los Angeles was relevant to the world I was choosing to enter. I set out to build a catalog of chamber works composed from the heart. I was 37 years old and beginning from scratch.

The combination of California's lack of tradition, with its numerous cultural influences, makes it a wonderful place to compose. Especially in Los Angeles, there is a sense that anything can be presented and judged on its own merit rather than held to the Eurocentric standards I grew up with on the East Coast. I see evidence of this freedom in the wildly diverse styles of many colleagues, and it inspires greater creativity within my own work. I had the perfect environment in which to find my voice.

### **Connecting with Musicians**

Since the late 1990s, my happiest focus has been composing music for small ensembles and soloists. Blame it on my

for Teresa McCollough  
**At the Abyss**  
 1. Observe

Alex Shapiro

$\text{♩} = 112+$  (*very fast*)

Tam Tam hit with butt end of stick, on the lip (side), parallel  
*mf* (rate)

Marimba, Vibes  
*mf* *an intense and ominous rumble*

Piano  
 $\text{♩} = 112+$  (*very fast*)  
*mf* *an intense and ominous rumble*

The image shows the first few measures of the score for 'At the Abyss'. It is written for Percussion, Marimba/Vibes, and Piano. The Percussion part features a Tam Tam hit with a specific instruction. The Marimba/Vibes part is marked with a dynamic of *mf* and described as 'an intense and ominous rumble'. The Piano part is also marked with a dynamic of *mf* and described as 'an intense and ominous rumble'. The tempo is indicated as  $\text{♩} = 112+$  (*very fast*). The score includes various musical notations such as rests, notes, and dynamic markings.

The opening measures of the finished "At the Abyss" score. An audio excerpt of this piece can be heard at via Alex Shapiro's website: [www.alexshapiro.org](http://www.alexshapiro.org).

having been an only child, but the intimacy of the relationships between small groupings of instruments and people is very compelling to me. I also work extensively with electronics, having transitioned from the primitive gear of the 1970s to the soon-to-be primitive wonders of today's world. Yet even in my electronic pieces, I often feature a live soloist playing against the prerecorded track to breathe humanness into an otherwise digital output.

Perhaps unlike the stereotypical only child, one of the things I enjoy the most about com-posing chamber music is the joy of collaborating with musicians and sharing ideas. Although my pieces are through-composed and my commissions are delivered in their initially conceived, completed state, for me, this is where the fun part of the process really begins.

When a composer has the great luck to work with exceptional musicians who are usually very friendly as well, an astonishing amount of discovery comes from experiencing a new piece together. I'm fairly meticulous in my phrasings, dynamics and tempo markings, yet I view them similarly to the suggested serving photo on a cereal box. Sure, you can put the flakes in a bowl with milk, but there are lots of other things you can do with them, too. So I listen carefully to the comments and interpretations

of the players, and often incorporate changes which, while usually subtle, are things I would never have considered myself because I had been limited by hearing the passages the same way repeatedly in my head as I composed. In the midst of our writing process, we risk losing a perch perspective as we become entwined with our initial ideas. That comfortable familiarity doesn't always equate with our best work. We need to find fresh ears with which to listen to our own instincts and to judge them honestly.

Ironically, it's that necessary act of judging that can get us into trouble early on in the composition of a piece. Creative paralysis – writer's block on one level or another – usually stems not from a lack of good ideas but from the fear that the idea we commit to the score pad won't be the right one, or the one that's perfect. But if we judge our output at the very moment we are trying to create the gestures, we're sabotaging ourselves. We can never compose with the conscious intent of writing something wonderful; that result is just an unexpected by-product. Likewise, it is paralyzing to expect every passage we scribble down to be a good one. I find freedom in the unlimited supply of blank manuscript pages or new computer sequences, allowing me to keep trying out ideas until the one that really holds my attention appears. Remove the internal pressure to be

perfect, and the notes suddenly flow. Write first, ask questions later!

One of the differences between authors and composers is that the latter usually have no editor. Writer friends complain bitterly to me about their work being ripped apart by those who might have been better suited for a career in a meat department. Meanwhile, a composer's offering placed on the music stand is often viewed as an inviolate, nearly sacred artifact. I'm always amazed at the humble reluctance of the very musicians learning a behemoth of a piece to make suggestions to the composer that would make the music more playable.

And conversely, I am appalled by the arrogance of some composers who immediately blame the musician, not their own ill-conceived concept, if something in their piece isn't working. I encourage feedback from players who will be premiering a new work of mine. It's my most naked and vulnerable time, but the music is still malleable and can be gently shaped a little more if needed. The rewards are enormous.

I've enjoyed an especially fruitful collaboration with pianist Teresa McCollough, who has an innately great sense of how a piece of music should flow. At her suggestion, I made significant improvements to the first movement of my *Sonata for Piano*, which she then recorded in 2000 for her "New American Piano Music" CD on the Forum's *innova* label. Teresa offered no particular thematic or rhythmic advice; it wasn't that she didn't care for the material, but that she knew it had to be organized differently. I knew it, too, but needed someone to give me a push. Talking openly with me about the possibility of refocusing energy in a score that seemed too diffuse, her frankness was a gift, and the revised movement subsequently became her favorite of the entire piece.

Three years later on a new commission for Teresa titled *At the Abyss*, which opens her 2004 "Music for Hammers and Sticks" CD for *innova*, no rewriting was necessary. But Teresa's guidance helped me cut two excess pages from the first movement. Again, the adjustments made an enormous difference in the success of the music, and I would not have thought to make them without someone else's input.

Another rewarding collaboration has been with the Los Angeles Flute Quartet, for whom I wrote a 2003 piece courtesy of a commission award from the California Association of Professional Music Teachers. There are challenges to expanding the sounds of homogeneous ensembles, and knowing how adventurous the quartet members are, I decided to treat the foursome as a unified,

primordial creature oozing across the sonic floor in a piece titled *Bioplasm*. It is a one-movement work in which I use many extended techniques in my quest for a wall of undulating textures. After devising a few ideas with special demands to create these unusual sounds, I asked the quartet if I might run some passages by them to check that everything would be playable before I committed to finishing each section. The resulting afternoon was as filled with laughter as it was with notes, and everything I heard in my head worked with the flutes. We conferred on some tricky notation, and I went home to safely complete the piece. But I would never have wanted to spring these sounds – some unique – on the flutists without their input. I received the most wonderful compliment a composer could hope for when the quartet told me that there was nothing in the repertoire like this, and that I had expanded their sense of what they were capable of playing. For me, that's the pinnacle of a great collaboration: I could not have composed the music without feedback from those bringing it to life. The 2004 recording appears on their CD, "Above and Beyond," and will also be featured on my own upcoming disc.

Pieces for acoustic instruments are not fully realized without the players to launch the sounds into the air, and I feel a commitment to be responsive to the realities musicians face as they take on a new work. In my sonata for bassoonist Carolyn Beck, *Of Breath and Touch*, I discovered that blue is not the natural coloring of a wind player's face. And thanks to pianist Deon Nielsen Price, I became far more adept at planning page turns for those musicians unfortunate enough not to have been born with three hands. And always, there is a constant challenge in translating the amorphous gestures I hear in my head into notation that will allow other humans to convey them to listeners. The smallest details can have the greatest effect on how our music sounds to the public. Honoring and respecting the musicians who give our written notes their ultimate meaning is a large part of this delightful process . . .

*To be continued in the January/February 2006 issue of Sounding Board*

-- Composer **Alex Shapiro** lives and works in Malibu, California, and serves as the President of the Board of Directors of ACF Los Angeles. Audio excerpts of each of the pieces discussed, as well as a complete list of her works, can be found on her website: [www.alexshapiro.org](http://www.alexshapiro.org). Alex welcomes readers' emails at: [alex@alexshapiro.org](mailto:alex@alexshapiro.org)



## AMERICAN COMPOSERS FORUM

Composer **Daniel Kellogg** (left) and Philadelphia Orchestra percussionist **Chris Devinney** (right) at Verizon Hall on November 16, 2005, after a rehearsal of “Ben.”



Photo: Paul Mange Johansen

## News from Our Chapters

### Daniel Kellogg and “Ben” in Philadelphia

By Paul Mange  
Johansen

One year ago, Christoph Eschenbach, the music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, selected **Daniel Kellogg**, a 29-year-old composer, to write a new symphonic work to commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1706-2006) of the birth of a famous Philadelphian, Benjamin Franklin.

Kellogg’s selection was the result of a nationwide **Benjamin Franklin Commissioning Competition** organized by The Philadelphia Orchestra and the Philadelphia Chapter of the American Composers Forum. Commissioning a symphonic work in honor of Franklin had become part of the City of Philadelphia’s year-long 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. More than 120 composers from around the country applied for the commission. The Philadelphia Orchestra premiered “Ben,” Kellogg’s new composition, on Friday, November 18, 2005.

Despite an impressive series of awards and a growing body of works in his catalog, Kellogg, now an assistant professor in the College of Music at the University of Colorado at Boulder, confessed to being overwhelmed by the prospect of translating the life of Franklin into a symphonic work. “I was in awe of all that he did,” said Kellogg. “I wanted my music to capture his curiosity, his flirtatiousness, sense of fun, wit, and the spirit of the amazing time in which he — and America — were born.”

Before he began composing the piece, Kellogg read “Benjamin Franklin: An American Life,” Walther Isaacson’s recent biography, and consulted with Yale historian Ellen R. Cohn, the country’s foremost scholar on Franklin’s connection to music. “The life of Ben Franklin could supply the stories for 100 operas,” notes Kellogg.

Famous as a statesman and inventor, Franklin was also a composer and instrumentalist. He invented his own version of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century novelty, the “glass armonica” (as Franklin called it) — a set of tuned and moistened glass bowls rotated on a treadle-powered spindle and played with the fingers of the performer’s hand.

Kellogg employed Franklin’s glass armonica in the third movement of “Ben,” a four movement symphonic work. Each section has its own evocative title and markings:

- “Such Merry as We Have Been” — fast and joyful;
- “Kisses in That Wind” — with a romantic lilt;
- “The Distance of Oceans” — slow and haunting; and
- “Le verre en main, chantons notre Benjamin (Glasses in hand, let’s sing to our Benjamin)” — fast and celebratory).

The “glass armonica” used in the Philadelphia Orchestra performances of Daniel Kellogg’s “Ben.”



Photo: Paul Mange Johansen

In “The Distance of Oceans,” the glass armonica was played by one of the Philadelphia Orchestra percussionists, Chris Devinney. Kellogg’s careful scoring, and the discreet employment of amplification, allowed this instrument’s

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## Compose, Communicate and Connect Part Two

By Alex Shapiro

*Editor’s note: This feature originally appeared in the Journal of the International Association of Women in Music (Vol. 11, no. 1) and is reprinted here with their kind permission and with some additional revisions by its author. Part One was included in the November-December 2005 edition of Sounding Board.*

Just as I cannot compose music for acoustic instruments without thinking of how the notes will feel under the fingers and against the bodies of the players, I rarely compose music of any kind without considering the experience of the audience, or at least, what I guess their experience might be. When a work of mine is programmed on a concert or a recording, I am given a temporary gift of time, which I can use to take the players and the listeners on a journey. And that presents me with a responsibility to consider just what kind of trip we are going to take.

In this sense I’m mildly programmatic in my approach; like a filmmaker, I want to elicit emotion. Occasionally, a dramatic event will be attached to my intent, as with a trio called *Desert Passage*, which alludes to a violent thunderstorm sweeping suddenly across an arid landscape. More often, I choose subjects like the tides in my string quintet *Current Events*, or human inadequacies, as referred to in *At the Abyss*, and use them as the emotional focus guiding me through the structure of the piece. Many listeners find program notes useful in assisting their connection with unfamiliar music, so I like to share the visions that glided across my mind as I composed.

There are inherent dichotomies in the act of writing music. Composing is mostly a private pursuit, yet the result from being sequestered is usually a very public one. If I expect an audience to not only listen to my music, but to pay money to do so, then while I’m composing I think in terms of what will communicate not only to myself, but to others.

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*“Compose, Communicate and Connect” continued from front cover*

Because I enjoy having my music performed as much as it is – a couple of times a week somewhere in the world – thoughts of those who will be hearing it are rarely far from my mind. Interestingly, this has not affected my artistic choices; even my more experimental pieces are considered tame by comparison to those of many of my peers, and so perhaps I’m just lucky that my own taste is not far afield from that of audiences. I can be true to my instincts and responsive to listeners at the same time. But regardless of the style of our music, composers have to earn the interest of our audiences. We cannot expect that simply because we deem what we do to be important, others will, too. And so just as I honor my relationships with musicians, I also believe that I have one with concertgoers as well.

There have even been times when considering the listener during the writing process has been a useful tool when I’m stuck on particular a passage. I try to distance myself from my own writing, and ask: “If I were sitting in the audience hearing this, what would I want to happen next?” This question helps get me out of myself and thinking like a listener rather than a creator. After all, once the piece is finished, listening is what will occur. The theory of composition is almost entirely meaningless to the hearts of those hearing the music.

### Shop Talk

There has never been a better time to be a composer than right now. Desktop publishing and the internet have given us access to innumerable potential audiences and musicians, as well as considerable control of our art and of the opportunities we can create. In my experience as a self-published composer, taking advantage of this has required a willingness to sleep a little less and devote some brain space to staying very organized, but because I am happy and motivated, it has been a pleasure. The reality of this life is that I spend about 40 percent of my time actually writing music and the other 60 percent on administration and publishing.

If we as composers are game for doing the additional work, publishers and record companies are no longer necessary conduits for our music to reach the public. It is up to each of us to find the market for our expression, and in exchange for our efforts we retain much more of the income from sales, performances, broadcasts and the like. If we can gather the required startup funds for a computer, printer and supplies, we can print and bind our scores, parts and promotional materials, produce our recording sessions, master, burn and package our CDs, set up distribution deals, and program websites viewed each month by thousands of potential buyers from around the world. We have the tools to disseminate our work and build international client and fan bases without gatekeepers filtering our personal vision. We need no one’s approval; all styles of music are welcome. All that is required is the belief that what we create has worth, coupled with the skills to build a resulting income stream. What a positive economic model this can be.

The downside to having so much control over our careers is that we now wear countless professional hats, and the extra work cuts into precious composing time. It’s a good thing that I have a tendency toward organization and time triage methods, because they have turned out to be crucial for this particular

career. It is not uncommon for me to be doing an adaptation of one piece, editing the score and parts of another, recording or mixing a third, and composing a fourth all at the same time, and often each piece has completely different instrumentation and mood. Add to this sending out score and CD orders, following up on emails, updating the website, and other administrative tasks, and suddenly the day is 19 hours long. No one hands us our composing time on a platter. I have learned to guard it and draw boundaries so that I can get my writing done; no amount of business will ever be more important.

In addition to all the enpixelated contact I have with the world, the importance of personal relationships in my professional life cannot be stressed enough. It seems as though with everyone I meet, no matter how significant or not, the connection has mysteriously led me toward something positive. This interconnectedness occurs in ways that are wonderfully unpredictable. I often joke that composing is a faith-based activity, because with experience, we learn to trust in our abilities to deliver intricate pieces on time. That faith also extends to the serendipity of life, and the unexpected paths presented just by being prepared and receptive. In addition to friendships with other composers and musicians, introducing myself to producers, distributors and radio music directors has been invaluable, as have been my relationships with the people at ASCAP, who always make me feel much more important to them than I think I am. They make themselves available to me and to their other composers, assisting in our careers with advice and networking. Additionally, relationships with the staff members of composer’s organizations like American Composers Forum, American Music Center and Chamber Music America have also done a tremendous amount to orient me in this otherwise solitary pursuit.

### Community Talk

Just as my daily interaction with nature broadens my output as an artist, so does my participation in causes I celebrate. This involvement with my community balances my life. When I started out, one of the best things I did was to get involved with music organizations where I quickly met colleagues and learned a great deal about the subtleties of the music world. I always feel a responsibility to share whatever knowledge I have picked up along the way, because in addition to helping peers, the more of us who succeed, the better for the state of our art in general. Currently, I am President of the Board of Directors of The American Composers Forum of Los Angeles, and in recent years I have served as an officer of NACUSA, The College Music Society’s Pacific Southern Chapter and The Society of Composers & Lyricists, among others. I also do a great deal of public speaking and event moderating within Los Angeles’ broad new-music community.

Another passionate interest has been civil liberties. During the time I was composing for film and TV in the 1990s, I served three terms on the Board of Directors of the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, including two years as the 30,000-member affiliate’s vice president. As one might guess, I was the sole composer in the organization, but a reminder to others that an American doesn’t need to be a constitutional lawyer to care about the Bill of Rights.

## Desert Passage

for Violin, Tenor Saxophone and Piano  
for the Cleveland Duo with James Smith

Alex Shapiro



The opening measures of "Desert Passage" by Alex Shapiro.

My involvement had begun on the smallest scale, attending ACLU house meetings and doing a little lobbying. Alarmed by the growing attacks on women's rights to reproductive health, I soon found myself working closely with The Feminist Majority, Planned Parenthood and the National Organization for Women. I became the ACLU's local spokesperson for pro-choice issues, and I was often pitted against the President of Right to Life and various politicians in formal public debates and in the media. It was exciting and rewarding, but after several years of balancing my music career with intense volunteerism, I realized that as much as I cared about social issues, I could no longer afford to participate quite as actively if I wanted my music career to flourish.

Art is both a reflection of society and a reaction to it. To have dual means by which to express myself has been a blessing. I believe it is important for artists to be involved with their communities, in whatever sort of activism interests them. Since what we do as composers is meant to reach others, making a connection that could have an effect on the community outside of music can be powerful, integrating us in our neighborhoods and making our work even more relevant to the public. Not surprisingly, the name of my publishing company is Activist Music.

### Girl Talk

I have never thought of myself in terms of being a female composer, only a composer. Music is about soul and passion and communication, and none of that is gender-specific.

Mine is the very first generation of women composers to benefit from an unlimited potential, thanks to the enormous efforts of women who preceded me and fought so hard against discrimination. By the time I entered conservatory in 1980, half of the composers in my small class were female, and the composition faculty included Ursula Mamlok and Ludmilla Ulehla. I came of age without any idea that it might be odd to have chosen this profession, due as well to progressive parents who raised me to believe that I could do anything I wanted, as long as I was good enough. That sense of personal responsibility for my success or failure has been significant.

From time to time I'm contacted by undergraduate students taking "gender in music" classes, and I'm perplexed by the nearly combative phrasing of the questions I'm asked in these interviews, as though the student believes that the world automatically shuts women out. I wonder from where in society they acquire all this animosity, since not only have I never been discriminated against, but have found that being female has occasionally been helpful.

I'm well aware that because I am neither in academia nor performance, I am sheltered from the ongoing battles some women continue to face; my perspective comes solely from being an independent working composer. But since being able to make a living as a composer is one of the goals we strive for, my limited perspective is worth sharing.

In our professional world, opportunity exists for anyone who visualizes it. What matters is what we have to say with our music, and how we interact with people. A career in music is made up of talent and also of social skills. If someone expects to be discriminated against, he or she may possess a subtle anger that can be off-putting to others, and thus turn their negative beliefs into a self-fulfilling prophesy. But when we walk through the world viewing ourselves as equal to others, we're more likely to be treated as such.

I have enormous respect and appreciation for women's advocacy groups like the International Alliance for Women in Music (IAWM), on whose concerts I have frequently and gratefully been included. But I'm not convinced that all-women concerts do anyone – composers or audiences – a favor. When presenters limit the selections to a particular, smaller pool of entries, there is a greater chance that the quality of the concert suffers, ironically at the risk of doing a disservice to the very female composers they're trying to help. If men who program concerts don't limit their programming choices, why should women? My own modest experience in the chamber music world has been that the playing field is far more level than some may believe.

I have found that an attitude of abundance brings abundance to my life. I take every opportunity to share information with my colleagues and assist composers who contact me from around the world, by answering their questions and pointing them to excellent resources. It thrills me to see more composers working than ever before, and I firmly believe that there is room for us all to thrive as we find peers and listeners who resonate with our unique offerings. Like fingerprints, no two composers are alike, and the only person I am in competition with is myself.

I feel very privileged to have work that I love, and I try to share my enthusiasm for this life hoping it will inspire other composers to take risks and follow their instincts to creative happiness. There is power in numbers, and the more living composers whose music is heard by the public, the greater our influence, as we communicate passionately and build a strong connection between ourselves and our society.

--- Composer **Alex Shapiro** lives and works in Malibu,

California, and serves as the President of the Board of Directors of ACF Los Angeles. Audio excerpts of each of the pieces discussed, as well as a complete list of her works, can be found on her website: [www.alexshapiro.org](http://www.alexshapiro.org), and she welcomes readers' emails at: [alex@alexshapiro.org](mailto:alex@alexshapiro.org)

