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## Interview with Alex Shapiro

**POOF! ZAP! That's right, after Alex Shapiro left us with a big BANG! when we last talked to her, it is now time to discuss the more intricate details of her work. There could hardly be a more suitable moment for this conversation, since the release of her first CD consisting entirely of her own material dates merely a couple of months back, yet memories of the album are still fresh. "Notes from the Kelp", named after (or in accordance with) her weblog, is a selection of recent tracks, a collection bulging out in many different directions, taking in whatever deemed necessary, exciting or simply fun - Shapiro is one of the select few contemporary artists who openly admit that emotions and personal experience are at the heart of their oeuvre. Consequently, there are pieces about intimate moments, times of happiness and joy to be found on the disc, whose stylistic outreach incorporates dark sound art and string quartets to arrive at a place simply called "music". Of course, our interview takes on a similarly open path, as we discuss video clips, the physical side of music, her first failures as a nine-year old composer and... nail fungus. Until the next time - KAZANG!**



*Hi! How are you? Where are you?*

Hello! I write this sitting at my desk on beautiful San Juan Island, CA where I moved from Malibu last Spring. It finally dawned on me that since I love the nature-based peacefulness of artist colonies, I should create my life so that I can live in my very own artist colony full time. Now I own a home in the woods, up the road from the beach and across from a wildlife preserve island I can kayak out to any time. I see more animals than people many days, and I've never been happier, living a rural life in a somewhat remote location. Thanks to the web, my career is even busier than when I lived in the city. And thanks to the recent invention of, uh, the airplane, I can still participate in urban events when I choose!

*What's on your schedule at the moment?*

Playing with my two cats. Best procrastination technique ever! I'm taking a 24 hour breather right now, because I just finished a commission from the U.S. Army for a concert wind band piece, titled "Homecoming," which premieres shortly in Newport News, Virginia. Tomorrow I jump into a completely different sonic realm, and begin composing a work for contrabass flute and electronics for the tour and CD of a terrific flutist in Australia, Peter Sheridan. I deliver that within the month, and then I'm back to more collaborations with a master 32-string veena player in New Delhi, Thakur Chakrapani Singh, with whom I wrote the electroacoustic raga "Chakra Suite" a couple of years ago.

I suffer from an incurable love of talking, and in the next three months I'll be speaking once again at the ASCAP Expo in Hollywood, moderating and presenting at a long running series in Los Angeles called the Composers Salon, and speaking on and moderating a panel for the enormous National Performing Arts Convention in Denver. The right brain/left brain balance of my life is great fun; I'm either writing music or gabbing about it.

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*The reactions to your latest CD, "Notes from the Kelp" were refreshingly unacademic and honest. Did that confirm your conviction that music is strongest, when it sets out to be a dialogue with the listener, instead of working along the lines of intellectual constructs and concepts?*

Absolutely! I've been thrilled with the great responses the disc has received, and it's fascinating to see that among what people have to say, two comments repeatedly arise: that music (mine, in this case) can be very well crafted without being "academic," and that music can defy genre categorization and still be taken very seriously. Listeners don't hear the process a composer used to create a piece. They only hear the end result: the music. To me, that's all that matters, with my own music and with any music that I hear. I was especially touched because people kept saying that they were really moved by the pieces on the CD, and that's the whole point: to express myself honestly and in doing so, elicit emotion from others.

I was bemused to discover that various retailers had placed my CD in different bins: classical, new classical, new age, jazz and rock. I kid you not. This is hilarious to me, and proves my point that music is music, and the terms we use to define it are ultimately unimportant. Pop music suffers from stultifying definitions to a greater degree than other current genres, because radio play on those stations is geared toward such narrowcast audiences due to advertising constraints. But in much smaller niche markets like mine, no one really knows what to do with any of the music composers like me are writing, anyway, so I felt very free to produce the kind of diverse album I did. The downside to the concert music niche is that there's often not much money in it, but that's also the upside: there's a lot of artistic freedom when the stakes aren't as high.

*"Notes from the Kelp" is a very openhearted album. As its title coincides with the blog you started roughly two years ago, I was wondering whether this public diary may also have inspired you to open up even more in your music?*

I think that all forms of expression in our lives are related-- composing, blogging, essay writing, public speaking, friendship, cooking... We get into trouble when we compartmentalize our activities. None of us is just a composer-on-legs, we're each fully assembled humans and every aspect of our daily life affects our musical output. My music is a reflection of what I observe and experience, just as my photos reflect my surroundings, and my essays reflect my thinking. My cooking, on the other hand, reflects my desperate need for cooking lessons.

I do love having my blog, [Notes from the Kelp](#), because the photos, music and commentary on it are a synesthetic expression of many things that define my life. One form of creativity feeds and incites the next, and I think that the more open I am in one arena, the more open I remain in all the others.

*The pieces on "Notes from the Kelp" are purposely arranged to offer listeners both a picture of you as a composer and as a private person. On the other hand: Could you imagine there being issues which you'd find too private to be used for a composition?*

I dunno... nail fungus? Ha ha! The most private issues often elicit the most honest art, specifically because they're so raw. Painful topics like death, emotional insecurity, loss of love, physical challenges, and joyous ones like romance, birth, and heart-wrenching beauty, bring out the most emotion in people. Published compositions offer listeners a form of voyeurism; the music takes you into the soul of the creator. That's something I want very much in a listening experience: to be taken into the composer's heart, into his or her confidence. When a piece leaves me cold, I sometimes wonder whether the composer was being too polite, too cautious and careful, and withholding their emotion from the piece and thus from other people.

Where else, if not in art and love, is it more natural and imperative, even, to express private emotion? I always feel so fortunate to have this means of communication, when words just fail me. And even for someone as loquacious as I, they do fail me quite often.



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CD Feature/ Alex  
Shapiro: "Notes from  
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15 Questions to Alex  
Shapiro



*"Notes from the Kelp" started in January of 2006, but it took a while before the comments-sections was used as vividly for debate as it is now. Would you say that this could be a good metaphor for your progress as an artist as well: Staying true and faithful to your work and allowing for a gradual ascent, instead of expecting things to fall into place right away?*

Most of what we accomplish, as artists or non-artists, is the result of everything that's come before. Most careers ramp up gradually, not overnight. A composer's professional life requires a steady combination of working hard and being prepared, plus taking the initiative to build good relationships with others. It's difficult to have a career without both components: the relationships can't serve you if you're not prepared with a lot of good music, and all your preparation and hard work isn't going to see the light of day if you can't network and get your art out there!

Perseverance is a large part of the process, because you can't allow yourself to become discouraged. You have to be patient and have faith that if you're offering something beautiful, people will eventually find out about it. Along with your patience, it helps if you're [politely] dogged about following up with people and pursue a variety of avenues that could lead to your happiness. So there's a natural momentum that builds exponentially, sometimes faster and sometimes slower. It's rewarding to see things really come together from a good dose of sticktoitiveness. That's a great word, isn't it?!

*There's a hearty dose of fun and joy on the opening track of the album, "Slipping" and a very grave and sad mood on "For My Father". Mauricio Kagel once said that only people with a lot of humour could be very serious as well. Can you relate to this feeling?*

Very much. The crying clown is a common metaphor, right? In my case, I have a goofy and sometimes rather dark wit and I call upon it often. Sometimes regrettably, as not everyone gets my sense of humor! But, I persist anyway. I wasn't the happiest kid growing up, and I think that my sense of irony was-- and continues to be-- a good coping mechanism. I was lucky to be born with a big DNA dollop of great brain chemistry, and so even in unhappiness, I could divert my thoughts elsewhere and not suffer from depression. Music has always been a safe outlet for anger, sadness, and hopelessness. All the things that I'd prefer not to allow in in daily life, I can wallow in with my music. I've said before that composing (among other artistic pursuits) is a socially acceptable form of insanity.

And speaking of musical insanity, I chose to put "Slipping" on as the first track on the CD, because it's one of the few comedic pieces of concert music out there and I thought it would be fun to confuse the heck out of people right off the bat, and then of course hit them between the eyes with some of the other deeply serious and emotional pieces on the CD. It's just a representation of me as a person: if I've got this wide emotional span, and presumably my listeners do, why shouldn't the music on my CD reflect that range of humanness?

*To me, "Current Events" is one of the highlights of the record. Are there any plans of continuing work in this direction and maybe publish a longer string quartet?*

I'd be thrilled if an ensemble were to commission a larger work in this vein. Writing for strings is somewhat intimidating because of the huge repertoire that precedes everything one begins to compose. The canon of great quartets is imposing-- so much so, that my advice to other composers would be to ignore it as much as possible and create your own new paradigm for what an intimate group of strings should sound like! I did this with my flute quartet, "Bioplasm." That being said, I ignored my own advice in "Current Events," and took a pretty traditional approach with that quintet that unabashedly declares my adoration for Beethoven, Brahms and Bartok. One of the things I love to do in my chamber music is make a few instruments sound like many more. I've always been very moved by the wall of sound that the great composers of the past created in their chamber pieces: dense, thick, pulsing works that affect me very directly. Strings are amazing; so human, so much power and frailty at once. I'd love to find further opportunities to explore these sounds.

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*You've mentioned that "so much of music has to do with texture and frequencies". Is "Deep", with its subsonic undulation, possibly a music-made concretization of that thought?*

Oh yes. Like sex, music is a very physical, sensual thing (at least, when it's done right!) and I'm always looking to immerse myself and my listeners in something that will transport them. The joy I find in working with electronics is that I can create frequencies and sounds that can't be found elsewhere.

*Talking about "Deep": The video shot for the composition is tremendous! Do you feel there is still a potential to the visual presentation of your music, which you could tap into in the future?*

Thanks! That video you refer to was done by contrabass clarinetist Marco Mazzini in Belgium, and it's wonderfully haunting. Readers can see it here:

He's a really talented guy. I'd love to meet more video artists who'd like to collaborate. I'm a very visual person: I grew up in New York City not only with a lot of music but also with a lot of fine art, and it's probably not a surprise that my career in Los Angeles was in film and TV scoring for about 15 years before I switched over to concert music -- for the enormous amount of fame, money and glamour, obviously :-). I think that the majority of my music is visually evocative, and that video and dance would be well suited to it. I've been told for a long time that I should get my pieces to choreographers. There's never enough time in the day.



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*You've worked with a plethora of artists on "Notes from the Kelp". What was working with so many different personalities like? Did you allow for different degrees of interpretational freedom with different performers?*  
The joy of composing music for humans as opposed to for machines lies in the ever-changing interaction between the notes and the players. I encourage every musician's input; I want their interpretation and their humanness. Even their mistakes! That's part of the humanity, too. People forget that, due to the ubiquitous illusion of perfection we can achieve from recording sessions now. But I'm not one of those producers who sterilizes a performance simply because I've got the digital tools to do so. I don't take out every gasp of breath or every bow knock or chair squeak. I want people to remember that there are living people behind these beautiful sounds.

Some of the 23 performers on [Notes from the Kelp](#) are very close friends of mine, and others I have a friendly but more formal relationship with. I certainly am more relaxed in the studio when I know the people on the other side of the glass really well, and it makes giving direction easier, too, because there's a shorthand and inherent sense of humor between us.

I deliver my scores with very thorough tempo, dynamic and phrasing indications. I think of those markings like the photo of on a box of cereal, showing the milk in the bowl with the flakes and stating in small print, "suggested serving." Ha! Sometimes I'm just so close to the work having heard a piece in my head many times over and over the same way, that I lose sight of other performance possibilities. There are always different ways to play and hear the music that I just hadn't taken the time to think of. This can be due to my brain becoming inured to the music by repetition, or because I'm almost always on to the next piece and the next deadline, and I don't have much time to curl up with a new work after creating it. There's usually only a few weeks between when it's been written and when it's premiered and/or recorded.

This is one of the fun things about concert music: each piece is performed and, hopefully, recorded repeatedly, and so the interpretation continues to evolve. It's never set in stone, unlike a movie score which is recorded once and stays with the film forever. I've heard a lot of performers talk about how much their presentation of a new piece changes over time, and that they now play something very differently from the way they recorded it X number of years ago. New pieces need time to seep into our consciousness and become themselves, just as repertoire has had a hundred or more years to do so. Much of the classical music on my piano desk I've played since I was an adolescent, and even in all these many years, I rarely play a piece the same way twice. Music is a living art, like language. It's meant to change. I have little patience for purists who think that there's only one correct way to interpret something.

*It has been said of James Cameron, that the thing which made it easy for actors to work with him (and hard on anyone else on the set) was that he knew nothing about acting. Vice versa, he took control of all aspects he was an expert in. As a trained pianist, do you feel you have a greater urge to take charge of the immediate playing aspects when participating in the recording of a piano piece than with your ensemble scores?*

I've never had that urge, thank goodness. I think if I ever expressed it, the pianists would want to smash my little precocious fingers with the fallboard. Ha! I always defer to the musicianship and abilities of the pianist who has spent the time to learn my piece. I'll usually offer a MIDI mockup I've recorded to speed up the pianist's absorption of the music as they make it their own, but the point here is for them to indeed make it their own. Otherwise, I'd record a CD of Shapiro playing Shapiro, and frankly, it wouldn't be nearly as wonderful, for all the reasons I describe in the previous question. When I'm asked whether I perform, I'm fond of saying that no, I just compose and make other musicians do all the hard work.

*You obviously believe in an immediate composing process, which fully preserves the emotions flowing into a piece. Does it sometimes happen that you feel the tools at your disposal are inadequate to express a certain idea, thought or sensation? If so, how do you cope with such a situation?*

The most inadequate tool is my own brain. Or rather, its two sometimes warring hemispheres. I try to stay as



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The most inadequate tool is my own brain. Or rather, its two sometimes warring hemispheres. I try to stay as much in the initial moment of inspiration as possible by literally drawing the essence of a new piece, with pencil and unlined paper, and initially staying far away from a score pad (or a computer notation program). I ain't no Picasso, but being able to express the gesture of the sounds that are swirling in my head without the need to simultaneously translate them into mathematics-- and that is what notated music really is-- is very freeing. This is a treasured technique that I learned from John Corigliano when I was a student at Manhattan School of Music, and it's been one of the most helpful things I've ever been taught.

I'm fascinated by the right brain/left brain dilemma: how challenging it is to stay in the groove of the artistic right brain activity, while calling upon the left brain to be a scribe for what the right brain is busy creating. No matter how fluent you are in musical language, the minute you have to think about how to translate something as abstract as sound into something readable for other musicians, it interrupts the creative flow, even if only for a blip. The more rhythmically complex or texturally original the musical thought is, the worse the dilemma, because the math problem must be solved in order for the gesture to be notated. Sometimes it's manageable, and other times it can nearly derail my composition process, taking me too far afield of that magic world of pure imagination.

I find that when my composing work is going very well and five hours swoops by as though it's been 20 minutes, it's a lot like being in a dream state, where ideas just flow and I'm not the least bit aware of how they're showing up. But just as when I awake from a dream, consciously try to remember it, and then POOF!, it vanishes, the moment I become self-conscious of how well things are going with my writing, ZAP!-- I'm suddenly taken out of the moment. A cruel joke, isn't it? It's like when a computer glitch derails an otherwise groovy recording session and you're flung from the happy place of recording music to the frustrating task of trying to troubleshoot a purely technical problem. All so that you can go back to that happy groovy place again. If you still have any energy and spirit left by the end of the day of troubleshooting!

*In our last interview, you felt it impossible to answer the question of art-subsidies with a simple true/false statement. After having listened to a couple of other interviews you've given on the subject matter in the past, would it be correct to say that you feel there is a great deal of responsibility a composer needs to take in order to obtain necessary commissions and that, essentially, "life's what you make it" (and that maybe there is nothing wrong with that)?*

Well, I do maintain that, barring ill fortune like health crises, etc., life is indeed what we make it. I'm a big believer in visualizing what you want your life to be, to look like, to feel like, to be filled with, and then going about building that vision into a reality. It's how I've lived, and since my mid-thirties, I think I've managed to conjure up a very happy life by envisioning what I want and by working hard.

I've noticed with alarm that the culture of artists tends to be one of negative messages: "no one wants the art I create," "there's no money to be had in the arts," or, "there's no way I can accomplish [name your dream here] because it's out of reach." One of the tricks I've learned is to retool the language I use and the thoughts I think, and instead of reiterating what I can't do, I instead say "why not? other people can, and so can I." I don't think about whether I can do something, I think about the methods I'm going to use to do it. By turning the messages I give myself from negative ones to positive ones, a lot of doors suddenly burst open.

There is nothing wrong with subsidies and grants. I've received them on occasion and have always been grateful. A dependancy on grants is, however, the absolute weakest position an artist can put himself or herself in. Period. Applying for grants, never knowing whether you will receive one or not, is like being a child with a hand out to a parent, hoping to gain approval and get allowance money for the week. If you're lucky enough to get some funding, it's often for a short term project, and not something with which you can support yourself for very long. And there's something inherently emotionally unhealthy about constantly putting ourselves in a position where others judge us and deem our passion to be worthy or not.



support myself for very long. And there's something inherently emotionally unhealthy about constantly putting ourselves in a position where others judge us and deem our passion to be worthy or not.

I like the adage, "give me a fish and I eat for a day, teach me to fish and I eat for a lifetime" (with apologies to vegetarians). If an artist believes that what they do is worthwhile and if they are willing to work hard at both the artistic and the business side of their career, then they have a good shot at finding a fan base willing to pay money to them for what they create. I am not necessarily saying that they will be wealthy or that this is an easy task, but my own experience taking this approach has led to great happiness. It begins with a sense of self worth, which I write about in [this article for NewMusicBox](#). It continues with creating a lot of art, retaining ownership of the rights to that art, and then learning where the income streams are so that all that art you've created can earn you more money to be able to live and create... more art!

I was very lucky to have worked for a long time in commercial music, because being in that world taught me a great deal about the business and of music and the potential worth of what I compose. I'm able to take the knowledge I'd gained in the film and TV world and put it to good use as I pursue my concert music career. Every concert artist should know the worth of their copyright.

Artists who wish to have their art be their main source of support, have responsibilities just like anyone else, to find a connection between what they do and how they are remunerated for it. They cannot just wait for opportunity to drop from the sky, they have to actively create opportunity by creating circumstances that will attract it. My response to your question about perseverance above addresses this, as well, and as you've probably noticed, I'm pretty passionate about the subject matter!

*After reading the liner notes to the release, some reviewers have come to the conclusion that you're an idealist - or even a utopianist. Does it sometimes bother you that offering an optimistic view of the world and the possibilities (rather than the difficulties) of life as a contemporary composer is often mistaken for a "hippie"-mentality?*

Well, reading my utopian answer to the previous question will certainly codify people's thinking along those lines! Ha ha. I'm not bothered in the least if other people assess me as being idealistic or... god forbid!... happy. Is it actually legal for an artist to be ebulliently happy??! Those are compliments, really, and I can think of many other things that would be much worse to be called. I do spend a lot of time, in print and in public speaking, encouraging my peers to think outside the box and to realize just how much power they possess that they might not be making full use of. I'm certainly not making full use of my own tools, and I'm not sure whether I ever will. There's so much to learn and to do. Maybe the point-- the fun in the journey-- is to keep striving and never quite achieve every possible thing. Otherwise, what would we want after that?

*Your biography mentions you started composing at the age of nine. Would you like to share the details of these first pieces with us?*

Oooh, those pieces were mostly dreadful, I'm sure! Mozart-the-Wunderkind, I wasn't. Even then, as now, I was all over the map stylistically, writing ditties in every genre from neo-Classical to rock songs to musical theater to bad lounge music. I actually asked my parents for piano lessons when I was ten, because I had been composing for a year or two and wanted to be more facile with playing and with notating. I was a true nerd. I do remember coming into music class in fourth grade when I was 8 or 9, where we all played recorder, with a four-part recorder arrangement of the then-popular theme to the PBS series Masterpiece Theater (otherwise known as Jean-Joseph Mouret's "Rondeau," from the first movement of his "First Suite in D"). I handed it to my very sweet music teacher and suggested we all play it. She looked at me with an unforgettable expression, somewhat shocked, and explained that it was too hard for the class. The first rejection of my music career! But it didn't stop me; I kept composing and arranging things. Even as a kid I just powered on, regardless of "reality." As I mentioned earlier, I was blessed with great brain chemistry-- pure luck! For that, and many things, including the opportunity to share my thoughts about these questions here on Tokafi, I'm grateful.

By Tobias Fischer