



AMERICAN COMPOSERS FORUM

332 Minnesota Street, Suite E-145
St. Paul, MN 55101-1300 USA
651.228.1407
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Netting a Government Commission: MySpace Taps a New Musical Arsenal

by Alex Shapiro

The brass name plate on the door declared, "COMMANDER." As I entered, my eyes grazed a wall of framed, autographed photos featuring highly ranked officers. Bookshelves held an assortment of reading material, CDs, files, and a few mementos of stuffed animal toys. A combat helmet casually rested atop a coat rack in which camouflaged jumpsuits hung next to civilian clothes. I was inside the Fort Monroe Army Base in Virginia. How did I, a chamber-music composer, end up here?

Blame it all on the serendipity of the Internet – and that MySpace page I put up a while back.

In the last week of June 2007, while reading messages from some of my newly acquired MySpace e-friends scattered around the world, I came across one that was longer than most. Most notable was that the photo of the writer was a man in a dark-blue military uniform, complete with an intimidatingly long sword, standing on a shorn green field. Ruling out high-fashion battle dress, I went with the theory that this fellow was a band director. Additionally ruling out the possibility that anyone from the military would ever contact me, I assumed that this was probably a joke from a friend, since one doesn't expect the U.S. government to go trolling for artists on MySpace. The writer's name was **Major Tod A. Addison**, Commander and conductor of the **United States Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Band**.

As I read the words tucked within the tight MySpace box which framed them, the phrases "inquiry for a possible commission," and "piece for concert band," popped out. I still wondered whether this was for real, since some of my pals are famous for their senses of humor. Reading further, the writer stated his understanding of budget needs and scheduling restraints

in light of my current obligations. I began to take this letter seriously. I also began to worry, because concert wind band writing was many ZIP codes away from my comfort zone of acoustic and electronic chamber music. Not only had I never composed for wind band, I had never even attended a concert of wind band music.

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photo: Dan Kubisike

Alex Shapiro addressing the audience at the premiere of "Homecoming" onstage with Major Tod A. Addison and members of the United States Army TRADOC Band.

The Minnesota Orchestra Composer Institute: November 1-8, 2008

The *Minnesota Orchestra Composer Institute* offers a unique week-long immersion into the world of a major American symphony orchestra.

From a field of 162 applicants from 31 states, a jury chaired by composer Aaron Jay Kernis and consisting of composers Yehudi Wyner, Sebastian Currier, Shafer Mahoney and Minnesota Orchestra Assistant Conductor Sarah Hatsuko Hicks selected the composers and works to will be featured in this year's Institute. They are:

- Antonio DeFeo** (Pelham Manor, N.Y.):
"Four Portraits"
- Ted Hearne** (New Haven, Conn.):
"Patriot"
- Wang Lu** (New York, N.Y.):
"Wailing"
- Andrew McManus** (Rochester, N.Y.):
"Identity"
- Justin Merritt** (Northfield, Minn.):
"River of Blood"
- David Schneider** (Bloomington, Ind.):
"Automation"
- Ming-Hsiu Yen** (Ann Arbor, Mich.):
"Yun"

Under the guidance of Kernis, these seven composers will have their orchestral works rehearsed and performed by the Minnesota Orchestra and will participate in a series of seminars on musical, career, business and professional development issues. Composers receive consultations with Kernis and Music Director Osmo Vänskä before and after the rehearsals. They will also meet with Orchestra members and attend small-group sessions with leading music industry professionals.

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“Netting a Government Commission” (continued from front cover)

Then I read the writer’s description of what kind of piece he was looking for, and yet another phrase popped out: his comment that he was seeking something with a “military theme.” I began to worry even more. I have a profound respect for the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces. Their bravery and sacrifice is extraordinary and puts the ease of my daily life into sobering perspective. I love my country’s Constitution, and have spent years as an activist on legislative issues during my time as vice president of the Board of the 30,000 member American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California. But I am not known for supporting my government’s pugilistic nature, regardless of the occupants of the White House. I wondered, “Did the Commander read my bio?” It clearly offers a clue – or twenty – about my civic leanings.

Yet I remembered that just because someone is employed by the government, does not mean that they necessarily agree with everything the ever-rotating administrations decide. Keeping this in mind and realizing that this letter was indeed for real, wanting the gig, but also wanting to be nothing short of honest in my response, I thought for a moment as to how I would balance my problem with the “military theme” request with my growing interest in delving into a creative world I knew virtually nothing about: concert wind band music.

I wrote Major Addison a warm MySpace message reply of thanks and genuine interest. I suspected that there was a comfortable budget for the commission, and I knew for certain that given the opportunity to compose for this 40-piece ensemble, I would learn a tremendous amount. Addressing the issue of his desire for something military in nature, I carefully typed the following: “A ‘military theme’ can mean so many things, from strong national pride and patriotism, to difficult decisions that come from the need to secure a nation, to the joyous and painful results from these actions. Quite a lot of emotion for musicians to explore.” I figured that this would either put a quick end to any further discussion of a commission, or open up new musical avenues. Receiving Major Addison’s enthusiastic response the next day, I was happy to have achieved the latter.

But how in the world did Major Addison find me in the first place? I later learned he was visiting the MySpace page of a friend of his, fellow composer **Anne McGinty**, and saw me listed among her “Top Friends.” I had never emailed, much less met, Anne, but I now know she is best known for her educational band music and was recently commissioned to write for the TRADOC Band herself. Apparently she liked my online audio clips enough to post me up there right along with Simon Cowell and Quincy Jones (ah, the delightful bizarreness of MySpace), and that directly led to the Commander clicking on my audio files, hearing my work, and contacting me. Needless to say, soon after beginning the dialogue with Major Addison, I wrote Anne a grateful message, and since then she and I have become friends via email and phone. Internet networking at its best, all the way around: a new commission and new friends.

photo: Dan Kubiske



Lt. Toulouse and Major Addison present a souvenir TRADOC plaque to Alex Shapiro.

Working for Uncle Sam: a Parallel Universe

The ensuing contract process was just a tad different from the usual civilian commissioning agreement, beginning with my need to sign up with the Central Contractor Registration System, obtain a Trading Partner Identification Number, a DUNS Confirmation Number, a CAGE Code, a NAICS Code, create a confidential Trading Partner Profile, and become a contractor with the Department of Defense! Suddenly I was getting a lot of emails splashing around the acronyms CCR, TPIN, DUNS, TPP, NAICS, CAGE and TRADOC. Slightly dizzying, but the guys in the Army office were always helpful if in a moment of civilian confusion I had a question or three.

One of my more amusing afternoons prior to beginning the piece was spent slogging through the lengthy online registration process, which involved the requirement for me to classify and categorize the kind of work I do. I found myself scrolling slowly through an impressively long list of job descriptions that, oddly enough, I had never before considered: Nuclear Radiation Specialist, Area Mine Clearance Personnel, Weapons Repair Services, Guided Missile Assistant, and Radioactive Waste Management, among the many colorful options. Tempting as it was to go for that last one in light of what some of my pieces sound like, I checked the box for “Entertainers & Entertainment Groups.”

There is something a little unnerving about receiving emails whose subject line includes the capitalized declaration: [UNCLASSIFIED]. But there was something even funnier, if also slightly unnerving, at the bottom of some of these emails. Working with the U.S. Armed Forces bands, one is constantly reminded that not only are these players superb musicians, many of whom come from the finest conservatories and university programs, but they are also soldiers.

My introduction to this parallel musical universe came when I received an email from one of the band members who also works in the TRADOC office helping with administrative details. I glanced at the signature at the end of his email, and almost fell out of my chair laughing. After his rank and name, was the following: “Bass Trombonist and Ammunition Handler.”

Major Addison and the TRADOC band extended a generous invitation to fly me from my home on San Juan Island, Washington, to Newport News, Virginia, for the late March premiere. It was a treat to attend the final rehearsal, hearing all the notes from my head blasted at me by wonderful players. And it was certainly visually unique: everyone, including Maestro Addison at the podium, wore their camouflage utility jumpsuits, with pant legs tucked into rugged army boots. The musicians looked like at any moment they were ready to drop their oboes and head into combat. I sat there feeling remarkably well protected, and tried to imagine the New York Philharmonic musicians in such attire.

Military personnel, even those who are artists, use a traditional language that is foreign to a civilian like me. These musicians possess a decorum of emotional detachment, and a remarkable lack of ego about what they do, referring to their musical work as assignments or tasks to be accomplished. Rank is very significant in this world, and I was careful to always address my new friend Tod as “Major Addison” when speaking with the musicians. Likewise, I was always addressed formally as “Ma’am” or “Ms. Shapiro.” This sincerity and formality is striking, and charming, to an independent composer from the hippie West Coast.

I left rehearsal on the base in the company of Major Addison and **Lt. Sharon Toulouse**, an impressive young woman who is the other conductor of the band. Headed for an early dinner, we happened to step foot outside just as 5:00 p.m. rolled around. Suddenly, a trumpet was playing taps and my companions abruptly froze right where we were standing, and held a salute. After taps, a canon sounded, and then a military jet swooped overhead. I asked if the latter was a regular fly over, and Tod said no, just good timing. A flash of melancholy hit me as I juxtaposed the uniformed musicians in this safe environment, with the uniformed soldiers flying missions and risking their lives overseas at this same moment.

Getting to Work

The experience of composing this piece for the TRADOC Band was fabulous. I have never been more respectfully treated by a client. Anything I needed and any question I had, were no problem at all. I was even able to set the delivery date for the non-transposed concert pitch score; the Army offices would take care of all the parts preparation. Most significantly, I retain the publishing rights for a piece with an extraordinarily brief 90-day exclusivity. The job itself could not have gone more smoothly.

Beginning the piece, however, was another issue, as I did battle with myself and my many, slightly schizophrenic, muses. I have a broad stylistic approach, and as I worked to envision the piece before even writing a note, I wrestled with a myriad of choices. Unused to having such a sizable array of musicians from whom I could make a joyous noise, the sonic possibilities became nearly overwhelming. Much of my concert music catalog could be noted for pieces that elicit a lot of sound and timbral depth

from a small number of players. Suddenly, my acoustic world had multiplied ten-fold, and the endless choices created endless ideas and endless pondering as to which path to take.

Added to this was the education inherent in thinking about the balance of my palette: no string section, a full electric rhythm section, and 2’s and 3’s of almost every woodwind and brass except trumpets, of which I had a whopping five. During the first couple of weeks of starting the work, I came up with so many different techniques that interested me, that ultimately I couldn’t employ even half of them within a single eight minute piece. My initial sketches – drawings, musical scribbles and brief, descriptive outbursts of text – will serve me later for other band pieces.

Leaving Assumptions at the Door

A couple of weeks before the premiere, the phone rang with the band copyist, also a French hornist with the TRADOC band, on the other end. After a brief exchange of hellos and thank-you’s, he began, “Uh, Ms. Shapiro, I just want to check with you about the French horns.”

Uh-oh. Did I write something out of range? I started rewinding the piece in my mind, searching quickly for the different horn phrases and how I might have supremely messed up. Visions of wearing a prisoner’s orange jumpsuit flashed in my head, in case I had just failed miserably.

“Well, in measure 36, did you intend them in that octave? I mean, for them to be *that low*?”

I breathed an internal sigh of relief.

“Yes, I was looking for a dark sound there. Is this going to be a problem? Can they play this comfortably at such a quiet dynamic?”

“Oh, no problem at all, ma’am. They’re really going to love it. It’s just that we never see writing like this for the horns; it’s so . . . *symphonic*. That’s why we wanted you to write for us in the first place, because we knew it would be different.”

I knew it would be different, too, and while one half of me had been eager to stretch my brain and their repertoire a little, the other half of me had been terrified that with my utter lack of experience in this arena, I’d fall on my face in a very public way. Of course, that fear didn’t stop me from taking the gig, but it haunted me for the first few weeks as I began composing, wondering whether what I was hearing in my head would translate well once set free in the air.

Early on, to test the waters, I expressed some of my outside-the-box ideas about the music to Major Addison, telling him about a concept I had for using key clicks, and asking whether his band members might be up for singing. His response was nothing short of enthusiastic. “Oh, sure, they’ll love all that!” I realized I could do anything I wanted, and the combination of

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“Netting a Government Commission” (continued from previous page)

being paid well and writing for someone who clearly went to me because he wanted something different from the usual fare, was all the inspiration I needed. Not once did the Major suggest what to write, or more significantly, what not to.

As it turned out, Major Addison is one of the more sophisticated musicians I've met. Talking about music in his office, he delighted in showing me his favorite John Cage and John Adams CDs, and spoke at length about Harry Partch's work, which fascinated him. Between that, and other conversations I had with a few band members about contemporary music they love to play, any preconceptions I may have had about band musicians flew out the window.

There was, however, a subtle component that I chose to take into consideration. Major Addison mentioned that he had to put this new piece, and also the other traditional band music, on one specific concert marked “Concert Music Series,” because his audiences might not sit through all of this otherwise. Hmm. I started to think about who the audience might be for these concerts. Many of the attendees are military families, government employees, and locals from the community, which is almost never a major metropolis. In other words, it is unlikely that a large number of people in the audience hear new music on a regular basis, if at all.

In no way does that mean a composer should dumb down their work. I believe that composers who work for hire can be true to their personal voice, and still relate to an audience by choosing to speak through an aspect of their musical language that might also be readily absorbed by others. One of the signatures of my music is that I traverse many different genres, and can cull from a wide palette as a new piece unfolds. Envisioning what would become “Homecoming,” I knew that, inspired by the success of my flute quartet “Bioplasm,” I would open the piece with key clicks. “If they sound fabulous on just four instruments, just think how they'll sound on 40!” was my silly mantra. I also knew that I wanted to turn my back on the predictable timpani-snare-bass drum norm for band percussion, and immediately excised those from my arsenal, preferring to feature all mallets and later, drum set.

I chose a rather post-minimalist beginning, quietly setting up an irregularly repetitive intro based on parallel 5ths in the mallets, and letting it play out just long enough to make the audience wonder where, if anywhere, this piece is going. It indeed did go somewhere, gradually ramping up through chord entrances and thematic ideas until it blossomed into a full-on big band jazz number, alternatively shifting between that world and more traditionally concert band-sounding chords. By the end of the piece the jazz-pop feel wins out with a loudly joyous ending. It was fun to write something not quite concert and not quite pop, and these were all authentic parts of my musical personality.

Banding Together

Despite my misgivings about aspects of the piece's orchestration that I still intend to improve, “Homecoming” was wonderfully received by a full audience and I signed a lot of programs that evening. It was a moving experience to briefly introduce

the piece and discuss the meaning of the music, which travels from concern and worry, to promise and hope, and finally, to celebration. Far more than with savvy New Music audiences, putting a story along with this abstract wall of sound was a very effective way to have others connect with it. Most moving of all was a conversation I had after the concert with the young wife of the band's incoming music director. Bouncing two small children in a stroller, she told me that her brother was killed in Iraq just five months earlier. Unbeknownst to me, there is an event for veteran families called “Homecoming,” and in their grief, her parents had attended one in order to meet their son's friends, and find a glimpse of closure. The woman told me how much my piece meant to her. I was speechless.

With nearly three hundred active bands in the States and abroad, and a budget far larger than that of the music division of the N.E.A., the U.S. Armed Forces is actually the country's biggest employer of musicians, and a patron of new music. The musicians work very hard and endure rigors of physical training, but in exchange they receive benefits and pensions that many hard working players might envy. Like State Department diplomats, many of the musicians have tours of duty for just two to four years at a time, and are then transferred to other locations, which can be a challenge for family life. Most remain stateside, but a few are deployed overseas.

I'm very happy – and relieved – to have had such a positive experience, especially since I don't look very good in bright orange. Major Addison is proud of commissioning new works each year and loves letting his colleagues know about their availability. Within two weeks of the premiere, he distributed information about “Homecoming” to a number of other conductors in the Armed Forces. I'm going to seek out more band opportunities, because the possibility for many well rehearsed performances from rental scores is quite appealing. Having had the finest on-the-job training, my initial fears are now replaced by a desire to become an even better wind band composer. Inspiration is the kind of ammunition I think I'm best at handling.



— *Composer Alex Shapiro's life has only become busier since moving to the remote San Juan Islands in early 2007. Her music is regularly performed and recorded in the U.S. and abroad, and she is the author of several articles that help colleagues expand their careers through the internet.*

Audio excerpts of “Homecoming” and other works in her catalog can be found on Alex's website: www.alexshapiro.org. Her MySpace site can be accessed at www.myspace.com/alexshapiro, her Blog at www.notesfromthekelp.com.

The website of the TRADOC band is www.tradoc.army.mil/band ♦

Chapter Updates

San Francisco Bay Area

Another year of the Bay Area Chapter's long-running **Composer in the Schools** (CITS) program culminated in a pair of public concerts. Since 1997, CITS has been placing composers-in-residence at Bay Area high schools and has helped dozens of student composers develop their creative voices. As part of the program, professional performers are brought into the classrooms to work with students on their pieces and to present their works at public concerts towards the end of each school year.



Berkeley High School CITS participants: left to right (front row) student composers Mackenzie Sowers, Devon Brinner, Dylan Mattingly, Gabriela Smith, Eli Wirtschafter, Ben Williams, and Chase Jackson; (back row) Katrina Wreede (instructor) and Laura Simpson (harp soloist).

Berkeley High School students, taught by composer and violinist **Katrina Wreede**, had their works presented at Berkeley's Trinity Chapel on April 23, 2008, performed by Wreede, Bay Area harpist **Laura Simpson**, renowned pianist **Sarah Cahill**, and

several of the Berkeley students themselves. An enthusiastic audience heard new works by student composers **Devon Brinner, Ian Faquini, Ben Hamilton, Chase Jackson, Scott Johnston, Dylan Mattingly, Gabriela Smith, Mackenzie Sowers, Eli Wirtschafter** and also a new work by Wreede, commissioned by the Chapter as part of her residency.

The CITS class at Lowell High School, under composer **Christopher Jones**, had their works presented at the Presidio Chapel in San Francisco on April 25. An all-star group of instrumentalists (flutist Emma Moon; violinist Graeme Jennings; cellist Leighton Fong; pianist Ann Yi; and vibraphonist Florian Conzetti) performed new pieces by student composers **Michael Beese, Natalie Ho, Maria Hong, and Kailin Koch**, plus a newly-commissioned piece by Jones, again commissioned by the Chapter as part of his residency.

The San Francisco Bay Area Chapter's Composers in the Schools program is funded by The James Irvine Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and individual donors ♦

Minnesota Minnesota Voices

In commemoration of Minnesota's 2008 Sesquicentennial, the Chapter has partnered with the Minnesota Chorale to produce **Minnesota Voices**, a statewide commissioning project



The Minneapolis Youth Chorus (right) is one of six participating Minnesota Voices choral ensembles.

connecting five composers with six community choruses throughout Minnesota. This program is designed to celebrate Minnesota's 150th birthday through new music that honors the state's beauty, diverse history and rich choral heritage. The six participating choirs – representing voices young and old from the Twin Cities and Minnesota's Southwest, Southeast, Northwest and Northeast regions – will come together at the Minnesota State Fair on Saturday, August 23, 2008 at 2:30 p.m. to perform their commissioned works in a first-of-its-kind musical event at the Fair, offering a choral tour of the state. To close the concert, the participating ensembles will form a massed choir of more than 300 voices to premiere a new work highlighting Minnesota's heritage, written specifically for the occasion. The composers, works, and participating choirs are:

Paul Brandvik, who wrote “Yet Again, Spring,” a piece celebrating the annual cycle of the seasons that freeze and thaw Minnesota's northern lakes, for the Bemidji Chorale; **Edie Hill**, who composed “Circle of a River,” commemorating the history and life cycle of the Mississippi River, for the Minneapolis Youth Chorus; **J. David Moore**, who wrote “Old Waters,” about the glacial winters that honed the landscape and shaped the inhabitants of southwest Minnesota, for the Choral Arts Ensemble in Rochester, Minn.; **Brian Schmidt**, who wrote “Prairie Song,” a piece about southwest Minnesota's bountiful plains, for the Minnesota Valley Chorale in Mankato, Minn., and the Prairie Arts Chorale in Southwest, Minn.; and **Janika Vandervelde**, whose “All The Great Ships” highlights the names of the ships that use Duluth's harbor and make it a truly international sea port, written for the Arrowhead Chorale in Duluth, Minn.

For the finale of the State Fair concert, composer **Carol Barnett** and poet **Marisha Chamberlain** collaborated to create “Minnesota, That's Me,” which will be performed by a massed choir of all the regional ensembles, and will be conducted by Kathy Saltzman Romey, artistic director of the Minnesota Chorale. The **Minnesota Voices** concert is Saturday, August 23, at 2:30 p.m., at the State Fair's Bandshell, which is on Cosgrove Street, near the base of the Space Tower.

Minnesota Voices is sponsored in part with generous donations from Target, the National Endowment for the Arts, The Lee and Rose Warner Foundation, and the Wenger Foundation and financed in part with funds provided by the State of Minnesota through the Minnesota Sesquicentennial Commission's Grants Program.

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