

Contemporary Composer Interview: Alex Shapiro

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8/24/2002 -

I had the opportunity to meet Alex Shapiro at the New Music and Art Festival held each October at Bowling Green State University (Ohio). Alex has won many awards for her music including a *2000 Artist Fellowship Award for the Performing Arts* from The California Arts Council. She currently resides in Malibu, CA where she enjoys a career as a freelance composer.

This interview with Alex Shapiro is the first in the Contemporary Composer Interview series exclusive to New Music Forum.

To start with, I would like to ask, how did you first get into music?

I was lucky enough to grow up in a household in which classical music was played constantly. My father adored music and had an incredible LP collection, and particularly loved late Beethoven string quartets, Brahms chamber music, and Mahler symphonies. My mother was a talented amateur flutist who studied for many years with the New York Philharmonic's principal flutist, John Wummer, and she practiced every day. So, living amidst so much flute repertoire and being lulled quietly to sleep to the dulcet, calming strains of Bernstein conducting Mahler's 1st (Ha!), I must have absorbed a little something along the way. I started composing and notating music when I was nine, and by the time I was 15 I knew without question that I was going to be a composer professionally. I never even questioned it.

Who have you studied composition with?

I was really fortunate to grow up in Manhattan, where there's so much to take advantage of, in terms of schools and live music. I've had a number of terrific teachers, and again, I owe a lot to my parents for being so willing to support my studies and tolerate me trudging around town by myself to go to everything from the Metropolitan Opera to the Village Vanguard on a very regular basis (I always looked older than I was, which was a major plus for a 15 year old Elvin Jones fan). My first composition teacher was Leo Edwards, with whom I studied when I was 15 when I attended Mannes College of Music summer school. He was very supportive, and receiving encouragement from him at that age made a big impact on me. That's also the same year I took my first class in electronic music, by the way, which at the time -- 1977-- meant learning on a modular Aries system of oscillators and envelope generators, etc. that required an inordinate number of patch cords just to produce a sine wave.

When I was 16 and 17, I was accepted to the Aspen School of Music, and during those two summers I studied composition with Michael Czajkowski, who now heads up the electronic music department at Julliard. In addition to studying acoustic instruments, I also had the chance for more electronic music studies, working a

little bit on the Buchla that Mike had borrowed for the summer from his friend Morton Subotnik. I also studied ear training and some composition with George Tsontakis, and took master classes with everyone from Elliot Carter to Erich Leinsdorf to Freddie Hubbard! What an amazing opportunity that was for me-- two very life-changing summers. After this, I was accepted to (and graduated from) Julliard Pre-College Division, and was a composition student of Craig Shuler, and took additional classes with Bruce Adolphe.

After graduating high school I attended Manhattan School of Music, where I was a composition student of Ursula Mamlok and John Corigliano until 1983. They were both fabulous teachers, in different ways. With Ursula, I would learn the specifics of constructing a piece and developing themes, etc. From John I learned a great deal about the bigger issue of summoning and responding to the muses. Both teachers gave me creative tools that I use to this day, especially at that middle point in some pieces when I occasionally become, er... stuck! I also took electronic music classes with Elias Tannenbaum, and the only class MSM offered in commercial music, taught by Roy Eaton, who at the time was music director at a big advertising agency, Benton & Bowles. That class was invaluable: I learned about click tracks and about scoring to picture, and as I watched movies and listened more closely to the scores, I began to think that this was the direction I wanted my music career to go. At the time-- twenty years ago-- musical styles within the concert scene weren't quite as broad as they are now, and especially being in New York, I felt that I probably didn't have much of a chance for a lot of performances of my less-than-cutting-edge work. After studying with Corigliano the same year he returned from scoring "Altered States" and pouring over that score with him, I also realized that good film scoring was a way to get a larger segment of the public hearing some very sophisticated music. I saw that a composer can "get away" with a lot harmonically and rhythmically, when their music is set in the context of visuals and a story line.

While I was a student at MSM, I began scoring low budget documentaries for local cable stations in New York City, and started to get my feet a little wet in the jingle business. But I really felt that I wanted my musical life to be longer than thirty seconds at a pop, so in 1983 when I had the opportunity to come out to Los Angeles and score a documentary video, I grabbed it. I never left there, and ended up writing scores for low budget features, TV, documentaries and corporate videos for the next 15 years. Ironically, little of the scoring work I did gave me an opportunity to push any musical boundaries the way Corigliano and so many others did, but I was happy to be working and found that being a musical chameleon and writing in a lot of different styles was fun. I also found that all the studies in electronic music really paid off, because by the late eighties, every working composer in L.A. had to have a pretty sophisticated MIDI project studio, and I was able to put a nice one together without too much difficulty.

Which composers (aside from your teachers) influenced your music when you began composing?

The usual suspects: Brahms and Debussy for their lyricism, Berg for a certain kind of gorgeous angularity, Stravinsky and Bartok, rhythmically. Oh yeah, and Mahler! Jazz: Bill Evans, Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock; in the 70's the fusion thing was fresh, it was before "smoooooth jazz," and it was interesting. Rock: The Police, the Stones, U2.

Why do you compose?

To communicate with other people! And with myself. I write for catharsis, but also to please others. I'm a

musical codependent, perhaps. Surely, there must be a 12-step program for this. :-)

Virtually every piece I compose these days is a commission, many of which are from musicians. It makes me incredibly happy to see the players light up and really dig playing the music I've put in front of them, and to give them something that they'll want to play more than just once or twice. Maybe it's because I used to create a lot of music specifically "to order" when it came to commercial work, but the first thing I ask a commissioning player is to tell me what kind of piece they'd like that would be a nice contrast to other things in their programming repertoire. I feel that I can still completely retain my own voice and my own direction, while giving them what they suggest. And it helps to have a framework to begin with (not unlike scoring to picture). Sometimes the most daunting jobs are those where the player responds, "oh just write whatever you feel." Yikes! Even then, already knowing the instrumentation, I at least hone it down to setting the projected length of the piece, and that gives me a general frame in which to determine the arc or flow of the music, and tells me how long I have to "communicate" in that instance. It's all about communication.

You write a lot of pieces that are commissioned. What was the first piece someone commissioned from you?

My very first commission was when I was a 16 year old student at the Aspen Music School, and a brass player who liked what he had heard of my music paid me \$500 to compose a brass quartet for he and his colleagues. I was thrilled to write for them, and they performed the piece a couple of times that summer. What I remember about the piece is that I took the French horn rather painfully high at some key points, and I had the poor tubist occasionally playing lines that were far better suited for a pianist's left hand! Fortunately, my writing has improved a little bit since then.

What are your current projects?

My writing life is never boring, and there's a wide diversity in the kind of instrumentation I get to play with. I just finished two concert pieces, one for SATB choir and piano that premiered this summer in L.A., and the other a comedic program closer for violin and harpsichord that will premiere here later this year. I'm just about to begin a multi movement duet for piano and mixed percussion that the wonderful pianist Teresa McCollough, who recorded my "Sonata for Piano" a couple of years ago, has commissioned for her next CD. Following that is a piece for Great Highland bagpipes and electronics-- a concerto of sorts-- for one of the best pipers in the country, Ian Whitelaw. On the heels of that, I start a three-movement work for string quintet (a quartet with an added viola in this case) for the Pacific Serenades concert series in Los Angeles in March 2003.

I always find it fascinating to learn how composers got their start. I tend to see some parallels between my own experiences as a young composer and the way others have started. You mentioned that you have taken classes in electronic music. How have those classes influenced the way you think about acoustic music?

All sound is made up of frequencies, and we hear them as textures and feel them as soundwaves against our bodies. Ooooh. One of the things that has always impressed me with electronics has been the relative sonic power I can create with these electrified tools. Not so much volume, but texture and depth. In turn, I've given a great deal of thought as to how I can impact an audience with acoustic instruments in a similarly sensual way.

My personal preference in music, be it contemporary or from 150 years ago, is a rich, full sound. Beethoven and Brahms are just two of many giants who consistently achieved this even in their chamber music, because they understood how to voice just three or four instruments and make them sound like ten.

Working with electronics, especially mixing them in the safe confines of a studio, gives a composer a hypersensitivity to many aspects of sound: the physical placement of the music around the listener, the frequencies that are or aren't being stressed, the counterpoint that is or isn't being emphasized, etc. As a composer/engineer, you have to think of all these things as you create an electronic piece, and, quite significantly, you have control over them to a large degree. Now consider the acoustic concert hall and its living, breathing, taco-eating musicians: suddenly, the composer isn't a direct part of the process; he or she only has control by way of what dynamics and phrasing have been notated on the page, or through his or her interaction (suggesting, begging, bribing...) with the players to interpret a passage a certain way. Among other things, I think electronics teach us about control, and about the need to release some of it when we work with human beings with no MIDI cables running out of their.... whatever.

When we met in Bowling Green (Ohio) at the New Music and Art Festival we talked a bit about self-publishing. Could you briefly describe the steps you took to start the process?

Step one: I joined ASCAP as both a writer and a publisher member. It's very inexpensive and easy to do, and if you get live or broadcast performances of your pieces, joining a performing rights organization such as ASCAP, BMI or SESAC is essential for getting paid. Step two: I wrote a lot of chamber music and built up my catalog. I copyrighted everything with the Library of Congress and registered each work with ASCAP so that it could be tracked each time it was performed. Step three: I created a distribution deal for my published (read: proofed, bound and ready to be performed) scores and parts, which helped to get my works into many libraries and universities around the country, as well as featured at various music library conventions, etc.

Additionally, I created a website that's as interactive as the geek side of my brain can make it, with lots of audio files and program notes on each piece, and a page from which score orders can easily be placed. PayPal set up a very simple (and free) shopping cart plug-in for Dreamweaver that makes it easy to sell scores and CDs. There's nothing like getting up in the morning and clicking open an email that says so-and-so has just deposited X amount of dollars into your PayPal (bank) account, for such-and-such score(s). Plus, I get a large number of performances via my presence on the internet, and that results in more royalties, more commissions, and more score sales, etc., all of which is a part of the business of being a self published composer. Publishing really means "to make public," and that's essentially what a career composer has to do: make themselves "public."

This is the outline of what I've done; there's much more, and in short I can say that if one is trying as I am to make a living solely as a composer (I'm not on faculty anywhere, and I don't have a "day job"), administrating the publishing/business side of things-- copying, proofing and reproducing scores, fulfilling and following up on orders, tracking and reporting new pieces and performances, contacting ensembles, etc. etc.-- will easily take up at least half of a composer's time, with the other half, one hopes, being jealously reserved for... uh, actually creating new music. Oh yeah, and then there's that "life" thing that's important to try to squeeze in! I work very long hours, beginning around noon and very often going until five in the morning or later. But I also try to take a day or two off every weekend if I'm not on a ridiculously tight deadline, and have some fun that's unrelated to work. Balance is essential.

The role of the critic has been a hot bed of discussion among composers I know over the last month or two. How do you deal with public or private criticism of your works?

It would be a very dull world if everyone had the same taste, and I never expect everyone to love everything I write. And hey, some folks might not care for any of it. So far I've been pretty lucky and have yet to get a review that makes me cringe, but I have no doubt that it will indeed happen if I persist in this music making thing (!). Hopefully, I'll react gracefully. Then I'll just track down the critic who maligned my fabulous new piece and break his kneecaps.

Just kidding. ;-)

Alex, I want to thank you for your time. I know you're a busy person and I really appreciate you answering my questions. I have just one final question for you. What advice would you give to young and emerging composers?

Follow your passion! That's the most important thing. Be true to yourself and put yourself in a position to write the kind of music that speaks most personally to you. Even if you're making a living writing another sort of music, or perhaps not writing music for a living at all at a given moment, try your best to retain the joy and passion that started you down this musical path.

I also am a big believer in being active in one's community of colleagues. Join organizations that are related to your interests--musical or otherwise. It's a great way to meet like-minded people and quickly learn a lot about what's going on, and professionally it can be extremely helpful. Similarly, I think it's very, very important to share whatever knowledge we gain as composers, both artistically and business-wise. If each of us is a good composer with a unique voice, then we're not in competition with each other, only with ourselves as we strive internally to become better writers. Never feel threatened or jealous of other composers, and never view what you do as a competitive sport. It's not. It's a beautiful, joyful art, one that can also make you money based on your unique, individual voice. The happier you remain and the more open your heart is, the more wonderful opportunities that will come into your life easily.

Thanks again for your time and I look forward to hearing your music in the future!

It's been my pleasure, and all the best with the new interview series, Brian! I'm delighted to have kicked it off by being able to share my enthusiasm about being a composer.

You can find out more about Alex Shapiro and her upcoming performances from her web site:
<http://www.alexshapiro.org>.

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