

Alex Shapiro

Let the music wash over the audience

By Camila Fernández

Alex Shapiro (b. New York City, 1962) has lived on Washington State's remote San Juan Island for the last eleven years, composing in a home on the water's edge surrounded by wildlife. She is known for her genre-blind acoustic and electroacoustic pieces, her seamless melding of live and recorded sounds that often include striking visual and physical elements, and for her innovative uses of technology in her music for wind bands. Educated at The Juilliard School and Manhattan School of Music as a student of Ursula Mamlok and John Corigliano, she moved from Manhattan to Los Angeles in 1983, beginning her career composing for commercial media before switching her focus to the concert music world in the late 90s. Her works are heard in concerts and broadcasts across the U.S. and abroad have been released on nearly thirty recordings. Alex is a member of the board of directors of ASCAP and its representative to The International Council of Music Authors (CIAM), as well as a board member of The Aaron Copland Fund for Music and The ASCAP Foundation.



We meet for breakfast at a trendy cafe on Broadway with top-to-bottom windows overlooking Lincoln Center. The place is packed with noisy New Yorkers, but we spot her at a quiet corner looking out at the Metropolitan Opera. She ask for two eggs over-hard and a loyal waiter takes the order, ready to refill our mugs of coffee before they are empty. She welcomes us with a vibrant energy, a bright enthusiasm for composition and a natural confidence in herself, all of which she is able to convey during our conversation by encouraging a deep determination to embrace life, nature, community and music.

I love writing about music without judging it. Many times, I have the feeling that critics believe they own the right to define music...

I could not agree more. It is one thing to let readers know about an experience, to describe it, but I don't appreciate it when critics throw in their own opinion about something that then turns people away from the chance of experiencing it for themselves. Everybody has their own personal experience: If we went to a concert, each of us would have a completely different reaction to it based on what kind of mood we are in, and whether it speaks to our condition at the time or not. I wish that all music critics would begin their reviews by saying: «I may not have been in the mood for this piece» if they do not like something, because perhaps someone else will enjoy it.

I remember a critique of a film festival by Carlos Boyero, in which he was mad because his favorite restaurant had been closed, so the article was all about that instead of about the movies...

Exactly... [she laughs, surprised at the example]. There it is! He was so annoyed that he didn't get his favorite meal before seeing the film that he couldn't be in the right headspace to enjoy it, and so the film director suffered because the restaurant was closed! [laughs] Ridiculous. Poor director [laughs some more]. So, this is my problem with criticism, and that's why I like journalism instead. I wish critics would just speak personally about it and not act like they are defining what that piece of music was for everybody else. You can do that to some degree, describe the music and say, well, it didn't quite develop, I was expecting it to

do more, etc., but to turn people away from a piece before they even have the chance to listen to it is unfortunate.

I think new music needs all the advocates it can have; we want to open everybody's ears. We are still suffering, we are still being punished for— what I happen to think is— the wonderful music of Schoenberg and Webern, back to almost one hundred years ago. Contemporary composers are still being punished by audiences for that departure from easily perceivable tonal centers. Audiences are still afraid, all these years later, to go to a new music concert for fear that they will be assaulted by sound. And it's so sad, because now, composers are writing in any style they want. I can create a piece that is lyrical and then dissonant. Or totally lyrical, or totally atonal. Whatever I want to do. Times have changed.

Do you think that there has been a recent interest in contemporary music from the audience? Is there a need for education to be able to listen?

We have to do a much better outreach job of letting people know the delights of all kinds that are waiting for them in a concert hall. We have to find a way of breaking down their preconceived notions of what contemporary music is. Some of it is assaultive, some of it is easy to listen to and to take in... but they don't often realize that all of this is available to them. My oth-

er theory about why audiences are afraid to go to our concerts is that they're afraid of committing to something they may not enjoy, rather than being open to the likelihood that they may very well end up loving it! For example, these same people go to museums to see modern art, but they are not as afraid of it, because if they see something that they don't like, they walk right by it and they don't have to invest any time with it. But when you go to a concert, you are being held hostage; music is a chronological, linear art form. Someone has paid their money to sit there and is probably not going to leave in the middle of the performance. So, they are afraid of being stuck in a situation where they have to sit and listen to sound, which is perhaps more emotionally assaultive than a painting is and listen to it for anywhere between three and thirty or more minutes a piece, without being able to leave. So, part of audiences' reticence has to do with what I jokingly refer to as that hostage-taking concept.

We need to find a way to let people in and make it comfortable for them— including letting them know that they have permission not to like everything! One of the problems is that audiences feel as though they have to be educated or smart to understand the music, which is a terribly sad thing. You don't have to be a musicologist in order to go to a concert, let sound wash over you, and experience it emotionally. It is my job as

a composer to create an emotional experience, and I don't want anybody to feel they have to think analytically about the music to sit there and experience it. So, one of the things that I think we can do a better job at—we, meaning presenters, composers, conductors, musicians—, is giving the audiences permission not to enjoy something. To say to them: «It may or may not resonate with you but let the music wash over you and see how it makes you feel. And, if you don't like it, ask yourself why. And by the way, the musicians are wonderful most of the time, so even if you don't like the piece, enjoy watching their artistry as they bring the notes to life.»

This is what most of us composers do when we don't like something: we ask ourselves why we don't like it. We search for a good answer as artists by delving deeper into ourselves to define why we do or do not enjoy or appreciate

something. Audiences need to be given permission to do that too. They somehow think that if they pay their money, they have to like everything; it has to be a great experience. They don't feel that way as much about theatre, which is interesting, because there it is, another hostage-taking experience, right? But audiences seem to be a little bit more tolerant of theatre for some reason.

I completely agree with you, it is about the experience, and also about the communication process between the composer and the audience.

That's a very interesting relationship that I don't think it is spoken about enough. In contemporary music there is now the trend and almost the expectation that the composer, the conductor or the musicians will speak from the stage to the audience and break down that fourth wall. I think it's great, because it connects everybody. Anything that we can do to connect our

personhood and our hearts to the people who are showing up and taking the shot of listening to what we are doing, anything that we can do to build that bridge on a personal level, is really important. And if more musicians had the chance to talk to their audience

before presenting a new piece, that audience would be much more open to listening to it and would probably like it ten times more than they would have if no one had spoken to them before they'd heard the music.

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Going back to the seventies, I imagine New York was not like it is now, it must have been very interesting to grow up here, to be able to go to concerts...

It was a-ma-zing. [Big pause]. I had, on that level, the most incredible childhood. And when you grow up with it, you think everybody grows up this way, and you don't realize that not everybody goes to Carnegie Hall, the Met, the Village Vanguard... all the time! I was very lucky. I am an only child, and I grew up with two parents who loved the arts passionately, even though they weren't artists themselves. So, they'd take me to concerts, ballet, and theatre, and then I had my own interests, because they didn't care for pop music or jazz, but I loved it all. Also, raising children forty years ago was a different thing than it is today. Parents are so protective now, they don't let their kids go out and run around the city by themselves when they are little. But I was allowed the free-run of the city. By the time I was seven I was on public buses by myself, taking myself to school, and when I was thirteen, if I wanted to go out and hear a concert by myself, my parents just said: «Fine!». By the time I was fifteen, it could be a Wednesday night and I would say: «Elvin Jones, –he was an amazing jazz drummer– is playing at the Village Vanguard,» or, «Bill Evans is playing. I'm going to go downtown and catch the first set, and I may want to stay for the second set.» And my father, in his infinite wisdom, would say: «What

time are you going to be home?» I'd say, «By 1 a. m.». And as long as I was home by when I said I would be, it was fine. And I'd go to the Met, right over there. I spent a lot of time as a kid, as a teenager, right there in that building. I'd save my babysitting money, which at the time was \$1.25 an hour, which was good! you know? [we all smile]. It was a lot of money [we all burst into laughter]. And so maybe I made ten bucks a week. A standing room ticket for the Metropolitan Opera cost three dollars, and I'd always dress nicely, because invariably, I'd be able to sneak into an orchestra seat after the first act. Especially with modern opera, like *Lulú* or *Wozzeck*, some old lady would run from the hall, screaming: «Agh! It's Berg!» [laughs] and I'd get a great seat for three dollars. So that's how I afforded to take myself to everything: jazz clubs were still cheap, and there were standing room tickets for the Joffrey, American Ballet Theatre, the New York City Ballet... So, yeah, growing up here was amazing.

And then you went to Juilliard, right?

Right. I graduated Juilliard Pre-College, another very fortunate thing about being a kid in New York. My first formal composition was when I was fifteen. I went to Mannes College of Music summer school, and the summer of 1977 I studied composition there with Leo Edwards. He is a wonderful guy, really encouraging. His encouragement deeply affected my interest in going

forward as a composer. I took my first electronic music class there. The teacher had us build an Aries modular synthesizer, and I learned how envelopes, oscillators, filters, etc. work. To this day, when I am working in my studio, some of what he taught us still rings in my head. When we were bus-sing a channel through an effect, he used to say: «Everybody, get on the bus!». Just this week I was mixing a hundred tracks in my digital studio, and as I ran some effects through I said to myself: «Everybody, get on the bus!» That's the impact that teachers have: they say one little thing and you'll remember it the rest of your life!

When I was sixteen, I found out about the Aspen Music School, applied and auditioned, and they accepted me. I was very fortunate; I was the youngest composer they had. I studied with the wonderful Michael Czajkowski, who also ran the electronic music program at Juilliard, and after two summers at Aspen I got into Juilliard Pre-College while finishing my last year and a half in high school here in New York. I studied composition with Craig Shuler, and Literature & Materials with Bruce Adolphe, who I remember as being hilarious. Then from 1980 to 1983 I was a composition major at Manhattan School of Music.

By that time, I knew that I didn't want to teach, that that wouldn't be my path. I just wanted to write, write, write! I didn't have a clue about how to make a living as a concert

music composer, but this was what I wanted to do. I was interested in a lot of different genres. At Manhattan School of music, I took a class in commercial scoring from an amazing musician named Roy Eaton. At the time, Roy was heading up the music department for a very big advertising agency and had been producing and writing in the jingle and commercial music business for a long time. It was from Roy that I learned about click tracks, about synching music to picture, and about many of the tools and tasks related to commercial music. I scarfed it up, I just loved it. I would go with Roy to his recording sessions and watch him work with some of the biggest studio musicians in the city. At the same time, I had opportunities to score very low budget documentaries and cable TV shows. So, I was getting my feet wet doing my own recording sessions while I was in conservatory. I went out to Los Angeles to visit someone I knew and met a producer who hired me to score my first commercial gig. It was just a direct-to-video documentary, but it was an opportunity. In the meantime, I was studying with Ursula Mamlok and John Corigliano at Manhattan School of Music (this was before John went to teach at Juilliard). I had spent three years at MSM, I had done well, had almost all the credits I needed to graduate, and my last year would have mostly been spent writing a thesis of some symphonic piece that no one would ever play again in a million years. I had this opportunity to go out to Los Angeles to work, and John and Ursula both

said: «Go for it.» So, the whole time I was in school I was writing, working, and looking for opportunities to learn how to be a better composer. I'm sure I was terrible [she laughs]. But I loved doing it, and I took the initiative.

What would you say to students that are almost finishing or have just finished their studies? It is a scary moment...

Things may be very different in Spain than here in the U.S. One of the tragedies in American society is the destruction of our education system from the top down. We have an ignorant President who has no interest in promoting higher education, and every interest in dismantling both the U.S. Department of Education as well as public education. This is a horror, it is a tragedy, it is wrong. One of the big problems that we have in the United States is that it's often very expensive to obtain a higher education. If you are going to become an oncologist and treat people for cancer, you can afford to take the bet and rack up student loans, because you know you are going to be able to make a lot of money treating people for cancer, and you'll have a good living. But if you are trying to become a violist, or a composer, the chance of being able to make a good living any time soon is very slim. That's not the way the arts work. And yet students feel that to be in the game they need to spend



many tens of thousands of dollars to get all these degrees to support themselves while they're building their music career. A handful of universities, like Yale School of Music, offer a fantastic free program, but most are obscenely expensive. Young people set themselves up for a lot of difficulty later on in their lives by incurring tremendous debt in student loans. And now we have a wicked government that refuses to forgive or help with those loans and wants to charge taxes on scholarships. I know people who are 45 years old and are still paying off their student loans

while trying to work and raise a family. So, I tell students: «Education is wonderful, obviously, but don't put yourself in a financial position where you are going to incur debt and drag that around like a ball and a chain for the next four decades of your life; that is insane, it is not worth it. There are other ways— and I'm an example of that—, to create a rewarding musical life. Get out there, take the initiative, find ways to generate income where you don't have to have a degree. No one has ever asked me to see my diploma when they commissioned me. No one has ever asked for my CV before they've hired me. Get out there and do your best work and build positive relationships with others.»

Until 2008 you wrote mostly chamber music, and then you switched to wind bands, what changed?

I didn't switch, I added. I'll tell you a story that proves the power of serendipity in our lives, and it's applicable to any of us. The most popular social media platform in 2008 was MySpace. MySpace was where all the musicians were, it was a great online platform for music. You'd post your music samples and collect «riends.» I had thousands of MySpace contacts. One day, someone who I had never met, the very well-known band composer Anne McGinty, stumbled upon my page, liked my music samples, and featured me in her list of «top friends.» A Commander of the U.S. Army

TRADOC Band had commissioned her the year before and was among her friends. He happened to be scrolling around her page, saw my picture as one of her top friends, and clicked on my link. He started listening, and the next thing you know, he sent me a message through MySpace saying that he'd like to commission me to compose a piece for his wind band.

At first, I thought it was a joke from a friend. I literally didn't even think this was for real, because my life didn't intersect in the slightest with anything in the military or band worlds. His profile picture was of him standing in a field, in a very formal uniform, with a feather in his hat and a sword. [She laughs] I looked at his picture and I thought: «Nah, this can't be for real.» And then I carefully re-read his very nice message and I realized, «Oh wow, I think it is!» The man's name is Tod Addison, a very high-ranking member of the Armed Forces and an incredibly gifted musician with broad tastes in music. I thought to myself: «I am terrified, I've never written for an ensemble like this, I wouldn't even know which part of a euphonium you blow though! [she laughs]» So I wrote him back and was quite honest: «I'm really flattered, thank you for this great opportunity, but not only have I never written for band before, I've never even been to a wind band concert.» I received the best response from Tod: «That's why we want you, because you don't have any preconceived ideas about it, like so many band compos-

ers have. Having listened to your chamber music, I know that whatever you do is going to be different.» I thanked him and agreed to compose the piece. I was terrified that I was going to fail, that I wouldn't be able to pull it off, but I wrote a purely acoustic piece called *Homecoming* (2008), that has since been performed by many ensembles. What a wonderful gift it is when someone takes a chance on an artist. I took the risk, got out of my comfort zone, and seized an opportunity that unexpectedly presented itself. And taking that risk opened up a whole new part of the music world to me. Later that year Tod said: «Are you going to go to the Midwest Clinic?»

I asked: «What's the Midwest Clinic?» «It's the biggest band and orchestra convention imaginable. It's in Chicago every December, and more than 15,000 musicians attend.» I only had one band piece to show, but he assured me: «It's enough, go there and meet people, show them the score, and bring a demo CD.» I did as he suggested. And the next thing you know I received more big wind band commissions, and those commissions led me to a new approach to the genre.

Can you tell me more about some of those big commissions?

Jerry Luckhardt, a conductor at the University of Minnesota, also took a risk on me. He put together a small consortium of sev-

en bands to commission what ended up being a significant wind symphony of three movements called *Immersion* (2011). I'd composed a number of electro-acoustic chamber music pieces, and I thought: «Wouldn't it be interesting to put an entire wind band on stage performing with a prerecorded

track, with the conductor using a click track like we do in Hollywood, and have the audience experience the combination of those two, sizable elements?» I had this vision where it could all blend together and create a huge, new sonic world. Jerry agreed and took a chance on me.

Almost at the same time, I received a commission from the American Composers Forum. They have a wonderful series called «BandQuest», for which they commission composers (most of whom have never written for band), to write for young students because they knew we would probably take a fresh approach and write something weird, –some of us

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something really weird! I asked if I could compose an electroacoustic piece, and they agreed. When I started writing, once I realized what I was doing, I called them up and said: «I really appreciate you taking the risk with me creating an electroacoustic piece (it was the first one composed for middle school). Would it be okay if I also had the students play pieces of paper?» «What do you mean?» they asked. And I said: «Every member of the band is going to have a piece of printer paper, and they're going to play it like a percussion instrument and make sounds ripping it, tearing it apart, snapping it— in addition to playing their instruments.» ACF gave me permission, and the resulting piece is called *Paper Cut* (2010). I thought it would sell three copies and that would be it. I had no idea that it would end up becoming a big hit.



Which was the inflection point of your career?

What really put me on the map was when a band director—a great guy named Peter Guenther—performed *Paper Cut* with his middle school ensemble in Minnesota. He came up with the idea to use black light on the paper, and to play the piece in the dark. This opened my mind to multimedia and visuals with band music. It was game changing, because at the 2011 Minnesota Music Educators Association conference, Peter conducted the very first black light performance of *Paper Cut*. It looked unbelievable, it was so cool. The video was posted on YouTube, and a lot of people saw it. Now half the band directors who play it do it in the dark, with lighting, and special effects. That put the piece on the map, it put me on the map, and it opened my artistic ideas up to all the different things you can do to shake audiences out of their comfort zone.

What have you composed lately?

These days, about half of my pieces are very multimedia oriented. This week I just finished my 11th piece for band, another electroacoustic work called *Trains of Thought* (2017). Among the benefits of an electroacoustic piece is that when you're dealing with younger musicians who don't yet have a wide playing range, you don't need to write down to them. You can make them sound amazing with an accompani-

ment track. The track can include very sophisticated rhythms, and very high and very low frequencies and pitches that they can't reach themselves, but with which they can play along. The big, produced track that they play with helps them feel like they are really making music. One example is *Tight Squeeze* (2013), a twelve-tone piece with a very syncopated, hip, Afro-Cuban Latin-techno groove. I knew that the students couldn't yet play those tight syncopations, so I put them in the prerecorded accompaniment track. The students have simpler parts, but when you put it all together, it sounds really cool. That's a gift of electro-acoustic music: we can give the students a much broader sense of what they can actually do. It also helps with their intonation, because the track gives them something that they have to tune to. Rhythmically, it's a challenge to follow an unforgiving track that just chugs along. So, it's a lesson in musicianship to work with the conductor as well as with the track. It's also a challenge for the conductors, because it's a very different way of making music than the norm of just setting your own tempo. So, it's an interesting lesson for everybody to have to listen carefully to intonation and tempo.

How would you characterize your wind compositions?

Eclectic. What I like about my catalogue is that no two pieces are alike. What I've discovered about the band world is that con-

ductors love living composers, they want new repertoire, they need repertoire, they play it, they rehearse the pieces over and over, they tell their friends about them, and they don't hold on to them for long periods of time before allowing other ensembles to play them. It's an incredibly supportive environment. Band directors give you permission to do artistically anything you want, and then they celebrate it.

I've never had anyone who has said no, no matter how crazy my ideas were. And some of them were pretty crazy. One such piece is called *Lights Out* (2015) which you play in the dark— it's very loud and uptempo and encourages a lot of lighting effects that really wake up the audience! Right after that I wrote *Rock Music* (2016), which is a minimalist piece: very quiet, dark, pensive, and incredibly slow. It is my way of proving that you can get one hundred thirteen-year-old students to sit very quietly, and very still. It's magic; the students really get into this piece. It's about climate change, geology, and taking care of the planet. I wanted to get musicians away from their computers and away from their instruments and make them go outside and look down at the ground they walk upon. You can change people's perception of the world around them, with the simplest request: «Go outside and find some rocks.» I have them find the most primitive thing, that costs nothing, and make music with it. No matter where you live, no matter if it's in the city or in the country, you can always find

rocks. In the piece, the musicians scrape the rocks, they hit them, they rub them, and they connect to other people through music, and through the world around them, using a part of that physical world.

When I have the opportunity to talk to an audience before this piece is performed, I explain that the students on stage who'll perform it are the strength and future of this planet. They are its stewards. I could stand on the stage and talk about minor seventh chords that they would not understand, or— getting back to the beginning of this conversation— I can build a relationship with the audience, allowing them to not understand the music, but inviting them to connect with the things we mutually care about, such as our planet.

I have the feeling that in composition, gender is not so defined. Can composition change the way that women are perceived, and give them perhaps a more powerful position in society?

I've always assumed that my pieces are judged by their own merit. But until recently, women were largely cut out of the composition world. Being fifty-five, I am of the first generation of women that includes those like me who have not had any problems at all as a composer. I wish this were the case for all women, but it isn't; there is still enormous gender inequity in concert programming. But in my personal experi-

ence, never, to my knowledge, have I been denied an opportunity for being a woman. If anything, I've been given more opportunities because of being female, with more ensembles specifically seeking to program works by women. But these efforts were not the norm until recently. In composing, conducting, and certain areas of performing, women continue to be discriminated against. We still have a long way to go. We still have a painfully misogynistic society, and a dangerously misogynistic man in the Oval Office who has signaled to a good portion of the population in America that it's acceptable to abuse and objectify women. So, we have to work harder now to remind everyone that that's wrong, it is evil, and we are not going to put up with it. Just because some horrible person is a temporary occupant of the White House, doesn't mean that he can dictate the tone of our society.

What I find is that not only is it important that I compose the best music I can, but that understanding business is a very important part of being an artist. If I conduct myself professionally, I am treated seriously. The advice I give to young women is the same I give to young men: When you take yourself seriously, and you do your best work, your work speaks for itself. One problem is that many women are still raised to be «nice girls» and told to always be polite so that they can win everybody's approval. Screw that! [laughs] No woman can thrive like that— afraid of giving their opinion, or too hesitant to pro-

professionally promote themselves. Women composers, just like their male counterparts, need to be able to email somebody and say: «I just listened to a recording of yours and it is terrific; there is a piece in my catalog that you might find interesting, and below is a link where you can hear it. I wish you a wonderful performance season, and I hope we get to meet sometime». Simple, and professional. This is how I started my chamber music career. I don't need to write these emails anymore, but I did for a long time, and it was never a problem. People are delighted to hear from others who admire their work, and most musicians are looking to broaden their contacts.

The same rules apply for everybody, but what I have noticed over the years is that women in particular have a hard time doing this, even though it is perfectly fine to be forthright—hopefully pleasant, hopefully fun to be around—, but feeling confident about what you do. That's a tough message, especially for artists. The advice that I tend to give to young composers is the same, whether they are male or female: «Feel good about your work, write authentic music that matters to you, get yourself out there, meet people, go to concerts and conferences, volunteer

your time with advocacy organizations, and get involved in the world around you. It doesn't matter what your gender is: smile, be friendly, be interested in others, and connect with people.»

So how would you define your work?

I think one of the most interesting things about 2017 and beyond is we can choose our own definition of ourselves, and it doesn't have to fit into a prescribed category. It can be whatever you choose to say you are, any day of the week. Not that long ago, composers were placed inside what

I call a cookie cutter mold and expected to adhere to somewhat rigid— if random— genre criteria. Now— the last twenty years or so— thanks largely to technology we have the ability and freedom to self-publish and to create our own professional connections, and thus we are no longer reliant on other

people to define us and approve of us. If you no longer seek the approval of «gate keepers» and you just do what you want to do, and write what you want to hear, that is the most wonderful, empowering thing. It means we can change our own definition of ourselves, or not have any definitions at all.

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