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Shatin's Jefferson-Inspired Piece Makes East Coast Premiere April 24-25, Composer Celebrating 30 Years at U.Va.

April 8, 2010 — Sound artist and composer Judith Shatin often looks to the world around her for inspiration. For "Jefferson: In His Own Words," a composition for narrator and orchestra, it was the University of Virginia's founder Thomas Jefferson that sparked her creativity.

For the composition, Shatin delved deep into the writings of Jefferson. Her piece will make its East Coast premiere April 24 and 25 when the Charlottesville & University Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Kate Tamarkin, features the work on its program titled "The New World." The Honorable Gerald L. Baliles will serve as narrator.

The April 24 concert is at 8 p.m. in Old Cabell Hall. The April 25 concert is 3:30 p.m. at Monticello High School. Tickets are \$35, \$30, \$25 and \$20 for adults, \$10 for students and free for U.Va. students if reserved in advance. WHTJ, WVPT and WMRA Public Broadcasting MemberCard holders can receive two tickets for the price of one, using Benefit Number 261. Tickets may be purchased at the University of Virginia **Arts Box Office**, 434-924-3376, noon to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, in the lobby of the Drama Building at 109 Culbreth Road.

Co-commissioned by four orchestras, Shatin's composition premiered March 12 and 13 with the Illinois Symphony. It will be performed by the other co-commissioners, the Richmond and Virginia symphonies, next season.

Shatin began the project by sifting through many of Jefferson's writings. While some are only available at U.Va.'s Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library and at the Jefferson Library at Monticello, she was happily surprised at how many Jefferson papers are available online. She collaborated with acclaimed American poet Barbara Goldberg in developing the narrative.

"What struck me was the astonishing range of his erudition and how intimate some of the letters are. He was remarkably forward thinking in some areas, and very much of his time in others," Shatin said.

She also turned to the music of Jefferson's time for inspiration – listening to the music Jefferson lived with as well as investigating the music that was part of the slaves' lives.

Shatin's goal was to create a portrait, not just of a statesman, but "a more nuanced and intimate portrait."

"The first movement focuses on Jefferson's political passions. The second, 'Head and Heart' – is drawn from just two personal letters. The third, 'Justice Never Sleeps,' – draws on both letters and his Farm Book, and is about his complicated relationship to slavery. The fourth, 'Freedom of Reason,' is about his retirement to Monticello, his founding of the University of Virginia, the meaning of education to him and his hopes for the future," she said.

The project comes on the heels of another Jefferson project, Rotunda, a collaborative film portrait of the Lawn and Rotunda, which premiered at the U.Va. Art Museum during the fall exhibition "Thomas Jefferson's Academical Village: the Creation of an Architectural Masterpiece."

Shatin said it's happenstance that these two projects came one after the other.

"Both of them have given me a renewed sense of the legacy Jefferson left, and how vivid it remains."

Jefferson had earlier figured in Shatin's music, with her We Hold These Truths for chorus, brass quintet and tympani commissioned by U.Va. to celebrate Jefferson's 250th birthday in 1993.

Jefferson wrote in 1820 that his new university would be based on the "unlimited freedom of the human mind." Shatin has embraced that ideal.

During her 30 years in the McIntire Department of Art in the College and Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, Shatin's curiosity and devotion to her work as a composer and teacher have developed, like her music, in an intertwined fashion. She has also developed deep roots in the community, and worked with a variety of community groups. The most recent example is a Gala Benefit for the Piedmont Council of the Arts at the Paramount Theatre coming up on May 8, featuring a concert of her violin and piano music performed by the Borup-Ernst Duo.



Judith Shatin (click for high-res version)

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Shatin founded U.Va.'s Virginia Center for Computer Music in 1987-88, and it continues to grow and flourish, with outstanding colleagues who are both innovative educators and technical experts. She served as department chair for two terms, helping forge new directions in music education at U.Va. During her tenure she shepherded the music Ph.D. program, the first in the state, to completion. The composition alums and current students' work is being performed all over the world. Hers continues to be as well, with recent performances on the "Beyond the Machine " festival at Juilliard and by the Dutch Hexagon Ensemble in Nooderhagen.

The research Shatin has undertaken for the more than 100 acoustic and digital compositions she has created contributes to her work as an educator, as do the master classes and residencies she has participated in at numerous institutions. Examples include her Broadcast Music Inc. residency at Vanderbilt University and her service as master composer at the Wellesley Composers Conference, as well as upcoming residencies at Wintergreen Performing Arts and California Summer Music. Here at home, her teaching has been recognized with a "Teacher of the Year" award from the Z Society.

"My research and preparation for teaching fuels my music and in turn my composing informs my teaching," Shatin said. "There's a strong feedback between the two."

Just as Shatin has developed a creative and distinct compositional voice, she treasures helping students develop their own.

Steven Kemper, a Ph.D. student in composition and computer technologies, said she has supported his projects, ranging from acoustic instrumental music to musical robotics.

"She has always emphasized the importance of my musical ideas regardless of the medium," he said. "It is inspiring to work with such a prolific and talented composer who provides guidance on both the craft and artistry of my music and who continually challenges me to produce the highest quality work." said.

— *By Jane Ford*

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