Time To Burn: Judith Shatin in conversation

Feature Article by Colin Clarke

Judith Shatin, Kenan professor of music at the University of Virginia, writes music that is satisfyingly challenging, music that forces listeners to face up to their own perceptions of music, what it is and how it relates to other artistic disciplines. I admit that I had actually only come across one of her pieces before, the light-hearted chamber piece *Spin*, on a North/South disc (Fanfare 32:1). Yet the music on the current disc is of a different nature (although the finale of her piece Glyph seems to include a fair amount of play). More, she has been described in the pages of Fanfare previously (by Peter Burwasser) as a "natural story teller" and as having a "natural ability to create a narrative pulse" (Fanfare 37:5). I ask Shatin about her take on the narrative function within music, mentioning that in particular *Elijah's Chariot* seems to have a story to tell….

"I believe that all music is narrative: it contains a sequence of events with particular emphases created by rhythmic, timbral, pitch, and tempo inflections. We are, by nature, pattern seekers, and we interpret patterns and our experience of them through narrative, whether we couch our understanding in music-theoretic or external programmatic terms. It is narrative that helps us to create connections between events, why one happens after another. I have never accepted the standard notion that music is either abstract or programmatic. The program may be abstract, for instance, based on a set of interval relationships that are transformed in particular ways. But as soon as those relationships are reified in music and we try to make sense of them, we turn to narrative. We can of course have strong emotional responses without going through that process. But to say anything to ourselves about those responses, we talk to ourselves about how the music goes, and how we perceive it. It is fascinating to me that Lakoff and Johnson discuss so much of the structure of ideas in terms of metaphors with a narrative shape.

"Titles are important starting points for me, as they pertain to multiple elements: tone of voice, type of musical flow, and structural design. And, while I don't wish to prescribe how others think about my music, I also want to share some verbal connection to both my inspiration and shaping mechanisms. In the case of *Glyph*, which is a figure carved in relief, I was also thinking of qualities of light that illuminate these figures, and of glyphs as carving sound in time. *Elijah's Chariot*, inspired by the Biblical story of Elijah, works rather differently. Scored for amplified string quartet and electronics, the processed shofar sounds link directly to the story of Elijah's return, to be announced by the blowing of the shofar. Likewise, the inclusion of the opening phrase of the Jewish folk tune *Eliahu HaNavi*, sometimes heavily obscured, and at one point breaking forth in a hummed melody, refers directly to the prophet. The flow of the music follows

a trajectory that rises to a dense and fiery sonic whirl, before returning to earth, as it were. In fact, I became so obsessed with this tune that, when I had a residency at Brahmshaus in Baden-Baden shortly thereafter, I created *Chai Variations on Eliahu HaNavi*. This piece, a set of 18 variations (the number associated with Chai) was just recorded by Mary Kathleen Ernst on her CD "Keeping Time" (Innova 868).

Of obvious importance to Judith Shatin is the integration of the various arts: visual, literary, and music. Obviously I am keen to learn why this is important to her, and some of the ways it has come out in her music.

"For starts, I have been thrilled by the various arts as far back as I can remember. I gravitated to our piano when I was about four, I grew up as an avid reader, and am fascinated by art from a wide variety of periods and cultures—Hans Memling to Andrew Goldsworthy, Piero della Francesca to Lucio Fontana. I find synergistic inspiration in my experiences of visual and literary art. I love setting texts to music, though the choosing of texts is a laborious and lengthy process. Many of my pieces have been inspired by experiences of other arts: seeing Degas's *L'étude des Mains* inspired *L'étude du Coeur* for solo viola, commissioned by the late violist Rosemary Glyde; reading the delightful poetry cycle *Marvelous Pursuits* by American poet Barbara Goldberg directly inspired my piece of the same name for vocal quartet and piano four-hands, telling the humorous story of a man with two mistresses whose wife is having an affair with the piano tuner!

"Sometimes the connections pop unbidden into being. For example my *Penelope's Song* was inspired by the story of Ulysses, but from Penelope's point of view. That idea led me to record talented local weaver Jan Russell working on wooden looms, and to create the electronics from that source. The acoustic part, originally for amplified viola, now also exists in versions for violin, cello, clarinet, flute, and soprano saxophone. The violin version was recorded by Hasse Borup on my *Tower of the Eight Winds* CD (Innova 770), while the eminent saxophonist Susan Fancher recorded it on her CD *In Two Worlds* (Innova 736). It feels as though my antennae are always up and listening for experiences, not only of the visual and literary, but of the entire world around me, and how these might be variously transformed into music or serve as guides into musical thought."

I notice for example that the third piece we hear, *Grito del Corazón*, is inspired by Goya's black paintings. Scored for two clarinets and electronics, it brings us neatly on to Shatin's engagement with electronic music.

"My involvement with electronic music came as something of a surprise. I am not someone who grew up with a particular interest in technology or much access to it. Nonetheless, there was something about the extended possibilities I could imagine electronic music offering that led me to explore it. My first experiences were with the old 'tape music,' created by recording onto magnetic tape, and cutting and splicing it. I did not stick with this for long, because I found neither the results I achieved nor the process compelling. I am full of admiration for composers such as Mario Davidovsky who made such terrific music using these techniques.

“My next experiences with electronic music were at the Aspen Music Festival, where Michael Czajkowski taught using a Buchla synthesizer. We used patch cords to connect oscillators and controllers. This was fascinating, and Mr. Czajkowksi kindly allowed me to continue working with the synthesizer in New York. However, since it was an analog machine, there was always some drift in the sound, and it was difficult to reset patches between sessions to obtain the same sound. Still, it was to me a kind of proof of concept that electronic music could be compositionally powerful.

“Finally, it was on to computer music, rather than analog electronics. I had access to an IBM mainframe while a graduate student at Princeton. This was in the early days when one had to type huge stacks of note cards detailing the musical parameters numerically, hand them in to be transferred to tape, and wait to go to the Engineering School in the middle of the night to use their digital–analog converters to hear the result. Again, this turned out not to seem very promising for me. If you made any typos, you might hear nothing, and in any case the process was extremely cumbersome and the results did not seem worth the struggle.

“Not until some time after I joined the faculty at the University of Virginia did I found the Virginia Center for Computer Music in 1987–88. At that time the MIDI protocol, which enabled computers to ‘talk’ to synthesizers, and for synthesizers to be controlled by one another, had just been invented. The first equipment we bought consisted of a couple of Mac SEs, a Mac II, and an Amiga computer, with a bunch of peripheral devices and software that is long gone. But, I finally felt that the early promise of electronic music was coming to fruition, and found working with it endlessly tantalizing. My first piece, called *Hearing Things*, was scored for amplified violin, MIDI keyboard controller, a Mac II, and a bunch of peripherals, including a sampler, voice processor, and various additional effects processors. It took a long time to figure out how to integrate the electronics and acoustic elements, and was also an object lesson in the almost-immediate obsolescence of electronic gear. At the same time, the sonic world it captured was thrilling.

“The developments in the world of digital media since then are simply stunning. A huge community of developers, ranging from the pioneering work of Max Mathews in computer music program development to the multitude of engineers, inventors, computer scientists, and musicians working now, has led to a fantastic plethora of tools. Of course, there are issues in keeping up with all of these developments, and in the obsolescence of both hardware and software.”

Related to this perhaps is your engagement with sounds around us and their transformative potential into music, either verbatim of via various transformations. “The sounds around us are a never-ending source of inspiration. One of my most recent pieces is *Tape Music*, made from recordings of myself snapping, pulling, mashing and otherwise messing with different types of tape ranging from packing and masking tape to duct tape, paper tape, and several other varieties. On the one hand it is a nostalgic reference to the genre of tape music, with electronic music encoded on magnetic tape. On the other, it sings of a humble material with a wide array of sonic elements. The original version of *Tape Music* is for 5.1 surround sound. Next, I composed *Tape Music*∞ for any number of participants and stereo electronics made from the same original sources. I worked with fourth- and-fifth-grade students at the Sabot School at Stony Point in

Richmond, and premiered both pieces at the Third Practice Festival in 2014 in Richmond. And, currently, I have just finished an acoustic version of the piece, called *Music for Tape, Box and Pencil,* for any number of participants, who each have a roll of tape on a dispenser, a small cardboard box, and a blunt pencil.

"Some other examples of pieces with sources in the world around us include *Singing the Blue Ridge* for mezzo, baritone, orchestra, and electronics made from wild animal sounds; *For the Birds,* for amplified cello and electronics made from bird calls from the Yellowstone region; and *Coal*, which I call a folk oratorio, scored for Appalachian band, chorus, synthesizer, and electronics made from sounds collected from a West Virginia coal mine. The latter piece was the result of a two-year foray into the lore and culture of coal mining. Sponsored by the Lila Wallace–Reader's Digest Arts Partners Program, it brought together the acoustic and digital, the traditional and contemporary. And, the process involved a great deal of research, as well as travel throughout West Virginia."

Going back to Shatin's periods of study (she studied at both the Juilliard School and at Princeton), I ask who were her principal influences from these august establishments, and what did she take from them?

"Before discussing my studies at Juilliard and Princeton, I would like to mention two professors I studied with while at Douglass College: James Scott and Robert Moevs. Professor Scott is a flutist and theorist, and he piqued my interest in composition to the point that I sought out Robert Moevs, a composer of beautiful, precise, and poignant music who I had the privilege of studying with during my senior year. At that time, I already knew I wanted to move on in composition, and proposed the first senior recital in composition in the school's history. I managed to pull it off, and this experience launched me on my way. At Juilliard, I studied primarily with Milton Babbitt. Although I had already read some of his work, and heard him lecture, I was mesmerized by his course on Schoenberg, and by his combination of brilliance and humor. This led me to Princeton, where I completed my Ph.D., and worked with J. K. Randall, Peter Westergaard, and Paul Lansky as well as Babbitt. I would say that what I took from the combination of my studies at these two institutions was a deep regard for sounds and ideas, with both of those elements balancing each other. I also had the pleasure of collaborating with many amazing musicians, and that is still a fundamental part of my musical practice. I am currently studying percussion with our outstanding percussion faculty member, I-Jen Fang. Although I have already composed numerous pieces involving percussion, I love the hands-on and exploratory aspect of such close study."

The present disc is named after the piece *Time to Burn*, something which seems especially important once one realizes the importance of the work's generating factors to you, viz., the wars and holocausts caused by racial hatred.

"While there was not just one factor that sparked *Time to Burn*, I composed it in 2006 while the Iraq hostilities continued, the Israel-Lebanon/Hezbollah War broke out, the Darfur disaster was ongoing. I also was moved by not only the renewed holocausts driven by ethnic and religious hatred, but by the rampant intolerance that seems reminiscent of the 'burning time' of the Inquisition and that of the burning of witches."

The sound world of this piece is indeed rather angry, and Shatin makes huge demands on her performers, including multiphonics for the oboe. Does that testing of the boundaries of what a performer can do result in a more visceral, exciting experience?

"I worked with oboist Scott Perry and percussionist I-Jen Fang as I was developing the sound world of this piece. While the multiphonics have a stark angry edge, they are all playable. It is indeed a rather dark piece, though there are lighter moments as well. Music can express a huge range of emotions, just as visual art and literature can. You mentioned Goya earlier, and his anguished prints, titled *Los Desastres de la Guerra* speak directly to this aspect. Testing the boundaries of performers is not something I am interested in for its own sake. Rather, I like to explore instruments with expert performers and to draw closer to both their traditional techniques and find new ones, while expressing the full range of emotions."

The piece *Sic Transit* is scored for percussionist and CADI. Firstly I ask about CADI. "CADI stands for Computer Assisted Drumming Instrument, and was created by a group of former graduate students at the University of Virginia, who formed a company called EMMI (Experimental Machines Musical Instruments at expressivemachines.com/dev/wordpress) to make robotic instruments that play acoustic ones. So, in this case, there are six robot arms, controlled by a computer program, that were set to play on six different drums. I used a program to tell them when to play, and chose the instruments they should play. This took a huge amount of trial and error, in developing the rhythmic design, as it was not something I could just imagine in the abstract. I created the piece as a duet between a live percussionist, playing an assortment of instruments and CADI. One other aspect of CADI that was interesting to explore was the possibility of creating rhythms that, either due to their complexity or speed, could not be played by a human performer. On the other hand, the sweep of performance achieved by a live performer cannot be managed with CADI. For anyone interested in taking a look/listen to the piece, it is posted on YouTube at: youtube.com/watch?v=gt2l9hMO4g0. Most of the piece involves precisely timed and notated elements for both the percussionist and CADI. There are a few places where CADI draws from randomly assigned rhythmic elements, and where the percussionist responds to what CADI is doing. The idea here was to embody some of the unexpected events that occur in our lives. However, the repertoire of moves that each can make is circumscribed, as are own behaviors are."

Of course time (and rhythm's interactions with it) are vital to music itself. Good to get the grander issues out in the open: I ask if Shatin would care to expound on her ideas about time and our relationship to it, both in specifically musical and in more general terms? "Not exactly a small question! Musical time is a hugely complex topic, and I can't hope to expound on it here. However, what I will say is that tempo, rhythmic grouping and flow have a profound effect on all of us. Whether it is the layered and syncopated interactions of salsa music, the cyclical patterns of African and some East Asian music, the repetitive beat patterns of minimal music, or the wide-open sonic spaces of ambient music, our experience of time through rhythm is key to our sense of music. In more general terms, the experience of temporal flow, where hours feel like minutes, is a common one, as is its inverse. Sometimes I have students try to decipher the duration of a minute simply by feel, and they often have difficulty doing so. Time is measured by what happens in it."

The next piece is for electronics only (*Hosech al P'ney HaTehom*). Its basis (music appearing out of darkness) seems to have been the basis for a good amount of "contemporary" music over the past 50 or so years (not to mention prior: Rheingold, for example). Can you also explain a little more about the "Sambox" synthesizer?

"'Sambox' was a non-realtime synthesizer controlled by a command-line language called Pla, created by Bill Schottstaedt at Stanford University Center for Research in Music and Acoustics. I spent a sabbatical as a guest composer at 'CCRMA.' To work with this language I had to write computer code using Pla. It was very labor intensive, but at the time if offered an excellent way to control the synthesis and shaping of sound. But, you had to write the code and then wait for the machine to chew on the program and write a soundfile before you could hear it.

"The example you mention from Das Rheingold spins out a rising arpeggio and increasing orchestral density for quite some time. It quite literally rises from the registral depths, embodying a rise from the bottom of the river. *Hosech al P'ney HaTehom* also begins in a very low register, and you can almost feel the music before you hear it. However, rather than rise consistently from the depths, there are bolts of musical lightning, shivers of sound coming into being, and, even though all of the sounds were made by shaping the stuff of soundwaves, there are sounds that could be taken for strange beings singing. I think that your sense of the temporal extension of the piece beyond its duration comes from the wide registral and dynamic range, and the sense of spaciousness that results. There are places where one can rest in the sound, and this expands one's sense of the passing of time."

Is it deliberate that the final piece (*Elijah's Chariot* for amplified string quartet and electronics from processed shofar sounds) starts without a break and seems to itself grow out of the previous piece? It also seems to demonstrate Shatin's use of found sounds and electronics very effectively indeed.

"While *Elijah's Chariot* does not actually grow out of the previous piece, I can understand why you might think so. The pitch of its opening closely matches the closing pitch of the previous piece, and as is the case in the previous piece, it has a Biblical theme. I liked the linking of an ancient instrument (the shofar) and the string quartet with modern technology, but unfortunately it turned out that the shofar was not an easily found sound, or at least an easily played instrument! It took several tries before I found Dr. Mel Siegel of Minneapolis, who made the recordings that formed the basis of the electronics. Perhaps one reason that the acoustic and electronic elements feel integrated is that I work on them simultaneously, after designing the overall shape of the piece. In addition, I've been blessed with a fine sense of pitch, and this helps me create links between the acoustic and electronic worlds even when I am not using traditional instruments or tuning."

I notice that it includes (around the 10-minute mark and before) the use of some melodic gestures (derived from the shofar "fanfares") that could surely be labeled as "Romantic" in inspiration. Is that deliberate?

"The folksong *Eliahu HaNavi* features prominently in the string quartet part as mentioned above, and I can see why you would think of this as "Romantic," in its inspiration. That is not a label I

eschew, and indeed there are elements in many of my pieces that one might ascribe to a similar source. My chamber piece *Werther*, for instance, was inspired by the quintessential Romantic novel. Again, though, I resist 'ism-izing' my music. It is not that anything goes, but that I want to be buoyed rather than drowned by the music of both the past and present."

Certainly the list of "Acoustic, Electronic, Interactive, Robotics" on the disc cover seems to imply a cutting edge aspect to the music on display here. Where are these experiments with electronics leading Shatin? And where has her search led her since the recording of the album, Time to Burn?

"My experiments with electronics have led me closer to the sounding world around me, and to have a more open approach to the possibilities of traditional instruments. I don't think of acoustic and electronic as mutually exclusive at all. I still compose a great deal of music for purely acoustic sources, including solo, chamber, choral, vocal, and orchestral. I have also composed music for theater. But I also find that electronics can expand the universe of traditional instruments, and the possibility of making music from the intricate sonic web in which we live expands the realm of music itself. The term 'electronic' does not cover any one aspect of music any more than the term 'acoustic' does. They each enable sonic exploration and collaboration, and I find that my work in each infuses the other."

Finally, I invite Shatin to give readers an idea of what she is working on presently, or what is about to be premiered. "I will mention two current projects, as they demonstrate the points made above. I have just completed *Being in Time*, scored for conductor-controlled electronics, wind ensemble, and interactive video for the UVA Wind Ensemble, sponsored by the UVA Arts in Action Program. The electronics were made from recordings I made of members of the ensemble. This project involved a team effort, and if anyone would like to know more details, they are discussed on my web site blog (judithshatin.com). This project combines the acoustic and digital worlds, and adds the visual one as well. The video has a background drawn from the Charlottesville night sky, while the interactive elements appear above it, as they respond to the music the instrumentalists play. My other current project, *Trace Elements*, for two pianos and two percussion, was commissioned by Ensemble Berlin PianoPercussion, and will be premiered by them in December. Here, there are no electronics, but I never would have conceived of the sonic detail without my previous experiences in that realm. Rather than privilege the acoustic or digital, I focus on the musical experience being created, drawing on either or both. It is the entire range that I treasure."

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