

new music connoisseur

The magazine devoted to the contemporary music scene

IN ASSOCIATION WITH COMPOSERS CONCORDANCE, INC. ▪ www.newmusicon.org ▪ NEWSSTAND PRICE \$4.95

A Full Report On the ACA's 2004 American Music Festival

The American Composers Alliance gives this town one of the finest new music events every year. Billed as "the past, present and future of American music," the 2004 festival was again designed to show off the work of its members in a panoramic soundview of the current state of the art. But did we come away with anything about our musical past or where it's all going?



Among the more ambitious works at the festival were: *Excavating the Perfect Farewell*, by Robert Carl (top left); *Last Letters from Stalingrad* with baritone Robert Osborne (large photo); and *Lettere*, by John Eaton (right). Above: BMI's Ralph Jackson with ACA President Hubert Howe and Executive-Director Jasna Radonjic. (See pages 13-17.)



PLUS

▪ NMC GALA—

How did NMC's Gala 2004 fare? Who were the standouts of this event? Why was the "envelope" chosen as a conspicuous symbol of the event?

▪ **INTERVIEW—** An interview with composer and university professor Judith Shatin, who is making sound and other waves at the school founded by Thomas Jefferson.

▪ **REVIEWS** by Leo Kraft, David Cleary, John de Clef Piñeiro, among others ... and a **Fun puzzle**.

Judith Shatin

A Conversation with the Publisher

Called “marvelously inventive” by the *Washington Post* and “exuberant and captivating” by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Judith Shatin’s music is inspired by her explorations and inventive extensions of timbre. Her music ranges from acoustic to electronic and multimedia, from chamber and choral to orchestral. It is internationally performed, ranging from BAM’s Next Wave Festival to the World Music Days in Slovenia, and across Europe, to Israel and Asia. Her music can be heard on the Capstone, Centaur, Neuma, New World and Sonora labels. She has received commissions from the Ash Lawn Opera, Barlow Foundation, Core Ensemble, Kronos Quartet, National Symphony, Hexagon Ensemble and Wintergreen Performing Arts, the last through Americans for the Arts. A two-year retrospective of her work, culminating in the premiere of *COAL*, a folk oratorio scored for Appalachian ensemble, chorus and electronics, was sponsored by Shepherd College, with major funding from the Lila Wallace-Readers Digest Arts Partners Program. She has been involved in many residencies. Currently, Judith Shatin is William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Music and Director of the Virginia Center for Computer Music of the McIntire Department of Music at the University of Virginia. Her teaching focuses on composition, computer music and related topics.

BLC: In the liner notes of your orchestral CD, ‘Piping the Earth,’ you are quoted as saying “I’ve always wanted to create music that resonates, that you feel in your body and mind.” I was wondering if this involves a conscious decision on your part, something that determines exactly how you are going to proceed with a composition, or rather something that you simply bring to the table in the hope that it will be borne out in the end by whatever means, perhaps by your own compositional skills and talents.

JS: This does indeed involve a conscious decision about my compositional approach. I am interested in creating perceptible rhythmic frameworks and in developing musical structures that invite both physical and intellectual response.

BLC: Are good titles for your pieces of the utmost importance to you? I ask that because three of the titles in the album make reference to ancient concepts derived from several cultures. The liner notes – quite perceptively written by David Schulman, by the way – also



Judith Shatin

intimate that you have supplied a lot of explanatory commentary yourself. Of course, only you would know why you chose a particular title and how it was designed to color your work. Do you feel then that your compositions cannot be appreciated until the listener carefully reads your comments and understands the bases of the titles?

JS: Titles are indeed important to me. I have loved and been inspired by words as long as I have been engaged by music. I used to write a fair amount of poetry, and am frequently inspired by other types of narratives or art to create musical structures. I do believe that my music can be appreciated by the listener without reading my comments or studying the structure of the music. But, as is the case in appreciating a painting by Memling or a symphony by Mozart, the more you know the greater your understanding and pleasure will be.

BLC: Of course, we can all agree that the compact disc is an attractive medium if for no other reason than its ability to reach thousands of music lovers willing to buy it and listen. Another great advantage that it has over live performance is the freedom to listen again and again, especially to music that is complex and that may shift the listener’s judgment with each hearing. Does that attract you when you hear of an opportunity to cut a CD?

JS: I believe that both the opportunity to reach people and to provide them the option of multiple listenings are excellent reasons to release CD’s. People often ask me whether recordings are available when they hear my music in concert. And, there is a much smaller limit to the number of people who hear one’s

work in concert. So, for the time being, releasing CD’s makes one’s music more accessible as well as providing a means of studying it. And as methods for disseminating music over the internet continue to mature, I will increasingly use those as well.

BLC: Our first introduction to your work involved some electronics. Let’s grant that your use of electronics brought about acoustically successful results. There were no electronics in this CD. Do you still feel it has further possibilities for you? Does it continue to have a future in music, as a tool, medium, instrument, whatever?

JS: Electroacoustic music continues to fascinate me. And, though I have no samples on either of my recent CD’s (*Piping the Earth* and *Dreamtigers*), I expect to release electroacoustic pieces on future CD’s. I believe it has a crucial role in my music. While I continue to enjoy composing for traditional acoustic instruments, my abiding fascination with timbre has led me on a compelling journey into the world of digital media. I recently completed my first piece involving multi-channel audio, *Cherry Blossom and a Wrapped Thing* (After Hokusai), for clarinet and electronics, for clarinetist F. Gerard Errante. In addition, my interactive installation, *Tree Music*, commissioned for a sculpture exhibit by the University of Virginia, leaves me enthusiastic about interactive possibilities. I am confident that digital media will provide creative options that we can barely imagine. And in any case, it enables me to develop timbral worlds that are not otherwise available.

BLC: May we talk just a bit about your own self-discovery? One is impressed from reading about your work’s inspirations and explanations and that there appears to be a genuine erudition coming out of studies that affected your thinking for life, not just in passing. Some might plain and simply call this intellect. If true, how would that have affected your discovery of music and your own personal life’s direction?

JS: I don’t differentiate between my musical self and some other self! I have always had an overflowing curiosity and taken great pleasure in learning. I chose to go to a liberal arts undergraduate institution (Douglass College), because I wanted to continue broad studies rather than focus exclusively on music. I did

focus more exclusively on music during studies at the Aspen and Tanglewood Festivals, and while working on my MM at the Juilliard School. While there, my study with Milton Babbitt was especially important. I was captivated by the depth of his theoretical and compositional approach and decided to continue my graduate studies at Princeton, where I completed the PhD. One of the joys of teaching at a University is the continued opportunity for learning.

BLC: Is there an interest or background in music within your family? As you are well aware, the argument still goes on as to whether musical ability exists in one's genes or merely the greater opportunities for earlier training. How do you see this question?

JS: My parents were both trained as scientists—my father as a clinical psychologist and my mother as a medical bacteriologist. Though they both enjoyed music, neither had any particular background in it. However, my father worked with members of the Musicians Emergency Fund, and they suggested that he buy a piano. He did, and both I and my older sister gravitated to it. We were fortunate that our parents offered us piano lessons. In addition, I took flute lessons at my public school in Albany, New York. Later, while living in South Orange, NJ, I sang in the school choir and played flute in the orchestra, continuing the latter through high school, and piano through college.

I agree that early encouragement and support make a tremendous difference in the development of whatever potential one is endowed with. This position is argued strongly in an article "Innate talents: Reality or Myth?" by Howe, Davidson and Sloboda and published in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. My husband, cognitive psychologist Michael Kubovy, assigned this article to students in our class, 'The Mind of the Artist', taught by me and art historian David Summers at the University of Virginia.

Shatin: "... the more intellectually prepared one is to experience any concert, the better"

BLC: That idea [regarding Kubovy's study in Shatin's U. Va class] certainly seems appropriate to musical studies, and I can see why your husband found your class to be a logical testing ground for cognitive psychological research.

JS: What we all wanted to do in our 'Mind of the Artist' class was to encourage students to challenge their preconceptions about what art is and what artists do. So, rather than serve as a testing ground for cognitive psychological

research, we wanted to give them access to the current work in this field.

BLC: It's also interesting that earlier you mentioned Milton Babbitt as a teacher with



a great influence on your own musical directions. It happens that the two composers I studied with, and who had both studied with Milton, found him to be enormously demanding in his expectations that students think about musically unrelated matters in order to broaden their perspectives. He too practiced a kind of cognitive psychology. Almost no one disagrees that Milton Babbitt has one of the most searching minds as both creator and teacher. At the same time, there are many who are totally antagonistic to his stance that the concert hall is not a place for entertainment and that the composer of serious music has an obligation perhaps to avoid treating accessibility as a given or taking the position that accessibility is exactly what is missing in new music today. I recall his expressing the belief (in a NY Times debate with John Corigliano) that he expects an audience to come to the concert hall intellectually prepared. Are you firmly in his corner on this?

JS: What I did and do find so appealing in Milton is precisely the intellectual inquisitiveness and searching nature of his approach, the seamless connection between his theoretical and compositional work, the sense of how deeply and broadly music can count as investigation. As to expectations that students think about musically unrelated matters—I have two responses. One, virtually anything can be a musically related matter! Two, it's crucial for composers to be informed well beyond what some would think of as "purely" musical matters. I think we all need to understand the cultural contexts in which we work; to find ways to think about structure and design in relation to our creative process; to use the fascinating research currently being done in cognitive perception to help us think about compositional strategies.

The issue of the concert hall is a vexing one on multiple counts. First, as I mentioned before, the more intellectually prepared one is

to experience any concert, the better. If I go to hear a concert of Northern Indian music, and know nothing of its theory and meaning, I will surely get less from the experience. The same is true for a concert of any other music, from Adolph to Zwilich. That said, one can experience pleasure and emotional response to music without having a deep understanding of the music-historical or theoretical elements involved. I think of music as nourishing the mind-body, rather than either/or. And I wish we could stop thinking of music as either "entertaining" or "demanding." If by entertaining, we mean engaging, and by demanding, we mean requiring us to actively respond, then I want both! Accessibility—is another problematic notion. Probably most would find Bach's Goldberg Variations accessible, yet they are terrifically complicated. I think that accessibility has to do with a certain range of density of musical information and with our perceptual capacities for such musical elements as rhythm.

BLC: Then you approach your role as teacher in the same way, expecting students to think out of the box, so to speak?

JS: As is no doubt clear from my answers above, I expect students to care about ideas and concepts that might not be typically understood as traditionally "musical." One of the reasons that I enjoy teaching at the University of Virginia is the many opportunities for encountering work such a variety of disciplines offers. A recent example is the terrific colloquium that our colleague in Astronomy, Mark Whittle, offered on his sonification of the Big Bang. He explained how astonishingly long sound waves were created very soon after the Big Bang, and how they were involved in the creation of the universe, including the locus of star formation. He also gave the rationale for his fifty-octave transposition of the frequencies that enabled us to hear a sonic interpretation of those original frequencies.

And, in the context of my courses, I also ask students to read broadly. One recent example is Lydia Goehr's book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, assigned in my seminar on American experimental music. It is a thought-provoking discussion of the notion of the musical work, surely a topic that composers should think about!

BLC: Then exactly how do you approach your own composition students as to the question of considering the audience for their music?

JS: I don't see a discrepancy between the positive answer I gave before and consideration of the audience for our music. My students and I have indeed pondered the question of audience, and the larger one of community. We have considered not just concerts, but the many ways/places people encounter music. Some of my students are working on projects that reach audiences on the internet. Some want to create music that will be encountered

in surprising places. Some want to create music for the more social encounter of the concert hall.

BLC: Tell us a bit more about your personal ideas regarding musical education. Is there a Shatin school of thought on the subject?

JS: I have an approach to music education that combines elements of the conservatory and the university. I have always been frustrated by the distinctions between the two. That perhaps accounts for my own educational choices, mentioned above. I always wished that elements of the conservatory and the academy could be combined. At the University of Virginia we have been building a program that combines the passion of music creating, music making and music thinking. I find this an exciting direction. Why? I want students to have the joy and insight only available through playing instruments. I want them to explore music theory, to be able to think in music, to understand what has mattered to composers; I want them to engage with the broader field and ongoing disciplinary changes. I also think that anyone serious about becoming a composer now should explore both acoustic and digital technologies. This was very much in mind when we developed our new PhD program in Composition and Computing Technologies.

BLC: Would you be able to share with us your feelings about where you think your career ought to be going or actually is going? There's composition vs. education. Will they remain in careful balance? Or perhaps there is a third destiny, an unexpected force that just might emerge and steer you along new paths.

JS: Talking about a career is perhaps best done by those considering someone else's work. I don't think in terms of my career, but rather of the adventure I've embarked upon. The territory is out there, but much remains to be discovered. Projects lead me in different, often unexpected directions.

For example, working on my folk oratorio, *COAL*, based on the lore and culture of coal mining in West Virginia, opened completely new areas for me. I undertook research in a variety of settings, ranging from the archives of West Virginia University to the National Mine Health and Safety Academy in Beckley, WV. I worked with some amazing old-time Appalachian musicians, including singer Ginny Hawker and guitarist/singer Tracy Schwartz. I participated in a class in Appalachian singing at the Augusta Heritage Center in Elkins, VA. In the course of these explorations, I met people from all walks of life, from miners to company owners, and harvested sounds in a working coal mine in Twilight, West Virginia. This piece was commissioned as part of a two-year residency of my music, sponsored by the Lila Wallace-Readers Digest Arts Partners Program at Shepherd College in West Virginia.

Another project that involved my increasing interest in how music can respond to environmental issues was *Singing the Blue Ridge*,

for mezzo, baritone, orchestra and electronics made from wild animal calls, on commission from Wintergreen Performing Arts, through Americans for the Arts. I also participated in the larger project, *Preserving the Rural Soundscape*, whose goal was to create arts-based civic dialogue that engaged people in considering the impact of development on our sounding environment. We are so often more visually attuned to our environments that we don't pay attention to the change, including degradation, of our sounding environment, by development, and how the larger animal world figures in that environment. An upcoming composition on this theme is *For the Birds*, for amplified cello and electronics, for cellist Madeleine Shapiro. In this case, the electronics are based on bird calls from the Yellowstone area, and the intent is to draw our attention to the continuum between us and them. And of course the title also refers to Cage's book of the same title.

Other current adventures include composition of *Civil War Memories*, an electronic piece commissioned by Jane Franklin Dance for her Ridge Line Project. Slated to be premiered at Fort C.F. Smith Park in Arlington, VA, on April 10 and then to move to Gunston Theatre One on April 28, this project involved us both in researching the Civil War fortifications in Washington, as well as delving into letters and diaries that have helped shape the piece. For the latter, I made use of my colleague Ed Ayers extraordinary web-based archive, *The Valley of*

the Shadow. He also participated by reading passages that form the raw material of some of the sections.

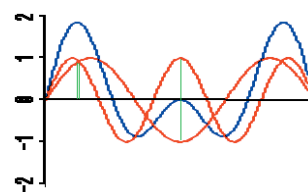
Additional projects under development range from interactive music/video and dance to opera. In the end, composing is a way of engaging with and responding to the wider world. Upcoming performances also reflect my range of interests. The Azure Ensemble will give the chamber version premiere of my *Three Summers Heat*, for soprano, flute, viola and harp at Merkin Hall on March 19; the newEar Ensemble will premiere *Clavé* on May 5; and on May 15 Da Capo Chamber Players will give the New York premiere of *Grito del Corzon* for chamber ensemble, electronics and video, the latter by videographer Katherine Aoki, at the Knitting Factory. Originally commissioned by the Barcelona New Music Ensemble for a program called *Painting Music*, my piece was inspired by Goya's powerful *Black Paintings*.

BLC: Thank you for this fascinating and impressive tour through the mind of a composer and teacher, which I have found, among other things, refreshingly honest. NMC will remain continually interested in your thoughts, your work, and your concerns

Additional information about Judith Shatin's music can be found at www.judithshatin.com



Composers Concordance



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Brian Ferneyhough	Unity Capsule (flute)
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Patrick Hardish	Fantasy Swing (piano & drum set)
Libby Larsen	Birdcall (sax & cello)
Marc Antonio Consoli	Sciuri Novi IV (horn & electronics)
Meyer Kupferman	Moonsticks (marimba)
Meyer Kupferman	Five Flicks (clarinet & piano)

Performed by: Erin Lesser, flute; Esther Lamneck, clarinet; Paul Bro, sax; Karl Kramer, horn; Peter Jarvis, marimba; Tom Goldstein, percussion; Alla Borzova, Paul Hoffmann, piano; Ana Milosavjevic, violin; Kurt Fowler, cello.

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