

Judith Shatin

BY Kyle Gann



Judith Shatin is a quiet, warm woman who writes violent music. She claims that that's part of her personality—though certainly not a visible part—and notes that her childhood nickname was “the little Russian.” Her music bristles with energy. Chords pound repeatedly. They are mostly dissonant, and I would generally describe the idiom as atonal. Yet the music often swoops into tonality, and you'll find yourself in a pool of calm E-flat major before you're aware the change was coming. She likes, she says, to “break the taboo against premodern gestures.” But despite the violence, the angularity, and the stylistic contrasts, the overriding impression I get from her music is its sensuousness. The bristling is sustained, the contrasts are gradual, and the overall effect is visceral and textural. Shimmering, vibrating, wheeling in place, her music creates an aggressive kind of physical excitement.

Take her *Akhmatova Songs* (1982, revised 2007), settings of three poems in Russian by the poet Anna Akhmatova, for soprano and Pierrot ensemble. Were I to print here a two-measure excerpt, I could create the impression that Shatin's style is rather Webernesque, with leaping sevenths and ninths and atomized textures, notes bouncing all over the register. But zoom back a little, and there's something about the way she keeps repeating and even tonicizing those note complexes that dissolves them into texture. Whole-tone arpeggios transform dissonant harmony into

a passage of atonal minimalism. Sometimes a passage will come to sound tonal only because the harmony is so sustained and the timbres so delicate; looking at the score, I find dissonances my ear didn't pick up. In fact, overall, I find Shatin's scores some of the most distracting to look at of any composer. Following them prevents one from noticing how the music sounds.

One of my favorite Shatin works is her *Ockeghem Variations* (2000), inspired by one of my favorite composers in history. The piece is scored for the unusual coupling of piano and wind quintet. Wallingford Riegger uses that configuration somewhat orchestrally in his concerto for that combination, but Shatin fuses it into a more focused chamber filigree. The first movement, solidly in F but flowering into all chromatic notes at various times, is both an unfolding and disintegration of the opening of Ockeghem's monumental *Missa Prolationum*. The second movement, though, bursts out in dissonant chords, repeated or trilled on or returned to so often that the music, despite its violence, takes on a granitic solidity.

A composer of electroacoustic works, as well as chamber and orchestra music, Shatin is often inspired by extramusical events and associations. The most recurring thread is a sense of Jewish history and identity. She spent a year of college studying in Israel, several of her titles and texts are in Hebrew, and she has a fondness for the sound of the shofar, the ram's horn used in the synagogue to celebrate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. That sound runs through her string quartet with electronics, *Elijah's Chariot* (1996), in which the quartet plays along with a CD of processed and unprocessed shofar calls, surrounding its animal-like wails with a halo of static chords and noisy tremolos. At two points the quartet breaks into the mournful Hebrew song "Elihu HaNavi" in C minor over a dominant drone.

It's this kind of gestural variety that makes me wonder if Shatin can be considered, as she seems at first, a modernist composer. She is certainly not the kind of postmodernist, like George Rochberg,

David Del Tredici, or William Bolcom, whose mixtures of different styles feel like collage, or cause aesthetic whiplash. Her idiom is too smooth for that; tonality emerges gradually from dissonance, pointillism unnoticeably morphs into texture and then melody. Thus the music has an aura of sincerity, and the "premodern" passages

homage to *Die Fledermaus*), and she does it so seamlessly that it's easy, at first, to miss the radicalness of the attempt. I've had the experience with her music of thinking first it was kind of middle-of-the-road and conventional and then realizing, while listening, that on some larger level it was quite original. It's taken me years to figure out why.

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give no whiff of irony. The angularity and dissonance of Shatin's pitch-set thinking place her squarely in mid-century aesthetics. But so many composers working in that idiom produced audience-unfriendly music through the misassumption that the note or interval is the basic unit of musical meaning. Shatin never makes that mistake. Her unit is the larger sound-complex, the sonority defined not only by its pitches but by registral placement, contour, and gesture. And her style is fluid enough to move among simple tonality, repetition, atonality, and even noise, without much sense of disruption or even contradiction.

The gods forgive me for injecting a stereotype, but all that tempts me to characterize Shatin as having created a paradigm for a *feminized* postmodernism: without the shock, the parody, the arbitrariness, but instead with all distant points suavely mediated and the connections seemingly natural. That also makes it difficult to perceive what's central to her aesthetic, until you hear a lot of her music in quick succession, and realize how consistent her methods are. Perhaps she's the first woman composer whose music tends to glide all over the stylistic map (she's even got a violin and piano piece that's a tuneful

One of Shatin's most recent large scores is an orchestra piece with narrator, titled *Jefferson in His Own Words* (2010). In it Thomas Jefferson's elegantly 18th-century sentiments are set off by static sonorities, growling tremolos, noisy repetitions, ecstatic climaxes, and even a quaint Baroque dance in the orchestra—much the way the quartet creates a halo around the shofar calls in *Elijah's Chariot*. In the last movement Jefferson talks about the University of Virginia, which he founded and designed, and where Shatin teaches. The contrast of Enlightenment concerns and 20th-century orchestral techniques make this piece sound more obviously postmodern than many of her works, yet Shatin manages to make all the diverse gestures sound as though they belong together.

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