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Endlessly Curious, Alex Shapiro Draws Inspiration from Nature, Technology, and Humble Beginnings

AMANDA COOK on May 2, 2023 at 8:00 am

"Nobody *needs* me," composer **Alex Shapiro** says to me via Zoom, with a playfully self-deprecating tone. "I'm not waving a stick at anybody, I'm not teaching, and I'm not playing an instrument. All I have to do is sit in this room and come up with stuff that people want to play."

Despite decades of experience working in both the commercial and concert music scenes, this is an artist who is in absolutely no danger of taking herself too seriously. But even if Shapiro is a bit cheeky when it comes to discussing herself, she exudes warmth and compassion in conversation.

To start our interview, she flips her webcam around to reveal the view from her studio on the San Juan Islands off the coast of Washington State; against a backdrop of pastel mountains in the distance, the tides gently roll by as hummingbirds flit in and out of the feeders hanging from the deck.

Shapiro has found both solace and inspiration surrounded by nature; she moved to the Islands in her 40s after years of the city-life grind, having grown up in New York and worked in Los Angeles for 25 years. The conditions had to be right to permanently relocate to a remote area, but the combination of technology and a strong professional network finally allowed her to make the leap.



Technology has always been a point of curiosity for Shapiro. She started composing at age 9, and by age 15, she was taking summer courses at Mannes College of Music, where she was introduced to electronic music composition. With the sounds of **Wendy Carlos** and Pink Floyd already in her ears, she built her first modular synth and was hooked, "not because I thought the sounds were interesting; I thought they actually sounded pretty crappy," she said laughing. "All the blip-blop stuff was not aesthetically that interesting to me, but I was just really fascinated with the process."

Shapiro enrolled at Manhattan School of Music as an undergraduate composition student, but moved to L.A. to work in commercial scoring before completing her degree. The emergence of the Mac computer and the **Yamaha DX7** synthesizer were quickly changing the industry, and Shapiro has always found herself in the vanguard when it comes to learning new technologies.

For the next 15 years, Shapiro wrangled the racks of gear in her studio to create MIDI cues for film and TV. She was drawn to the psychological feat of affecting an audience's perception of a scene through music, but something was missing. Her lightbulb moment came in her late 30s when she was scoring a film for chamber orchestra. As someone primarily working with low-budget synths, collaborating with live musicians helped her realize she wanted to follow her own creative vision and write concert music, instead of "serving someone else's vision" by working in film.

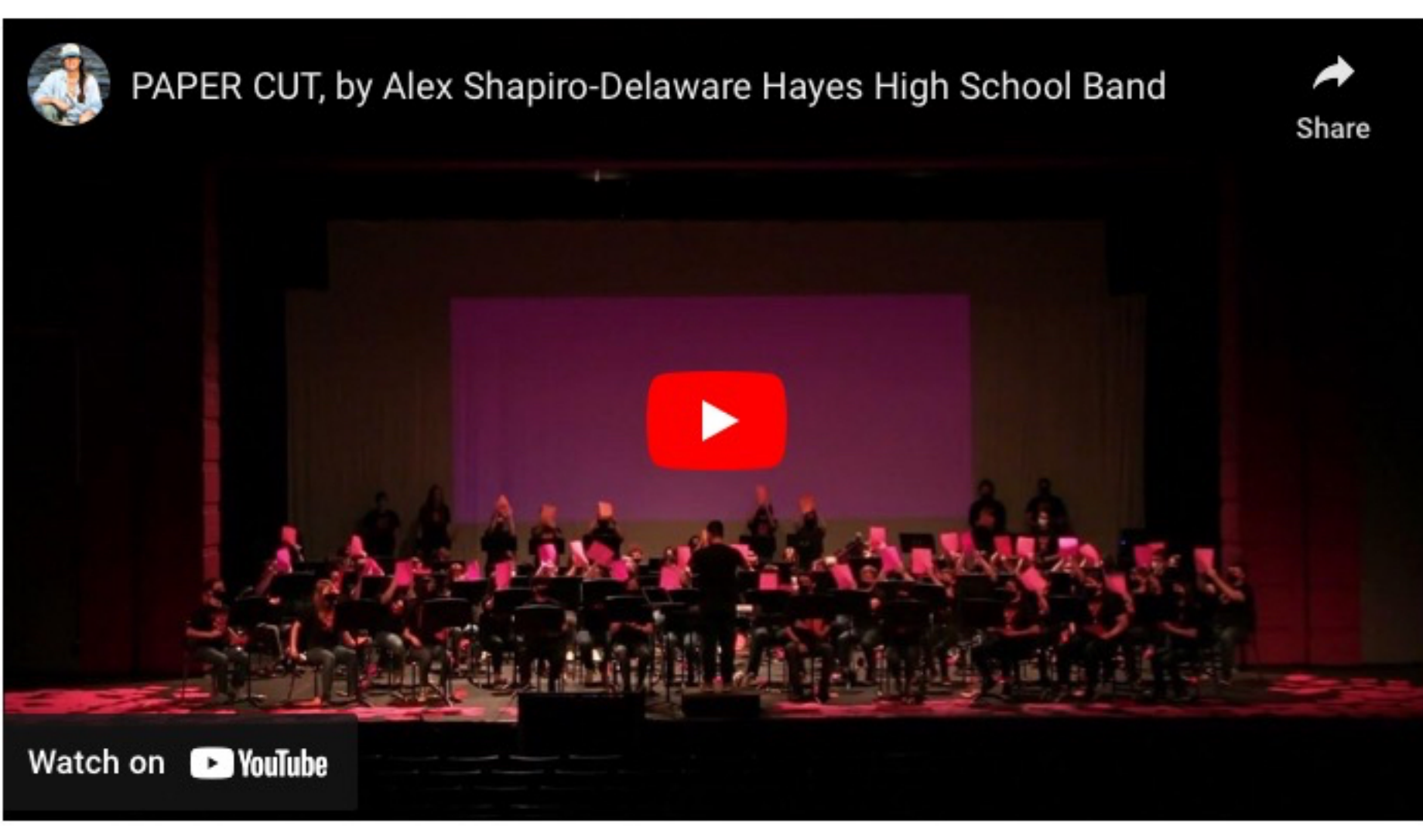


Alex Shapiro — Photo by Paul Chapman

The early aughts marked this shift in Shapiro's career and the beginning of her decades-long relationship with **American Composers Forum**. Over the past 20 years, she has received multiple Subito awards, a former program designed to support career-advancing projects with quick-turnaround grants; four albums on ACF's label **innova Recordings** catalog her chamber music and solo piano works; and in 2010, she was commissioned through ACF's **BandQuest** program to compose **PAPER CUT**, a new wind band piece for **Friday Harbor Middle School**.

Groove-driven and visually-engaging electroacoustic band music has become something of a calling card for Shapiro, and it all started with the BandQuest commission. "One of the myriad goals of BandQuest included inviting composers who have had little-or-no experience in the wind band genre to create a mid-level difficulty work for the repertoire," she explained in a **2020 article**. "In 2010, I was exactly such a composer, having written only one work for wind band, and none yet for younger players... I look back to the magical opportunity BandQuest offered me. It not only ushered in my passion for multimedia band music, but for my keen desire to be a part of music education."

Now with 25 wind ensemble works under her belt, a major facet of Shapiro's livelihood is commissions, virtual rehearsals, and in-person residencies with bands across the United States. **PAPER CUT** alone has sold over 2,500 copies to date, and has been performed internationally by middle school, high school, collegiate, community, and professional ensembles. The work is distributed through **Hal Leonard**, but Shapiro personally manages the other 150 unique titles in her catalog through her publishing company, **Activist Music LLC**.



Much of Shapiro's work is driven by curiosity and a willingness to enter unfamiliar, and sometimes uncomfortable, spaces. Her most recent innova album, **Arcana** (2020), is a complete anthology of her piano works and includes multiple pieces that repurpose material she wrote as a 19-year-old student. Looking for inspiration when she first made the transition to writing concert music, Shapiro took on the cringe-worthy task of playing through her early compositions at the piano. "Getting me started were things that I created anew out of germs of ideas that I had written when I was 19 that were worthy ideas — I just didn't know how to develop them," she said with a genuine sense of excitement. "But with age comes a little bit of ability, and suddenly, I knew what to do with the material."

And while revisiting one's early work takes a hefty dose of creative humility, it also requires personal resilience, especially if, like Shapiro, these artistic imprints are tied to trauma, feeling lost, and not being surrounded by the right people. But her advice is to embrace the past, not to run away from it. "No human is flawless. We're all fallible, and we all do things that we regret or make mistakes... It's very, very hard, if not impossible, when you're in the pain and in the lossiness to look at that clearly, other than to keep feeling like you're spiraling and mired down in it and don't know what to do. When you have finally broken out of that riptide and you're on the shore again, you have the safety point to be able to look backwards."

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Shapiro's early works, such as her **Piano Suite No. 1: "The Resonance of Childhood"** are complex and introspective, but her more recent compositions — while still stylistically and emotionally wide-ranging — are imbued with a sense of peace and stability. Having finally landed in a place where she can personally and professionally thrive, Shapiro encourages other artists to ask themselves: "What do you want to see out the window when you open your eyes, when you have your morning coffee, when you're struggling with a piece and trying to come up with something — what environment feeds you?"

These questions will yield different responses for different people, but being able to answer them with honesty and clarity is essential for artists, Shapiro says. "When you are happy, when you are one with yourself, when you're in the place you need to be and feeling like it's enabling you to do your best work — whatever that work is in whatever field — that is what is going to lead to success."

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