



Mini-Lesson: Meet Composer Alex Shapiro

OVERVIEW

Students will read, discuss, and share background stories about the composer of *Paper Cut*.

LEARNING GOAL

Students will learn about composer Alex Shapiro's life in music through reading, writing and discussion.

RESOURCES & MATERIALS

Student copies of:

- [Meet the Composer of *Paper Cut*](#) reading
- [Read & Write a Composer Profile](#) worksheet

PROCESS

1. Divide students into small groups and direct them to read "[Meet the Composer of *Paper Cut*](#)." They can read silently or out loud, sharing the reader's role within their group.
2. Direct them to discuss what they've read and write responses to the questions on the [Read & Write a Composer Profile](#) worksheet. All students can complete a worksheet or one student can act as the scribe for the group.
3. Their last task is to discuss and agree upon the most interesting fact or idea they learned about Shapiro.
4. Reconvene as a large group. Each small group will share the most interesting fact or idea about the composer.

EXTENSIONS

Summarize what you know about *Paper Cut*:

- Ask a small group (or the whole band) to create a *Paper Cut* bulletin board or display using the information in the readings, other resources in the materials, and information and images they search for on their own.
- If students work in small groups, consider alternative format for collecting and displaying what they learn such as a PowerPoint presentation, display boards, and i-Movies. When performing *Paper Cut*, display students work behind the band, show PowerPoint presentations or iMovies at the concert.

Meet the Composer of Paper Cut



Composer Alex Shapiro was born in Manhattan in 1962. Living in New York presented a great opportunity to explore many kinds of music. As a teen, she used money she earned babysitting to pay for inexpensive student tickets for all kinds of concerts across the city.



Opera, ballet, classical concerts, jazz, rock 'n' roll, and alternative music were all of interest to this young musician.

Alex started composing at the age of nine. Piano lessons came soon after. She says that when she practiced, she didn't correct her wrong notes, but turned them into mini-improvisations! This approach was an excellent training for a budding composer!

At 15, she began formal composition lessons and attended a class in electronic music. The skills she learned in that class ultimately became a significant part of her career. At age 16, Alex was among the youngest composition students to ever be accepted to the Aspen Music School in Colorado. Her teachers at Aspen were Michael Czajkowski and George Tsontakis. It was at Aspen that Alex was given her very first paid commission to compose a new piece of music. She was commissioned to write a fanfare for brass quartet and earned a \$500 fee! Looking back, Alex says that the piece included the worst tuba lines ever written, but that she hopes she's gotten a little better over the years!

Studying music at Aspen (Aspen Music Festival and School, Aspen, Colorado) was a life-changing experience for Alex. Learning from many outstanding teachers and artists provided many new opportunities and energized her desire for a lifetime in music. She also continued learning more about electronic music at Aspen. Living in a beautiful, rural mountain setting, the girl from New York could really see the sky for the first time in her life.



From <http://thingsyoushoulddo.com/wp2/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/aspen-music-festival-school.jpg>

At Aspen, Alex began to develop a passion for causes and community service. The first time she used her activist's voice occurred when she was hired as the 17 year old chorus manager for the world premiere of Peter Schat's opera, "Houdini." The music was challenging and rehearsals were long and complicated. Alex negotiated with the school's president to make sure that every singer would be paid something for their work. This first experience of speaking up on behalf of others to make changes moved her to become a lifelong activist.

During Alex's last year of high school, she also simultaneously attended The Juilliard School's Pre-College Division as a composition major. In addition to composition, she also became a fine piano player.

She attended college at the Manhattan Schools of Music in New York. During college, she began writing film scores for documentaries aired on local cable TV and jingles for radio and TV ads.

1983 brought big changes. Hired to write the music for a video, she moved across the country to Los Angeles. Alex lived in Southern California for the next 24 years, composing film and TV music, often creating her scores using electronics rather than acoustic instruments. Then a new opportunity came her way. Alex was hired to compose a chamber orchestra score for a feature film. It was such a joyful experience that she decided it was time to return to creating concert music.

More commissions for concert music followed, including two early pieces that were recorded and commercially released soon after their premieres. All at once, Alex and her music were in the right place at the right time. This was the beginning of the age of the internet. Her geeky technical tendencies, volunteer work with music service organizations, and grasp of how the world of publishing works (from her film music background) paid off. Her music, which often paired live musicians with prerecorded digital audio, quickly became widely performed and recorded in many countries. Since returning to concert music, she's written over 100 concert works, each published by her own company, Activist Music.

In 2007, Alex knew that she could live anywhere in the world and continue her career as composer – and stay connected with the rest of the world through the web. Drawn to nature and the out of doors, Alex moved to San Juan Island off the coast of Washington State. It is a serene, beautiful place without a single traffic light.¹

¹ Photo from
<http://courses.washington.edu/uwtoc05/webg4/index.htm>

Alex continues her commitment to many important causes. She travels broadly to speak at conferences, meetings, and events across the country. She gives workshops about the power of the web and how to earn a living using it as a creative medium. Recently Alex testified before the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) about digital rights



and the ownership of creative content on the web. She has numerous published articles about the digital age and working in the arts in the 21st century.

Since moving to San Juan Island, Alex's career has never been busier. The

rural island inspires her, just as Aspen did, to compose music while being deeply connected to the natural environment. Alex regularly expresses gratitude for her life in music, in nature, and as part of a large and supportive community of music-makers and music-lovers.²

Learn More About...

- The composer at <http://www.alexshapiro.org/index.html>. Also, Alex also writes a blog, Notes from the kelp: nature and music in the San Juan Islands at <http://www.alexshapiro.org/blog/>
- The Aspen School and Festival at www.aspenmusicfestival.com/
- San Juan Islands at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Juan_Islands

² A. Shapiro photo from Alex Shapiro's website, <http://www.alexshapiro.org/New%20Photos/AlexShapiro600-1.jpg>



READ & WRITE A COMPOSER PROFILE



Name _____

Read about composer Alex Shapiro (A.S.) and complete this Composer Profile with the things you've learned. It's okay to reread to find the answers.

1. Alex Shapiro was born and raised in _____.
2. Her first paid commission was a fanfare for a _____ ensemble.
3. As a teenage composer, what famous summer mountain music festival and school did A.S. attend? _____
4. The instrument she studied as a child and in college was the _____.
5. What was kind of music did A.S. compose in the years immediately after college graduation? _____
6. What other important skills and knowledge did she develop that complemented her career as a composer? _____
7. What is the name of her music publishing company? _____
8. Where does A.S. live today? _____
9. What is one interesting thing you've learned about A.S. and/or her music?

