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2023 NOW Music Festival Guest Composer Alex Shapiro Finds Inspiration from the Score of Everyday Life

Nestled amidst the lush landscape of the San Juan Islands in Washington State, [Alex Shapiro](#) can often be found composing her next piece at the edge of the water. While her surroundings may have changed throughout her career, her ability to be inspired by her environment has not.

"I think anytime you live in a place that has more animals than people, it changes the way you hear. I can hear myself think," said Shapiro. "Living in nature and living in such a remote environment is unbelievably inspiring, although it's not for everybody."

As Shapiro has learned for the past 15 years, a peaceful environment does not equal a silent environment.

"Nature is not silent. You have the regular rhythms of the waves, of the birds, of the animals trotting by. The visual rhythms of the clouds as they pass, all the sounds that you pick up standing on the deck looking out across the archipelago. It all translates into a very personal and immersive experience that does affect how I view pulse, rhythm, meter, sounds, and frequencies – all the things that make up music," said Shapiro.

Musicians and listeners alike can detect nature's influence in some of Shapiro's most memorable pieces.

"Some pieces are very directly and quite obviously nature-based. For example, the second movement of my first symphony IMMERSION, titled SURFACE. Listening to the music, it sounds frantic, crazy, and quite intense. You don't have to know the story to enjoy the piece, but when you read the program note you will understand what inspired that particular music," she said.

"Just yards away from my house there was an epic battle between a harbor seal and a Giant Pacific octopus. The harbor seal was hoping to have the octopus for lunch, and the octopus was fighting back, flinging its tentacles wildly and wrapping them around the seal's head as they struggled. The piece was inspired by the irregular rhythms as the duo repeatedly plunged and then broke through the surface again."

From water surrounding the rural island on which she's lived for 16 years, to sirens rushing across the island on which she was born and raised, Manhattan, Shapiro has been inspired to discover music in the most unlikely settings.

"Everything in our lives, no matter where we are, is music. Music is organized sound, and composers always hear the sounds that surround us. It's sort of an affliction, frankly. There probably should be a 12-step program, but of all the possible afflictions, it's a fun one," said Shapiro. "If you are musical, you interpret all sounds as music. It's up to each one of us as we grow into ourselves to determine what environment makes us happiest and most inspired."

Born to music-loving parents, Shapiro was inspired early on, even writing her first four-part arrangement in the fourth grade for her music classmates to play on their recorders.

"I was so lucky because I grew up as an only child of two parents that adored classical music. Unfortunately, that's the only type of music they had in their record collection, but because I was in New York City, I filled in the blanks with everything else," said Shapiro. "I was curious about all music and loved it all, whether it was salsa, disco, jazz, pop, rock, or musical theater. You name it, and I absorbed it."

Shapiro attended The Juilliard School Pre-College Division and then the Manhattan School of Music to study as a composer. Before she finished, she accepted an offer to move to L.A. to score a low budget documentary film. For the next few years, she worked only in commercial music before reinventing herself and, in her late thirties, returning to her roots.

Thanks to 15 years spent composing in the film and TV music business, when she started her publishing company she had, "a head start because I understood copyright law and intellectual property."

As the first composer to serve on both the Board of Directors of ASCAP, for which she holds the sole Symphonic & Concert writer member seat, and the Music Publishers Association of the United States, on which she represents her company Activist Music LLC, Shapiro has the unique opportunity to advocate for her colleagues in the industry.

"A starving artist is not a happy or productive artist. If you are so busy holding down three jobs just to pay your rent, that's time away from doing your art," said Shapiro. "My father, who grew up in the Depression with very little money, always said that there's no virtue in poverty. There's no virtue in being a starving anything. There's this whole myth around the virtue of suffering for your art. He didn't buy into it, and I don't either."

Shapiro hopes copyright law and basic business practice becomes part of the national conversation and curriculum for all upcoming composers.

"The more we talk about fair compensation and the lack of diverse representation in our industry, the more it becomes general knowledge. We can raise awareness about these issues and encourage ongoing conversation among our peers. I do everything I can to try and move the peg forward," said Shapiro.

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