

HOME ABOUT DONATE CONTACT



ALEX SHAPIRO, COMPOSER

November 7, 2020 The Cross-Eyed Pianist One comment

Who or what were the most significant influences on your musical life and career as a composer?

Growing up in Manhattan as the only child of parents who valued the arts and were supportive of my desire for music studies was a stroke of very good fortune. Although my parents' taste in music was limited to concert works between the Baroque period and Bartok, the phonograph played at nearly full volume every evening in our apartment, and was my portal to endless great performances of European repertoire. When I was little, my parents regularly took me to concerts and museums, and from age 13 and onward I was able to save up money I made from babysitting, and go to events on my own. My tastes in music were naturally broad, and I loved everything: from punk rock clubs to the Metropolitan Opera; from intimate jazz clubs like the Village Vanguard to symphonic performances at Carnegie Hall; from the Studio 54 disco scene to Alvin Ailey ballet, plus as many Broadway musicals as I could manage. The 1970s were a terrific time for music in New York City, and I soaked up everything.

Additionally significant was that my father Ivan, an attorney by profession, was a respected social activist. His shining example set the tone for my own life in music, which is filled with volunteer advocacy work through which I try to improve the lives of my fellow artists.

What have been the greatest challenges of your career so far?

My career trials have been positive challenges to myself, each of which involved risk-taking. Three years into pursuing my four-year undergraduate composition degree at Manhattan School of Music, I was hired to score a low budget documentary in Los Angeles and, with the encouragement of my teachers, left school and moved west to pursue scoring work in the film and television industry. After 15 years working steadily on mostly unremarkable projects, inspired by a film for which I was able to compose and produce a chamber music score, I decided to take another risk, and shift my career entirely over to composing concert works for small ensembles—even though I didn't know anyone in the genre and hadn't written any such music since leaving Manhattan School of Music.

Thanks to working hard and building my catalog, along with understanding copyright and business practices and being an early adopter of technology, I was able to create a happy life in that niche, from scratch. It was the late '90s, and the internet was just becoming a powerful tool that connected artists with colleagues and clients around the world. I'm very proud of that body of work, and of the 30 or so commercially released albums which feature my pieces, I've produced two on the innova Recordings label: NOTES FROM THE KELP (2007), a collection of my chamber works, and ARCANA (2020), a collection of all the solo piano works I've composed over 22 years, magnificently performed and recorded by Adam Marks.

After ten years composing solely for small ensembles, I received a commission out of the blue from the U.S. Army, requesting a wind band work. Not only had I never written for such a sizable ensemble, but I had never attended a wind band concert! Despite being slightly terrified of failing, I giddily accepted the commission, and the experience immediately sparked a new area of my musical sensibilities. Taking that risk in 2008 opened the door to what has become an extremely satisfying part of my career: composing for large ensembles. And as if that wasn't challenging enough, for my next band commission I took another risk and followed my instincts once again, choosing to compose a multimedia electroacoustic work. This began another joyous and productive stage of my career—in a decidedly narrower, weirder niche!

What are the special challenges/pleasures of working on a commissioned piece?

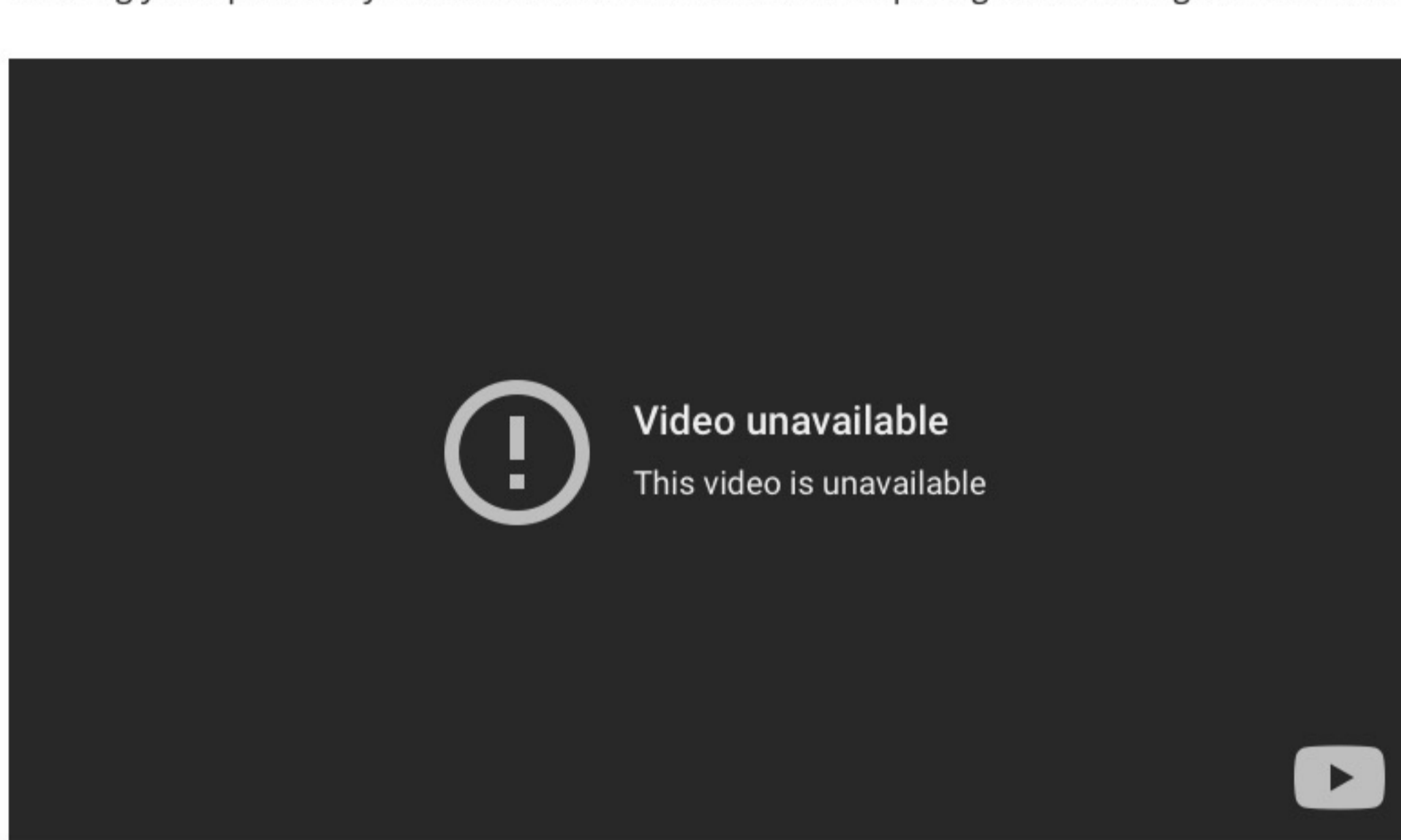
I challenge myself to not repeat my previous musical gestures, and to always choose a different approach to the sonic journey on which I take the musicians and listeners. With electroacoustic pieces, I always create a new digital audio palette from scratch, rather than re-using sounds I've programmed in the past.

What are the special challenges/pleasures of working with particular musicians, singers, ensembles or orchestras?

Composing with specific individuals or ensembles in mind is wonderful, because I know their strengths and can write to them!

Of which works are you most proud?

Most recently, the intimate solo piano works on the new album ARCANA have held a dear place in my heart on the heels of collaborating so beautifully with pianist Adam Marks to capture their essence. I hadn't listened to those works in quite a while, and hearing Adam bring them to life so touchingly and powerfully made the emotions I felt while composing them rush right back to me.



On the other end of the spectrum, a couple of my electroacoustic wind band works of which I'm fond are IMMERSION, a three movement symphony to the sea and the fragility of its creatures, and ASCENT, a short, sound design-heavy concert opener. Both works represent the scope of what I love most about working with big, cinematic sound.

How would you characterise your compositional language?

Mutt-like! The great thing about being a composer in the 21st century is that we no longer need to be the least bit affected by anyone's arbitrary rules about what's considered acceptable or not in concert music. Anything goes, as long as it's done well and authentically. Thanks to desktop publishing and the internet, composers can discover their own fan bases.

Because my own tastes in music are so wide-ranging, I love seamlessly including contrasting voices and styles that might not ordinarily be found within the same piece of music. One such example of this is a short electroacoustic wind band piece titled, TIGHT SQUEEZE. I wrote a very chromatic 12-tone row that might have met with Schoenberg's approval, and I paired it with an Afro-Cuban techno percussion groove that pulses under orchestration pulled from the big band era. I also get the musicians to stand up and dance while they play the ending. Fun!

How do you work?

When I'm starting a new piece, I stay as far away from the staves of music manuscript paper as I can, for as long as I can. I want to remain in the right-brain gestural phase of my imagination; to me, the staff and bar lines represent a jail cell for creativity. I lie down and envision what kind of emotional exploration I'm going to pursue, and then I often write down adjectives and adverbs, and maybe even lengthier descriptions, that represent those emotions and the trajectory of the music. Duration determines the architecture of a piece, so if I have 3 minutes, I'll come up with something concise, and if I have 20 minutes I can let my ideas wander further.

After this, it's not uncommon for me to draw scribbles and sketches of what the music "looks like" in my head, even though at this point I may not have specific pitches or rhythms in mind. Then, if the piece is electroacoustic, I sit down at my rig in my studio and begin creating the sound world I've determined I'd like to try, which will meld with the live instruments that are always the predetermined aspect of the commission. This process can take a couple of weeks, because there's a fair amount of programming and decision making involved with defining and designing the initial digital audio palette.

An analogy for this new group of sounds and textures is what we see on cooking shows: all those tidy little bowls of freshly chopped and diced ingredients, at the ready for the chef so that the moment the heat is just right, they can be grabbed and tossed in. For the meal, it's likely that all those ingredients will end up in the final dish. For my piece, I'll end up using about two thirds of the sounds I initially created, because as the music reveals itself, it becomes evident that some of those sounds won't be suitable—and I'll program additional sounds to reflect what I'm hearing in my head that matches the needs of the music as it evolves.

As a musician, what is your definition of success?

It's a purely personal definition that reflects whatever an individual's ideal is. For me, as simplistic as this sounds, success is having a life filled with wonderful people, and creating music on my own terms that meets my standards of personal excellence, and experiencing all of this in a stunningly beautiful natural environment. For almost 14 years I've lived on remote San Juan Island, WA on the very edge of the water, gazing out an extraordinary distance across the sea to islands and mountain ranges. I pinch myself daily!

What do you consider to be the most important ideas and concepts to impart to aspiring musicians?

That when it comes to their art-making, the opinion that matters the most is their own. Every artist should strive to get better at expressing themselves in their chosen medium; I'm not suggesting anyone adopt an attitude of arrogance. But it's vital to maintain an openness to continued self-exploration that will not be stultified by the paralyzing need for approval from others.

What do you feel needs to be done to grow classical music audiences/listeners?

Oh, where to begin?! So many things need to be done, but for now, I will focus on education:

Music education should be supported at the earliest stages of every child's development, and school programmes should be funded through all grade levels.

Music education and exposure should go beyond the traditional, limited, 12-note-based European approach to Classical music. It should expand to include music from the rest of the world so that students will have a greater understanding of and love for all music, as well as for all cultures.

Thought must be put into selecting textbook examples and repertoire, so that they equitably include music composed by women and people of colour. Diversity is essential, and the way to normalize it is to ensure that when choosing excellent works, all composers of excellent music are included.

Where would you like to be in 10 years' time?

Still looking at the daisies from this side of the grass, and doing it from right here on San Juan Island!

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

A few uninterrupted days and nights in a row with no obligations to the outside world, so that I can let my composing brain run wild!

What is your present state of mind?

Overwhelmed, both negatively and positively, I'm utterly despondent about the state of the world and, most appallingly, my own United States and the sizable, fearful and hate-filled segment of our population. And yet my own life is so very, very fortunate, with more music work than I can even keep up with, more opportunities to speak publicly on a wider variety of topics than I ever imagined, more love and friendship than I could have ever hoped for, and a daily life in one of the most beautiful spots on the planet. I am keenly, painfully aware of what an incredible gift I have been given.

Alex Shapiro's second composer portrait album, ARCANA, is released by innova Recordings. Featuring pianist Adam Marks, ARCANA comprises over two decades of Shapiro's piano compositions.

Alex Shapiro (b. New York City, 1962) composes genre-blind acoustic and electroacoustic solo, chamber, choral, and symphonic pieces known for their lyricism and drama. Published by Activist Music LLC, her works are heard daily in concerts and broadcasts across the U.S. and internationally, and can be found on over thirty commercially released recordings from around the world. Shapiro is known for her seamless melding of live and recorded sounds that often include striking visual and physical elements, and for her innovative uses of technology throughout the composing, rehearsing, and performance of her music.

Ms. Shapiro is the Symphonic & Concert writer member on the Board of Directors of ASCAP, and a board member of the ASCAP Foundation. She also serves as a board member of The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, and is a former board member of U.S. music organizations including The American Music Center, the American Composers Forum of Los Angeles, The MacDowell Colony, and The Society of Composers & Lyricists.

Educated at The Juilliard School and Manhattan School of Music as a student of Ursula Mamlok and John Corigliano, Alex moved from Manhattan to Los Angeles in 1983, and in 2007 relocated to Washington State's remote San Juan Island, where she composes in a home perched on the water's edge, surrounded by wildlife. An award-winning nature photographer, Alex's images and music can be experienced on her blog, www.notesfromthekelp.com, and her website, www.alexshapiro.org.

[Read more](#)

[Notes from the Kelp](#)

[Arcana](#)

[Immersion](#)

[Ascent](#)

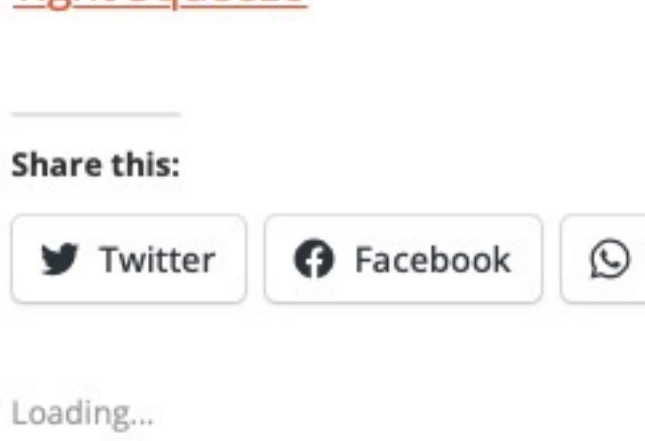
[Tight Squeeze](#)

[Share this:](#)

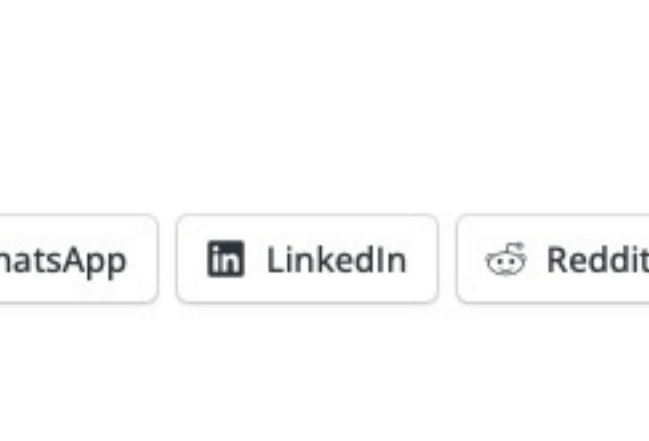
[Twitter](#)
[Facebook](#)
[WhatsApp](#)
[LinkedIn](#)
[Reddit](#)
[Email](#)

Loading...

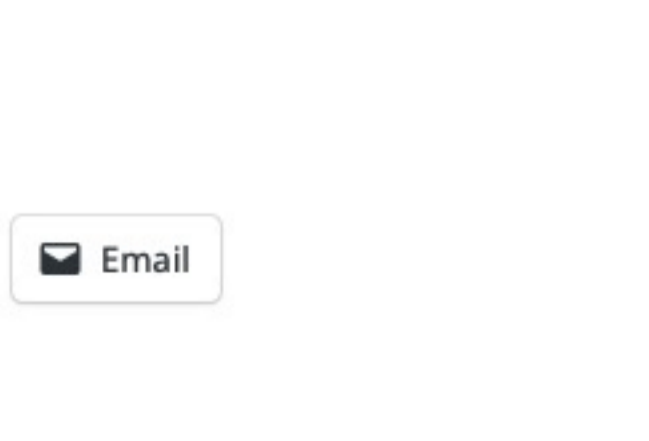
Related



Adam Marks, pianist
November 8, 2020
In "Interview"



Mark Darvill Evans, composer
September 26, 2017
In "Interview"



Gilbert Isbin, composer
May 27, 2019
In "Interview"

[← Jaap Nico Hamburger, composer](#)

[Adam Marks, pianist →](#)

ONE COMMENT

Pingback: [Adam Marks, pianist – MEET THE ARTIST](#)

LEAVE A REPLY

Enter your comment here...

SOCIAL MEDIA



Search ...

Follow MEET THE ARTIST

SUBSCRIBE TO BLOG VIA EMAIL

Enter your email address to subscribe to this blog and receive notifications of new posts by email.

Email Address

Join 9,781 other subscribers

BLOGROLL

- ArtMuseLondon
- Frances Wilson
- Specs Blog
- The Cross-Eyed Pianist



The Cross-Eyed Pianist

Frances Wilson is a pianist, writer, music and arts reviewer, music PR, and blogger on classical music and pianism under the pen name 'The Cross-Eyed Pianist'

[View Full Profile →](#)

FOLLOW ME ON TWITTER

Tweets from @CrossEyedPiano

[Fran Wilson](#) Retweeted
[Interlude](#) @in... · 1h
 *We should never for an