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COMPOSERS  
FORUM

Composer  
Alex Shapiro talking  
to the Friday Harbor  
Middle School 7th  
grade band, in Friday  
Harbor, Washington.



Photo: Charles Richardson

## Shredding with the 7th Grade: The Making of "Paper Cut"

By Alex Shapiro

What do 13-year-olds like? Xbox and PlayStation games, videos, TV, and movies. What do all these media have in common? When I asked this question of the **Friday Harbor Middle School** seventh grade band, eager students blurted out, "A remote!" I almost fell off the podium laughing. Others declared, "A screen!" Finally, a student said the very thing that in my middle-aged naïveté I thought was the most obvious: "Music!" Phew.

It was my first day working with the students on my commission for ACF's terrific **BandQuest** series, and I was excited to be bringing these kids something that would be out of the ordinary for any middle schoolers, much less those growing up on Washington State's remote, bridgeless San Juan Island. After assuring them that, yes, all of their answers were correct, I explained that many of the soundtracks they hear in each of these media are created with a combination of electronic sounds and live instruments, and that in the concert world we call this "electroacoustic music," a term they could now blithely fling around to really impress their parents. I described a little bit of the film scoring process, and said that I was bringing a Hollywood scoring session to them. They would be playing their instruments accompanied by a big-sounding prerecorded track, very much like a film cue.

As if that weren't enough, I also told the students that for the first half of their new piece, they would not even be playing their instruments, but instead, a totally new instrument that each of them already had. And, that it was not their voice.

I had their attention. They had no idea what I was talking about.

I held up a piece of printer paper, and began slowly tearing it. An eerie sound. The kids listened. I loudly crumpled the paper into a ball. Then I gently tapped my fingers all over it, making a rain-like sound. I said, "if it sounds this cool with just me, imagine what it'll sound like with 41 of you!" No sooner did I take a breath than all the students were picking up pieces of recycled trash-worthy paper handed out by their music director **Janet Olsen** – a wonderful, energetic woman with a deeply touching devotion to her class – and making creative sounds. This gave me an opportunity to talk with them about how music-making is not only sonic, but visual. I envisioned "Paper Cut" as a multimedia piece in which the music and sound effects would come from the unexpected sources of house monitors and paper, and also as a piece that would be visually interesting to the audience – another new concept for the students. I planned to use different colors of printer paper for the performance, creating a beautiful effect from the stage. I asked the kids: even when they're playing a traditional acoustic piece, what do they think the audience is looking at? Them!

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## Hollywood Calling

On a beautiful spring weekend in April, fifty-two composers from seventeen states convened in St. Paul, Minnesota, for a two-day seminar on film composition. ACF and **McNally Smith College of Music** developed and presented a program entitled **Hollywood Calling: An Insider's Guide to Film Scoring**.

**Christopher Young** and **Sean McMahon**, two experienced film composers, served as co-instructors and mentors for the weekend (See page 5 for more on their film careers).

Over the course of the *Hollywood Calling* weekend, Young and McMahon conducted seminars surveying the field, including: *Introduction to the Process of Film Scoring*, *Gear and Mockups*, *Conventional Hollywood Writing*, *Orchestration and Music Prep*, and *Establishing and Sustaining a Career in Film Scoring*.

Registrants also had an opportunity to participate in a networking event with a group of filmmakers who were attending the annual convention of the Minnesota chapter of the **Independent Film Producers**.

In the weeks following *Hollywood Calling*, some two dozen of the attendees created short film scores which were critiqued by Sean McMahon. Everyone involved agreed that the debut *Hollywood Calling* weekend was a resounding success, and well worth the time and effort.

As composer **William Neil** put it: "This was the most thorough, professional and informative seminar that I have ever participated in relating to composition."

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After demonstrating a few more paper techniques I'd come up with, I asked the class to show me sounds that I hadn't been clever enough to think of. Sure enough, two especially compelling effects emerged, which I told them I would immediately incorporate into the score. One was fairly obvious: holding a page by its edges and snapping it sharply, making a terrific, tight percussive sound. Another was more unusual: a student suddenly dove down and began vigorously rubbing a crumpled ball of paper against the floor. Kids do not miss a trick: everyone heard me quietly compliment this fellow on his athletic maneuver, and the next thing I knew, all 41 students simultaneously hit the deck, diving under their music stands to follow suit with their own scraps of paper.

I could not stop laughing: the visual from the podium was stunning. One moment there was a whole class in front of me, and the next, everyone had disappeared! Not a head or torso in sight. I knew that this could be a highlight in the piece, and I was determined to find the right climactic moment for it. I returned to my studio that evening and discovered the perfect spot in the existing action/adventure-style track to add this new gem: during a tense crescendo that precedes the dramatic, loud entrance of the whole band playing their instruments for the first time in the piece, two-and-a-half minutes in. I elongated that phrase to lead right into the moment when parents would wonder what had possessed their children and whether they'd be returned in time for dinner. I also added a few measures afterward, to allow not only for the procedure itself, but for the blood rushing to the kids' heads to return to their bodies and to give them time to find their place in the music, pick up their instrument, and be ready to play. I was having a lot of fun, and hoped that the students would, too.

#### Ready to rip

A composer can easily go his or her entire career without ever writing music for young people, and until this project, I was one who had only thought in terms of professional level players. My music world happily expanded when, on the heels of a concert wind-band piece I'd done for the U.S. Army (a great experience I describe in a July 2008 article for *Sounding Board*), I was invited to be the 2010 *BandQuest* composer. This turned out to be career-influencing: with "Paper Cut" under my sonic belt, now all I can think of is when I'll get to write my next educational electroacoustic band piece.

My first step was to attend a rehearsal, watch Ms. Olsen work with the kids, and get a sense of their sound. Yes, indeed, it is remarkably... uh, different!... from what I'd been used to. And that was just fine, because it focused me on the realities of what's necessary to create... er... listenable... sound through an instrument at an early age.

As I sat there hearing the kids play through some standard 7th-grade-level band music, it struck me that too often, the melodies and rhythms were on a par with that which would please a cute toddler. Thirteen-year-olds are invested in one thing: being as hip as possible. Especially these days, between early onset hormones and the media, adolescents are frighteningly savvy, and given the TV shows and films that constantly surround them, I saw no reason why they shouldn't be treated as adults and get to play emotionally engaging music along the lines of what they're already steeped in. I wanted to create a piece that teenagers could relate to. And, I wanted to play to my own strengths as a composer working increasingly in electroacoustic music, and create a new genre of middle-school band music that incorporates a pre-recorded track that accompanies the band. This *BandQuest* project offered the opportunity for me to bring several aspects of my music life together: my background in film scoring, where I began my composing career; my longtime work with electronics and with blending them with acoustic instruments; and my experience with alternative ways of creating interesting sounds. Compositionally, it was ideal: the fun of writing an imaginary film cue, without having to please a director! To some composers in Hollywood, that perk alone would be highly attractive.

#### Pulp friction: what I learned in middle school

Throughout this residency I learned as much as the students and the music director. None of them had ever played to a track, or had used something other than instruments to make music. And I'd never composed for middle schoolers, or even amateur musicians for that matter. To my extreme relief, the experience turned out wonderfully. But it was not without its unexpected and amusing challenges.

I decided to create a piece to help students grasp rhythm and become even more sensitive to textures in sound, since plenty of other band works address playing the notes and developing good intonation. Thus, my emphasis on the paper techniques and on a strong ostinato that carries much of the theme on its shoulders. But I can certainly see why the educational repertoire focuses on traditional technique: one of the rookie mistakes I made was assuming that longer half-notes would be easier to play. Not so! For a younger player, long notes are difficult to keep in tune, and they're also boring for teens who don't focus particularly well on anything at that pituitarily infused phase of their lives – a concept that we never think about with professionals. Kids that age, blessed with the attention span of a gnat, are going to be much more compelled by playing a moving line than a static one. My solution midway through rehearsals was to add ebbing and flooding dynamics to the longer notes to make the students think about shaping each one. I suspect my next piece for middle schoolers will have a lot more quarter and eighth notes in the theme!

Another thing that I failed to take into consideration is that 13-year-olds are, by definition, more than a little self-conscious, and do not necessarily wish to be looked at. As good-



Photo: Charles Richardson

Alex Shapiro offers some introductory comments before the premiere of "Paper Cut" with the Friday Harbor Middle School 7th grade band led by Janet Olsen.

natured and excited as the kids were to be premiering this unusual, sometimes visual work, it was a real challenge to get all of them to do what was necessary to dramatically sell the piece to the audience: hold the paper high above their heads while tearing, ripping, tapping, or crumpling the sheets. Even though Ms. Olsen and I knew that they looked great doing it, I suspect that many of them thought this exercise made them look like idiots, ruining any chance of them getting a date while no doubt increasing their acne breakouts. I continued to be encouraging and explained that this was a visual effect as much as a sonic one, and that it was not a stretch to boldly declare that they were the only musical paper virtuosi in the entire nation. I openly sympathized with them and said that I knew they thought they looked dorky, but in fact, they looked very cool (which they did). But it was difficult to fully convince them of this. I think that the first time the students realized the powerful effect of their efforts was when at the performance, the packed theater of 300 parents and friends simultaneously rose to their feet in a standing ovation the moment the piece ended. That finally made an impression on these students!

#### Staying on track

Since this was a middle-school piece, I knew that despite my tendency in professional chamber works to create amorphous, floating electronic tracks that obscure the downbeats, I needed to split the difference to keep the group and the conductor together with the track as well as with each other. But I didn't realize just how different from usual my track mix would need to be until we began rehearsals. In fact, almost every time I returned from the school, I continued to tweak the mix. This was yet another learning experience for me; I had not anticipated the importance of hearing highly audible downbeats, as opposed to just counting the measures as more experienced players would.

Another reason it was vital to amplify the downbeats was because, as is probably the case for most band rehearsal rooms in the country, there was no proper monitor setup available. I felt fortunate that our room in quaint little Friday Harbor, population 2,000 and even more foxes and deer, had a stereo system with a CD player, and two old, large, boomy speakers sitting high up on a shelf. The only problem was, they were both on the far-left side of the band! Needless to say, this presented a synchronization problem right off the bat because no one, including the ever-intrepid Ms. Olsen, could properly hear the track against which they needed to play their parts quite steadily. If the students slowed down or sped up, they would be off from the track for quite some time until the music director could wrestle them back to a downbeat. This sometimes turned rehearsals into sporting events in which it was a race to the finish to see which would get to the double bar first: the track or the band.

Wanting to make "Paper Cut" as playable as possible, I had made the pulse a steady quarter-equals-88 from the start to the end of the piece, with absolutely no variation in tempo. In theory, this would be great because once everyone feels the pulse, they will know where they are. This technique had always worked well for me in electroacoustic chamber music. But one has to hear the pulse in order to feel it, and if the monitor setup is not ideal, this means that the track has to represent the beat exceedingly clearly. Instead of just one or two players finding their way in and out of the track in a chamber music piece, with an entire roomful of people, the potential for synchronization problems and furrowed brows is remarkably magnified.

When not having the kids rehearse to the accompanying track, Ms. Olsen conducted with an earbud connected to her metronome. This certainly was useful for keeping everyone

together and getting them used to the tempo. But even this presented an initial difficulty: it hadn't occurred to me, steeped for years in the film scoring arena, that most conductors are used to being the ones who set the tempo and lilted phrasing of a score. It's a new skill set to have to conduct to the equivalent of a click track – an immutable pulse determined by an outside source. Ms. Olsen loved taking on this challenge and said that it wonderfully expanded her abilities, but I was aware and appreciative of the effort she put into becoming comfortable with conducting in this manner.

All in all, there were a number of unexpected variables that, despite being challenges, never became obstacles, because everyone's attitude was so positive and we knew that the end result would be worth the effort. At least... I desperately hoped so. I really wanted the kids to have a good experience with this rather bizarre little piece. I've always been artistically fearless and I'll try anything (largely because, unlike brain surgery, if I screw up, nobody dies), but in an odd way, blowing it in a tiny community where everyone sees you at the farmer's market and the post office is an even more public, personal failure than having an off night at Carnegie Hall.

In the weeks before I actually began composing "Paper Cut," I gave a lot of thought to how I might incorporate syncopated grooves and interesting rhythms into educational music that too often, plods along in a straight, march-like, 4/4. Having a pre-recorded track gave me an immediate advantage, because I made aspects of it very syncopated and had the students play along with that as a helpful cue. The track also adds a welcome contrast when the kids are playing a straighter rhythm. It was incredibly important to me to create music that would hold their attention – and mine. The end result seemed to work: much of the main theme is step-wise, steady 4/4 rhythm, but it's set against a driving track that belies the simplicity of what the students are playing.

Another helpful bonus to using a pre-recorded accompaniment track with younger players, is that the composer can include some doublings that will bolster the still-developing [read: amazing out of tune] tone of the band. I never once used emulative samples that mimic the sound of real instruments, because that's entirely opposite to the reason I utilize electronics, which offer unique sounds of their own. But it was useful to find sonorities that served as a guide track for the students. It was also great to be able to add frequencies in ranges beyond those the kids could play at their level to make the piece sound more lushly orchestrated than I might have been able to accomplish with band alone. Again, these were considerations I hadn't had with professional players, and they were key to creating a solid piece of this genre.

#### Paper processing

Once I came up with the idea of using paper as an instrument, the process of composing "Paper Cut" was very entertaining for me as I juggled the three elements that would comprise the piece: paper, electronics, and live instruments. After I had the first few bars of my electronic track in place and got a sense of the textures I wanted to use to contrast those from the paper, it was play time. I grabbed a stack of cheap printer paper and while sitting at my desk, began toying with a single sheet. First, I wanted to see how many different kinds of tearing sounds and rhythms I could come up with: some quiet, some loud, some steady, some crescendoing. Next came sounds made from crumpling the paper, and then all sorts of effects that fingernails and hands can create with it flat, folded, and rolled up in a ball.

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I figured that anything that sounded interesting in just my paws would sound pretty amazing sweeping across a room of forty pairs of them. As I came up with new sounds, I began a catalog with a name for each one, a description of whether it was percussive or textural, and its dynamic range. For every effect, I included a brief description of how to achieve it using as few words as possible, knowing that these would be necessary indications placed in text boxes in the score and parts.

I asked the band director for a map of where all the instruments were placed on stage, so that as I wrote the score, I could split the paper maneuvers into groups to choreograph panned, call-and-response effects. Divvying up the paper playing was somewhat detailed and required a lot of thought: I had to make certain that not only would there be a balance between contrapuntal paper techniques (gee, I've never written those three words together before), but also ensure that anyone playing paper and then moving on to their instrument would have at least a couple of bars at this moderate tempo in which to get comfortably oriented to begin blowing.

So, for any fellow music geeks out there with a papiral penchant, here's a paragraph about my process. Once I had all my paper sounds lined up, out came my iPhone and the accompanying Blue mic that slots right into it. I methodically slated and recorded each of the twenty or so effects I devised. The recording quality of the iPhone is actually pretty terrific for field sampling, but in this instance, I wasn't looking to use these samples in the final track. Instead, I wanted to be able to record them right along with my electronics, for the purposes of making a demo mock-up of the whole piece. I wanted to play the demo for the students so that they could have a concept of what the heck I was asking them to do and how it would sound when all the elements came together.

After syncing the iPhone with my Mac, I dragged the little .m4a sound files into a folder, and opened each one in *Bias Peak* to edit it. I found the "sweet spot" of the realistic sound, trimmed the file, adjusted the gain, notch-filtered out any extraneous noise if needed, and saved it as an aif file that I could drag it into *MOTU's MachFive* and create my very own paper sound bank, with different sounds triggered into *Digital Performer* by different notes on my controller keyboard. Working with the real paper sounds was a great tool as I wove together a very dense electronic soundscape. It was worth taking the time to create the demo: when I played it for the class, they proclaimed, "Wow, that was awesome!" High, high praise from teens to this dorky composer who was briefly invading their world. I also posted the track on my website so that the kids could download it and practice along with it at home. "Music Minus 40!"

## Cutting a positive swath

When I was commissioned for this project, I was told I could choose to work with any school band in the country. I was thrilled to discover the remarkably active band program right here in my back yard. Each grade has its own band class, and the 7th graders meet for 50 minutes virtually every day of the week. Despite having little access to private lessons, thanks to Ms. Olsen's dedication and talents, students learn their instruments from her on-the-fly instruction from the podium, and by studying fingering charts on their own. Only rarely do they have access to private instruction.

This reality is hardly unique to a rural island community: it's one that almost every school in America is coping with. Major budget cuts to music programs have left an enormous hole in the education of America's kids, and anything that composers and music-makers can do to help fill that void is deeply important.

Composers have the power to address an even broader economic reality, by creating engaging music for underprivileged communities. Many schools have limited access to instruments and simply do not have the budget for a wind band. But they might have a small PA system for their school hall, and they might have some sort of music class. I've looked into the possibility of creating other versions of "Paper Cut" in addition to the one which includes the band instruments. Since this piece is as much about rhythm as anything, there could be an edition that requires NO instruments: just the paper for the students to "play," and the CD of the track for playback. Kids could learn how to play music without even needing instruments! Another version could be created for Orff instruments, also more commonly available in schools of modest means.

With a nifty nod to environmentalism, "Paper Cut" also reminds kids to avoid waste and recycle their trash. Early on, I told the class to save all their bad homework and worst test scores, so that they could bring them to rehearsal and get out their aggressions, ripping up things that they would have otherwise just tossed in the garbage. For each rehearsal, they used random paper scraps, giving a fun, ragged look to the piece. I preferred a more uniform sound and visual for the actual performance, so I splurged on two packs of colored printer paper, one blue and another green, for a total cost of \$13. But for any school without even modest funds, recycled paper from magazines, old homework and the like adds another wonderful dimension to the experience.

As with many projects I take on, when I began this one, I felt giddily out of my element and ill-equipped to come up with a good piece. Not only had I never composed for kids, but I hadn't spent much time with any either, since my two cats are all I think I could ever be trusted with. I often say that composing is a faith-based activity, and this wonderful *BandQuest* experience has proven that to me again: leap and the net will appear. Or, rip, tear and crumple and you'll like what you hear! My ears and heart have been torn open to an entirely new source for musical inspiration, and I'm eager to work with middle and high school bands in the future. *ACF's BandQuest* program is, indeed, on the cutting edge.



Music by composer Alex Shapiro is regularly performed and recorded in the U.S. and abroad. She is the author of several articles that help colleagues expand their careers through the Internet, and is a familiar speaker at events such as the National Performing Arts Convention and the ASCAP Expo. For more information, visit [www.alexshapiro.org](http://www.alexshapiro.org)

"Paper Cut" is scheduled to be published in September 2010. For more on this and other works in the *ACF BandQuest* series, visit [www.bandquest.org](http://www.bandquest.org) ♦