

A version of this appeared in the Journal of the International Alliance for Women in Music (IAWM) Volume 23, No.2 – 2017

Reflections on a Composer's Trajectory Across Two Hemispheres

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I wanted to be a composer even before I knew that such a vocation existed. There was always music around the house where I grew up, and I don't remember a time when I wasn't playing an instrument or listening to it. When I was three my parents bought a piano and I delighted in exploring the sounds it produced. Soon I was able to pick out tunes and invent my own. My parents often took me to concerts. At age five and a half I began going to music school every Sunday at New York's Hebrew Arts School for Music and Dance, where I learned to play the recorder, took beginning classes in music theory, and began piano lessons. Each week my piano teacher, Helen Lanfer, would help me write down the melodies I had made up since the previous lesson. She told me stories about a boy named Mozart who also wrote music. She described how he composed pieces for many instruments, symphonies and even operas, to be performed in fancy places. For my seventh birthday my parents took me to see *La Boheme* at the Metropolitan Opera. This, coupled with my competitive feelings toward this boy named Mozart, inspired me to write an opera. I got as far as an overture and an aria (*"What Shall We Do Today?"*) – all in C major, before moving on to other youthful projects. Nothing that I wrote during that period was particularly good, but my identity as a composer, encouraged by my piano teacher, had been formed.

Besides my piano teacher, I had several women mentors who encouraged and helped me grow as a composer. As a teenager I studied composition with Miriam Gideon. I loved going to her apartment on Central Park West for my lessons. She lived on the nineteenth floor, and her elevator had a very distinctive rhythmic pattern. One of the first pieces I wrote while studying with her was *Central Park West*, a duo for oboe and bassoon, based on that rhythm. "This reminds me of my elevator," she remarked when I showed it to her.

During this period, I attended High School of Music and Art in New York, now La Guardia School of the Arts. I began oboe lessons and played in bands and orchestras with my fellow students, many wonderful instrumentalists and composers among them. Participating in these ensembles gave me an awareness of the blends of different instruments. It was an informal introduction to orchestration. Music had become an integral part of my life.

I received my B.A. in music at Yale University in 1975, as part of the third class of women who entered as freshmen. One of my composition teachers there was Robert Morris, who often gave me music to listen to, either something he was working on or recordings by composers who wrote in a style completely different from mine. He pushed me to broaden my way of listening and thinking about music. My other composition teacher was Yehudi Wyner, who for my initial assignment asked me to write a piece using only two intervals and their inversions. At first I thought it an impossible task, but eventually I realized that it forced me to explore new

combinations of pitches, which yielded melodies and harmonies I would not have used otherwise. This lesson broadened my palette as a composer. To this day, whenever I begin a new piece I first give myself limits to work within. Stravinsky once said that limits set you free. Without limits, one is faced with the daunting prospect of the blank page.

At Yale I was part of a group of composers who gave concerts of contemporary music several times a semester. The other composers wrote in a variety of styles, exposing me to more contemporary and avant-garde music. One of the privileges of being at Yale was the access to outstanding instrumentalists at the College and the School of Music, who were eager to play new music by fellow students. Feedback from performers provided me with invaluable training in writing idiomatically for specific instruments. While women were a rarity on campus during my undergraduate years, I never felt any discrimination at the College or in the department of music. In fact, it was an exciting, stimulating and supportive environment.

After college I headed west to University of California, San Diego, for an M.A. in composition. Pauline Oliveros taught the composition seminar for new graduate students. For our first class we lay on the floor listening to white noise for 45 minutes. I wasn't sure what to make of it. This was not to be the only time UCSD pushed me outside of my comfort zone. During my year there, I was exposed to conceptual music, theater pieces, and an ensemble devoted to the use of extended vocal techniques. Though I may not have appreciated it at the time, these experiences helped expand my concept of music and music making. For the second year of my masters I transferred to UC Berkeley, which was more comfortable for me, given my "east-coast" sensibilities.

Before leaving San Diego, I had several lessons with a composer and inspired teacher named Kenneth Gaburo. After moving to Berkeley, I flew to San Diego once a month to study with him. During one lesson he asked me, "How many ways you can think about 18?" I said, "Nine times two, two times nine, three times six, six times three..." He said, "What about seventeen plus one?" It was a revelation, and taught me to explore less obvious ways of constructing my works and think in less conventional ways.

After finishing my masters I spent a year in London, where I played oboe in the Morley Wind Group, led by the delightful conductor Lawrence Leonard. He invited me to write a piece for the ensemble. I wrote *Unfoldings* for double woodwind quintet, using the London Tube map as my inspiration. Each line represented one of the instruments in the tentet, the map's contours and intersections guiding the score - a technique learned from Kenneth Gaburo.

I left London to get my Ph.D. in composition at The University of Chicago, where I studied with Shulamit Ran, another supportive teacher. In Chicago, I became active in American Women Composers, Midwest, through which I met many instrumentalists from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and superb chamber ensembles, who regularly performed on our concerts. One such fortuitous meeting was with John Bruce Yeh, assistant principal clarinetist of the CSO. After hearing a piece of mine for three flutes on a concert, he asked me to write him a solo piece for basset clarinet. He told me he had liked the instrumental interaction in my flute piece. My challenge, thus, was to write a solo piece that was interactive. I decided to write for basset

clarinet and four pre-recorded clarinets. When writing for a particular player I like to personalize the work by using references to his or her life. After asking John to tell me about himself, I focused on one aspect in each of the three movements. The piece is called *A New Leaf* (*Yeh* is the Chinese word for leaf). He premiered it (with recordings of him playing the other parts) in a Clarinet Festival in 1991 and later recorded the piece on a disc with Boulez's *Dialogue de l'ombre double*, a work that was the subject of my Ph.D. dissertation.

In 1994 I was hired as Assistant Professor and Chair of the music department at Lake Forest College, where I taught theory, form and analysis, and Latin American music, and conducted the chamber orchestra. One of my first acts at the College was to create a concert series, *Lake Forest Lyrica*, for which I used my connections with Chicago-area musicians to invite some of the city's finest chamber ensembles to perform: the Vermeer Quartet, the Pacifica Quartet, Chicago Pro Musica, Chicago Chamber Musicians, and excellent choruses from the area including Chicago Chorale, Bella Voce and Chicago *a cappella*. A number of these groups commissioned me to write pieces for them, which were premiered on the series.

In 2008, I received a Fulbright grant to spend a semester teaching and composing at a university in Brazil. Teaching a graduate analysis seminar on the works of Stravinsky was a marvelous experience. The students, many of them composers, were engaged and enthusiastic. For a final project I gave them the option of writing an analysis paper or composing a piece for the instrumentalists in the class, using some of the compositional techniques that we had studied. They presented the works in a concert at the university, with brief spoken introductions by the composers, explaining their compositional ideas. The participants were delighted with the results and the audience was enthusiastic in its reception.

During that semester, I got to know the members of Prelúdio 21, a group of six composers who give monthly concerts of their music at a cultural center in Rio de Janeiro. When I moved to Rio in 2010 after taking early retirement from Lake Forest College, they invited me to write a piece for one of their upcoming concerts featuring soprano and guitar. I chose to write my own text in Portuguese. The piece, *Obras* (Works), describes the horrors of living through apartment renovations. It begins with a lyrical melody without words, which is suddenly interrupted by an angry rant from the soprano, saying that all the renovations in her home and on the street are driving her crazy. When she says the word '*maluca*' (crazy), she cries, stutters, screams and grunts while the guitarist makes weird sounds on the guitar – knocking the wood, plucking the strings violently, and so on. The performers improvise the 'crazy' section, which happens twice in the piece. After the outbursts, the musicians continue their lyrical song, only to have it interrupted again until a happy musical resolution is reached. Two years later, Prelúdio 21 invited me to be Composer-in-Residence for one semester. Writing for a different ensemble each month, culminating in a performance, was a terrific opportunity and challenge.

One outgrowth of my association with that group was a project I developed in 2015 with one of its members, Sergio Roberto de Oliveira'. We invited three other composers to join us in creating two compilation CDs. The first of these was with Orquestra Sinfônica Nacional under the

brilliant direction of Tobias Volkman, and features my piece *Expressões*, written specifically for the project. The second recording, with Trio Paineiras (clarinet, violin, and piano), includes my two-movement piece *Asas* (Wings), which explores the calls of two different birds, common in Brazil. Both recordings were produced by Sergio's studio, *A Casa Discos*.

Throughout my career as a composer, which has included writing for orchestra, chorus, chamber ensembles and solo instruments, my creative process has varied from work to work, but I always begin with an idea – an intellectual one, or one based on events or feelings current in my life. For instance, I wrote my *Portrait* for wind quintet after the death of my father. The first movement, *In Absence*, musically describes my feelings of deep sadness and mourning; the second, *In Presence*, is a depiction of his ever-optimistic and exuberant nature.

Another example is *Fruits of Life*, for flute, cello and piano, which I wrote for my daughter Arielle when she was pregnant with her first child, Sam. In order for me to follow his growth, she showed me a website that pairs each week's gestational developments with pictures of fruits demonstrating the size of the fetus: a blueberry, early on, then a grape, an apple, a mango, a pineapple and finally, a watermelon. My piece is a musical expression of the key stages of this process, beginning with a three-note cell in the flute, followed by the other instruments. The cello then plays a steady pizzicato pitch, symbolizing the baby's heartbeat; shortly thereafter, a trill motive appears, representing the blinking of the eyes. In the next stage, the fetus starts to hiccup, expressed musically with a lilting motive. The piece builds and develops, much as the fetus does. When, towards the end of the process, the baby typically turns upside down in preparation for birth, the opening material returns in inverted form. The music grows steadily to a climax, signifying the child's emergence into the world.

My wind quintet *Reflections of Reflections*, commissioned by Quintet Attacca, is based on an intellectual idea. The piece is dedicated to my son Daniel, who spent two years in Paris working with the OuLiPo, a group of (mostly)² French writers dedicated to creating constraint-based literature. (The most famous example is a 300-page novel written by Georges Perec, which does not include the letter e.)

The piece, which I wrote in 2011, pays homage to the OuLiPo and the idea of constraints. I have always been fond of palindromes, and was particularly delighted by the once-in-a-lifetime occurrence of the date 11/11/11. The piece has 11 sections, each containing 11 measures, and is in 11/8 meter. Each section uses only 11 of the 12 pitches of the chromatic scale. The missing pitches begin with C in the first section and follow the circle of fifths in each subsequent section. (The only pitch never to be eliminated is F, for France.) The metronome marking is eighth note = 275, a multiple of 11. By sheer chance – or perhaps not – the score is 11 pages long. The listener does not need to be aware of the constraints on which the piece is based to appreciate it.

Life changes are often catalysts for creativity. In May 2017 I moved back to the U.S. to be closer to my family. I have already met many fine musicians and have joined two choirs in West Hartford, Connecticut. I plan to become involved in the Women Composers Festival of

Hartford. I don't know yet what my next musical expression will be, but surely my recent move will inspire new creations.

¹ I feel fortunate to have known Sergio Roberto de Oliveira (1970-2017), composer, producer and a leading creative force behind contemporary music in Rio de Janeiro. He left a huge imprint on all who knew him and though his music will live on, he will be sorely missed.

² Daniel was elected a member of the group in 2009, the second American to be so named.