

Reflections on Composing – Fall, 2021 Anna Rubin

There are many threads that weave their way through my interests and work — the primacy of voice, the music of speech, synesthesia of sound and form, ecstatic melismatic melody, a roving palette of harmony spanning a variety of tonalities, engagement with a variety of social justice issues. And the key musical element — textural/timbre often generated by a sonic metaphor or image:

Broken sobs of laughter,
Silken shawls floating in gusts of wind,
The heavy slide of amber honey,
A theft of precious metal, ringing, ringing –
A wild bee swarm and the depthless solidity of a black hole.

My musical imagination is grounded in a kind of textural synesthesia not of sound and color but of sound and shape, texture, energy, and space. I didn't always understand or trust this idiosyncratic approach to composition, which fully emerged when I began working with electronic music.

Working Method

Now age seventy-five, it took me some years to trust my musical imagination and discover my own method of working. As a young composer, I was cowed by two assumptions. The first was the so-called inevitability theory — that the final form of a masterwork was the only way in which it could possibly be, which led me to doubt my choices. Had I truly found the inevitable note/rhythm/chord? The second debilitating emphasis for me was that any worthy composition had to be constructed according to a pre-fabricated model as detailed as an architect's blueprint.

The working method that has evolved for me is that, whether working instrumentally or electronically, I begin with a vacuum which attracts a textural image here, an energy quality there, a scalar fragment, and often a social issue. And once there are enough of these evocative components, I can begin. Then the dance proceeds in which I alternate between overall considerations and the composition of specific passages. When I reach a point where I have internalized the piece's logic, I can slowly improvise; that would be Pauline Oliveros' definition of composition. The piano has been such an important tool for developing my ideas when working on instrumental pieces. On many occasions, I have found that the first cluster of notes I play becomes the root of the harmonic structure.

When composing for the computer, I first have to decide on my "instruments." I begin experimenting with a specific sound structure and generate multiple variations of that sound(s). Assembling this library then allows me to proceed to the stage of composition/improvisation.

Inflection Points

I would like to share some of the important inflection points of my life and music without any attempt to be thorough. I'll begin with the loneliness and isolation I felt at around age ten. I was suffering from a mysterious disease and went through a hospitalization and then a long stretch out of school before I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. The experience intensified my

preoccupation with my inner fantasy life. I continue to be surprised at how many artists had a similar childhood experience that forced them to develop the habit of introspection and imagination.

Fortunately, my mother filled the house with the sounds of her favorite music — classical, jazz and folk. I had begun playing piano at age seven and loved the classical music I was taught as well as the Jewish music I was surrounded with in the synagogue and in my home. My Jewish identity was and is intrinsic to my identity, and being a part of a minority prompted my intense and lifelong curiosity about cultural and political power. I continue to be fascinated with how Jewish music has influenced not only my approach to composition but its effect on perception. Musicologist Judit Frigesi has written powerfully about how Jewish children are, in effect, prepared for dealing with anti-Semitism and a history of genocide by Jewish music.¹

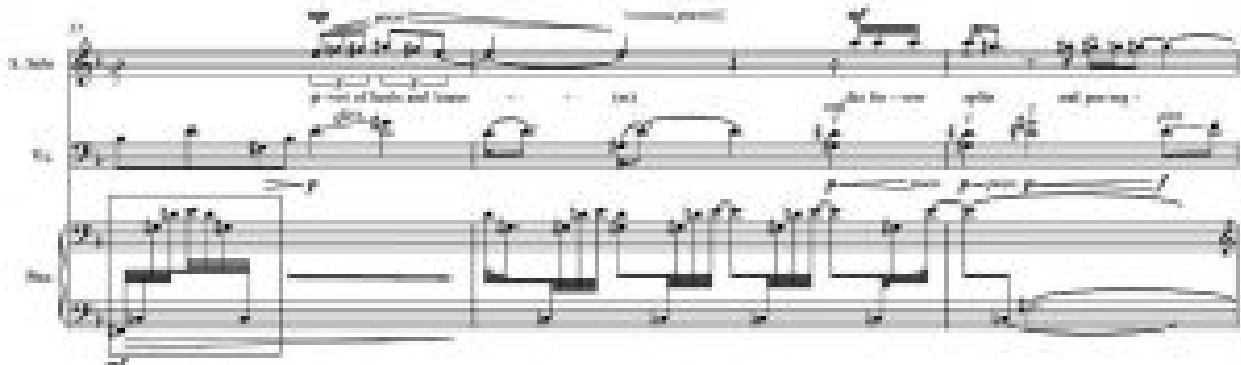
Into my teens, I continued to study piano and immerse myself in the triumvirate of Bach, Beethoven and Gershwin, but I never considered that music could be my life work. My attitude towards composers was that it was a heavenly gift, only for the rarest geniuses. We moved from the Midwest to Arizona as I began to be aware of the civil rights movement and the writings of James Baldwin, and I realized how segregated both areas were.

I attended Pomona College in Claremont, CA, followed by years in the Berkeley/Oakland area. I had majored in sociology, which I originally thought would lead to a social work career. But I ended up joining a quirky band of organizers who started a high school group that focused on creating an innovative and socially relevant curriculum. I was involved in various activist groups, including draft resisters, the Black Panther Breakfast program, and the Welfare Rights organization. I also participated in a women's writers group, which was intensely stimulating and empowering in a way no college seminar ever had been. It was in that group that I developed the skills of critical thinking.

During this time, I continued piano lessons and was especially inspired by my teacher, Barbara Lawson (Berkeley), a woman who had deliberately built up an integrated clientele of piano students. I played in a UC Berkeley contemporary ensemble and discovered extended piano techniques with wonder and delight.

I heard about CalArts, an unusual school of the arts outside of Los Angeles, where the famous feminist artist, Judy Chicago, taught. I assumed that the music department would be equally as feminist oriented as the visual arts department, and I enrolled to complete a second BA degree in music. To my surprise, there were few full-time women instructors and no one discussed women composers in seminars or even in guest lectures. The faculty of the music department was mostly a collection of brilliant, if not always effective, male instructors who focused almost exclusively on contemporary music. I had classes with Jim Tenney, Mort Subotnick, Lucky Moskow and a host of international composers and performers, but most vital were my studies with Mel Powell, whom I think of as the Mozart of the twelve-tone school. In three-hour weekly private lessons and later at CalArts, he imparted a practical and effective grasp of form, climax, and continuity and what he called “energistic” typologies. His holistic approach to composition was the right thing for me at the right moment. One of the first pieces I worked on with Mel was Songs to

Death, settings of four Sylvia Plath poems in which I benefitted from his guidance (See Example 1, below).



Ex. 1 – Excerpt from “Ariel” in *Songs to Death*, 1974 rev. 2010

One of the only women on the faculty was Romanian conductor/educator Marta Ghezso, whose atonal musicianship classes were masterful and original, and I quickly began to compose in an atonal language that was very satisfying — largely skipping tonal harmony.

Meanwhile, I was teaching piano in Los Angeles and helped start the Independent Composers Association, a composer collective, which included Lois Vierk and Susan Palmer (in recent years, a noted Zen teacher). I met and worked with many other active women performers and musicians in the late 70s and early 80s including Nancy Fierro, Deon Price, and Jeannie Poole and on the popular side of music, Sue Fink and her LA Women’s Choir. I joined the International League of Women in Music and attended a spirited conference in New York hosted by the International Congress of Women in Music.² Catherine Roma and I connected during that time, and she commissioned me to write a women’s choral piece, *Sappho*, for her choir Anna Crusis, the first feminist choir in the US.

I was intensely curious about electronic music and had not had the time explore the possibilities while at CalArts. I decided to travel to Amsterdam in 1982 because of the nearby Institute for Sonology in Utrecht. I attended a course there but more important was the access I gained to a marvelous studio at the Sweelinck Conservatorium. There I found a 24-track recorder, which for me was like finding the key to the Enigma code. With this massive piece of technology, I could easily quilt together multiple layers of sound and along with 4-track recorders and a host of other analog modules, and explore texture and timbre in a way that was at once fresh and so comfortable for me. My first electronic piece was *Crying the Laughing and Golden* in which I processed a woman’s laughter in a variety of ways. Learning the studio as I created the piece, I happened upon the instinctual method I have continued to use: develop a primal sound, make countless variations of it, and then shape and form them into a coherent work.

It was during a side trip to the Darmstadt Ferienkurse (summer course) in Germany in 1982 that I met composer Violeta Dinescu. Darmstadt was a must for young composers in the 80s. Violeta had just left Communist-controlled Romania, ostensibly to attend the Darmstadt Festival but with the intention to defect to Germany. Her determination and fearlessness were stunning. Both

her affinity for her Romanian folk tradition and her original approach towards counterpoint resonated deeply with me, and I learned a tremendous amount from her. While in Amsterdam, I became engaged with Alex Haley's book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and James Baldwin's adaptation for the screen. As a result, I composed *De Nacht; Lament for Malcolm X* for the Dutch group, the Delta Ensemble, which won their new ensemble award in 1983.

While I was in Europe, I learned about the German tradition of Hörspiel (radio play), and I was fascinated by the combination of narrative and sound. After I returned to the US and settled in New York, I had the opportunity develop my own Hörspiel. I met Helen Thorington and Regina Beyer of New American Radio and won a joint commission from NAR and Radio station WNYC to create a sound collage on Robert Moses, an innovative urban planner who reshaped the physical environment of New York City. I developed a second project with Helen as well with a speculative science fiction text about a future apocalypse.

So, between 1984 and 1994, I supported myself by teaching piano, editing publications at the American Music Center, and writing program notes for The Group for Contemporary Music. My compositions in the 1980s had been mainly chamber and electronic music, but I decided to experiment and took a foray into orchestral writing with the composition of *Freedom: Sweet and Bitter* for orchestra and fixed media. The title derives from the complex liberation of Romania from Communist rule after the overthrow of the dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu, and I dedicated this piece to Violeta Dinescu. My experiment was very successful, and the work won the National Orchestral Association award in 1988.

The year 1989 marked an important change in my career beginning with my meeting with Charles Dodge at the Brooklyn College Center for Computer Music. He had a welcoming attitude towards anyone interested in computer music and made his classes and studios open to a variety of composers in the New York region. Charles introduced me to the CSound synthesis program, and I began studying with him and his assistant, Curtis Bahn. The center was then a really collaborative space with one main room with several computers and one sound system. We would take turns processing our sounds and listening to what others were doing. While I was in residence at Brooklyn College, I created *Stolen Gold* (1991/rev. 2007) for amplified baroque oboe, modern oboe, violin, and fixed media; the work exists in three versions. The original version for baroque oboe was done in collaboration with Deborah Nagy. Her virtuosity with the keyless instrument allowed me to compose long glissandi, which are extremely difficult on the modern keyed instrument. Patricia Moorhead asked for a version for modern oboe, and violinist Airi Yoshioka later asked for a version for violin. In all cases, the live instrument is amplified. Clouds of pointillistic sound contrast with drone and glissandi, acting as a counterpart to a highly decorated melodic part in the solo instrument. The piece has been performed throughout the US by a variety of performers.

Ex. 2 – Excerpt from *Stolen Gold*, violin version.

Another one of my major works from the 1990s was *Landmine*. In 1997, the international treaty to ban anti-personnel landmines was attracting a great deal of attention. Through contacts, I connected with a landmine activist who had worked on the issue in Cambodia. I originally wrote the work for flute and fixed media for a Canadian flutist with whom I collaborated. Later, Abby Conant, whom many readers may know for her brilliant performance and feminist agitation, performed a version for trombone in her extensive 2002 tour, and cellist Jeff Krieger has performed it widely.

I had been a member of one of the parent groups of IAWM, the International League of Women Composers since the 1970s and when IAWM formed, I joined the board and later served as president (2010-2012). I have always found the conferences and publications to be powerful and have appreciated the opportunities all the groups provided me and other women to network and learn from each other.

I decided late in 1993 to return to college to get my doctorate because university positions were otherwise out of reach. I was accepted at Princeton, and in 1998, I received an offer of a position teaching composition and electronic music Oberlin College. I had been warned in advance that I could run into trouble with a longtime faculty chair of the composition department who had a ruthless reputation for getting new faculty members terminated. And, indeed, I did run afoul of him and the tenure process, but I was fortunate to then get a position at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). For some years, I directed the Linehan Artist Scholars Program, a special program for talented students across the arts. One of most interesting projects I did there was a collaboration with the Liz Lerman Dance Company, Charlestown Retirement Community, UMBC gerontologists, and UMBC Linehan students. The project included wonderful conversations between students and Charlestown residents and seminars on aging with sociologist Dr. Caroline Tice. The project culminated in a joyous multi-generational dance

performance. At UMBC, I also had the pleasure of teaching and collaborating with Linda Dusman, Lisa Cella, Airi Yoshioka, Tom Goldstein and others.

My attention began to turn towards the environment and bees around 2010, after reading about the Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD). I began a collaboration with cellist Madeleine Shapiro, whose longtime environmental concerns motivated her to commission many works on environmental themes. When she approached me about a commission, I decided to interview a family of local beekeepers as well as scientists at the nearby US Department of Agriculture facility. The Beekeepers for amplified cello and fixed media is a piece she has championed for several years. (See Example 2.)

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The image shows a musical score excerpt for 'The Beekeepers for amplified cello and fixed media'. It consists of three staves. The top staff is a treble clef staff with a long horizontal line and a slur over it, with the text 'Dist. Bee bee bee' written below it. The middle staff is a bass clef staff with a long horizontal line and a slur over it, with the text 'Male Bee' written above it. The bottom staff is a bass clef staff with a complex rhythmic pattern of notes and rests, with dynamic markings *f*, *p*, *poco*, *mf*, *mf*, *f*, and *f* written below it. There are also markings for *arco* and *pp* above the staff. The score is divided into two measures by a double bar line, with a '32'' marking above the first measure and a '1.0'' marking above the second measure. The word '(Pizzicato)' is written above the second measure.

Ex. 3, Excerpt from The Beekeepers for amplified cello and fixed media.

I then began to turn to the piano, my first instrument, but for which I had written very little solo music. Pianist Margaret Lucia asked me for a piece, and I composed a four-part suite, For the Love of Bees. While writing this piece, I discovered a way to approach the piano that focused on texture and timbre. (See Example 3.)

28 Now the story gets interesting—

29 In the 1950s a scientist named Warwick Kerr

Ex. 4, Excerpt from “Las abelhas assassinas” in For the Love of Bees

And then in 2018, Sandrine Erdely-Sayo, a brilliant pianist and director of the Piano on the Rocks Festival in Sedona, Arizona, invited me to be a guest composer at the festival. She frequently features pieces with spoken word so I added text to each section of For the Love of Bees. After the success of that work, we began planning more projects. The festival commissioned me to write a piece on black holes, Powehi, for the spring 2020 festival, which of course had to be delayed until 2022. In the meantime, we applied for funding for a piece for soprano, mezzo, piano, and electronics on the subject of women migrants. In the last four years, I have become very involved in immigration issues, both locally and nationally. I was able to interview two women with very different stories — one woman from Mexico who was brought to the US as a child and a woman from Honduras fleeing persecution and assault. I created a libretto based on their stories. It has been incredibly satisfying to bring together my artistic and current activist interests.

Over the years, I have also taken great interest in working with “non-standard” Western instruments such as baroque oboe and viola da gamba and Asian instruments including the oud and zheng. In the last fifteen years, I have been rediscovering chromatic tonality, which I incorporate into a flexible approach to harmonic structure spanning modal, tonal, idiosyncratic, and atonal note collections. I think this flexibility, which many composers share, is very liberating and allows one to match the harmonic palate to the subject.

Current projects include upcoming CDs of the bee and black hole pieces and continuing my project of interviewing women migrants. I feel grateful to have escaped contracting COVID and to have had compositions to focus on in the last year. Music, as always, has been a refuge, a solace, a gift which invariably lifts me into a state of flow and of gratitude.

NOTES

1 This is of course true of all groups, especially minorities whose cultures create profound musical and artistic archetypes of resistance and beauty. These DNA-deep cultural structures, such as gospel music and the music of the Roma, are literally life-giving and life-saving.

2 Both organizations later joined to form the IAWM.