

INTERVIEWS

“Timbral exploration and collaboration with performers lie at the heart of my musical life”: An Interview with Judith Shatin

KRISTINA WARREN

Judith Shatin is a composer and sound artist whose music engages our social, cultural, and physical environments. She is William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor Emerita at the University of Virginia, having retired in 2018 after teaching there for 39 years. While at UVA, she founded the Virginia Center for Computer Music and oversaw the creation of the first PhD program in music in the history of the state. A distinguished composer whose music combines acoustic and digital elements, Judith is the recipient of numerous commissions and awards, and her music is performed around the globe. She is a strong advocate for her fellow composers, having served as President of American Women Composers (1989-93) and collaborated in the creation of the IAWM. I interviewed her via Skype in January 2019.

Kristina Warren: *Tell me about your early experiences with music and sound.*

Judith Shatin: When I was about six, my father bought an old upright piano, and I gravitated to it racing to play it first thing in the morning. I later took up the flute, played in the school band and orchestra, and sang in the chorus. I was always drawn to music and to sound, and I remain grateful that music had a strong place in the public schools I attended.

I first became seriously involved with composition (studying with Robert Moevs) when I was an undergraduate at Douglass College (Rutgers University). I became obsessed with composing and was allowed to give the first composition recital in the school's history. Of course, this came with the condition that I find the performers, organize all details, and perform one of my pieces for solo piano. This was good preparation for so many other experiences, not to mention the ever-present requirement of perseverance!

As to electronic music, I briefly composed in a small studio on the Rutgers Campus. It consisted of a couple of tape recorders and splicing equipment, and I found the process frustrating. Next, as a student at the Aspen Music Festival, I tried a Buchla Synthesizer and found that much more approachable. I continued working on a Buchla while completing the MM de-

gree at Juilliard, but I was still not satisfied with the results. So, I focused on acoustic composition, including my first orchestral piece. Later, while completing the PhD at Princeton in the mid '70s, I tried composing using a mainframe computer. In those days, we laboriously typed parameters on cardboard cards, and had the results transferred to digital tape, which we brought to the Engineering School late at night to listen to the results. I found them disappointing and decided to wait for further developments. Somehow, I knew they were in the offing. And I was/am still captivated by acoustic composition.



Judith Shatin playing the conga drum
(photo by Lisa Maki)

KW: *You founded the Virginia Center for Computer Music at the University of Virginia in 1987. How has the musical community evolved over several decades?*

JS: I started the Virginia Center for Computer Music to create a center for teaching, creative work, and research. At the start, it was rather lonely, but happily that changed quickly, and students were immediately excited by the new opportunities. MIDI had just been introduced, and I learned that funding was available through UVA's Academic Computing Sup-

port Committee for teaching and new technologies. I went to New York, parked myself at a store that sold MIDI equipment, learned enough to write the grant proposal to start the program, and received a number of other successful grants to keep it going. I'll never forget my first large electroacoustic piece. Called *Hearing Things*, it was scored for amplified violin, 88-key keyboard controller, Mac II, a DEP5 effects processor, a Roland S550 Sampler, a Roland Voice Processor, and a TX-802 Synthesizer. We had to bring the equipment to New York in a station wagon for a performance at Miller Theatre at Columbia University.

At the start, just Systems Engineer Pete Yadowsky, who was lent part-time by our Information Technology Services, and I worked at the Center. It was a major step forward when composers Alison Warren and John Gibson joined us, as well as technical director Dave Topper. And, as the program continued to develop, Matthew Burtner and Ted Coffey joined the department, and they, together with our new technical director, Travis Thatcher, have made continual advances, expanding the entire computer music program. Most recently Luke Dahl, an expert in signal processing and music interaction design, joined the team. And currently the department also has outstanding visiting composers—Leah Reid and Heather Frasch—so I am optimistic about the future.

Another aspect of our program that has continued apace is the maturation of our PhD in Composition and Computer Technologies. While I was Department Chair, I worked hard to bring our PhD proposal to completion, going through an extensive process with my colleagues, handling benchmarking with other programs, convincing various administrators of its merit, and shepherding it through the various levels within the institution and on to the State Council on Higher Education, where we won approval. We have had a string of outstanding students go on to their own careers at Oberlin, Rutgers, the University of Miami, Christopher Newport University, and numerous other institutions.

One ongoing issue still exists everywhere: finding the “right” balance between acoustic and digital. I had an ideal vision of these being equal and being integrated with one another. Yet, because each is so time intensive, and music technology has such shape-shifting qualities, the balance remains elusive. So, while we try to make sure that all of our undergraduates and graduate students have time and opportunity to develop both, it is not easy. In

the end, each of us has to find the balance for herself. I often blend the two, though I also love to compose acoustic music. One example of this blending can be found in *For the Fallen*, originally commissioned by Ivano Ascari for trumpet and electronics made from field recordings of the Peace Bell in Rovereto, Italy. I have made several versions for different instruments.

The most recent is for ace flutist Lindsey Goodman, who recorded it on her re-

cent CD *Returning to Heights Unseen*. (See Example 1.) This example shows both a controlled improvisation section, and a passage with specific, though proportional, notation used to create a flexible interaction between the performer and electronics. Further, I use a combination of verbal and pitch notation for the electronics to convey specific pictures and textures.

KW: *The balance of time among different activities is a fascinating aspect of be-*

Respond to the electronics, starting very sparsely and increasing density and intensity. Draw from these pitches, repeat and change register a piacere; Increasingly wild registral leaps, timbral trills, change playing techniques, including key slaps, growling sounds, fltz, increasingly rough, noisy, multiphonics, tongue pizz (with syllables a piacere), jet whistle, voice and overblow (with rh trill fingers) jagged rhythms; Dynamics - range from f to ffff!

3:40 *Increasingly Crazy*

Fl.

add voice over harmonic gliss
Include a piacere RH123 bisbigliano, tremolo overblow
Tk12 bisbigliando overblow

Increasingly angry bell sounds, war-like, interspersed vocal sounds

4:05 *Lamenting*

Fl.

Gradual dim., smoother, more extended sounds, slight pitch bends, becoming sparser

4:20 *Bereft*

Fl.

Flowing

Gradual dim.

4:30

Fl.

4:35 Tk2

4:40

Fl.

4:45

Fl.

Airy Sound Add r ring finger

4:50

4:55 ord. Finger F# + Tk1 Tk1

Ex. 1. Judith Shatin, *Returning to Heights Unseen*

ing a musician. I'm curious to learn which activities resonate most with you, for instance, composing, recording, programming, mixing, or working with physical or textual materials.

JS: I feel lucky to have started as an acoustic composer because I had already spent years developing that practice when I turned to electronic composition, as each required such intense focus. I still delight in both, and I cannot imagine dropping either.

KW: I performed your "Tape Music" [tape on a dispenser with teeth, a cardboard box, a blunt instrument such as a pencil, and fixed media] with the UVA New Music Ensemble. I perceived a real levity and exuberance in this piece. What is the role of emotional content in your work?

JS: I see it as fundamental, as every utterance that we make has an emotional valence. Whether we think about it or not, when music is experienced, it conveys emotional content. It's not that I sit around and think, "OK, what emotional content do I want to convey?" but it's all bound up together. Actually, there is a caveat to that. When I am setting a text, the choices I make are governed by the textual flow of sound and by the meaning. I'm interested in finding ways for the music to interact with the text.

KW: You have written a great deal of vocal music. Why do you find this genre to be especially interesting?

JS: Language has so much richness and voices have a raw power and intimacy. I find that when a text resonates with me, rhythmic ideas and sonic qualities jump into my mind. Before I turned to music, I wrote poetry, so it's something I've always been rather sensitive to. I find how we connect meaning with utterance endlessly fascinating.

I've worked with all kinds of texts. And often one project leads to another. For example, The Illinois Wesleyan Collegiate Choir, conducted by J. Scott Ferguson, performed *Hark My Love*, a setting of verses from the *Song of Songs* during a residency I did at IWU and immediately commissioned *I Love*, a setting of a verse from Gertrude Stein's extended poem *Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded*. It has humor and lightness and a variety of linguistic twists. The first line goes, "I love my love with a v." The choir premiered and toured it in March 2019.

Just prior to that I was commissioned by opera singer Amy Johnson to compose a monodrama for soprano and piano. I set a long poem by Amy Lowell called *Patterns*, which is about the patterns that constrict us on so many different levels. The narrative is told from a woman's point of view, and starts with her walking in the garden musing on the constrictions of her dress and her class. She longs for her fiancé who is off fighting in the war in Flanders. Over the course of the poem there are many intimations of his death, and the poem closes with him dying "...In a pattern called war./ Christ! What are patterns for?" It goes from the personal to the societal, suggesting the many ways our lives are patterned by social constraints. The poem itself has wonderful internal rhymes and compelling images.

KW: When I was a graduate student at UVA, one of the many things I came to admire is your balance between what I'll call the musical and the practical, or between one's inner life and imagination as a composer on the one hand, and how these come to fruition in the real world of instruments, venues, and ears on the other hand. How do you think about the real, the aesthetic, the private, the shared, and so on?

JS: One of the aspects that I valued, not only about my work at UVA, but also within the larger community, is the sharing of my music in performance and the feedback that results. I also love collaborative interaction with performers, especially

those who like to experiment. For example, I find a great deal of joy in working with stellar percussionist I-Jen Fang. The hands-on encounters with the huge range of percussion instruments is terrific! The collaboration I've had with many performers has been crucial. I think of flutist Patricia Spencer, saxophonist Susan Fancher, cellist Madeleine Shapiro, clarinetist F. Gerard Errante, and many others.

Another example occurred last year, when the San Jose Chamber Orchestra and its intrepid conductor, Barbara Day Turner, commissioned *Ice Becomes Water*, scored for string orchestra and electronics fashioned from field recordings shared by glaciologist Oscar Glowacki. My colleagues at UVA, David Sariti (violin), Ayn Balija (viola), Adam Carter (cello), and Peter Spaar (bass), responded to my request for exploratory sessions very enthusiastically. It was great fun to try out different techniques, inventing new ones as we went along. That kind of interaction always feeds my imagination.

KW: You've collaborated with a wide variety of people, including coal miners, scientists, children; what are your thoughts on these collaborations? What are some memorable moments?

JS: Where to start? My large-scale pieces are quite varied! *COAL*, an evening-length folk oratorio, was scored for an Appalachian ensemble consisting of two singers, guitar, banjo, fiddle, hammered dulcimer, keyboard synthesizer, and elec-

Shatin Music Month

The University of Virginia honored Judith Shatin with a two-day celebration starting with a symposium on April 5, 2019. Three speakers presented papers: Steve Kempa, "Sounding the Word; Exploring Religious Symbolism in the Music of Judith Shatin"; Juraj Kojs: "Streams and Voices in the Electroacoustic Music of Judith Shatin"; and Denise Von Glahn: "Judith Shatin Composes Environmental Awareness." That evening the University Singers, under the baton of Ryan Mullaney, performed *Adonai Ro'i*, Shatin's setting of *Psalm 23* in the original Hebrew. The concert on April 6 featured acoustic, electroacoustic, and digital music that Shatin created during her tenure at the University.

The celebration continued with three more concerts in April. On the 18th, the New Music Ensemble presented her digital music, premiering *Zipper Music*, scored for two amplified zipper players and interactive electronics, performed with 2 MIDI controllers. The piece is part of her *Quotidian Music* series. On April 27 and 28, The Charlottesville Symphony, conducted by Benjamin Rous, performed Shatin's *Piping the Earth*. The work was inspired by a metaphor in the ancient Chinese text, the *Zhuangzi*. It refers to the changing sounds of the wind as it sweeps through earth's caverns. Like the wind, the music ranges from the murmuring of the opening to tumultuous sweeps, from eddying swirls to a powerful maelstrom. The piece was commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts and The Women's Philharmonic. It has been recorded by the Moravian Philharmonic on the Capstone label.

tronics, which I fashioned from recordings I made in a working coal mine. *COAL* was part of a two-year project that was sponsored by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Arts Partners Program. Pianist and dynamo Mary Kathleen Ernst, at Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, conceived of and spearheaded the project. I did four week-long residencies and worked with numerous community groups. I also made numerous research trips to West Virginia and southwest Virginia, and met people who worked in coal mines, people who owned coal mines, and an assortment of community activists and historians. It was a very moving experience. After descending into Eagles Nest Coal Mine in Twilight, West Virginia for a day, I came out totally covered in coal dust, and it took me several days to get it out of my system. I drew on these experiences in creating my own libretto. We gave the profits from the premiere to the Black Lung Association, and hoped that at least some people had been given more awareness of the issues. I remain distressed, though, by how many people still suffer from lax conditions in mines.

As to other projects—you mentioned children. I first heard the San Francisco Girls' Chorus when I was spending a year as a guest composer at Stanford. I composed *Beetles, Monsters and Roses* for them. It was their first piece with electronics, and they sang beautifully under the direction of Sharon Paul. And one of the most delightful compliments I have received came right after the premiere. One movement, "Click Beetle," is a setting of a poem about a beetle by Mary Ann Hoberman. After the concert, one of the girls came up to me and said, "I'm not afraid of beetles anymore."

KW: *The past decade has seen major performances of several large works, including "The Passion of St. Cecilia," "Singing the Blue Ridge," "Being in Time," and others. What have been some of the unique interests and challenges of these large-scale projects?*

JS: The earliest of these is *The Passion of St. Cecilia* (1981), a three-movement concerto for piano and orchestra, which I composed for pianist Gayle Martin, who recorded it with the Moravian Philharmon-

ic for my orchestral portrait CD *Piping the Earth*. I created most of the work while in residence at La Cité des Arts in Paris, an inspiring place to work. There were a number of elements that drew me to Cecilia. One is the contrast of her legend as the patron saint of music and the arts with the facts as they are known. The association appears to be based on a mistranslation in the 15th century. I love the mystery as well as much of the art that has been created in response to this legend. The original story of her martyrdom is intense, and I decided to create a musical response to the martyrdom of a woman. Gayle later commissioned the solo adaptation, *Fantasy on St. Cecilia*.

Fantasy on St. Cecilia fuses the duality of piano and orchestra within the coloristic world of the piano. (See Example 2.) The first movement suggests the attack on her religious belief. The second is a meditation on her faith, while the third portrays her final struggle. The work opens with loud, ominous crashes, and continues in dramatic fashion. Gayle, who has long been my pianistic muse, recorded this piece on her CD *To Keep the Dark Away* (Ravello RR #7937), with the title of the CD named for the other piece of mine included on the disc.

Singing the Blue Ridge (2002), for mezzo, baritone, orchestra, and electronics, is fashioned from calls of wild animals that are indigenous to this area. It was commissioned by Wintergreen Performing Arts as part of a major project called Preserving the Rural Soundscape. I worked with the American poet Barbara Goldberg, who created poetry whose arc moves from the time before humanity, to a snapshot of the destruction we create, to the cycle of life of all animals. Then, the last movement, "Miracle of Stars," sings of a hope for better stewardship in the future. I again engaged with the local community, this time in Nelson County, VA. I led sound walks, arranged for a number of community members to record environmental sounds that were important to them, and led discussions on the role of sound in the environment, including the sonic environment that animals provide as well as the one we create ourselves.

Being in Time (2015) was yet another engrossing project. Supported by a Faculty Research Grant in the Arts at UVA, I first scored the piece for wind ensemble, interactive video, and conductor-controlled electronics developed from recordings that I made of students in the ensemble. I col-

Ex. 2. Judith Shatin, *Fantasy on St. Cecilia*

laborated with graduate student composers Paul Turowski and Joe Adkins on the video and interactive elements. While we completed the project according to my original idea, the technology was complicated and, in some ways, unreliable. So, after the premiere, I created another version for wind ensemble and electronic playback that was performed most recently by the UT-Austin Wind Ensemble, conducted by Jerry Junkin. Occasionally, I have to rein in some of my visions for technology that is not quite ready for prime time.

I want to mention one other point that I believe very strongly: the compositional process is about the imagination. I don't care whether you're using sticks and stones or the newest technologies, or common household items, as in my recent *Zipper Music* (2019, part of my *Quotidian Music* series). It's really a question of what your imagination is capable of, what kind of structures you can imagine and create in sound. I don't think that one should feel a "have to" about using any particular technology. But I also feel strongly that everyone who creates music or does sound design should at least have some experience creating with both acoustic and digital media, because they're both so rich and enable different kinds of imagination.

KW: *Is there anything you'd like to comment on regarding teaching?*

JS: At UVA and elsewhere, my teaching has been another part of the collaborative process. I have found the exchange of ideas and repertoire to be a meaningful kind of collaboration, both with graduate students and undergraduates. For instance, when I developed a course in songwriting, I decided to start each class with a student performing a favorite song. It was a terrific way not only to foster exchange between the performer and the class, but also a way to expand our repertoire. It was a fascinating experience, with multiple surprises.

Another example concerns the development of a course in choral composition. I had taught a number of acoustic instrument classes and computer music classes, and eventually I said to myself, "Hm. I love choral writing. Why isn't there a Choral Composition class?" I started looking around, and I found some classes in choral arranging, but I didn't find any in choral composition. So, I decided to create one. That circles back to your question about texted music, and how strange I still find it that there is so

little time devoted to creating texted music in most composition courses. I think that it has to do with the outdated idea that "absolute music" is better than texted music. That is a long-standing canard. I deeply, deeply disagree with that notion, so I was very excited to start a Choral Composition course.

I would like to see texted music on the same playing field as instrumental music. It seems strange to me to make that dichotomy. I think of all music—because it is engaged with utterance—as having emotional and narrative qualities. We may not think linguistically, semantically as we're experiencing music, but when we want to think about and communicate about it, we need words.

KW: *You have been a staunch advocate for women in new music for decades. What are some of your proudest achievements, and what is the next step for improving our approach to gender equality?*

JS: When I started composing seriously in 1971, I didn't see women composers around—I didn't know any, I didn't know of any. While at Juilliard I met Victoria Bond and was excited to hear some of her music, as well as music by Joan Tower and a few others; then at Princeton I was happy to meet Hilary Tann, Kristi Allik, and Stefania de Kenessey. Afterwards, when I joined BMI, Gilbert Roy, Head of Classical Music, suggested that I contact Tommie Carl, who had founded American Women Composers. I became very involved in that organization, serving as Secretary and later as President (1989 to 1993). One of the great things about it was finding a multitude of fascinating women composers and meeting so many of them. These included Ruth Schonthal, Alexandra Pierce, Sally Reid, Janet Peachy,

Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner, to name just a few who were active in AWC. I won't go into more detail here, as J. Michele Edwards focused on this history in a previous interview. I'll just say how pleased I am that the IAWM continues to flourish in so many ways.

No doubt being a composer of concert music in the U.S. (and beyond) is challenging, whatever one's gender. However, it's clear that there's much more to achieve in terms of programming contemporary music in general and music by women in particular. While there have been major strides, especially recently, the problem is by no means solved. We can all help bring change. I made sure to include music by a variety of women composers such as Linda Dusman, Elianie Lillios, Maggie Payne, Lois Vierk, Amy Williams, Frances White, and many others in my courses. This is crucial, and all of us can participate through our teaching, performance, research, and, of course, listening!

Other current and upcoming events:

May 19, *Dust and Shadow* (solo organ), Gail Archer, Golden Anniversary Organ Recital at St. Bede's Episcopal Church; Menlo Park, CA

August 3, *Ruah* (flute concerto) by the Aspen Contemporary Ensemble

August 4-11, Composer in Residence, Bennington Chamber Music Conference. For additional information, please visit www.judithshatin.com

Kristina Warren composes music for and with chamber ensembles, builds and performs with unique electronic instruments, improvises with laptop and voice, and teaches electronic music and multimedia as Visiting Assistant Professor at Brown University. (www.kmwarren.org)

The IAWM Journal 25 Years Ago

As the Journal celebrates its 25th anniversary, we look back to Volume 1, No. 1, and, surprisingly, the lead article was by this year's honored composer, Judith Shatin! Her article, "Histories of the AWC, ICWM and ILWC," describes the three women in music organizations (American Women Composers, International Congress on Women in Music, and International League of Women Composers) that merged to form the IAWM.

In her introductory remarks, Journal editor Sylvia Glickman wrote: "We want you to write about your accomplishments, your interests, your research, your concern, and your ideas on how to make the twenty-first century the Century of Women in Music." Her comment is still appropriate today. The issue also included a welcome message from President Stefania de Kenessey, a memorial tribute to Elizabeth Maconchy, technology tips from Sally Reid, and a discussion of Virgil Thomson's music reviews in the *New York Herald Tribune*. The author described his reviews as "models of good criticism." The volume also included book and CD reviews, reports on conferences and festivals, announcements, awards, and members' news. The Journal was published three times a year and averaged about 40 pages per issue.