

LIVING MUSIC

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FROM THE EDITOR

This issue of Living Music presents a diversity of articles, interviews, and reviews -- focusing as much as possible on the actual spoken or written words of living composers.

Thus, this issue contains personal interviews with composers Sydney Hodkinson, Michael Gandolfi, and Peter Lieberson.

Live concert reviews and CD reviews are covered both in extended articles and also our new "briefly noted" reviews section.

An ongoing series focusing on composers who have also been active in non-musical fields begins with two interviews of medical doctors who are also composers -- Albert Hurwit and Franklin Ashdown.

Our feature scholarly article, by author Gordon Rumson, creatively considers the work of one of Canada's most significant composers, R. Murray Schafer.

The Spring 2005 issue, in addition to our regular features, will begin an ongoing series of profiles and reviews of new music record labels and their releases -- beginning with the British NMC label.

Also to be announced in the Spring issue will be the unveiling of our new Living Music Journal website -- with additional features and a back issue archive.

-- Carson Cooman

An Interview with Dr. Albert Hurwit: Composer & Radiologist

by Carson Cooman

American composer Albert Hurwit (b. 1931) graduated from Harvard University and Tufts Medical School. He trained and practiced as a radiologist for thirty years. He retired from his medical practice in 1986 in order to devote all of his energies to music composition.

His first large-scale work, Symphony No. 1, "Remembrance," has been recorded by the Bulgarian National Radio Orchestra under the direction of Michael Lankester and released on the MSR Classics label.

Hurwit's symphony is an extended, neo-romantic composition that traces, across its four movements (Origins, Separation, Remembrance, and Arrival) the journey of his ancestors across Europe & Russia, their separation, and eventual arrival in the United States.

For more information about Hurwit, or to find out more about the recording, visit his website at: www.alberthurwit.com

CC: *Why did you decide to start pursuing composition?*

AH: Music just started to bubble out of my soul. At night it would keep me up, and I'd have all these musical feelings going through me. It was a pragmatic decision. I was a physician at that time and had my own practice. When the last of my three children became self-sufficient, I realized that if I were going to "make a break", this was the time to do it. I was 55 years old and knew that there was a lot of learning ahead of me. If I put it off for too long, I was concerned that either intellectual status or time itself would preclude me going into composing seriously.

I started to compose part time while still working as a radiologist, but I was too compulsive. I felt I wasn't doing justice either to my medical practice or composition. So at that point, I thought I'd give a six month trial to being a composer exclusively. After six months, it became clear that, as much as I missed medicine (and I still do -- every day), composition was what was really more fulfilling for me.

CC: *Were you doing any writing during the years that you were practicing radiology?*

AH: Yes, in a way I've been composing since I was about 13 or 14. It was, however, in a very crude and Neanderthal manner. I took piano lessons for three years as a child but was a poor student. I had a pretty good ear and bluffed my way through as best I could. But to the present time, I really only read music probably as well as a second year piano student. I would often use a number or graphic system to reproduce what I had created musically. Then, I started to use stenographic tape recorders and other media to record the music.

CC: *Your first symphony is a very autobiographical work, tracing your own family's ethnic and life history. Did you feel it was particularly important to be able to document these things musically in this way?*

AH: Like with many things in my life, this came about by serendipity. I started to compose seriously in 1986 and at that point I really didn't know how to go about doing it. So I had no real thoughts then of a "symphony" or family history or such. I went to the head of composition at the Hartt School, Robert Carl, and he said that he thought I had some talent and should pursue studies -- but that it would take years of undergraduate and graduate training to learn the various musical skills. I felt I had been through that already as a physician, and that once was enough for one lifetime!

In those years, however, synthesizers and computer software programs started to become more common. So I bought the equipment, hooked it all up, and taught myself how to use it. Thus, I was able to record and print out my compositions and ideas in that form.

In 1997, I was driving in the car and the executive director of the Hartt Symphony Orchestra was on the radio saying that she wanted to get Hartford people more involved in the orchestra's activities. I saw that in their upcoming season they had cabaret singer Shirley Cook performing. I had written a cabaret piece, and so I called up the executive director and asked if she might want to see it. She told me to come by, and I played it for her. She thought it was terrific and wanted to immediately submit it to Shirley Cook.

While I was there, I said that I had also composed this five minute "Adagio" for orchestra. She said that the conductor, Michael Lankester, received hundreds of scores a year, and since I had no training or experience, it was unlikely that anything would come of that piece.

What happened was that Wally Harper, Cook's arranger, got the cabaret piece and thought it was too unconventional for her. But, a few weeks later, Michael Lankester called me and said he had heard the synthesized version of my Adagio and wanted to perform it with the orchestra!

On the basis of that short piece, Lankester and other professionals thought I should compose a longer work. I had some beginnings of symphonies and things I was working on. So I prolonged one of those into a first movement of a potential new piece. In 2000, Lankester was leaving the Hartford Symphony, and I asked him to come over to my house and review what I had done. I asked him to listen and be totally and completely honest with me.

After hearing it, he told me that I had this massive symphony in me that needed to come out. He offered to help me in realizing the piece.

CC: Now that your symphony is completed and recorded, do you have plans or projects for other compositions?

AH: There are several and that's probably the problem. If I had only one, I'd be going full force on that, but I keep fiddling around with different things. I keep thinking about everything from another symphony to setting the poem "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allen Poe. That is probably what I'll do next since I've done most of it already for piano and tenor.

I do have more symphonic music, but I don't plan try another symphony of quite that length (59 minutes), because it's such an impractical thing to write such a huge piece and then get it performed or recorded.

CC: Do you have other compositions from before the symphony?

AH: Yes, I have hours and hours of music on my computer. Some are completed pieces and some are possibilities or ideas for things -- ranging from a few seconds to 10 or 15 minutes.

CC: Have there been any influences in your musical work from your work in medicine? AH: I'd say it's emotional. There is nothing really of a technical nature that inspired me.

But certainly, as with any physician, I have many "inspirational" stories of all kinds: of faith and trust and angst and horror. These stores are a part of me and, at some level, are also a part of the music.

Perhaps the only specific connection is that at times a physician has to put on the blinders and focus all energies on the critical task at hand. When I compose I also do that but also allow my subjective feelings become the primary part of the inspirational process.