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THE SHIMER EXPERIENCE IN REVIEW

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WEDNESDAY, APRIL 25, 2012

Symposium interview with Laurie Spiegel

The following is the full text of an interview with Shimer alum and visionary electronic composer Laurie Spiegel ('67), conducted by Shimer professor Barbara Stone on November 23, 2003. Spiegel came to Shimer via [the college's early entrance program](#), and later further broadened her horizons through the [Oxford study abroad program](#).

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This interview was published in the [Symposium](#) in 2004, but until now only a partial version has been available online. Republished by the kind permission of Laurie Spiegel and Shimer College.

B (Barbara): How far back does your composing and music go?

L (Laurie): My grandmother from Lithuania played mandolin and she gave me one when I was about 9. I had a plastic ukulele when I was little, but I wasn't one of those kids who studied music all through childhood. I just messed around with instruments. I improvised and made things up. I just always loved music. My sister and I had about 6 piano lessons, but our father had migraine headaches and couldn't bear to hear kids practicing and playing wrong notes. It just wasn't feasible in our house. I saved up from odd jobs and got myself a guitar when I was fourteen and then a banjo.

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When it was time to think about college, everyone in high school asked "What do you want to do when you grow up?" When I said "Music. I love music best." they all said "No. Too late for that. You haven't studied it. That's only for people who started much younger." So I accepted I'd just be an amateur who loved music very much but would be either an academic intellectual or a writer.

While at Shimer, I began trying to teach myself enough notation to be able to write down bits of music I'd made up so I wouldn't forget them. In England, after the [Shimer-in-Oxford program](#) in '66-7, I decided to stay an extra year and took private lessons in theory, counterpoint, composition and classical

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guitar. I ended up playing all the plucked instruments. I loved to play music at Shimer, as people did then and I hope still do now.

At one point when I was trying to write down some music I had made up in order not to forget it, one of the three Oxford students sharing that house said, "You know, they call that 'composing'." I'd never have been so presumptuous as to think I was actually composing, but by definition apparently I was. I talked to the guitarist and composer Jack (John. W.) Duarte in London and he took me on as a student. He told me, "Well, you know, composing is not a mystery. It's something that you practice like you practice guitar and if you want to learn to compose music, you should practice writing something down every day. It doesn't matter if you throw it away..."

B: How do you compose music? Do you hear it first? Do you write it?

S: I go back and forth. In music, they often say that there are two approaches, Stravinsky and Schoenberg. Schoenberg would sit there in a quiet room without an instrument, without a piano, and from his mind, his preconceptions, his imagination and his intellect, he would write out a piece in silence and then hear it played only much later. Stravinsky, on the other hand, would sit down at the piano, start to play something, hit a wrong note, get fascinated by the direction the wrong note was leading and basically just work with the sounds. I've done both but I tend toward the latter. I pick up an instrument or start messing around with electronic sounds. I'm very much an improviser and always have been. I also do a lot of preparatory work, sometimes writing an entire computer program so that I can interact live, in real time, with the sound and see where it leads me. Sometimes I do something completely preconceived like realizing Kepler's "Harmony of the Planets" or translating a genetic sequence into music, but predominantly I'm an improviser. I almost never pick up any instrument, whether I've played it before or not, without finding some sound in it that leads me to more sound and then I follow it where it goes. It's this bizarre combination of active and passive in which people say that they feel as though some spirit has possessed them and they are just a vehicle for the work to come through, although it actually is just some unknown cognitive process. Jack Duarte in London described composition as "improvising slowed down with a chance to edit out the bad parts." I never like to do the same thing twice. I'm not one who finds a successful formula and then follows it. I'm all over the map.

B: What do you mean by that? If somebody puts Mozart on, chances are it will be recognized as Mozart, or someone from the same era. I think of that as similar to a signature or personal style.

S: People have told me that I have a certain personal style but I don't see it

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Symposium interview

myself. I might write something that's a Renaissance piece in the style of Dowland or some motets in species counterpoint or I might use electronic sounds that are almost unpitched, just textures and densities, but people say it all sounds like me anyway. What we consider recognizable style might be described in terms of Shannon's information theory (which I like a lot), such as the rate at which you make changes, the rate at which new information is introduced, the curves in variation density leading up to climaxes, how the timbre and the loudness and the pitch change in relation to each other, all on a sensory and cognitive processing level. If you hear Bach you can always recognize Bach. It has something to do with the rates of change, the degree of parallel processing, and of course he has an incredible ability to be completely active on the emotional, intellectual, sensual and symbolic-associative levels all at once. Bach is one of my idols.

B: Do you use a musical score in the same way as Bach?

S: He was a traditionalist in his own time. One problem I had more than many musicians was that because I started late and lacked traditional musical skills, the rate at which I could write things down did not keep up with the rate at which things evolved in my imagination. This is a major problem for temporal media like music or video or film or any art that unfolds over time. It's bad enough writing words as your mind gets ahead of what you're writing. But in music you may have many parallel streams of information getting ahead of how fast you can write. One thing that computers allow and part of why I got involved with them is that they let you work directly with sounds rather than just a symbolic notation for them. I started using computers to make music in 1973, before you could interact in real time with digitally synthesized sounds. Computers were too slow back then. This was considerably before the Apple II generation of computers.

I figured I'd try to automate anything I could about my own decision-making processes while composing to be freer to focus on the aspects of the process that could not be automated. For example, you can code an algorithm (a logical process) that describes how to get roughly an equal stereo balance between two audio channels. You can always go back and edit the result later, but you've delegated stereo balancing. So you can now focus on phrasing and pitches and other stuff that you can't automate as easily. Eventually I had the computer basically taking care of all of the notes, right up through four-part harmony. We began calling such computer programs "intelligent instruments", and my Mac program "Music Mouse" is an example.

I started working with computers at Bell Labs in the early 70s because I felt I needed to know more and was lucky enough to work in the lab of Max Mathews, the Director of Acoustic Research for Bell Telephone Labs. He's a

with Laurie Spiegel

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Adrian Nelson
(2011)

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wonderful and brilliant man. He characterized intelligent instruments as those with better than a one to one ratio between the performance information you put in and the sonic information that comes out. You do that by picking relatively small numbers of relatively powerful variables to control musical sound. In contrast, traditional composing involves decisions about zillions of weak variables: this note is the pitch A, the next C, the next one E. Instead, you might just stipulate that the next twenty notes will have pitches from an A minor chord and I don't care what order they are in. So now I have a cloud of music that covers the next twenty notes with this harmony and I can focus on a melody or rhythm or timbre...

B: What is the relationship between a traditional written score and the music on one of your CDs?

S: It's like the difference between a play and a novel. A play is a set of instructions that are meant to be realized, performed, by a group of people to be properly experienced. But a novel needs only your private mind and you imagine the voices, the dialogue and everything else. In the old days, before humans could record sound, the only way to record music was by writing down the set of instructions for others to play it, to turn it into sound. Now you can just record the sound itself for anyone to play back. The reason I still write music on paper is because of how wonderful it feels to play music yourself. I prefer to write pieces that are for one player at home, rather than concert virtuoso pieces for performance in front of an audience. Even though concerts are wonderful experiences, the big deal for me is that a lone individual can play music, whether on a CD player or a guitar, just for the experience of playing and hearing it. I love to just sit down and read scores on an instrument. I can spend hours and hours doing this when I can find the time.

I got into technology in part because I fell madly in love with it, but also it let me use cleverness and my intellect to make up for my lack of early classical training. It let me get to a point where I could put out recorded music and get jobs doing soundtracks within a relatively short amount of time. Initially I learned composing by writing music down on paper that I never got to hear. I began learning much faster when I could turn my pieces into sound using technology because of the immediate auditory feedback.

Another reason I went into electronic music was that I'd leaf through my records, looking for the thing I wanted to hear and it wouldn't be there. So I had to make it myself. I've always been a do-it-yourselfer, and some kinds of music were just easier to make one than to find. It's like going in the kitchen and cooking something rather than going to a restaurant. I really fell in love with sounds. Sounds are amazing.

Getting back to composing, there's another way to look at it, another one of these wonderful little dichotomies: additive versus subtractive. Traditional music is made by additive processes. You write a note, then another, and another, and then you put another voice against it. You add lots of little, tiny components that hopefully form into the gestalt of a large experience. Having worked with analog synthesizers before I went to computers, I tend more toward subtractive processes. I'll program a big, wild, full, rich texture with many different levels and then sculpt it down with filters and attenuators in order to be able to let it build up as a composition over time by bringing things back in and opening up the various audible apertures. It's more like a sculptor at work with a large block of marble finding the Michelangelo sculpture that's inside.

B: How has the technology changed since your work at Bell Labs?

S: Initially, vast new conceptual and acoustic vistas were opened by the new technology. Then, as it became more commercialized and product oriented, it became more and more conventional. Now it's ordinary for everybody to use computers to simulate a piece of paper, a tape recorder or a variety of additive processing models. Those models have been moved forward to some degree, hybridized with new techniques, but in general things have reverted to older methods. When I started doing this it was almost inevitable that just about everything would go wrong because everybody was doing everything for the first time. There were no software engineers making tools for artists. Artists were trying to learn the technology to make the tools they needed in order to realize visions that they had no way to create. When I began, the whole purpose of new tools was to work in new ways with new materials, not just labor saving or speed for old ways.

One of my worst periods creatively was after I'd been working at Bell Labs for seven years when they replaced the computers I'd been using with new ones not capable of the same things. Instead of having one computer all to yourself during your scheduled time on it so you could do real time audio, the new time-sharing system swapped itself back and forth between simultaneous users. All of the software I had written was obsolete and I was without tools. After a period of mostly writing unheard notes on paper again, I got an Apple II and I got into the personal computer revolution, a wonderful time. This period in the late 70s was exciting and fun, and involved a lot of idea sharing, but there was a period there where I just didn't have the tools I needed.

B: Looking around your studio, there's lots of electronic equipment but I'm struck by the number of stringed instruments.

S: I love stringed instruments. There's nothing like picking up an instrument

and touching it and having it respond with sound. I play just about every day, at least one or two different instruments. I really love them. It's like vitamins. But there was a major revolution that I was part of, bringing new technology to music. Initially there was a lot of resistance to electronic technology in music. Back then, people said computers would completely dehumanize music. They had the science fiction image of computers from the fifties and early sixties, when computers had the connotation of belonging only to the government, and the military and being an oppressive force. (This was before personal computers.) Now this revolution is accomplished, and instead of having to explain why you are using electronic technology to do any kind of creative art, you would have to explain why you're not. The default now is that everyone uses computers in all the arts and in a way that frees me to go back to playing my guitar and banjo.

B: Can you say something about how you came to Shimer?

S: Probably one of the best things that ever happened to me was finding a little article in the Chicago Tribune that mentioned that you could go to Shimer [without finishing high school](#). This was at a point when I was desperate to get away from home. I discovered that Shimer was a place where people were really into ideas and cared about things, not just the superficial things that people were into in high school. Back in the early, early sixties, things were very up-tight and girls were expected to be into makeup and clothes and to want to date varsity football players, get married and live happily ever after. In contrast, I was passionately into the arts and politics and philosophy and literature and read just all the time and was inventing and making things up and drawing and writing and playing guitar. I didn't fit in at my large public high school, so Shimer was great for me. It was the first time I felt that there was a place for me in the world, where I actually kind of belonged.

B: Did you play music at Shimer?

S: I played guitar and banjo a lot.

B: Did you play with others?

S: Not often. I always loved jamming with others but I seem constitutionally incapable of playing anything the same way twice. The improviser in me always wants to take off and run in my own direction. I almost never have the discipline to memorize a piece of music. I like to just read through a score then go on to read the next one or to improvise.

B: A totally different approach than preparation for a concert?

S: Yeah, a completely different mindset. I never wanted to rehearse. I'd always want to change a line or harmony or take off on some riff instead of perfecting something already decided, but I love playing with other people and I still do once in a while.

B: Was there a time when you did a lot of performances?

S: In the early seventies, when I first began officially studying music and got a lute. I ended up being an onstage lutenist for Jacobean revenge tragedies and Elizabethan plays. I even played classic guitar once in Alice Tully Hall. I also did lots of little gallery concerts in the "downtown" experimental music scene. But I always felt extremely nervous. I could never sleep the night before a concert. Composing was just much more "me" than performing. It was private.

B: You're originally from Chicago. How did you get to New York?

S: New York was as close to being half-way between Chicago and England as I could get without drowning in the Atlantic. Also, New York is just about the world's information capital, and the arts are informational media. I really like being in a place where, if I'm doing an all-nighter, I can look out the window and there are all these other lights on and I know that lots of other people are awake too. When I got here from Oxford, the only jobs I could get were about "How fast can you type?" I thought, "This is ridiculous. Why don't I just give music a one year real try?" I did and by the end of the year, I had a job teaching music at a community college, was doing little soundtrack jobs and performing around the city. I was actually earning a living doing music. It was kind of amazing.

Under my first New York apartment (for about forty six dollars a month - in the Lower East Side before it was the "East Village"), a group used to rehearse jazz in the basement. One of them told me that anyone could take courses at Julliard in their open extension division, and if you did well, they had to let you into the regular division classes. I went and started acing ear training and all that stuff because I already had a pretty good ear and I was taking four-part dictation by my second semester. Eventually I got an MA in Composition. This was still pretty rare for women back then.

What this should show you is never to let anybody tell you that you can't do something you want to do. People can only tell you what's been done before but they can't tell you what's possible because what's possible includes the entire scope of everything that hasn't been done before. You can always be the exception. If you want to do something, go for it. Don't give up before you even start. Otherwise I would not have gone into music, which I love and have done all my adult life. Nonetheless, I still don't feel entirely comfortable saying "I

am a composer" because it's got all of these horrible 19th century dead white men connotations. But in fact that's what I've done.

B: I know you've kept up with some Shimer people. Did you get to know Dan Sandin while you were a student?

S: Oh yeah, Dan and I were buddies at Shimer. At that point he was studying chemistry and I was doing social sciences. We never dreamed that he would go into video synthesis and I would compose electronic music. We've done a number of collaborations and will continue doing them. He's working on a new film right now and I'm planning to do the soundtrack. I did some sounds for a virtual reality environment that he did recently. Dan is wonderful. For anyone at Shimer reading this interview, don't worry too much about what you're going to do after Shimer. It'll happen, and it may not be anything you could predict because it may not be something that has been done before.

I would've loved to have seen him and others at the Reunion, but I was sick and under pressure with various projects. There's a lot of pressure. I mean, the creative life is like never having left school. You have to be very self-disciplined. There are always deadlines, long projects with many stages that you have to stay on top of. It's like having never-ending term papers to get done on time.

B: Is the pressure due to all the imaginative ideas, or is it supporting yourself and outside pressures?

S: Great question. There is certainly always internal pressure from new ideas and imagination, and the need to resist it in order to actually complete the works that seem most worth realizing. There is also a lot of outside pressure. Once you become known for something that's wanted, the world keeps coming back to you for more stuff like the stuff you've done in the past despite how much you want to go on and explore new things. You need to be better at saying "No" than I am. The works you've put out already are like perpetual children. They need follow-up care. There are always people coming to you wanting to do something for works created years ago. They need documentation and information, liner notes, program notes, pictures... They need you to listen to them play a score to be sure they're playing it the way you intended. There are often gigantic time lags between composing and performance or recording. Someone visited last week who plans to do my harpsichord piece on a CD, so I had to do a whole bunch of work on and about a piece that I hadn't thought about in a dozen years. This kind of thing obviously holds back new works. In fields that make more money, like my upstairs neighbor who is a very successful sculptor, or people whose music is more commercial than mine, you may be able to hire people to take care of a

lot of this stuff, and in the old days publishers would take care of such work for composers. But at this point, and especially for experimental music, you have to take care of everything yourself. Trying to find the time for the creative work is always a problem. It's a toss up between finishing touches for old works versus going with new ideas. This is a perpetual conflict for me, and then of course life takes a lot of time.

B: One often talks about artistic movements or schools -the op artists, the pop artists and the abstract expressionists - is there a movement that you consider yourself a part of or is it something you even think about?

S: I don't really think that way. I have friends who are composers and artists of all kinds. There was a period in the 70s when I was often grouped with the minimalists, though I didn't really consider myself one. Steve Reich and Terry Riley and many others are people I knew and was inspired by, and some of us still try to keep each other inspired. Terry Riley was often considered to have initially inspired both Phil Glass and Steve Reich, and Terry also got me my first CD contract. And then of course [John Fahey](#), who was a friend, was a towering figure of the whole acoustic instrument revival and for what's now called "world music". It's really hard to say but today it's much more a case of individuals with whom I have musical or intellectual things in common than any kind of artistic movement. Earlier, in the 60s and 70s composed music was dominated by very bleak, dry, intellectual aesthetics like serialism, and we were all forced to write atonal music in music school. I was part of the "movement" to bring back tonality, motor rhythm, sensuality, and a sense of flow to music. It was a battle, as was bringing the use of computers into music and art. I have many colleagues who are allies and good friends from the era when there were just a handful of us trying to do each of these things and to bring other changes into being. But at this point there isn't anything that I'm part of other than a world full of many people like me who love music of many kinds and all the arts and sciences and ideas too, and who care about people, animals, the world.



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