



Composer Arlene Sierra: Process, Strategy, Evolution

Feature Article by [Robert Schulslaper](#)

If an ever-expanding number of commissions coupled with worldwide performances by prominent orchestras, instrumental groups, and soloists are any indication, Arlene Sierra is a rising star in the world of contemporary music. Her youthful appearance, engaging personality, and easy laugh virtually guaranteed that a pleasant conversation would follow as we began to discuss her career. As she is fascinated by natural phenomena, scientifically aware, international in outlook, and has a background in dance that's given her an appreciation of the interaction of music and movement, we could only touch on her myriad interests. Nonetheless, there's plenty of food for thought in even her casual remarks. We spoke in Greenwich Village in May, just before the presentation by New York City Opera Vox of her work in progress, *Faustine*.

Q: Have you always wanted to be a composer?

A: I started on piano at age five; I improvised a lot. Then I got into synthesizers and electronics in high school, which in retrospect I think was a way of reaching toward composition.

Q: Were you in a rock band?

A: Sure! What American kid doesn't play in a band? Absolutely. It's not something I put in my CV because it's such a typical experience, totally unremarkable for younger composers and older ones, too. It's not something that figures in my composition; I had a firm grounding in classical music because my parents were huge classical music lovers.

Q: Did they play?

A: No, I'm the only musician in the family. But I heard a lot of classical music throughout my childhood because my parents were fascinated with it. Of course like any other kid, I heard tons of popular music, too. Lots of music, all the time—that was the thing.

Q: It's become quite common to read about classical composers who consider rock and roll to have been a formative influence.

A: Right. For me, that's not so interesting [laughs]. But that's one of those polemical points that come up between composers. For example, some composers who are into rock seem convinced that those of us who don't embrace its influence somehow don't know about popular music; in the vast majority of cases that's just not true. You can know the stuff without

feeling compelled to imitate it. After all, it's nothing new.

Q: And there's more to popular music than rock.

A: Yes. I really like Latin music and all kinds of dance music, funk, disco, club music ... what those things have in common is, well, they're not rock and roll. The popular music that I gravitated toward, I realize now, tended to have a lot of density, big chords in brass and strings, strong rhythms, polyrhythms. The orchestral music I loved as a kid had those elements, too. Three little chords on a guitar to accompany a less-than-great voice—it never really held my attention. I wanted more going on.

Q: It seems you're attracted to large forms and big sounds. You're not the sort of composer who would be inclined to write a 10-minute solo for recorder.

A: Hmmm. Well, I have written an eight-minute flute piece. Not easy!

Q: Was that your idea or was it a commission?

A: My flute solo, *Art of Lightness*, was commissioned by a wonderful soloist, Lisa Nelsen. But that's the thing ... talking about what I gravitated toward when growing up is a different thing from professional life in composition. I mean, my teenaged self would not have put up with a solo flute piece. But to a composer it's a really interesting problem to solve; how can I do what I do with just that one line, one instrument? And I've seen and worked with some incredible flute players; the performer you're writing for makes all the difference.

Q: When did you actually start to write?

A: At Oberlin

Q: Were you enrolled in the conservatory?

A: I started at Oberlin College as a history major but I chose it because having the conservatory nearby would enable me to stick with piano lessons. I auditioned and got a good teacher, and I played piano fairly seriously, but I also knew I didn't want to be a concert pianist. To be a professional performer is like being an Olympic athlete—I never could practice as much as I was supposed to, and was too interested in ideas, reading, and learning languages.

Q: Which languages were you learning?

A: I studied Chinese for a couple of years and lived in the Spanish-language dorm for a year to keep up with my second language at the same time. Later on I studied French and German, which helped a lot with more advanced music studies and travel. But at Oberlin, my history major turned into an East Asian studies major and I read Chinese history, art history, and philosophy.

All the time I knew I wanted to do more in music, I just wasn't sure how to do it. Until I got to college, I was one of those classical musicians who thought all composers were dead; I didn't know about contemporary music at all. My repertoire had gotten about as far as Bartók and Stravinsky. When I got to Oberlin, I saw that they had a major in electronic music and because I made a start with synthesizers with my little high school bands, that was kind of a way in. The assignments in electronic music class were basically, "Figure out how to use this machine and

then make a piece!” So it was really fun, a wonderful beginning.

Q: What instruments did you use?

A: Oh, everything, from the old Moog, a huge wall of a machine, to some of the first digital sampling machines that were out in the early '90s. So materials were very mixed, analog with digital, reel-to-reel tape as well as sampling. Some of the work we did was programming computers to do algorithmic composition, and some of it was just figuring out how to get sounds out of these old boxes with little ...

Q: Patch cords?

A: Yes! It was a way to create music without worrying about notation and theory. And because I'd always trained as a pianist I didn't really have the written skills yet, which bothered me a lot; I wished I'd had that training earlier.

Q: But it's probably second nature to you now.

A: Well, I had to work very hard. I mean, as part of my electronic music degree I did get the theory training, but I didn't start notating compositions until my last year or two of college.

Q: Without an instructor?

A: Mostly. I mean, Michael Daugherty was very supportive (and has remained so for many years), but it was more at a distance since I couldn't take composition lessons as an electronic music major at that point.

Q: How did you meet him?

A: He was teaching at Oberlin, the youngest composer working there. His pieces were so different from what the other composition professors were doing; in those years he was writing pieces for the London Sinfonietta like Snap! and Blue Like an Orange.

Q: Obviously you eventually started to listen to contemporary music.

A: Yeah. I started hearing important 20th-century rep with the Oberlin Contemporary Ensemble, which was amazing—Ligeti, Webern, Lutosławski, etc.— as well as pieces by the composition students. Of course, there were student pieces that were really bad [laughs], but it got me thinking—if all these guys can do this ...

Q: I can do it too.

A: Absolutely. Because it was so intimidating at first to realize these people were actually notating music for other people to play. I was amazed to meet students my own age who seemed to take for granted that they were actually composers. When I heard what they were writing and found that some of it wasn't very good, I thought, if they can do this and have things performed, I can try to do it better. It was a very positive realization. Michael seemed the most approachable of the teachers, someone whose music was alive and out in the real world, too.

Q: Did you just walk up to him and say, “I want to be a composer”?

A: Yeah! Basically. I was about 20, doing electronics and wrapping up the East Asian studies degree, and at that time at the conservatory, an electronic music degree meant no composition lessons because the two departments were very divided. So I had to get advice outside of classes and do the work on my own. In retrospect, a good preparation for professional life!

Q: You studied composition independently.

A: Exactly. I said to Michael, “I want to study composition; how should I start?” And he said, “Apply to Aspen this summer, write pieces for different instrumentations, and see how you do.” I did that, showed him some work a few months later, and he said, “Why not apply to Yale for a master’s?” Conrad Cummings, a Yale composer teaching in the electronic music department, was also very encouraging. So that’s pretty much how it happened.

Q: Did Daugherty teach at Aspen?

A: No, but his former teacher, Jacob Druckman, taught there, as did Bernard Rands and George Tsontakis.

Q: Michael thought you could get in there even though you hadn’t written a lot of music?

A: Well, I had already produced a whole stack of electronic pieces, it’s just that very little was notated. I studied with George Tsontakis that first summer at Aspen and wrote a very chromatic piano piece that was quite virtuosic, far beyond my abilities as a pianist. Then I spent my last year of college writing more non-electronic pieces and not getting any credit for them [laughs]. Just writing, composing; I worked like a lunatic, wrote a lot of music and did a lot of things wrong, but it was amazing to get all the players together to perform the work on my senior recital. The next summer I got a fellowship at Aspen and worked with Druckman and Rands on the advanced course. By that point I had just gotten into Yale; it was a dream come true.

Q: With whom did you study at Yale?

A: Jacob Druckman and Martin Bresnick. So, yeah, the master’s was a hugely important experience, because it was my first time to concentrate on composition without any Chinese classes and electronic music projects. I’d only written three or four pieces with notation by then, so I was thrown in at the deep end and had to learn to swim. By then I knew it was what I wanted to do. It was very inspiring, but hard work.

Q: Of course it’s hard, unless you’re Bach or Mozart. That’s one reason I don’t compose. I love to improvise, but composition’s another story. Plus, I haven’t done enough to be comfortable with notation.

A: See, now I love notation. There’s a very intimate relationship between improvisation and composition, but what the notation does is, it makes the improvisation grow into something much bigger. You can plan, you can build, it’s architecture, but it can have rigor and spontaneity all at the same time. And yet, while I start with structured things, I like to leave room for what Stravinsky describes as “the finger slip” at the keyboard, where something that might seem wrong actually turns out to be right for the piece. That’s why I think of composing without a safety net, leaving room to make mistakes and wrong turns—and it can be risky, but it’s more interesting than having too much worked out before you begin.

Q: Tell me about your opera, Faustine. From the title I assumed it’s a retelling of the Faust

story, only with a female protagonist.

A: It's several things; it's the idea of modernizing the Faust story and putting it in the present day, getting rid of the unconvincing Christian morality side of it and focusing on the very human desire to be young just for vanity and power. It's also about intergenerational strife between the '50s ideal of womanhood and '70s feminism, and the subsequent confusions since then.

Q: What gave you the idea to write it?

A: It's based on a novella that I found in a used bookstore in London and it's by a British author, Emma Tennant. She's reinterpreted all kinds of fairy tales, often with a feminist slant. She's a well-known writer who has written fiction and also nonfiction, including a book about Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath called *Burnt Diaries*. Tennant's *Faustine* is an old woman who falls in love with her daughter's lover, and she makes a deal with the devil to steal him away. It has a mythic quality to it, but this man who is desired by both women is like a Ted Hughes. He's intellectual and sensitive, but powerfully masculine, sort of a smart woman's ideal. It was fun telling baritone Ian Greenlaw at City Opera that he had to be all that [laughs]. He was a little intimidated, but I think he just about managed it!

Q: Did he know who Ted Hughes was?

A: Oh, yes, of course, and actually the conductor I'm working with, Ryan McAdams, knows Hughes's poetry and a lot of background to the story too; he's completely into it. So the Vox rehearsals have been going well and the cast is so committed to the work. I heard them run *Faustine* for the first time with piano two days ago. They'll be performing the first four scenes with orchestra, around 25 minutes of music, as part of City Opera's weekend festival of new works in progress.

Q: How long is the whole thing?

A: The opera is projected to be about 70 minutes. It'll be a one-act grand opera, possibly to be programmed with *L'Heure espagnole* or *Gianni Schicchi*.

Q: Is opera special to you?

A: Definitely. I grew up on opera. As I mentioned, my parents were serious about classical music. I heard Met broadcasts every weekend of my life growing up. They would put the radio on the intercom so opera was blasted all over our house, and I couldn't go anywhere and not hear it. Which would drive me a little crazy, because I'd want to play piano and I'd have to listen to opera! But, yeah, I heard all the standard stuff and also went to opera productions at the Met and City Opera a lot as a kid. But because it's a genre I know, I haven't been in a rush to write an opera, actually. I've needed time to write a lot of other music, to feel ready now and actually do it. It's like climbing a mountain. In the same way, it took me a while to deal with the string quartet, and I just wrote my first quartet to commission last year. The repertoire is so monumental; it's a lot to think about, so I'm glad I didn't rush it.

Q: Since I'm not a composer, I'm always impressed that someone can write four independent parts that work so well together.

A: Well, that part's fun for me, I have to admit. I mean, when it becomes problem-solving

that's what I do, and I love it. It's a challenge. It's daunting in all the old genres, to find something new to say, to confront that form, whether it's the pure string quartet or the grand opera, and try to make a statement that's my own.

Q: Do the City Opera singers like singing your parts?

A: Yes, I think so, they've said such nice things! They sound really secure with the material now, and it's getting more and more expressive as we work, which is a real joy.

Q: They feel it's well written for the voice?

A: They've said so, which means a lot to me since I'm not a singer. I want my music to be challenging and have rigor and interest, but I don't set out to make things difficult for singers and players for the sake of it. I want it to come naturally to them so that they can perform it completely convincingly.

Q. That makes sense.

A: Well, there's a whole school of composers who ...

Q: Try to make it as hard as possible?

A: Absolutely, yes!

Q. Sing this, if you dare!

A: Yeah! I could send you a list. These composers live on the tension of what that difficulty produces. They like the risk of the performance. It's an interesting approach, if not exactly ideal for an opera. And honestly, I'd say performances always have an element of risk even if the piece isn't all that difficult.

Q: In a related way, I've had the experience of playing something that seemed very difficult at first and as I got used to it, it became substantially easier; you start to see other possibilities in your playing.

A: Yeah, and that's why I think if a composer is constantly aiming to please and making things super easy, they're giving performers (and listeners) less to engage with. Most musicians like a challenge, especially if you're lucky enough to work with fantastic players, which has been a real privilege for me. As prodigious as their abilities are, as in awe of them as I am, I still want to push them and make them go further—to give them something to sink their teeth into.

Q: Do you know Beethoven's supposed remark to an anxious violinist: "Do you think I care about your wretched fiddle when the spirit takes hold of me?"

A: [Laughs] Part of that's true, too. I mean, for a composer, of course the idea of the piece has to be paramount. For me, what players can do helps to inspire the idea. When I know whom I'm writing for and what they can do, it's really inspiring. Knowing I'd be writing these scenes for the New York City Opera, I was excited about the quality of singers and the quality of orchestra I was going to be working with. And I think it's important to do them justice, too, not to write something they've essentially already heard or sung somewhere else.

Q: Is the opera written in more or less the same style as your orchestral music?

A: Well, I think my music sounds like me ... I hope so!

Q: Sometimes composers write in different styles depending on the requirements of a piece, or out of a desire not to repeat themselves.

A: Well, style is a loaded issue, sure. But it's not so interesting, just putting on a different outfit for different occasions, at least to me. To me, the most interesting thing a composer can do is develop an individual voice. I certainly wouldn't want to sound like someone else or to abandon things that I've developed over a long time just because I'm writing an opera. It's my job to make the opera singable and doable in my style, in my compositional voice. That's a challenge worth taking on.

Q: If I can dwell on my previous remark a bit longer, think of Stravinsky, for example, who wrote in many different styles, yet retains a distinctive voice.

A: Well, his life was a long one and he had such big, sharp breaks: where he was living, what communities he was working in, and having to adapt. He feared falling behind the times and worked hard to stay relevant to the changing fashions of contemporary music. And yes, one of the things that makes Stravinsky a great composer is that you can still tell it's him. But he certainly has his very clear modes. His Russian style, his neoclassical style, his serial style, they're very different. And then there are little sub-styles in between the cracks. It must have been hard for artists who lived through the 20th century with those radical shifts and two world wars. I mean, we're living in interesting times now, too, of course, but back then most composers adhered to very clear-cut aesthetic camps, like political parties, and there were usually only two dominant ones at any given time. You know, the old battle, the neoclassicists versus the serialists. Since the decline of the serial project, for many composers it's more about finding an individual voice. And fortunately too, now that the field is much more open, you get composers of every background who are finding their own ways to write for great performers.

Q: You lived and worked in Berlin for two years as a grad student. Did you feel pressure to conform to any particular doctrine?

A: Of course I did, yes, and when I studied in France for a few months, too. But that was the case when I was a student in the U.S. as well; really, no one has a monopoly on these things.

Q: Were you criticized for writing as you did?

A: Well, I certainly had to defend myself. It was more like debating, learning how to make my case. But I do think with what remains of aesthetic political parties now, each one can be just as dogmatic as the next. I mean, some proponents of eclecticism can be just as dogmatic and closed-minded as certain academic serialists have been.

Q: I guess you can't get away from human nature.

A: No, I don't think you can. When I was coming up, the push to eclecticism was pretty oppressive at times. The U.S. scene can be just as polemical as anywhere else, more so in certain ways. The New York uptown/downtown opposition was a big deal when I was studying, and some still aren't really over it.

Q: Why can't they leave people alone? Just let them sit in their little rooms and write whatever they want.

A: Noooo! To some it's really either/ or: You are either eclectic or you are an old-school modernist. To me that is such a limited way of thinking. What's actually happened in the last few decades, if you listen to work from different countries, is that there's been this great splintering. Composers can pick and choose from a lot of approaches. For me, an international perspective reveals the old dichotomies as completely untenable. Some colleagues seem to be reacting against academic serialism even now, not realizing it's been over in Europe for decades. So for me, having lived in a few different countries and talked to colleagues who compose in all kinds of ways, I'm not so worried about it.

Q: That's good.

A: But when I'm back home in the States, some still seem to be caught in this argument from another time and I just want to tell them, "It's really OK, you can calm down—things have moved on!" But I guess I'm fortunate, because I get to hear such a great variety of contemporary music in performance.

Q: How would you characterize your music?

A: Well, I try to put myself outside of the old arguments. I hope the music is interesting ...

Q: That's it?

A: It's hard to describe one's own work. I'd rather have listeners make up their own minds.

Q: Well, for starters, the program notes to one of your works claims that Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection is an influence. Would that be apparent from hearing the music?

A: That's up to the individual; it's certainly not required. There's a huge difference between a musical process and a musical program. What I'm composing with is process, not story. For me, extramusical concepts are a way to determine what the music does structurally. If people are open to that, it's great because it offers a way of listening analytically without having to know technical things about how music is put together. But the music is music whether you know how it works or not.

I've come across stodgy types who seem to think a piece must have an abstract title (like "Sonata," or "Piece for Seven Instruments") in order to have rigor, and they're all too ready to mistake a process piece for some outdated notion of programmatic music. But really, that's like saying Varese's *Ionisation* must be program music because the process of ionization is somehow a story—it's totally absurd. Maybe they make this mistake from ignorance of 20th-century developments. Perhaps it isn't easy to recognize the distinctions if you can't get past Berlioz.

In my work, it's a process; what instruments do, what the form does, is determined by concepts that have both musical and nonmusical possibilities. So if you have an interest in the background concepts, perhaps you'll be more attuned to the structure and organization, as well as the drama, of what's going on.

For example, in my piece for the New York Philharmonic, *Game of Attrition*, the structure is

built on instruments in the same register competing for musical space. If you hear two violins, or a violin versus a trumpet, they're both soprano instruments and you're going to hear instruments in the same range vying for the foreground. While I wouldn't expect somebody who has no idea to suddenly hear this music and think, "Oh, that must be Darwinism!" in terms of a sound world, if you're thinking about territory in music, you can think about tessitura and instrumental capabilities, and you can think about what's happening in the soprano register as being competitive. The piece ends with the strings versus the brass, chords in the strings that are trying to drown out chords in the brass. It's an interesting sonority, with certain tricky balance issues, as in ...

Q: Good luck!

A: Well, yeah—exactly! I had fun writing the ending, because the only way that the strings can beat the brass is by sustaining, because of the simple fact that they don't have to use breath to produce a tone. Running out of air is the Achilles' heel for wind instruments. In the final flourish of *Game of Attrition*, there's a big held chord where the strings really overcome the brass, because the brass players naturally run out of air. It's that kind of situation where a program note can be useful: It can tip you off to what's happening, how the piece works, how the instruments work.

Q: You've written a piano concerto, *Art of War* (after writings of Sun Tzu), which was premiered by pianist Huw Watkins and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales in 2010. How does Sun's book of strategy actually shape the piece?

A: My interest in strategy applied to composition arose initially as a response to 9/11 and the resulting campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. It seemed like there had to be some smarter thinking out there concerning warfare, even if it was sorely lacking in the U.S. and U.K. administrations. Reading Sun Tzu's 2000-year-old maxims about large countries waging war against guerilla fighters and the issues of borders, I felt that I'd found a rich source for compositional planning that was also relevant to the times. Plus it was rewarding to employ this fascinating literature for an artistic purpose (the business world has co-opted Sun Tzu in recent years, kind of a shame). My strategy pieces started obliquely with *Ballistae* and *Truel* (based on different but related sources) and grew into an *Art of War* series including *Cicada Shell* and *Surrounded Ground*, as well as the Piano Concerto. So, with the concerto, I was interested in creating a piece where the soloist could be powerful without being heroic, and could subvert textures in order to dominate them. Much of Sun Tzu's writing is about non-aggression and subtle attacks, and this helped to shape my thinking about musical materials and transitions. The concerto starts with an orchestral texture in which the piano is just playing one note that's displaced all around the keyboard. The piano part starts effortlessly with that one note, but the music that comes out of it will eventually break through the orchestra's wall of sound by sheer persistence.

Setting up these kinds of schemes can reveal new possibilities in the sonic relationships of instruments and players, and for me it creates interesting formal results. I'm writing for classical performers, sure, but living in these splintered times where individuality seems at last to be winning out over polemical schools, one can work both within a tradition and against it at the same time. Conceptual association and lateral thinking enable me to build structures, while keeping the music grounded in the world as it really is, full of multilayered processes, behaviors, and natural systems.

Q: Before you sit down to write a piece, do you hear the music in your head? Do you know what you're going to write, or does it sort of happen as you do it, or both?

A: A bit of both. I certainly do pre-composition work, figuring out material and planning how things will evolve in a piece. I set up the materials I'm going to work with and I like having a scheme of what a piece is going to do. At the same time, I also like being surprised with how the piece turns out. Some composers really plan every possible detail and I wrote some early pieces that way for the exercise, but I got bored with it because, as I've said, I like composing without that safety net. I like the element of surprise.

Q: I've read that some novelists feel their books write themselves after a certain point. It's as if the characters tell them what to do.

A: Exactly, yeah. Musical materials can do that too, when you've lived with them for a while.

Q: You live in London and you teach at Cardiff University. What is it like to work in Wales?

A: It's really interesting to work in a place that has an old tradition but is still, of course, a modern country. And of course you could say that about the whole U.K. I love the history; there's a certain groundedness that comes with it that I appreciate. To some Americans it can have this mystical aura (stone circles, castles, etc.), but when you spend time there you can see it's just a jumble, it's all coexisting—the very old with the brand-new. One thing I love about being an expatriate is that I get to see the different layers. I've stayed long enough to leave the tourist world of nostalgia behind.

Q: Musically, I tend to think of the U.K. as traditional in outlook, and yet there's also a strong dedication to the modern, to the new.

A: Absolutely. That's another reason why it's great to be working there.

Q: Don't we have that, too, in the States?

A: Of course we do! But there are things about the U.K. music scene that are particularly strong and exciting. Living in London, I hear new operas on a regular basis, fully staged works from interesting composers like Birtwistle, Saariaho, Turnage, and Weir, as well as 20th-century classics by Ligeti and Britten. I'd say the programming is generally more adventurous.

Q: Would you say that classical music is more fully integrated into the general culture?

A: Maybe. They have the BBC, the Proms, there's plenty of new opera But I would also say, things are more open in America than they used to be, even just 10 years ago.

Q: How about the man in the street, do you think there's an interest in contemporary music?

A: One can only hope! But I don't worry about that so much. I mean, how many average people are interested in contemporary poets, contemporary playwrights? If you're busy making new, adventurous work, the risk you run is that not a lot of people are going to know about it. But the hope is that people find out about these things sooner or later—the Internet makes that process easier now.

Q: You're married to a British composer.

A: His name is Ken Hesketh and he's just a couple of years older than me. We met when we were grad students, at Tanglewood.

Q: Do you write similar kinds of music?

A: No, not at all; the point of commonality is that we both write concert music, vocal, chamber, and orchestral music, and share an interest in those forms. He had all his training in Britain and I had all my training in the States, so that's made for a lot of interesting differences and discussions!

Q: Is the training very different?

A: Definitely.

Q: How so?

A: Well, for one thing the British have an ancient choral tradition, a very powerful one. Also, they have a tradition of nurturing prodigies.

Q: You mean composers like Thomas Adès?

A: Sure. And before him, George Benjamin, Oliver Knussen, Benjamin Britten ... it goes back a long way. Plus there are equally interesting figures from the past and present that the U.S. doesn't hear about so much.

Q: I suppose it's natural for people to get excited when someone young does something exceptionally well.

A: But in Britain it's sort of expected. And because it's a small country, people are very aware of what everybody's doing. In the States it's relatively diffuse and not so engaged with the profession internationally. So even if there is a young composer prodigy in New York, people in L.A. won't automatically expect to know about it, and chances are the work will be quite conservative and derivative. But the U.K.'s prodigy culture is actually a byproduct of something more interesting: It's a very intense, cosmopolitan scene for new music. It's thoroughly professional and technically accomplished in the best sense. People do what they do at a very high level without a lot of ego.

Q: Their orchestras are renowned for their wonderful sight-reading.

A: Yeah, the musicians are really like that. So my husband, Ken, trained that way, as a chorister and at the piano, and started writing large orchestral pieces at 13. He's been working professionally since he was a teenager. For an American, that can be sort of intimidating—it's certainly not expected, especially for composers! But I guess I've gotten used to it, and in the U.K. there's a great variety of contemporary music that gets written, played, and supported—it all coexists. When I was coming up in the States and going to concerts in New York City and at my various schools, new music seemed limited to just the two camps, and very powerful they were, too. To work in Berlin and then in London was liberating, just when I was finishing up my studies in the late '90s, because I got to hear so many different ways of approaching contemporary music, leaving behind the old, familiar oppositions. And it's wonderful to see that things have been evolving at home, too, in more recent years. Younger ensembles like the

International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) have had a huge role to play in this.

Q: Your new disc for Bridge Records: How did that happen?

A: While I've been working abroad for about a decade, my work has slowly started getting more attention at home. An award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in '07 led to various things, including a Miller Theatre Composer Portrait concert at Columbia University in '09. The partners at Bridge Records attended the concert and told me afterward that they wanted to make a CD of the pieces they'd heard.

Q: So they said, "We'd like to record a portrait disc"?

A: Yes, they did! To me this was totally unexpected and out of the blue. So we started the project, working with ICE and conductor Jayce Ogren, and soprano Susan Narucki, who were all part of the portrait concert. It then expanded to include the Daedalus Quartet with Stephen Gosling (piano) and Charles Neidich (clarinet), and solo pianist Vassily Primakov. Adam Abeshouse engineered and produced, and it was a privilege—just a fantastic experience to work with such incredible musicians. But the biggest thrill for me is that Bridge Records has become an advocate for my music: They've decided to make this disc the first of a series that will focus on my work. The second disc is already underway and we'll include some orchestral pieces, something I'm really excited about since this will include recent commissions Game of Attrition and the piano concerto Art of War. Stay tuned for Volume 2!