BEYOND THE PULITZER PRIZE
A Conversation with composer LEWIS SPRATLAN, winner of the 2000 Pulitzer Prize in Music
With
JAMES MARANISS, librettist for the 2000 Pulitzer Prize-winning music composition
HAROLD MELTZER, composer and director of Sequitur, former student of Spratlan
FRANK J. OTERI, composer and editor of *NewMusicBox*

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Filmed by NATHAN MICHEL
Transcribed by KARYN JOAQUINO

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1. WINNING THE PULITZER

FRANK J. OTERI: Congratulations on winning the Pulitzer Prize!

LEWIS SPRATLAN: It's a great thrill. I'm still coming down to earth from it.

FRANK J. OTERI: What have been some of the reactions that you've been getting so far?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, an enormous variety of people, as you can imagine, from old, old students that I had totally lost track of through, you know, and colleagues have been calling me. Roger Reynolds, Yehudi Wyner, people who are roughly from my generation, and lots of people that I don't know, too. A full gamut. Old professors from when I was in graduate school, and a former sweetheart of mine from high school, [laughs], who is now an artist in Washington DC… I had totally lost track of her. It's been on the Jim Lehrer Newshour and stuff like that, generated, there's been a *New Yorker* piece... Each time one of these comes out, there's a little wave of e-mails that comes in. Hundreds of people have been in touch. It's been wonderful to reconnect with people that way, too, as you can imagine.

FRANK J. OTERI: So what do you feel the prize means?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, the number one thing that it means for me right now is that the chances of getting this opera staged are suddenly boosted by an enormous factor. That's by far the most valuable thing about it to me, and I'm doing everything I possibly can to capitalize on that. This piece, as you know, has been sitting on the shelf for 22 years. First there was the opportunity to actually hear it, and it was this fabulous performance, an absolutely, world-class performance I think. Gunther Schuller, in the *New Yorker* comments that he made, described it as an "impeccable performance," and he also said that it was a word he's used about four times in his life, and it was truly that, it was a magnificent performance…

FRANK J. OTERI: It really comes across on the recording I heard.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: We had world-class singers involved, John Cheek and Allan Glassman from the Met, Christina Bouras, who's doing a Juliet in New York City next year. Very, very fine singers from Boston, too, William Hite and David Ripley, and beyond that, probably the most committed performance from a conductor that I've ever had. He was another student of mine, J. David Jackson, who graduated from Amherst in about 1980 or so. He's been in Europe for about 15 years doing the usual apprenticeship route: five years in Germany, five years in Spain, five years in Brussels, and he's an absolute miracle worker with singers, and he has just the perfect touch with singers, and had absolutely internalized the score. He had learned the score more thoroughly than I've ever had any performer learn a score on a piece of mine. It was just in the palm of his hands, tremendous work from him. So all of that led to the performance. I'm saying the experience of this opera came in waves. First, this wonderful performance, and then some very nice recognition of the performance… It got a terrific review from Richard Dyer in the *Globe*, which in itself was of interest, because I think it drew a lot of attention

to that moment, and with no great optimism, I submitted it to the Pulitzer Board. I mean, composers, as you know, just send anything that feels like it might be sort of big enough to be considered. I sent it along, but... And I had honestly no particular reason to think that it would fare any better than other pieces that I've submitted to the Pulitzer Board before. But, in fact, it seems, again, from Schuller's remarks, it seems to have caused quite a bit of interest on the Pulitzer Board. I hadn't even particularly paid attention to when the awards were coming out. I knew they were in the spring sometime. I didn't know just when. So I was pretty knocked out when the call came.

FRANK J. OTERI: So the call came on a Monday…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: But not from the Pulitzer Board. It was three days before I heard from the Pulitzers. I got a little telegram, "You have won the Pulitzer Prize." Ellen, our concert manager, got the call. The prize was announced at 3 o'clock. At ten minutes after 3, NPR called Ellen, wanting materials to put on the radio. And then she called me and said, "That's fabulous. Congratulations!" And I said, "Congratulations for what?" And then she told me and I went straight through the ceiling at that point. But it was from Ellen that I first heard it. It started sort of pouring in after that, the phone was just ringing away, but nothing official still for a while.

FRANK J. OTERI: This is work that's 22 years old. And it's unusual – certainly there's a precedent for it: the Ives Third Symphony won in the '40's, and it was written 30 years earlier. But it's sort of odd, in a way, to have the Prize for the year 2000 go to a piece that was written in 1978. But it's also odd that you submitted an older piece this year, and it's obviously something, even though it's from 22 years ago, that's still very near and dear to your heart.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: To be sure. I consider this my magnum opus. I think it's the most significant piece I've written. And, by far, the biggest, and the only opera… I have an enormous identity with the hero in this piece, who is an exile. Although I do all sorts of public things, there's a certain sort of sense of psychological exile that I feel. So I have a visceral attachment to the piece. And I like it a lot, and I think it's awfully good, and to have this performance sitting there became a perfect opportunity for me to submit it to the Pulitzer Board. And there was no way I wasn't going to, I mean, I had been intending all along, assuming it was a decent performance, to submit it. I was aware myself of the fact that it was an old piece and I didn't know whether that was going to be a kind of hitch in things, you know, whether they just sort of had a policy against giving the award to older pieces. I can imagine, I mean, it's kind of conceivable that on balance, that is the view that they would take. If they had a sort of older piece that was right up there, but a newer one that was just as good, I can imagine they might be inclined to give it to the newer one, but I like to imagine that the excellence of the piece is what won it the award, and that that was able to overcome whatever sense they might have that wouldn't be normal to give it to an older piece that way.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, the other thing that's so unusual about the work winning is, of course, only the second act won, because only the second act was performed this past year. We are fortunate to have with us as part of the discussion this afternoon, the

librettist of the opera. I'd like to talk to you a little bit about this. This is something you also did 22 years ago, and now, all of a sudden, here it is. There's a performance that happens in January, and, it not only finally gets performed, it wins the Pulitzer Prize in Music. What is your feeling of the work now? Have you forgotten about this piece? How important is it in your life?

JAMES MARANISS: Well, I was aware of this year of Calderón. This year is the 400th anniversary of Calderón's birth, and so there are Calderón symposia and celebrations all over the world. And the performance of this opera, to my mind, is the most significant event marking Calderón's anniversary and presenting Calderón to the new millennium. When I was an undergraduate at Harvard in the '60's, I first became acquainted with this play and it had an effect upon me like that of Lew's: I identified completely with the predicament that the hero was in, and I liked the language a lot. It was merely fortuitous that I would then become the neighbor of this person, who had, not only had this psychic affinity with me and with Calderón, but also had this prodigious gift as a composer and a musician. And my attitude then was that whatever I can do to put this into some kind of poetic English, and doing that over the course of 3 years, I didn't really have the feeling that I was doing it alone. I had the feeling that I was the instrument of something, call it Calderón, that was bigger than me. And it was an archetype, really, of this idea, of "Life is a Dream," and the predicament that this character, that I was doing this, and that I had the gift of having this friend who was a neighbor, who was a musician, and who could actually realize the archetype for the future, for the coming of the developing of western civilization in which this play was an important thing, in which his idea was an important thing. And so I never really thought that the play, the opera, wouldn't be done. It was out of mind because it wasn't being done, but I knew then, 22 years ago, and I've always known in the interim, that if there was any really good thing that I had done, (…and Lewis has done significant and wonderful things since but I thought also that this was his best work…), somehow or other it didn't surprise me that this would be produced and that people would like it, because I always knew it was good.

2. OPERATIC COLLABORATION

FRANK J. OTERI: It's interesting that the two of you were neighbors, but basically you worked on the opera totally apart from each other. It's as though you lived in other countries, even if you were on the same wavelength.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, we saw each other all the time and we have an understanding, I think. Besides, it was just so good. I mean, if there had been problems with the libretto, I think that we would have had to work together a lot more. But Jim's a great musician, he's not a practicing musician, but he knows what a libretto has to be. The libretto has this magnificent quality of distillation about it, I mean, it just takes this Baroque edifice and boils it down to just the most meaningful parts. And the English is very beautiful, and extremely settable. He was so aware of those values, as to what sung English would have to be. Hands off was better, as far as I was concerned, and I can't remember, did I actually play you bits of it? Every now and then…

JAMES MARANISS: Yeah, you would play me bits of it on the piano, sing all the parts, and you were always on key, your voice quality, you know, couldn't really hit all the notes, but you were in key. My feeling then was, and it still it, now, that as far as I can imagine, the real rich wholeness of Calderón's poetry gets realized by being sung in the music, and that Calderón's play in Spanish, or in English, or in any language, merely language, is partly realized, but that the real realization, in that it's better as an opera than it is as a play, the real realization is when it's sung.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: So this wasn't through any sense of avoidance – avoiding one another or avoidance of the chore of sitting down and working together. It was just that it was taking care of itself.

FRANK J. OTERI: What I find so interesting about it, though, as a listener, hearing it, you know, 22 years later, in this performance from 22 years later, is it sounds like you were working together the whole time. The prosody is so perfect, it sounds like the words and music happened simultaneously. They marry each other.

JAMES MARANISS: Yeah, well, thank you very much.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: That is the highest compliment, by the way. I'm thrilled to hear you say that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Oscar Hammerstein II often said that great songwriting collaborations are about the words and music marrying each other. And they do.

JAMES MARANISS: That's all his doing because I didn't have anything to do with the music.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Except that it was musically conceived by you on whatever level, conscious or subconscious. But… Very well, I mean, it could be that it sounds as if we had been working side by side. In a certain sense we were, but just not actually. It was through a common understanding of the values of Calderón, I think, that led to this, but,

you know, you're mentioning the prosody. I'm very pleased to hear that, because the piece absolutely hangs on the language, it is in as many dimensions as you can imagine there, first of all, of course, just the semantic suggestiveness of it, but very much the rhythm of the language, very much the contour of the language. There are just pages and pages of the opera where you could go through and speak the words and you would find that the melody has just exactly that – heightened, heightened, of course, but it honors the language very much, and when it works against the language, it's for some very, very particular dramatic reason. For example, in the music of the cousins, I think, does tend to, you haven't heard it, but in the first act, Estrella and Astolfo were the pretenders to the throne, and in the first act, he's trying to flatter his cousin and win her in cahoots so they can proceed together to take over the throne, and there, it's this tremendously arched language. Like some blazing comment, just loaded with the most forced imagery. And the music is ludicrous there, as the character is ludicrous, and one of the ways that the music is ludicrous is that it fights the language of the words so much. So that's what I meant in saying that when it doesn't follow the norm of the language it's for some dramatic reason.

3. GETTING AN OPERA PERFORMED

FRANK J. OTERI: Other articles have talked a little bit about what the history of this piece was, and people who are reading this might know something of the history, but I think it might be worthwhile, and certainly it is constructive for anybody who wants to write an opera, the process that set the creation of this piece in motion and then what wound up happening.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Sure. In 1975, Herta Glaz who was the founder and director of the New Haven Opera Theater, approached me about doing a piece for them. This was actually on the recommendation of Yehudi Wyner, who was a teacher of mine there in New Haven. I never studied composition with him but I'd done a number of other courses with him. He had said very early on in our acquaintance that he felt I had a dramatic gift, and he was rather emphatic about it. And I sort of pooh poohed it, because I've never considered myself an opera buff particularly. I really am not a big follower of opera.

FRANK J. OTERI: Had you written vocal music?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: I had written lots and lots of vocal music, and have continued to since. There's a great deal of vocal music and choral music in my output but not opera. In any case, she reached me and it was partly on the prodding of Yehudi's that I said, oh, okay, you know, I'll go talk to her about it. (Jim wasn't on board on this yet, it was actually just a couple of days before we got in touch.) At our very first meeting she sort of laid out the land of what the New Haven Opera was all about. It was a small modest company, and one of the reasons that it's written for relatively small orchestra, just single woodwinds, 2 horns, 1 trumpet, 1 trombone, 2 percussion, harp, piano and strings, was because it is a fairly small company, I wanted to honor that. And it is a relatively small cast, too: 8 named characters and a chorus. So she laid out the scope of the company, and in practically the same breath, presented to me a copy of *La Vida Es Suena* of Calderón, saying this is a work that I would like you to think about as a possibility. That was not the commission as such, but I had told her I guess on the phone before we met, that I didn't particularly have any story in mind. And so she came prepared, a little bit.

JAMES MARANISS: Do you know what motivated her?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: As to wanting to see this set? Well, I think she saw something in that play. It's an opera sitting and ready to be written. If you ever read it, you can see what I mean by that. Just the way it's structured, it's immensely operatic in concept, I think. And I think she must have realized this. I'm going to have Jim butt in here for a second, because Herta is Viennese, and just, say a word about the kind of status that this play has in German-speaking countries…

JAMES MARANISS: Well, this play is well known in German culture. It was translated in the early 19th century by Schlegel.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: *Das Leben ist ein Traum.*

JAMES MARANISS: And Hoffmansthal, the librettist for Richard Strauss, did some versions of Calderón. He did a version of *The Great Theater of the World*. And Hoffmansthal and Grillparzer and other German dramatists, you could call continuers of Calderón. Calderón has always had a position in German literature, equivalent to what he's had in Spanish literature, which you wouldn't say of other languages. So probably Herta Glaz, as a young girl, in the Gymnasium or wherever she was in Vienna, was given this play in the Schlegel translation, and read it, and thought it was great. That would be my surmise.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: There was an investiture there on her part, I think, and she realized that it could turn into something. Beyond that I can't say. I never actually queried her about what her motivations might have been.

HAROLD MELTZER: Did the play grab you at first reading?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Yeah. Bingo. I mean, page 3, almost. I don't know what to say about that. It was just… well, page 10. But right away, and I had barely put it down before I had banged on Jim's door and said, "Look what I found," and then discovered that Calderón was his field, which I didn't know yet. So that's how it got launched, and off we went. We started to work on it right away. I can't remember what time of year it was. You remember writing mainly in summer, so I would assume that it was sometime in the spring that I had seen Herta. And we just worked straight through on it. And then the crisis came, which was in the third year of our work on this, the company disbanded. Because Herta moved with her husband to California, and the company was just simply not well-enough funded to manage without her. She's a dynamo, and she did all the fundraising, and she was the director of this company in a way far beyond what that term would seem to imply.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now in California did she work in opera?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: I don't know. I've got to contact her. She's now back in New Haven. She was married to the head of the psychiatry school at Yale and he got hired away to a position in southern California, either USC or UCLA, I don't recall exactly. And they were out there for, well, 20, 21 years, and I discovered just the other day that she has moved back to New Haven. I haven't been in touch with her yet. I'm very eager…

FRANK J. OTERI: She must have heard about the Pulitzer and she hasn't been in touch with you yet?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, she's very old. She's got to be in her 90's now. She must be. But I'm very remiss in not having been in touch with her. I must do that right away. But I can't answer your question. I don't know if she was still doing operatic things out there. I'd be surprised if she weren't. I mean, she was just so energetic that way.

FRANK J. OTERI: So the opera company and the planned performance of your opera fell apart before you were finished with it?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Yeah, I was almost finished. I was halfway through the third act.

FRANK J. OTERI: But you kept going.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: If you've got two and a half out of… yeah, I kept going.

FRANK J. OTERI: And then what happened?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, I started shopping it around. It was picked up almost immediately by Margun Music, my publisher. As a matter of fact, I think they were aware of the work even before it was done, and it was published at once, so they got to workshopping it around, and I did some of the same myself. And there were two encouraging responses, one from the Houston Grand Opera, the other from the Chicago Lyric. Both came to nothing. And then there were many other submissions to other opera companies, none of which materialized at all. I actually had voice contact with people from Houston and Chicago.

FRANK J. OTERI: Houston just did the new Carlisle Floyd opera. It's the 25th American opera that they've premiered, so they have a real track record for doing new American opera.

HAROLD MELTZER: They're also just did Mark Adamo's *Little Women*…

FRANK J. OTERI: Since winning the Prize, have new offers emerged?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: There have been inquiries and I know particularly about one, but I'm afraid I can't give any details about it just yet… If it actually comes into fruition and everybody involved signs off on it then I think that it would be fine to say something about it.

FRANK J. OTERI: By June 1?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Fat chance.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, you never know, the power of the Web…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Yeah, sure.

FRANK J. OTERI: There's been a real flourish of activity in opera with American composers. There was a period when people weren't writing operas. In the car ride coming up, we were talking about Pulitzer Prize-winning operas, and once upon a time Menotti won 2 Pulitzers, and Barber won a Pulitzer for *Vanessa*. The last time there was a Pulitzer Prize given for an opera was in the 60's with Robert Ward's *The Crucible*. So, it's almost 40 years since a Pulitzer Prize went to an opera. But in the past decade, there's been all this activity, with Glass and Adams, and then everybody else jumped in on the bandwagon. It seems that everybody's writing operas. But they are such large-scale works; the forces are so large. For most American composers, getting a large orchestra piece done is very difficult. Getting an opera done is really difficult, and

getting a repeat performance of the opera once it's done, yikes… And as you've seen from your own experience, writing the work that you consider the work of your career, nothing happened.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Sickening, isn't it?

FRANK J. OTERI: What does it mean? I mean, what do you do? I mean, I'm working on an opera…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, you know what it means! You're working on an opera now?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: On spec?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, [laughs], it's insane.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: You are insane. I mean, you're either that or a masochist, I don't know. Maybe, perhaps it's going to sail right to the top, I hope it does.

FRANK J. OTERI: [laughs]

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Good luck to you. But I wouldn't sit down to write an opera on spec at gunpoint. I just couldn't imagine doing such a thing. You know all the reasons behind this, Frank, I think opera companies are inherently timid. It costs a lot of money to put on operas, and they don't want duds on their hands, and then they keep trying to second guess what is going to be a success and half the time they fail, or more than half the time they fail. One of the companies, I don't even remember which company I sent it to, but I got this "falling out of your chair," hysterically funny thing back from them. It was a checklist with little boxes and "Thank you very much, Mr. Spratlan. Please take note of the reasons that we did not accept your piece." You know, 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 14 were all checked. "Do not overestimate the intelligence of your audience" was one of the things.

FRANK J. OTERI: [laughs]

LEWIS SPRATLAN: "Keep it simple, stupid" or some such… "Include reprises" was one of the things. "Do it again." One of them said, "Melody, melody, melody!" with an exclamation point. This was the little list, and, as absurd as it sounds, one has the feeling that this is actually the level of conversation that is going on in the offices of these companies. They seem to have totally lost track of what opera can do in the world, the galvanic power to pull an audience into another world. They've lost all interest, not all of them have, clearly, but, I mean, it's become something that's sort of riding along, it's become a little world in itself, full of its self-perpetuating myths that it's made up. It's lost touch with what it means to be in the world and to live in the world. And, for all of these reasons, I think, it's difficult to put an opera on, if it's an opera that has, that's attempting to take the form somewhere.

FRANK J. OTERI: There is this nebulous, unidentifiable "fear of audiences" in so many of our institutions, certainly within the orchestral community, although less so than it once was, and in radio. I was at the conference of the Major Orchestra Librarians Association recently. And somebody there mentioned a list that was compiled of the 25 most frequently performed operas in the 20th Century.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Was there a single American opera on the list?

FRANK J. OTERI: No, and there wasn't a single work written in the last 90 years. Puccini was the most contemporary composer on there if I remember correctly…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: I would have certainly guessed.

FRANK J. OTERI: This is staggering.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Did anybody raise a hand and say, wait, any thoughts about this, to this group of assembled people?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it inspired a lot of discussion about the larger musical community, like, imagine a publisher taking on an opera, and the whole notion of parts and what that means, the investment and what that represents for something that basically has no legs in our society. But then you go back and you look at it and you think to yourself, okay, so maybe you don't do any American operas, you don't anything that's contemporary, and you could say ditto for the symphony orchestras, or on the radio, just the so-called standard repertory. There's a chronological disconnect and a geographical disconnect with almost all of the music, and then you wonder why only 5 percent of Americans are interested in classical music? It doesn't connect to them. You know, why would it? And, you know, they can come back with anything they want, saying, well, you know, this isn't tuneful, this doesn't have tunes, this doesn't have this, this doesn't have that. Gangsta rap doesn't have "tunes" and it's immensely popular. People want something that's visceral, they want something that's exciting, they want something that's going to be unlike what they know, that's going to take them into another area and jolt them a little bit. If something's completely complacent, it's boring.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: If 3 or 4 opera companies in the country got serious about going against the tide of the lowest common denominator principle that they seem to be operating under, and were successful at it, it might suggest to other companies to start being a little bit braver, a little bit more in touch with the here and now. I don't know what it would take, but it occurs to me that at the minimum it would be that. I mean, there's got to be some sort of bellwether here, there's got to be some leading company with a lot of visibility and a lot of press, and outreach having a success. And maybe that would make some difference. The whole thing is so unfathomable to me that I can't even work up a sympathy for their point of view. It's difficult for me to put myself in their position and sort of reason it from there, from their point of view.

FRANK J. OTERI: Look at the record industry. There's a wonderful, hysterical thing that happened several years ago. All of a sudden Nonesuch has this million-selling record with Gorecki's Third. So all of a sudden all these major record labels were like,

oh, wow, contemporary music, we can make money, let's issue contemporary music. All these labels sprouted up as imprints of major labels that have all since folded, like Catalyst and Argo, and they were issuing all this music. Why didn't it work? They didn't understand. And then all these other labels issued Gorecki 3 again, thinking they'd sell, and, you know, they didn't. "Let's do the same thing." Someone else issued Gorecki 3 and made money, let's issue it and make money too. No one else's sold. It was a fluke. Then a couple of years ago, they discovered the monks. And it became that for a bit. I think once you tie art to dollars and commerce, you're going down a very dangerous path. And, in a way, you know, each of us in our own way is sort of lucky that we subsist separate and apart from those concerns. In this country, a record company or an orchestra or an opera company exists in the marketplace and always has to look at the bottom line. You both work here at Amherst, I work for a non-profit organization, and Harold is sort of scraping by [laughs]. You know, the "dictatorship of the bottom line" is not something that any of us really understands. But once you start mixing thinking about the bottom line with anything that's creative, I think you're doomed to failure.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: I guess I had enough sympathy with opera companies… the budgets are enormous for these things, as you know, and I mean, they're not, I think it's possible to be in business and hope to have a work generate a reasonable return on the investment, but it seems to me that if they really are counting entirely on the monetary success of something they put on, that they are reduced to a situation where they're trying to second guess what's going to be successful and then they run into this horrible problem that you're talking about. Seems to me the answer, which we'll never see in this country, I think, would be wholesale public involvement in the support of opera companies. But it runs so thoroughly against the tide to do that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, look at a country like Finland…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Oh, of course!

FRANK J. OTERI: The Savonlinna Opera Festival does so many contemporary operas. It's amazing.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: That's the one way to pull the "bottom line-ism" out of the thinking of the producers of these companies. But we're stuck in a sad situation here. I mean, there was a little bulge of the '80's where it looked as if the NEA was actually going to become something real, and we'd crossed the line, and we can see how utterly short-lived that was, and what a mistake it was to imagine that that line had been crossed. And, in fact, I think might have actually dipped down the other way. The NEA's in worse shape than it was before. I applied for an NEA grant to support the performance of *Life is a Dream*, and not a dime.

JAMES MARANISS: And the support we got, which was a privatized form of public financing, we got from Amherst College which really allowed us to do it.

4. TEACHING AND COMPOSING

FRANK J. OTERI: So Amherst has been completely supportive.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Wonderfully so. I mean, I just am very, very pleased by the support that they've shown throughout, not just about this piece, but they really have put their money where there mouth is, so to speak.

FRANK J. OTERI: You've been here a long time.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Since 1970.

FRANK J. OTERI: Thirty years.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Thirty years, yeah. And I've gotten performances, no music of mine has gone unperformed, actually, except for this opera. I've gotten very nice performances of everything. And the college hasn't totally supported all of those performances, but it's been involved to a certain extent monetarily in some of them, and you know, right through the whole time I've been here I've felt good support here. So this is a good place to be. It's also a good place to be because it's close to New York, it's close to Boston, it's easy to get people to come out here and perform. And there are a lot of very good players in this area, too, more than you might imagine.

FRANK J. OTERI: I want to talk a bit about teaching. I brought Harold along for me, not just for his wheels, which was great on a rainy day, but he is a student of yours, and in fact, he called me a day after I put the call in to you and sent off an e-mail to you and said, "I have this idea. I'd love to do an interview with Lew Spratlan. I was a student of his and I love his work." So I said, "Lew called me back an hour ago; we're on the same page, let's do this." I thought it could be really interesting to have input from a student of yours who feels transformed by the experience of having studied with you.

HAROLD MELTZER: When we were using the wheels on the way up here, I was talking about how you were my only undergraduate teacher. You're the only person teaching advanced composition here, and I didn't know whether this was peculiar to you or peculiar to undergraduate teaching, but I remember coming here to Amherst as an undergraduate in the mid-80's, not planning to be a composer at all, and being turned on by how your first concern seemed to be with musical issues, rather than musical technique. Because technique can always be acquired, and you lose interest in acquiring it later if you don't have anything that you want to say. And so I was just wondering, first of all, how you frame musical issues for a student who's coming to music composition for the first time?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, you could ask yourself that same question as to how I framed them with you. I think the important thing to say about that, is that right at the top of my concerns as a composition teacher is trying to discover what the student is bringing to this enterprise. To see what sort of music is in that person. And I must say I don't consider that to be necessarily a revolutionary point of view. I was privileged in my own studies by having a teacher whose primary concern was just that: Mel Powell. I

studied with him for a year as an undergraduate and two years as a graduate student at Yale. And this was magnificently his point of view. I mean, Powell was the opposite of a technique-monger. He would take the measliest scribbles that you brought in, something about which you felt awful, and find something in it he thought had a thumbprint of the students. And the lesson would then evolve from that to what the possibilities of what that would be. What does that little moment suggest, what are the implications of that moment? I didn't register his teaching that way at the time. He was my first real composition teacher. Well, I had scribbled stuff when I was younger and my mother would comment on it and say, "you know, that should be a G#" and stuff, but I mean, it wasn't beyond that. But Mel was the first composition teacher I had and I assumed that that was the way you taught composition. I have subsequently discovered that that is not at all the case, that this is actually quite an exceptional thing. And it would be on all kinds of levels, it would be this sort of, what that moment represented in a kind of psychological way, what its properties were, as far as musical structure, how to expand on that, what the reverse of that was, and the pieces would grow this way. And it was something, it's certainly a way of thinking about teaching that I have carried forward. This is, now I'm not sure that's a direct answer to your question, but I think that's the heart of the matter. I mean, this is really what's at stake to me in teaching, and it can happen in many, many different ways. You know, take these 3 notes and make something, fill a page with something that emerges from those 3 notes in some fashion. What might be the most foreign way of thinking for a student, but the very act of having to go through that is going to, in some way, reveal a proclivity, or a propensity, or a way of thinking… I don't care about those 3 notes, actually, or technically speaking, what goes on with them. I'm concerned with what goes on in the cracks, so to speak. What way of thinking seems to emerge. And, you know, in some cases, nothing emerges. It could be a very formulaic worthless thing, and I will say it. "This is formulaic and worthless. Do the same thing again for next week, and don't think so much about it." That might be the next thing that I would say. And then, something would start to show up. And then, you know, it's a long process, too. That's the most frustrating thing about teaching in a liberal arts school I think. For all the best reasons in the world, the kids are heavily involved in other things. I mean, it's just the nature of the place. You end up getting an education here, which can never be bad. I don't know why I put it in the negative that way; it's good, on balance. But it has its price, because kids don't have enough time to write. And if they have time to write, it's 30 minutes after dinner and then 15 minutes before breakfast. So that sort of concerted time to really compose is a big frustration. And there are kids who are, can never quite get over that. They're ones who cannot carve out the time to compose.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, how much time do you feel someone needs to give to composition?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, I can't give a number to that. I think the important thing is carving out the psychological space. And if they can, you have to sort of dump everything, and clear the psychic desk, so to speak, to get down to a spot where the musical thoughts have room to formulate themselves. Some students can reach that spot very quickly. Others need a lot more time. What can I say? I guess one thing I do feel is that they've got to clear an ample space of time as much as possible every day. That's

certainly true for my own work, I feel like when I'm involved in a piece, it's really just got to be regular work even if it's a brief amount of time. So regularity. And then the most important thing, I think is just, whatever time one needs to make room for the business of composing. There's no formula for it, but I think those are the two principles that are involved: regularity, and just being dogged about leaving enough time.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, in terms of teaching, you don't only teach composition students?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Music theory, and other things.

FRANK J. OTERI: To people who are not music majors.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Yeah. That's right.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, how do you bring in the students who are not part of this arcane world of new music that we exist in? How do you get them to appreciate contemporary music?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, opening their ears, of course, is the big trick. I do lots and lots and lots of listening assignments. I think that sheer exposure and repeated exposure is a lot of what's involved here. A lot of the time they just won't go and do the listening because they're scared to death of it, or scared that they don't know how to relate to it, or it's going to sound ugly to them or something, so really, just "forcing" them to do a lot of listening and finding that they are in fact, enticed by it, is step 1 here, I think. And also, I think it's valuable in confronting new music for the first time to help a student hear how the things that they love about the music that they do love are going on in this music, too. And sort of translating things for them into a different language, and seeing how, such simple things as how music moves in time, when it tends to sit still, when it tends to move ahead faster, when it stops, the various means of intensification that worked for Mozart are still at work in this music now, and just helping them to hear what is happening on a visceral level for them, translate into principles that they can see are at work in music over the long haul and not just isolated to this particular repertoire.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you also take in the pop music that they're undoubtedly listening to?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: I take it in. I plead a little guilty. I'm not as up to date on pop music as I wish I were, because I value that. I think that that's really an important way of getting to a student, opening doors of conversations with students. I'm not entirely outside of that sphere. One of the things is that the pop music scene is changing so rapidly, and it's so far flung that it takes, it takes a real investment of time to stay on top of it, and it's one that I haven't made. I'm not proud of that fact. I have a wonderful colleague here at Mount Holyoke College, David Sanford, I don't know if either of you guys know David, he's young, he just took the position at Holyoke, but he's a real pop music listener, and he has been his entire life, and it's just as heavily involved, and he's a real, very good composer, of, you know, quote "classical new music." But it's a very powerful tool for him in the classroom. I would say the same thing about Dan Warner at

Hampshire College. So it's something that I wish I did more, but I guess the quick answer is no.

HAROLD MELTZER: Do you think teaching has affected the way you compose, or your general approach?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: I don't know. It doesn't strike me that teaching has made all much difference in the way I compose. The only thing I would say, I suppose having to formulate things that are going on in new music to students when I talk to them about it, just the very act of that formulating has put ideas into my head, has caused focusing on certain principles, and so on. But it's not something I've thought very much about. Let me ask you that question. You were a student of mine. Did you see ways in which the teaching I was doing somehow made a difference in the music that I ended up writing?

HAROLD MELTZER: I don't know. There were issues that came up in class when we would discuss them together, because we would have private lessons and then we would all have a group lesson every Thursday, and those issues found their way, in some ways, into your pieces.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: It's a little "chicken and eggy," though, isn't it? I mean, can you think of one example, possibly? I don't want to put you on the spot.

HAROLD MELTZER: No, I remember around the time that you were working on *When Crows Gather*, which had more elements of not current pop music, but music from the past. At the heart of *Crows* there's a hymn, a Charleston and there's a ragtime. And I was writing, literally, my first piece with you. And I was also putting the same kinds of music in my piece. I'm sure you understood at least what I was trying to do, even if I didn't, and I certainly had no idea what you were trying to do, but in a way we ended up getting closer together in these concerns. And I'm sure there must have been similar experiences you've had with other students.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: That's a tough one. You know, I don't think all that much about that issue. I don't doubt that you're right, but I'd have to sort of sit and think about it before I could describe it. I mean, it's not the sort of thing that I'm ready with an answer for because it's not something I wonder about very much. Let me just think locally for a second. Actually, there's a kid, a wonderful student of mine right now who is doing music similar to what I've done, and I don't know whether I've subtly urged him this way or whether he's picked up on the fact – that's what I meant about chicken and egg – it's a marvelous technique, it's like a jigsaw puzzle technique, where the whole piece or the whole phrase or the whole page, whatever it is, is the complete picture of a jigsaw puzzle, or we don't get it, we just get this piece and we get that piece, and we get that piece and that piece and that piece, and then you begin to see the picture but it's not until that last piece is dropped in until you finally get the whole…

FRANK J. OTERI: Is it cubist at all?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: No, I don't think of it as cubist, it's almost the opposite of cubism. I mean, if you think of cubism as taking a whole thing and fracturing it down into

components, it's almost going the other way, it's taking these components and only gradually revealing what the whole thing is sequentially. But that's, so, yeah, I'm very alert to his doing that. And I haven't done it in as quite as systematic way as he has but we've talked about that kind of thing happening in my music in various places, so I guess there is feedback here but it's not something that I've paid that much attention to. I don't think all that much about how my life as a teacher is reflected in my own composition. I'm very aware of how my own music makes a difference to my students, or how it brings alive issues that I've been talking about it in their music, that I'm aware of, but not so much of how the teaching influences my composing.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's interesting. This became a big issue for us, of course, you know, we're all dual career, triple career, quadruple career composers and the issue with *NewM*us*icBox* we had for April 2000 is about that very issue. About people who juggle different careers and whether the two affect each other. In some cases they're very connected, with someone like Joan La Barbara sings other people's music and then does her own music, which is very vocally-based. Another extreme, it seems completely unrelated, David Soldier, a composer who has his own string quartet, is also a neurobiologist. But there are connections, and he feels that there are connections, that his music is largely inspired by a lot of the concepts that he gets from doing research in neurobiology.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: I've got plenty of things to say about that and me in the world. But not so much in teaching. For example, biology. I'm extremely tied into biological processes, and there's a lot of thinking that I've done about biological processes that show up in my music and somehow, in one way or another. I remember, once I was up in the White Mountains, peering for about five hours at the bottom of a pond, it was a very shallow pond there. There was a state that you could fall into, where you could put yourself into that world, watching those tiny little organisms, little bugs and so on, where one little move over here would have terrific implications in terms of that whole little corner of the pond, and then it would subside again. I've also looked at the way trees grow a lot. That's just one example. That didn't have anything to do with teaching, particularly, but you're mentioning your neurobiologist friend. I'm very sympathetic to that idea, and I think we probably all have things outside of music proper that fascinate us, and that we are interested in finding out more about.

HAROLD MELTZER: I can think of an example of the influence on teaching on your work, the *Apollo and Daphne Variations*…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Oh, well, this is a very peculiar…

HAROLD MELTZER: This is based on a theme that you wrote for a theory class.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: That is an extremely vivid example, almost to the far, far extreme relative to the kind of mealy-mouthness that I was coming up with before. That is a, this came about because, well, I can't resist telling the story, I'll try to be as absolutely brief as possible. Have you met Ron Bashford, Harold's partner? [laughs] Partner! The word partner doesn't mean the same thing it meant 20 years ago. His collaborator.

HAROLD MELTZER: Collaborator and college friend.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Ron was in a theory class of mine. Turns out we were studying Schumann, and going through the whole letter key thing, you know, the DSCH business.

FRANK J. OTERI: Like fugues on Bach's name… You can play with 9 pitches…A B C D E F G, then H is B natural so B has to be B flat, and S is Eb. I call it "pitchtalk."

LEWIS SPRATLAN: It turns out this guy's name is B A S H F O R D, 6 out of the 8 letters work.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: It is loaded [sings] "nee da da dee da daaaa" So the assignment was to go off and write a little 16 bar piece a la Schumann. Character piece, if possible, using code letters that way. So, Ron, I said, "Ron, you're particularly on the spot, because you've got the most musically loaded name in captivity. And so he did a little something, and completely wasted his name, and in response to that, I said, here's what you could have done with B A S H F D, and I dashed it off that night, and I brought it in for the next class, and it is in fact, the seed from which this entire piece grew. I didn't even think of the name of it. It has an aggressive first 8 bars and a serene second 8 bars, and literally, five minutes before I got into class, I said, oh, God, I've got to get a name to this, let me see, aggressive, serene: *Apollo and Daphne*. So I just scribbled out *Apollo and Daphne* on it. It was completely, it didn't generate from the idea of Apollo and Daphne; it was after the fact. So what Harold's talking about, is that piece, in toto, is actually, that little piano piece is quoted about 6 or 7 pages into this piece and gives rise to the whole series of variations that then, it's variations on that tune that came out, and on the front part of the piece is kind of subliminal, arising from the murk of the materials that finally cohere to that. So that's a particular example of teaching and composing…

5. MUSIC AND GEOGRAPHY

FRANK J. OTERI: We talk about California composers, and a "California sound." For years, the expression "New York School" has been bandied about for painters and poets and now it is frequently used to describe the music of Cage and Feldman and their cohorts, and other composers there now are the heirs to this. And people talk about midwest composers. To some extent, you're an outsider from the compositional centers that we think of in this country. And last week, when I listened to a tape of *When Crows Gather*, I thought to myself, "God, you know, I could never write this piece. I've been in New York City my whole life." You know, it's such a 'not New York' piece. It's such a 'not city' piece.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: But it's not an Amherst piece, either.

FRANK J. OTERI: No, but it's a piece that is so in touch with nature and is so organic.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, that's a great compliment.

FRANK J. OTERI: I was blown away by it, I was just sitting there, and I thought, this is so unique, it's a poetic response, it's a response to nature, I mean, to me, nature is concrete, traffic lights are my trees, buildings are my mountains, you know… They really are. New York City is what I know and it is what has shaped who I am. So I wonder how being in a small college, living in a small town, has shaped you as a composer?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, it might have freed me, in one sense. But I really have never felt that I'm part of an Amherst school or the Western Massachusetts school or even a New England school. That's why I jutted in a moment ago "it's certainly not Amherst music." I am referred to occasionally as a New England composer, I think that's very casual, I mean, I'm a composer who lives in New England…

FRANK J. OTERI: …You grew up in Florida.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, yeah, sure.

FRANK J. OTERI: And your family's from Alabama.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Montgomery. My people are all from Montgomery, the Montgomery area. So that's a whole other conversation. I don't feel like I'm an Amherst composer or a Western Mass. composer. I feel like the nature thing is interesting, and I think you might be onto something there. I mean, I'm extremely responsive to nature, and I guess it's nature, not in the concrete sense of nature, but in the more, sort of, ordinary sense of nature…

FRANK J. OTERI: Or extraordinary, if you would.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Yeah, yeah. So it could be that that might, you may be onto something there, I mean, it could be that my access to nature and the accessibility of

nature and my propensity in that direction could be tied up in this. The particular piece that you mention is very, very, expressly in that direction, I mean, even the title, it arose from an experience of nature, I mean, I don't know if you read the program notes for that piece…

FRANK J. OTERI: You mean the imitation of the sounds?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Yes, right, right, the very end, the frank imitation of it. But it's not, it's not all about nature, the piece, the part of it that you mentioned, the overlay of the hymn, and the Charleston and the ragtime and so on, is actually about my mother-in-law, who is an Indiana woman, and this is a little digest of my three fondest things about her.

HAROLD MELTZER: Is that where you got that?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: That's where it comes from. She was a conventionally Protestant religious woman, from a farm in Indiana, and she would sit at the piano and play little hymns like that. Totally untutored musician… And I've seen pictures of her, she was something of a flapper, and that's where the kind of Charleston-ish thing of it comes from, and then the other element is the ragtime, those are things that were from her, she used to play rags at the piano, too. So this was a little homage to this woman, she had just suffered a stroke, and was essentially not in this world anymore though her brain was completely active, and it was sort of a contemplation of her imprisonment, and that's what I was responding to in that piece. This both is and is not a programmatic piece. I mean, in general, there are things that are frankly programmatic: as you mentioned, the evocation of the crows … But there are also some very, very secret things in it. I mean, one of the sections is about a housebreak, it's a most violent one, I think it's the 3rd or 4th unit. We were robbed one day, we came home and all our valuables were taken, the TV was gone, the silverware, everything, and I had imaginations of them going up in my kids' room. So there are little bits of their, kind of, closet versions of favorite tunes of my, I don't know, Harold, in that little place where the 3 clarinets go [sings] "puh da doot da dut da ting/ Puh dat dit dit dee da dung." Lydia, our daughter, was watching at the time a little kids show that had a jingle: [sings] "Love somebody / Yes I do / Love somebody / Who are you?" Something like that. So, I mean, that was my little nod to this bandit, this burglar, this vile person being up in my daughter's room.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: And then, naturally, my son Dan, at the time, I'm trying, it's a little bit awhile ago, but then, at that same point, there's a little theme from *The Love Boat* in there, my 12-year old was watching *The Love Boat* all the time. This is all very disguised, and there's a lot of violence in that same movement. And it's the violence of the intrusion of this bad man or men or whoever they were. That is true of a lot of my music. Now, I don't know, going back to New York, Boston, you know, West Coast, blah, I don't know how all of this fits into that. In a way I do feel sort of free to do anything I want here. There's no school that I'm trying to get a check mark from, you know, or anything like that. I think that it goes both ways. If I were more, you know, if I

were more a part of some school, I'd probably have more performances than I do, because I'd be taken up by that school and sponsored by them, and so on, but at the same time I think that that might have its cost, in terms of trying to, sort of keep writing more like what it was that got that kind of response.

6. MUSICAL HEROES FROM IVES TO MINGUS

FRANK J. OTERI: When I was listening to *When Crows Gather*, the composer that came into my mind was Charles Ives.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Oh, big one for me. Of course. He was another New Englander, of course.

FRANK J. OTERI: Who do you admire? Who are your heroes?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well, Ives, enormously, and not just because of, sort of, the New England stuff. The freedom to layer things in Ives is something that I've loved about him from the very first music that I heard of his. Nothing's off limits to compound, and unlike things can live together and so on. That's a deep idea to me. Yeah, you know, so interesting that you should mention that. He is a very, very important figure to me. But, well, I, my heroes are, I mean, some of my basic heroes are the same ones that any composers, you know, the giants of this century, you know, the Viennese composers and Stravinsky, and, less so for me the sort of, earlier American composers apart from Ives. I mean, the whole, sort of, you know, Virgil Thomson end of things is a part of American music that just doesn't interest me very much. I've always found it overly obvious, or something like that. But as far as the deep for… and then I adore Boulez, and little bit less so Stockhausen, I, very, I like the recent Finnish people a lot.

FRANK J. OTERI: Magnus Lindberg?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Lindberg, Saariaho, and so on… Berio is a tremendously important composer to me. It's not going to be a very surprising list… Something very important also that I have to say. I grew up, college age, luckily, I was in New Haven, and I went to New York practically every weekend, or very nearly every weekend to hear the great jazz players. And they are enormously formative and central in my music. You know, Bird, Mingus, Miles Davis… These are people that I heard in their heyday, in the late '50's and early '60's. My music is loaded with jazz, sometimes it becomes a little evident, and other times it's much less evident. Art Farmer, Blakey, are very, very deeply important to me…

FRANK J. OTERI: When you were saying "this section represents this, and this represents the burglar coming in," I was thinking of Mingus, in terms of, you know, that each aspect of whatever chart that he was working on actually often does refer to things, like the "Fables of Faubus" or "Pithecanthropus Erectus."

LEWIS SPRATLAN: That's an absolutely accurate perception of yours, yeah, tremendously accurate. As far as me and New York, it's mainly the great jazz players in New York. If I have a big regret in that regard, it's that I get down there so seldom.

HAROLD MELTZER: As an aside, one of the great pleasures of having these composition seminars as an undergraduate was when you finished a piece, the bop elements of any piece came to the fore when you would demonstrate it, not so much by sitting at the piano, but by turning the pages and actually singing the fastest line you

could and you were practically scatting. You wrote a piece in the late ‘80’s called *Penelope’s Knees*, which was a double concerto for saxophone and bass and ensemble, and your rendition of the saxophone solo sounded like Ella Fitzgerald on speed.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: I did a lot of scatting. You know, there were buddies of mine when I was an undergraduate, we would just go in the hallway and scat a lot. It was very big. Vocal responses to things are very important to me, and sometimes in very abstract ways, too. I mean, there have been plenty of pieces of mine that have come about just through vocalizing, that, and not scatting tunes, particularly, [scats] “Waaah ‘n yoo su wow,” you know, something like that, will be the very first idea that comes to mind for a piece, and it will go from there, and I consider that, you know, it’s a vocalization of some sort. And I don’t know, it’s hard to say exactly what, well, I don’t know what the roots of that are, I’ve been singing in church choirs since I was that big, so the voice is a very natural thing to me, I don’t feel, what I just did is not out of church choirs, especially, but I don’t know what to say about that. It’s just, there it is. Am I coming close to saying something valuable to you about this question?

FRANK J. OTERI: Oh, yeah.

7. UPTOWN/DOWNTOWN

HAROLD MELTZER: We've been talking about being an outsider, and not being an outsider, and what that leaves you free to do. And I was thinking about the other piece that got premiered on the same concert as the opera, the new piece, *Sojourn*, for 10 players, and I remember this from when it was only a beginning MIDI file, and we talked about the piece. Your preface has this pair of sentences which are a lot about being an outsider. "Just as Sojourner, the brave little mini-tank, with the hinged proboscis, takes the lithic temperature of various objects on Mars, so the sojourner takes the psychic temperature of various clumps of society here on Earth. This piece is about both." Now, this seems to tie together everything from your interest in various scientific processes that you mentioned earlier, to being an outsider, to commenting on things both musical and non-musical, and I was just wondering, you know, what does this piece say about where you are now, and how you feel as an outsider at this stage?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: First of all, before this conversation came up today I don't think I ever thought of myself as an outsider. That idea had never particularly occurred to me, although once you posed it, it makes sense, it makes all kinds of sense. But so, I certainly had no thought of myself as an outsider in regarding that piece. The business of what it's really about does derive from, I mean, I'm very interested in astronomy and astromechanics, the engineering aspects of space, and I was totally captivated just on a most personal level by the little Mars rover, you know, we've all seen it on TV, it goes up and it sticks its snout out, and at one point its wheels go up. It's a thrilling thing to me, that sort of accomplishment, but, and the idea of, you know, and I knew it was named Sojourner, and it just sort of started cooking to me that, this little thing is sampling rocks on the surface of Mars, and through life, we sample things all the time, too. The minute we walk into a group of people or a room or something we sort of size up what's going on psychologically in that scene. I just started thinking about those parallels. And then, the heart of the matter in this music is these three, the three big movements in it are called Probe 1, Probe 2 and Probe 3. And each one of them is supposed to be an agglomeration of the Martian and Earthly perspectives. The way they blend together is quite different in each one. But that's what gave rise to it. Now as to far as, the sort of outsider issue, I'm not sure how that ties in. You tell me. I don't know what it, what is there about?

HAROLD MELTZER: Well, you're taking the psychic temperature on Earth. It seems you're taking a step back to take that look. Someone who's in the middle of it…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Okay, I see. Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. That makes some sense. But as far as my not being a part of a school, it's both liberating and confining, in its way, as far as being in the circles of things…

JAMES MARANISS: In the valley here, in the Connecticut Valley, there are other schools, and there is a community, maybe provincial, to some degree, but certainly not a school. And there are other composers that I know, and that Lew knows, too…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Oh, sure.

JAMES MARANISS: And performers that are known nationally, people who are really first-class musicians live around here, so it's not as if you're in the woods somewhere.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Right. No, that's very important to say. I mean, it's not a school, but it's not an arid spot as far as musical resources.

FRANK J. OTERI: But it's also not a political hotbed. New York City has sort of projected itself onto the whole nation with this notion of uptown and downtown, and it refers to geography in the borough of Manhattan. And, you know, we sort of superimposed this onto the whole nation. If you're below 14th Street, your music has to sound a certain way. Elliott Carter lives in Greenwich Village, and for years, Steve Reich lived on the Upper West Side.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: I can't comment on if I lived uptown or downtown, but I mean, if I were living in New York, I'm not tremendously sure, here I am, from the vantage point of someone who's about to turn 60, so I've been at this for a while, and I have my own habits of how I look at things. But I like to think that if I had been living in New York, I wouldn't necessarily have wanted to write either uptown or downtown music, but how can you say? I might have fallen into the sort of feeling that I needed to write what was politically important to write at that time. I can't say; I just don't have the kind of hindsight to do that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Certainly, you've written music in the 12-tone system. In fact, Harold said on the way up, that when you were teaching composition to him, that's the first thing you taught him to do.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Is that a fact?

FRANK J. OTERI: And he was writing serial music, for what, 6 years after that?

HAROLD MELTZER: Yeah. I didn't start by…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: But Picker had a lot to do with that, though…

HAROLD MELTZER: Yeah, well, strangely, he was so far away from that itself.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: It's the only way he knew, I might even say that it wasn't necessarily 12-tone, but it was highly, highly systematic, the pieces that you were writing.

HAROLD MELTZER: Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: And it was interesting because at that point in time, you know, we're talking about the late '80's, it really ceased being the central musical language for so many composers.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: There's very little serial music in my opera. Basilio's music is serial, the king, very conspicuously in that interview, the, yeah, their, and Basilio's first

meeting is very, very, very intricate serial music, with all sorts of fixed registers, things going on, which was symbolic of his frozenness and his star gazing. The only serial music in that piece, is Basilio's music.

FRANK J. OTERI: And there's no 12-tone writing as far as I can see or hear in *When Crows Gather*.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: None. None.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, do you still use rows in your music?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: No. Well, actually, in only the sloppiest way. I had an orchestra piece premiered just this past Sunday, and the middle section of one movement actually is serial, but not in the least bit post-second Viennese school. If I can just say a few words about that… When I did use serialism, it was definitely from the sort of Webernian persuasion, I mean, I just love the sort of symmetry and the mathematics of it, and the fun, sort of the mathematical-like fun of it. That was the part of serialism that most intrigued me, and I felt like I just said pretty much what I had to say, oh, I certainly would appropriate it for something which was just exactly right. But it's not especially ideological. I don't feel that that way of thinking about music has exhausted itself. I mean, I think there's still ways in which individual impetuses can be expressed that way. I never felt ideologically about it before or after. It was very much in the air when I was studying; when I was a student it was very much in the air…

FRANK J. OTERI: Powell…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: … and I sort of appropriated it, because that's what everybody was sort of doing. You know, I think, on some level, he certainly encouraged me in that direction. I remember, he sent me to an awful lot of Babbitt pieces, and some of his own.

FRANK J. OTERI: There was an article by Matthias Kriesberg that appeared in the *New York Times* that decried all the people who have equated 12-tone composition and serialism with communism, and the collapse of the two being, sort of, analogous events…And it was a bit of a rant…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Very chewy stuff, but it doesn't quite nail the true heart of serialism's demise: the fact that the way the system was taught made it seem as if all you had to do was "follow the rules" and you had a piece of music. This approach, of course, produced a lot of bad music and non-music. It also replaced real teaching, which entails opening the ears and teasing out of the student something truly fresh and truly personal.

FRANK J. OTERI: The gist of the article was essentially saying it's so upsetting that serialism is getting equated with communism, and his last point was so true. He said if anything, neo-Romanticism is equal to Reaganomics. They did come into being at the same time!

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Neo-romanticism is very boring to me. Not because it's necessarily a bad idea, but usually it's just so horribly practiced. You know, if you're

going to take that on, for Christ's sake, be good at it! And it so seldom is. It just becomes a substitute for imagination a lot of the time to me. I don't want to mention names, but you know what I'm talking about. It, to me, is one of the weakest, it's the most, it's one of the biggest collapses in, of will, in American art.

FRANK J. OTERI: But it's been enormously successful.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Tell me about it… So what? So it's been successful. I think it will be a black mark on the history of the last 15 years. Oh, no, are you a neo-romantic?

FRANK J. OTERI: Not exactly…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: If you are, I'm sure you're a very good one. Look, the funny thing, when you hear some of this stuff, well, for example, *Penelope's Knees*… The *Apollo and Daphne Variations*, is in Db major, I mean, great spans of it, and I would own up to its being a neo-Romantic piece. But it's good, and it takes Romanticism to the next step. It doesn't just go over the same ground. Also bad minimalism, I think, is boring. Good minimalism, I love, I'm not against minimalism. It's really made a very, very big impact on me…

FRANK J. OTERI: *When Crows Gather* has elements of minimalism…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Absolutely…

FRANK J. OTERI: What would be an example of good minimalism?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Oh, Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*, Six Pianos… *In C*.

FRANK J. OTERI: I was joking in the car… you know, in 1964 the Pulitzer Prize wasn't awarded. I said, well, that's the year they should have given it to *In C*.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: They decided there was no adequate piece?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Is that a fact?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Has there ever been another year that…

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah. '64. '81, '65 and '53, the year they didn't give it to *4'33"*.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Really? Terrible. No, *In C* should have gotten it that year!

8. OTHER PULITZER WINNERS

FRANK J. OTERI: Ultimately, the Pulitzer is uptown recognition. After all, it's administered by Columbia University…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Has a downtown piece ever won the Pulitzer?

FRANK J. OTERI: No.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: No?

FRANK J. OTERI: No. Never. And, you know, I was compiling a list of composers who, you know, are significant in our history who have never won the Pulitzer. We came up with an interesting list.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: It's a glorious list, I imagine.

FRANK J. OTERI: Cowell, Roy Harris, Cage, Feldman…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Cage never won? Wow.

FRANK J. OTERI: Ruggles. Lou Harrison never won. Reich, Adams, Glass, Rochberg, never won. But Babbitt also never won, although he received a special commendation at some point, which I think is interesting, too. And another major twelve-tone composer Andrew Imbrie, who is not based on the East coast, never won. Luening and Ussachevsky, neither of them ever won…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Davidovsky?

FRANK J. OTERI: He won.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: He did win?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yes. '71.

HAROLD MELTZER: Star next to his name – Ralph Shapey never won.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Yeah, I know that story… That's an astonishing list.

FRANK J. OTERI: And, but by the same token, you know, some of the composers who did win, we don't really think much about anymore. John La Montaine, Gail Kubik, Quincy Porter, who was actually one of the founders of the American Music Center and a major force at Yale for decades, you know, won, but his music isn't done very much these days; yet, it's so weird, there are also these works that are really part and parcel of what we think about in terms of American music: *Appalachian Spring*, 2 of the Carter quartets, Ives' 3rd, Barber's *Vanessa*, I mean, these are pieces that are all part of our musical identity as a nation…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: In the canon, really.

FRANK J. OTERI: In the canon. So it's a weird…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: …contradictory mix.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's an odd mix. And so I guess, to bring this conversation full circle, for you, I thought we'd speculate on how you fit in the trajectory of winners of Pulitzers. This is loaded, I know…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: What could I possibly say? I don't know. I love a lot of the winners on your list, I mean, their music is tremendously important to me. I also love a lot of the losers – I mean, the non-winners.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right. [laughs]

LEWIS SPRATLAN: But trajectory? God. I must say I've never given any thought to that. I've never thought of the curve of the Pulitzer Prize. I don't know. I'm still very much in the flush of it. Look, it's probably going to get this opera put on. I'm in a very selfish mode of thinking about it right now.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, but that's probably the first time anybody who's won the Pulitzer has ever thought that it's going to get a performance of the piece!

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Yeah! As far as I know, it's never been awarded for a fragment of a piece, well, this is a major fragment, I wouldn't exactly call it a fragment, but it happens to be, you know, it's at the heart of the matter, too, it's not just a little corner of the piece. But what's most extraordinary, I'd be surprised if there's any other Prize that's been awarded for just a part of a piece like this. Which actually flatters me quite a lot, that this beat out whole pieces. My little part of a piece beat out a whole piece… I think that what that must mean on some level is that, from this act, they are able to extrapolate that it's probably a good opera, although they were very careful to award it for the second act, concert version. I mean, they did not say for the opera itself. But that is sort of an interesting twist to things…

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, "Perform my opera. The second act of it won a Pulitzer Prize!"

LEWIS SPRATLAN: It is very strange.

JAMES MARANISS: Another thing that might be said, although it might sound absurd, you should, with regard to the Pulitzer Prize, you should take into account that Calderón is in the equation. Calderón is this great playwright of the 17th Century whom the German Romantics thought was even better than Shakespeare, and who, at least can be spoken of in the same breath as Shakespeare. Perfectly realized by Lew's music, and insofar as somebody, a great writer can find his realization musically with a composer that elevates a composer to a range of consideration beyond the ordinary.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Very well said. Part of what is compelling about this piece has nothing to do with me, at all, in a certain sense, and that's the greatness of the drama

itself. The flip side of that is that there have been many horrible operas written on great, great literature. I happened to see one, well, I've seen several, but I've only seen one I think was on great literature, a great source work, *Medea*, it was by… I can't even remember the composer's name, but it was the piece that beat this out in a competition that the New England Conservatory mounted just around 1980, or so. I won second prize in the New England Conservatory – Rockefeller Opera Competition around 1980, and I went over to Boston for the premiere of the prize-winning piece, which was Medea, and it was…

[Everyone laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: But based on a play by Euripides, an equally important playwright.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: An equivalent playwright to Calderón. So, I mean, true enough, JI sound caviling when I say this, but it is, you're completely right, it's the greatness of the work, of the Calderón, obviously the piece couldn't exist without it. But your projection of the truth of that piece and your libretto, and my ability to understand both your libretto and the source, all were involved in making this happen, for sure.

FRANK J. OTERI: I think, for all of us out there, your winning the Pulitzer Prize was thrilling. I must confess, I did not know who you were until you won the Pulitzer Prize.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Did you know who Melinda Wagner was before she won it?

FRANK J. OTERI: No.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Well.

FRANK J. OTERI: This is thrilling, because I think it says to all of us out there that it isn't necessarily about just the people who you think are going to get it, who are always getting the performances or who are in the inner circle, and it gave me an opportunity to learn about a new composer, so it is very exciting on that level.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: You know, it was terrific for me, apart from the individual pleasure, alongside that, it was hey, you know, somebody like me can win the Pulitzer. Not just that I won it, but that somebody like me, that nobody's ever heard of…

FRANK J. OTERI: And I think that's really important…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: It's not true, by the way, that nobody's ever heard of me. I mean, there are a lot of people in New York, people on the West Coast, people in Chicago, blah, blah, blah, blah. You know, I'm not any kind of household name, amongst even sort of people, you know, the general run of new music listeners.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, your music has been recorded on Gasparo. And, as Harold pointed out, I'd actually heard a piece of music of yours on one of his Sequitur concerts the year before.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Oh, the *Vocalise with Duck*?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, and then it clicked.

9. AN IDENTITY AS A COMPOSER

FRANK J. OTERI: I guess this is in sort of the advice to the rest of us composers department, what to do? How do you make people aware of your music?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: I think there's a prior question: what do you do to write good music?

FRANK J. OTERI: Okay.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: That's the first question. Well, this goes a little bit back to the discussion on Mel Powell. I think you just dig deeply down into yourself to find out what is special that you have to say. I think that's has irreplaceable value in composing. It's the most important thing. Second thing is to hope that you are taking the art somewhere, you know, that you're contributing, that some stone is being turned over by your work. But as far as getting out there, I have hooked myself up with various wonderful performers fairly early on and cultivated those relationships. John McDonald, an excellent pianist and also a fine composer, has performed my Toccapsody a number of times. Boston Musica Viva did several performances of works of mine very early on after I came here in the beginning of the early '70's and after that the Dinosaur Annex Ensemble in Boston, who has done 3 different pieces of mine over the years in multiple performances of all of them, I have been extremely pleased with these performances, and I haven't felt a tremendous need to go out and find others. The one area where I felt frustrated is in orchestral performances. I've sent orchestra pieces around to all the big orchestras and I've had very little success, the exception being the Florida Orchestra. You know, it's not a major symphony orchestra; it's a very, very good one, by the way. An excellent young orchestra…

FRANK J. OTERI: You wrote a major piece, *In Memoriam*, about the 500th anniversary of the conquest of the Americas, as it were. The so-called "discovery"; I won't use the term discovery, and this is a work that's been done…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: One time.

FRANK J. OTERI: One time. I mean, the score, this is a significant thing to spend your life working on for one performance.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Definitely. I'm sure hoping the Pulitzer's going to make a difference in that regard, too. This is one of the pieces that Schirmer doesn't have in its catalog that I want very much for them to get in there quickly and to distribute around. I'm a slob. I should have sent this piece around a lot more than I did. Partly, the thing that I regret, my worst quality is self-promotion, and that devolves mainly from laziness. And also, I have a lack of discipline. I'm very disciplined in certain regards. My wife is after me constantly to set aside x hours a week to do self-promoting things, and I just don't do it. I hate it so much. And if I hadn't been hearing my music, I think it would be a different thing. But I've heard it, and I've heard good performances of it. But I'm very bad about that, I should have made up, you know, 50 copies of it and sent it around to everybody. And I'm hoping that because of this new association with Schirmer, that

they'll take on some of that. I realize that, you know, you can't expect your publisher to do everything. But I plead slovenliness on that front a little bit, and I guess… Look, you know, if it hurt enough, I would do more of it. It just doesn't hurt quite enough. Which I guess, means that, on some level, I don't care that much. Although I do! I mean, this is very, very complicated because... I got a pretty good performance of this piece. It wasn't a great performance. It's a very demanding piece. It was entirely local. Entirely local. I mean, nobody came in from the outside to do it. I used most of the really good musicians in the valley, and I wouldn't say that I haven't heard the piece, but I certainly haven't heard it in an optimum way.

FRANK J. OTERI: And certainly, you know, the world hasn't heard the piece.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: The world hasn't heard it. There's no public recording of it.

HAROLD MELTZER: This brings up a question because you said that your interest in having a piece go out there flags at little bit after you've feel that you've had a good performance of it – begs the question of your relationship to audiences.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Begs the question?

HAROLD MELTZER: Well, in a way, if you feel comparatively satisfied, once you've heard it, the question is, who are you writing for? And, you know, what is your interest in your piece having a life past the premiere?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Very great, but as soon as I say that, it's obviously not great enough to get me off my ass more… Not great enough to get me off my ass to do more about it than I do do, so it's a vexed question. I mean, I would… I have no interest in privacy. It's not as if I love having only 6 people hear my music. Nothing would make me happier than for everybody to hear my music. I would love that to happen. But obviously I don't love it enough to do more about it than I've done. So, I don't know, there must be some psychiatric commentary on that, which I don't know about.

FRANK J. OTERI: It leads to an odd question to pose to you at the very end of this discussion, rather than at the beginning, but, when did you first think to yourself, growing up, "I'm a composer. This is what I want to do"?

LEWIS SPRATLAN: In a formal way, probably not until halfway through my undergraduate years, although I was writing music a lot before that, but I didn't have an identity as a composer. It was just something I did because I felt like doing it. I hadn't hung out my shingle, so to speak, to myself. But, I guess about halfway through my college years… It's when I switched from being an English major to being a music major because I realized I was spending all my time doing music. And then once I switched to being a music major, I thought, I considered myself, well, I was an oboist. A very, very active oboist. I played a lot. And then, all right, there was a time when I was thinking about, should I become a professional oboist, and reeds convinced me, I mean, just the horror of, oh, the life of an oboist is just one precarious day after another precarious day…

FRANK J. OTERI: And I've been told that you're a fabulous conductor as well.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Yeah, well, thank you, I am a conductor. But I have never had any interest in being a professional conductor. I did think about being a professional oboist but never a conductor. And so, so, it came down to say, you know, which way am I going to go? The thing is, I was writing more and more music. It just… It's not as if I suddenly one day said, oh, well, I'm hereby going to be a composer… It just sort of, you know… When I applied to graduate school in composition, I guess that meant that I was a composer. I was an honors candidate as an undergraduate in composition. So, by that time, I guess I identified myself…

FRANK J. OTERI: And when you thought of yourself in terms of that vision of what a being composer was, did you think, well, that means having works performed by orchestras, recordings, new music ensembles, a teaching career – what did you think…

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Teaching was certainly not part of it. Teaching is just what I did because I decided, well, that was a big fork… Do you go and wait tables in New York or…? I got married fairly early on, and, I don't know, I can't retrace all of this, but at some point, the decision to go the academic route was… Those were my models, after all, you know, these academic composers. Well, they were certainly more than academic composers but that's how they made a living.

HAROLD MELTZER: Mel Powell.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: Mel Powell, Gunther Schuller, and Yehudi Wyner. Yeah, so that was the model that was around me. They seemed to have the best of both worlds. They had time to write. They got good performances, and they got a paycheck. There was a paycheck coming in. They all seemed to enjoy teaching, too, which I reckoned I did, you know, I did a certain amount of TA-ing in graduate school and I was very good it. I kind of fell in that direction… It wasn't a huge tug and pull, it was just sort of the course things more or less naturally took. I have frequently had second thoughts about it. My wife and I have plenty of "what if"-type conversations…

FRANK J. OTERI: And she's a singer, she's a performer. And you've written a number of pieces for her over the years.

LEWIS SPRATLAN: You know, I wrote good music when I was in high school. I had a saint of an oboe teacher, a man by the name of Dominique-René de Lerma, who was far, far more than that. He was a great, great musician – a student of Tabuteau, this fount of all oboe playing in the United States, who was in Philadelphia… All modern oboe playing derives from Tabuteau, and my teacher was a student of his. He was a Corsican madman, Corsican American, a fabulous person. I would go for these 3-hour oboe lessons, about 1 hour of which would be oboe playing. The rest, he would say, "Now today we're going to look at the *St. Matthew Passion* by Bach." I was nine. You know, it was a huge, huge part of just my musicianship, not particularly my identity. After a few years, you know, he said, "you should write something." So, with absolutely no more than that as a go, I would scribble down something and bring it to him at my next

oboe lesson. They weren’t composition lessons, but he would approve or disapprove of this and that, and he was able to arrange things, I had some performances of mine when I was still in high school. But, again, I just wasn’t thinking about career at that time. But on the other hand, you can’t not count these things…

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