

Larry Polansky: The Art of Apostasy

The only job for a composer is to compose. Like a mathematician, a composer begins with axioms, certain assumptions, from which he or she can, with any luck and with a great deal of persistence, prove new theorems of the perceptual, intellectual, and emotional universe. The more the composer questions those axioms, and formulates new ones, the more revolutionary, and, to my way of thinking, significant, that composer's work.

Culture and tradition are generally not fertile areas for the radicalization necessary for visionary art. However, cultures and societies rapidly embrace and extoll those that they more easily understand, and in our case, as Jews, we have tended to label as "Jewish artists" those artists whose work has a fundamentally programmatic relationship to our heritage, and, as a corollary, has a tendency to be conservative in relation to artistic history.



Larry Polansky

I was asked by the editors to produce an article on my own work in "Jewish music". I have never really considered my work to be Jewish in nature, nor do I consider the work of some of the great composers of this century (like Schoenberg for instance) to be Jewish, even though my own work and that of Schoenberg's (please forgive the rather immodest comparison) frequently use artifacts from Hebraic culture to express musical and extra-musical ideas.

I have always found it curious that in the books on "Jewish composers" and "Jewish artists", the most important ones seem to be consistently overlooked. One will frequently hear of the work of Bloch and Binder, but almost never, in this context, of the revolutionary developments and thought of Schoenberg, Mahler, Steve Reich, or for that matter, Bob Dylan. I think this is partly due to the fact that the visionary artist must in large part be the heretic, no matter how deeply he or she believes in a given spiritual doctrine. The artist's role is to question — not to reaffirm — and it is no coincidence that all four of the above musicians had and are having gloriously apostatic lives.

But I do think of my music as the music of a Jewish composer, and of a Jewish composer living in America. In this respect I have been interested in the hybridization of culture through composition and in deliberately "erroneous" expressions of orthodoxy. Although this may seem contradictory, I am also interested in a clearly chauvinistic expression of "cultural faith", believing strongly that only

through a mastering of one's own culture can one be tolerant of another's.

Below is a more or less chronological annotated list of my compositions which seem to me in some way to express beliefs or ideas of a fundamentally Judaistic nature. It is in no way a complete list of my related activities in the area, which include everything from Torah cantillation through Yiddish folk music to producing and performing in concerts of avant-garde music by Jewish composers. One such, in 1978 at the Hillel Center in Urbana, Illinois, featured the work of Steve Reich, Larry Sherr, Shulamit Ran, Morton Feldman, and Arnold Schoenberg. Nor is the list a representation of my work in general, which includes extensive writing about and performing of American music of all kinds, more conventional chamber music, and long standing research, composition and design in electronic music.

V'LEEM'SHOL ("And to rule") (for 5 flutes); first of a set of 9 projected cantillation studies, in which the Shabbat morning Torah trope (17 verses for each piece, in order, from *B're'shit*) are used as melodic and morphological primitives upon which complex computer aided transformations are made. Each piece, like V'LEEM'SHOL, is preceded by an introduction in which the Torah portion is sung (by a woman), and accompanied by electronic and other instruments. V'LEEM'SHOL will be premiered in March at the Center for Twenty-First Century Music, Mills College, by Los Angeles flutist Ann Laberge. (1984)

RESTING PLACE/ANN'S SOLO BOOGIE, an electronic work commissioned by New York City choreographer Ann Rodiger and performed by her on numerous occasions. RESTING PLACE . . . is based on the Yiddish workers' song "Rueh Platz", and the end of the work is an almost conventional recording of that song for female voice and plucked strings (Berkeley resident Beth Sandweiss and myself). Realized at the Center for Contemporary Music. (1983)

FOUR VIOLIN STUDIES ("What to do when the night comes" for James Tenney); four virtuosic and minimal pieces for solo violin, intended as psalms and spiritual commentary (the first is entitled, programmatically, "V'yaal Moshe"). Performed on many occasions by Bay Area violinist Mary Oliver, and choreographed by Ann Rodiger, performed in both New York and the Bay Area. (1981)

ELIAZER'S REVENGE for Malcolm Goldstein. One page "haiga", or visual score, for violinist/composer friend, based on a Maccabean story.

*(A form of Japanese painting, usually includes a haiku.)

PSALTERY. My largest and personal favorite of my electronic works, for bowed Appalachian psaltery in just intonation. A complex intonation experiment which I feel, more than perhaps any other piece, expresses my (rather abstruse) feelings about the canons of knowledge and cultural affirmation. Like the "Sh'ma" (see below), written about the same time, it is a deliberate attempt at a piece which springs from the most radical traditions of Hebrew and American cultures. Realized at the University of Illinois Experimental Music Studios. (1979)

PRAYER WITHOUT WORDS. For cello, and male and female voices, this short piece has never been performed. (1978)

SH'MA: FUGING* TUNE IN G; for flute, alto flute, violin, viola, cello, bass, and percussion. One of my more extended chamber works, this is a setting of the European nineteenth century tune for the "Sh'ma Yisrael" in a style whose meta-structure and philosophical underpinnings are based on late 18th century American frontier culture "art" music. It consists of a set of "fuging" variations, each exploring a different idea of imitation and simple motivic development. This piece won the 1978 BMI young composers competition, and has been published by *Soundings Press* (Sante Fee, NM). It was premiered at Mills College, 1980, David Rosenboom, conducting. (1978)

*(18th - 19th Century American term for fugue-like style.)

17 FOR THE 36 (A HYMN); for ocarina, soprano sax, flute, and female speaker; based on a text by Gershom Scholem about the lamed vovniks. * Published in *Generation* magazine, Princeton, NJ. (1977)

*(The 36 hidden just men, due to whose existence the world is permitted to continue.)

IN MEMORIAM: STEFAN WOLPE; solo trumpet. Requiem fanfare for one of the great Jewish composers of this century. (1976)

LARRY POLANSKY is a composer, theorist, writer, performer, and electronic music systems designer. He is currently a staff member at the Mills College Center for Contemporary Music, and teaches electronic music, orchestration, composition, American Music, and fretted strings in the Mills Music Department. He also directs the Mills Contemporary Music Ensemble, and performs locally and nationally in a wide variety of idioms. In addition, he serves as the Chairman of the Oakland Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.
