An Interview with Larry Polansky

by

Daniel Junas

Although Larry Polansky is only twenty-eight years old, his musical experience ranges from jazz to bluegrass to avant-garde to country and western to rock and roll. He works both with highly sophisticated formal ideas and with source material drawn from a variety of indigenous American music forms. He draws strands from diverse materials to weave a style of music that is at once a personal vision and a celebration of American music and culture.

He has won the BMI Young Composers Award, and his work has been compared favorably with that of avant-garde notables John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

He is currently employed at the Center for Contemporary
Music at Mills College in Oakland, California, where he teaches electronic music, orchestration, and guitar. He is also conducting research on the nature of musical perception, and he is developing highly sophisticated computer languages for musical composition. He was recently made the director of the Contemporary Music Ensemble.

Junas: You've done a lot of things that fall under the rubric of American music. Could you give a rundown of your early musical experience in this regard?

Polansky: I started out playing jazz. It's a normal way young people start out learning music on the East Coast. I didn't have any classical training. But you learn pretty much the same things as a jazz player...reading, harmony. I played in all the standard high school things. Marching band, stage band, swing band. I did a lot of jazz gigging and rock and roll gigging. I was also very interested in folk music at an early age.

Junas: You were a part of the folk boom of the sixties?

Polansky: I was right in the middle of that. And since I was a guitar player I could fit into any idiom. A nice eclecticism built up at an early age. I used to go down to Union Grove, North Carolina when I was 14 or 15 and play with bluegrass bands. I had a sincere interest in various types of music. I have just continued that to the present day.

Junas: When did you get interested in composing?

Polansky: I actually started composing at about the age of 14 or 15. It always seemed like a beautiful activity, even though
the things I did back then were sort of primitive. I think the first major thing I did was a stage band arrangement of "The Girl from Ipanema." I was hooked from then on. I kind of sniffed around classical music, but again I had no real training. We played pipsqueak arrangements of symphonic music in high school. We played one movement of Beethoven's Ninth arranged for half-orchestra. I remember the first Bach I ever really became intimate with was an arrangement for concert band, which I played tuba in, of the Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, and I wondered where Bach got a concert band in the 1700's.

Junas: That was in between movie themes?

Polansky: Right. First you played "Hawaii Five-O," then you played Passacaglia and Fugue. Basically I was pretty ignorant. About the last year in high school I started to educate myself about the European role, and in college I got a straight ahead classical education.

Junas: That was at New College?

Polansky: At New College in Florida and the University of Illinois and the University of California at Santa Cruz. I did them with a vengeance. For about three years I became a zealot about the classical, European, contemporary tradition and learned all the standard things pretty ferociously, and then gave them up again.

Junas: Why did you give them up?

Polansky: They cease to be interesting once you've learned them.
You keep an intimacy with them without actually using them.
The things I am actively interested in, the things I can contribute to are not the classical European tradition. And I also have developed a tendency toward the American tradition. I am trying to make those roots equally powerful as the European roots. That is, not take Beethoven, Bach, and Brahms as my forebears, but Billings, Ives, and Bill Monroe.

Junas: When did you become interested in avant-garde traditions?

Polansky: As a composer, immediately I felt the things to look at were the things being done now. That wasn't so new, because I had done that in jazz all along. And in rock and roll and folk music. My tendency is to look at the current state of the art and work backward if necessary, but always to start with what is the most interesting currently. If you start the other way you tend to get waylaid and never make it. That's what I've done all my life, start with the goal and work backwards.

Junas: When did you first decide to compose seriously?

Polansky: As I said before, I started at an early age. But when I got to college I started writing seriously a lot and I started learning the Western European tradition. The person who really put me over the edge was Jim Tenney. I always wanted to be a composer, but I wasn't quite sure what that meant. He and Gordon Mumma and Sal Martirano and David Rosenboom and Joe Pizzaronne gave me concrete examples of what a composer was... and within a relatively short period of time Lou Harrison was
a big influence.

Junas: How did you develop after your association with Tenney?
Polansky: I think that a good teacher is someone who is like you but better, and who has the internal characteristics you'd like to have. Meeting Tenney brought that out. Here was a guy who had gone a lot further with the formal things I was thinking about in the bridge between music, mathematics, and philosophy. After meeting Tenney my music has gone through several stages. Lately I find myself moving radically away from the things I did when I worked under him.

Junas: What were some of your early pieces like?
Polansky: The works I consider serious and still play a lot are Four Voice Canon #3, the Stochastic Studies, Hoy Comienza, Una Nueva Etapa, and Sascha's Song (for the Peoples of Chile), among others. What these pieces all have in common is very stripped down ideological and thematic material. I like to think of them as elegant, although another word might be boring. They're not dramatic in any way. They're usually a single idea developed in some complex way. Four Voice Canon #3 is probably the best example. It's a simple mathematical idea I got from group theory that reflects on perception and has theoretical ramifications ... and that idea is developed in all its ramifications without ever using any other idea -- that is the idea of a single permutation function moving in a continuous way. The work is realized on a computer, and that simple idea permeates every parameter of the music. These pieces are a little strange because they don't do what the listener expects. They don't bring the listener
up or down. They just start and keep going.

Junas: A common reaction to these ideas is that this is music to be thought about more than felt.

Polansky: I don't think so, obviously. It depends on who is feeling it and on the levels of our feeling. I think that if to a certain extent the formal ideas are not new the feeling is somehow spurious. There are people who go to the supermarket and are moved by the muzak. And that's as much a reflection on the people who are moved by it as it is that this music uses the standard nineteenth century dramatic conventions. On some archetypal level they are the same devices Beethoven used. He did it more interestingly and a hell of a lot better, of course. But basically what pop music does is distill these and sock you over the head with them. One of the main thrusts of twentieth century music is to somehow change those notions of what music should do to make you emote. I think our emotions are changing. Look at New Wave. People are moved by it in any sense of the word. New Wave is probably out now, maybe we should be talking about Surf Nazi music. But my point is there is an emotion there that people have learned to have. I don't think the emotions and the intellect are separate. I think the role of music is to integrate them, and that's what I try to do with my music.

Junas: What is the latest stage of your music?

Polansky: Somehow, without giving up those formal ideas my work
has started to integrate as source material American music of various sorts -- jazz, folk music -- and it has become my own version of folk music. I haven't stayed completely in the academic music world in the last ten years, which is maybe my only salvation. I've done a lot of jazz playing and arranging, a lot of bluegrass and traditional music and rock and roll. I haven't made any distinctions between them unless I have to.

Junas: For commercial reasons?

Polansky: Right. But I don't think I've ever done anything, no matter how banal and commercial, that doesn't interest me. All the things I have ever done have all been arrangements that were somehow new. I have never been interested in leaving a genre alone. And I always integrate things I have learned in other disciplines. It always creates problems for musicians who are in one discipline. If you give a straight ahead bluegrass mandolin player something that's kind of "out there" you have to convince him to play it. You don't play a lot of Broadway shows that way.

Junas: One piece that seems to have been transitional between these two stages was Psaltery. What can you tell us about this piece?

Polansky: It was the end of a whole, long period for me of serious experimentation in just intonation and the harmonic series, and in static, monothematic pieces. It also ushered in a new stage of interest in American music.

Junas: Could you define just intonation?

Polansky: Just intonation is a tuning of intervals using rational numbers -- rational string lengths -- and it's very closely related to the harmonic series. It's as ancient as the Greeks and as
modern as Lou Harrison and Harry Partch. I don't make an issue out of it because it should be taken for granted. If you're composing with pitches you don't have to take the tempered scale as a given.

Junas: Now could you describe Psaltery?

Polansky: Psaltery is a seventeen minute chord continuously modulating. The sound source is one complex tone derived from a very small, bowed, Appalachian psaltery. The chord is then built up into one of huge harmonic content. Generally there are 17 or 18 pitches sounding at once, and those are all completely tuned to the harmonic series. There was tremendous amount of multitracking involved in the piece. Like a lot of my music it explores an abstract notion of continuity, the whole notion of continuos perceptible change.

Junas: Does this have anything to do with music being fun? I guess I am getting back to the question of intellect versus emotion.

Polansky: The idea is to get all this stuff happening together. There is some very sophisticated music that musicians have a hell of a lot of fun playing. Jazz players love to play Coltrane's "Giant Steps." That has as much to do with its being a nice tune as its being a bear to play. It has really difficult changes, and there are some incredible theoretical things that happen. I don't think modern composers are any more guilty of overintellectualizing than classical composers or Indonesian composers or Bill Monroe. Any really good music has a powerful intellectual base.
You can bet your ass that Bill Monroe was thinking very hard when he put together that first bluegrass band. It may not have been in terms of mathematics, but still in very formalistic terms. If you think about it, bluegrass is as much an intellectual breakthrough as a musical breakthrough.

Junas: How so?

Polansky: Bluegrass is taking the "hillbilliness" out of string band music. That's a very sophisticated intellectual decision. Getting rid of the haphazard, the "sloppy" beat, cleaning up hillbilly. One of the biggest changes Bill Monroe made was not to get them playing in strict time, to define the roles of the instruments. It was to get them to wear the same cowboy hats and to wear those cute shirts. It's an example of country music making an intellectual leap.

Gram Parsons is another great country musician who made some sophisticated decisions. He formed a new hybrid out of country, honky-tonk, rock and even rockabilly, and it seems to me he did it very carefully. There wasn't anything haphazard about it.

Junas: Since you brought up bluegrass, let's talk about one of your more recent pieces, which is an adaptation of a bluegrass standard called **Little Maggie**, arranged for two mandolins. What motivated you to write that piece?

Polansky: One thing is I like the tune so much. I should describe the piece. **Little Maggie** is a set of variations for only two mandolins -- which is a strange instrumental combination -- of the tune. All the verses are played in standard bluegrass style, except there is no band. And there are a lot of instrumental
variations, ranging from twin mandolin fiddle type solos to "out" patterns, or rhythmic percussive patterns. They're actually very expressive and romantic. It tries to be emotional entertainment. A lot of my pieces have gotten that way. Another You, the harp piece, is seventeen variations on "There Never Will Never Be Another You." They are really free composed.

They are meant to be interesting variations, although many have strict formal bases. Little Maggie grew out of my interest in extending traditional jazz from that very idiom. It doesn't really need to be done in jazz. There it's been done all along. But in traditional music it's an interesting idea, that is to integrate traditional music with some newer forms. I decided to play it the way I really heard it, which is "out," because I've been playing "out" jazz all my life. It's my own written down improvisations on the tune. That's the way I consider all my music now.

Junas: As written down improvisations?
Polansky: Yeah. My own compositional instincts operating on the tunes I like to play. Generally when I write down variations they get thought out quite a bit. But I don't even differentiate between playing and composing, because my own musical thoughts and styles have become integrated in my playing as well as my writing. In some ways I consider myself more of an arranger than anything else.

Junas: It seems that that process is a fairly natural one that you might expect to find, say, in a primitive culture that did not have written forms of music.
Polansky: Right. You are working against a process that was imposed on us. You have to deal with all these questions that are really non-questions. Are you writing classical music? Are you writing jazz? Is it an arrangement or is it a composition? These are non-questions. They don't exist unless you make them up first. I've had to come full circle to do things that seem quite natural to me. I had to write string quartets before I could say, "Wait a second, I can just sit down and play the piano, guitar, or mandolin and do the things I really want to do." Or I could write them out as string quartets. Now I don't have to make the distinction, "Now I am writing in the European style."

Junas: Do you think you are part of a larger trend? Do you think American composers are getting to the point where they can take the tradition and do whatever they want?

Polansky: American composers have always been able to do that. That's the nice thing about us. European composers have had a pretty hard time of it because they've had more tradition. American composers, to paraphrase Duck Baker, are all pretty damn ignorant. Billings is the classic example of that, a guy who invented his own style because he could never find anyone to teach him the European style. There were no textbooks available. He heard a fugue, somebody told him basically what it was, so he said, "Ok, I'll do it." It's an innovation born out of a kind of ignorance. I think that's a tradition we should preserve -- not knowing too much, because it might do us some harm. You know, inventing your own instead.
Junas: Perhaps we're inventing a new culture that has not fully emerged yet.

Polansky: Right. A culture of invention. That's always been the image of America -- the rugged individualist inventor who creates something out of nothing, simply out of adversity. That's a good tradition to stay a part of. There are a lot of composers doing this in really interesting ways. David Rosenboom's music is now turning into an incredible hybrid of electronic, classical, disco, and avant-garde sound poetry. Every grad student at the Center for Contemporary Music has his own version of this hybrid and they're all equally interesting and wonderful. We have grad students who don't feel obligated to learn to read music very well, and they shouldn't because they don't need it, because it doesn't really have anything to do with the music they want to create.

Junas: I'm glad you brought up the CCM. Can you tell us a little about what you're doing there?

Polansky: Well, one of the most interesting things to me is my work with David (Rosenboom) on composition and performance languages. We're hoping to do some fairly interesting things in that respect. I'd also like to mention that I'm currently director of the Contemporary Music Ensemble at Mills, and we're always looking for new scores. Composers can send them to me care of the Mills College Music Department