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Interview with David Mecionis, Composer and Executive Director of the New York Composers Circle

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Abstract. In the present interview American composer David Mecionis, living in New York, recounts his formation as a composer, his activities at the New York Composers Circle and his musical compositions. The composer tells about his elder colleagues who have influenced his musical style and those composers who are members of the New York Composers Circle and about his work on coordinating contemporary chamber music concerts organized by this group, and also describes his musical style and his most significant musical compositions. Mecionis' music is composed for the most part in the twelve-tone technique, which established itself in the USA when Schoenberg moved there in 1933, and after Stravinsky embraced it in his late music in the 1950s and 1960s. In a number of his works, the composer turns to diatonic harmonies and a neoclassic style, as well as to an avant-garde idiom, characterized by atonal harmonies and new textural instrumental effects. Despite this variety of musical means, the composer's music is endowed with a unified concise, thought-out musical style.

Keywords: David Mecionis, composer, New York Composers Circle, contemporary music concerts, American music, twelve-tone technique

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Интервью с Дэвидом Мечонисом, композитором и исполнительным директором Нью-Йоркского композиторского объединения

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Аннотация. В данном интервью американский композитор Дэвид Мечонис, живущий в Нью-Йорке, освещает ключевые аспекты своей биографии, процесс композиторского становления, деятельность на посту директора Нью-Йоркского композиторского объединения и особенности собственной музыки. Мечонис вспоминает старших коллег, оказавших влияние на его музыкальный стиль, рассказывает о членах объединения, своей работе в координации концертов современной камерной музыки, организованных этой группой, а также описывает свой музыкальный стиль и основные сочинения. Творчество Мечониса базируется преимущественно на серийной технике, получившей широкое распространение в американской музыке после переезда А. Шёнберга в США в 1933 году и обращения И. Стравинского к ней в сочинениях 1950–1960-х годов. В то же время в целом ряде случаев композитор обращается к диатонической гармонии и неоклассической стилистике, а также к авангардной идиоме, для которой характерны атональная гармония и поиск новых фактурных возможностей инструментов. Несмотря на разнообразие композиторских приёмов, в музыке Мечониса наблюдается единый, отчётливо кристаллизованный авторский стиль.

Ключевые слова: Дэвид Мечонис, композитор, Нью-Йоркское композиторское объединение, концерты современной музыки, американская музыка, серийная техника

Anton Rovner: *David, please tell us, where did you study music and musical composition, who were your teachers? Is there anything you wish to tell about the early stage of your compositional activities?*

David Mecionis: I will give you an answer you probably did not expect, which is: I did not study composition anywhere. I am essentially self-taught. I always had the idea since I was young that I wished to compose music. But it was a long time before I was able to accomplish this. I was born in a town called North Babylon, which is located on Long Island. I started my musical studies due to the fact that there was a guitar in the house. Had there been a piano, I would probably have become a pianist. I come from a lower middle-class family, and when I was young, I had no notion of a higher education. I taught myself to play guitar. When I went to grade school, I played the baritone horn or the euphonium, and also the trombone. I went to Nassau Community College on Long Island. When I became older, I began playing in bands. I became involved in rock music, specifically, progressive rock, because it is the most compositional form of rock music. I played guitar and electric bass guitar in various bands, including a wedding band. Later, I moved to New York City, where I was one of two guitarists in a rock band, which also included a drummer. When the drummer left our group, I also taught myself how to play percussion instruments and

continued playing a drum set in the same group. Then I felt the situation had run its course and left the group. Prior to that, I had been listening to classical, romantic and modern music for years. So I decided to explore the possibility of engaging myself in classical music. I have always liked the idea of working with people and achieving results that were surprising to myself. I had already begun composing little pieces of music in the classical vein.

So when I was 40 years old, which was in 2008, I made the decision to become a classical musician and a composer. By that time, I had already read a number of textbooks of harmony, including Arnold Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre*, translated into English as *Theory of Harmony*, as well as Anton Webern's book of lectures on music, *The Path Towards New Music*, which I have always been very fond of. At that time, I had not heard any twelve-tone music, and when I had familiarized myself with it, at first, I did not like it, since I thought it to be artificial and constructed cerebrally. Later I understood it much better, and I grew to like many of the compositions by the principal twelve-tone composers, most notably, those by Webern.

The only composer I had ever studied with was New York Composers Circle member, Richard Brooks, whom I had befriended from my days at Nassau Community College, where he was a professor. He recognized that I was a true musician, that I was well ahead of what I had been taught then. He taught me to listen to music in an inquisitive manner and search for the ideas present in each musical composition. After I finished my studies, we stayed in touch. Many years later, I asked him to give me some instruction in musical composition, which he did. The first thing he offered to do was to teach me twelve-tone theory, and under his tutelage, I became inspired by it. Joseph Strauss' book *Post-Tonal Theory* provided great inspiration for me. It gave me a new way to look at music. I was granted the opportunity to engage in a free approach to composition, where I would not know where I would arrive while I was composing a piece. I was not looking for ways of creating melodies in my head, but I was looking for numbers and rules that would inspire me, and then I would take it from there. Often what I would arrive at in my music would be totally different from what I conceived of at the beginning. In 2017 Richard Brooks sponsored me working at the New York Composers Circle. I knew about the New York Composers Circle before that, but I did not think I was in a position to join it, prior to that. So at that time, I joined the group.

Around the first or second salon, the composer whose music attracted my attention was Raoul Pleskow. A piano piece of his was played, which produced a great impression on me. I made the acquaintance of Pleskow, and asked him whether he could give me some composition lessons. He came from a background that appealed to me, having essentially continued the traditions of Schoenberg, Webern and late Stravinsky. He answered me: "I don't really consider myself a teacher, but we can talk." I brought Raoul my compositions, and he commented on them, gave me helpful advice. At times, he could be very critical and could make harsh comments on some of my pieces. But we remained very friendly, until he passed away. He was an absolute genius, and it is a shame that his music is not very well known. His music was performed at the New York Composers Circle numerous times. In the future, I have plans to perform more music by deceased members of our group, and I hope we would be able to raise enough money for that. Among the latter was Elliott Carter, who was very closely associated with our group. He had never joined us, but he was present at its inception, and he helped us out numerous times in various ways. Besides him, there was John Eaton, Raoul Pleskow, Brian Fennelly and others. Their names are regularly present on the back sides of our concert programs.

A.R.: *Have there been any composers who have influenced you as a composer among the classics and among the contemporary masters?*

D.M.: The three main composers who have influenced me are: Mozart, Webern and Stravinsky. I can also add Benjamin Britten to this list. It is not that I do not like the romantic composers, but they have not contributed to my development as a composer as much as the previously mentioned masters. I have to start with Mozart. I am not claiming to have composed anything on the level of Mozart, but merely stating that he presented a model for me of what I wished to achieve. Many people in America and, I am sure, in other countries as well, would give greater preference to Beethoven. But for me Mozart provides the answer to many important questions. His works encompass a lot of variety of styles, genres and moods, especially in his operas, but also in his chamber music, which is exquisite.

If you look at the lives of the three composers I have mentioned, two of them died young—namely, Mozart and Webern. Stravinsky was luckier in terms of the longevity of his life, so he was able to accomplish so much, having had distinctly different phases in terms of the styles of his music, having concluded his musical output with *Requiem Canticles* for chorus and orchestra composed in 1966. I think it is true that had Mozart and Webern lived longer lives and had they composed more music in their advanced ages, all of music history would have been different. Mozart's Requiem was the beginning of a new chapter of his life and musical output, which has not been written. There would have been somebody to stand beside Beethoven and offer him support in his life. So the subsequent development of music would have been essentially different.

The same could be said about Webern. In the wake of Webern's death, a particular group of composers appeared, who claimed that they were the ones who truly understood the principles of his music. Boulez and Stockhausen were convinced that they were carrying the torch of Webern's musical style. We all know that Webern was a master of short musical compositions. Yet he himself never seemed to notice that his compositions were becoming longer towards the end of his life. He was searching for ways to lengthen the durations of his works in an organic way. The mind boggles at the idea of what a twenty- or thirty-minute work by Webern would sound like. The composer was extremely honest with himself and his music. He started his musical output by creating extremely short pieces, in the first place, because he was an extremely sincere musician. He could not honestly provide additional length to his music, unless it was substantiated out of an inner musical necessity. His last composition, the Cantata No. 2 was fifteen minutes long, and that was longer than virtually all of his other compositions. So had he lived longer, he would have developed an innate, original means of development that would have generated longer compositions, possessing organic types of musical elaboration. This would have influenced younger composers, as the result of which music history would have been altogether different. And that would have shut down a lot of post-Webern opinions of what music should be like, what is right and what is wrong. And maybe, a way would have been found to teach this kind of listening to the public. Because it seems that there has been such an angry pushback against those particular postwar trends in music, that there remains a resentment against the very idea of twelve-tone music. Personally, I have been laughed at for saying that I write twelve-tone music.

A.R.: *What is the role you are playing in the leadership of the New York Composers Circle, and how does it affect you as a musician?*

D.M.: My position of executive director at the New York Composers Circle is essentially the sole form of work I have as a musician. I have

never taught at a university or a conservatory. The New York Composers Circle has an immense amount of musical activities, and this is why I have become so active in this group. When I began my activities in the group, I noticed that there were aspects missing in the planning and putting together of concerts. Certain members of the group were becoming tired of doing organizational work for the group. Other members were present there for a longtime but did not have the wish or initiative to put in any effort in helping with the organization. It takes a certain kind of person to plan out activities and then carry out these plans. There has always been an aspect of my personality, where I am not very competent at fulfilling certain objectives—for instance, I am not very good at self-promotion. If I took more care in promoting myself, I would have advanced much further in my career. However, as it stands, I like helping other people. As the result, I receive a tremendous amount of personal satisfaction from providing assistance to this group of composers, and it helps the entire group, not just me. This ties in with my personal code and with the fact that I am Eastern Orthodox Christian by religion. I have become a member of the American Eastern Orthodox Church, which is located on East 2nd Street in the East Village in Manhattan.

When I began my administrative work at the New York Composers Circle, I started contributing to it immensely, and this was recognized by its founder, Jacob Goodman, as well as by Deborah Kaye and, of course, Richard Brooks. Deborah Kaye, an active member of our group and its former executive director, spoke to Richard Brooks about me, mentioning that before I decide to do something else, I should be made the head administrator and the concert director. When Jacob resigned and, soon after that, passed away, I was appointed as the artistic director. Whereas a concert director was not actually an official position, an artistic director was one. Recently, I ran for the position of executive director and have received it. Good leadership always contains the element of service in it, and service is something I wanted to provide for the group. It means dealing with a lot of difficult and extremely annoying situations, but it definitely does have its rewarding aspects, as well.

A.R.: *Could you describe your musical style as a composer? Do you have any particular principles of style, or do you follow different styles? You have different compositions, which can definitely be attributed to different styles, including tonal, atonal and twelve-tone. Please elaborate on this for us.*

D.M.: I do seem to follow different stylistic patterns in my music. It is quite true that there have been many composers whose music has been associated with a particular definite style, including the aforementioned composers who are my favorite ones. Mozart is probably the hardest to spot a definite style. Stravinsky had at least three different styles, but in each style he added his own particular touch and remained himself.

While I do not have what may be defined as a single rigid style, I do have a set of convictions. The first of them is that I think the ear, even the untrained ear, on some level, does understand musical structure. I started from the conviction that music consists of ideas and sound. If I were to take a work by any particular composer—whether yours, mine or Stravinsky's—and talk about it, I am taking it over into words, and thereby I am doing an unfortunate thing to it. It is much worse than taking a poem apart and analyzing it. Because if you do that, you are taking apart something that should be heard and experienced for it to be really understood. So I believe that this is what we are doing, when we are so convinced; so when a person who is composing music hears things in there what is going on, he or she perceives them innately. And I feel that at the core of what is happening that we, humans,

experience music as a language-based entity, continuously resorting to images, as we listen to music. When describing music, we compare it with various extramusical objects, characters or notions. But I think that hearing music as it is in itself is much more substantive to our senses and more vital to our emotions. But, if I were to introduce a visual comparison, I think that when we really listen to music, we perceive it as a sculpture in the mind that is built or happens over time. Time is an important aspect. So, when our memory is at work in hearing music, when or memory function is operating with music as a piece of sound, it should be perceived as what it is, and not as an illustration to a visual image or intellectual concept. Given from that, I hold the principle that if I take some melody, even the most well-known tune, *Happy Birthday*, and have it sung by a person with an unsatisfactory perception of pitch, with no sense of rhythm and a terrible voice, even if they would say the words in a foreign language, you would still know what tune that was. That is because the singing of the melody is based on intervals and their directions, even if they are wrong. When I read Stravinsky's biography written by Joseph N. Straus, called *Stravinsky's Late Music*, already after I had developed this approach of thinking, I encountered an utterance of Stravinsky that "music is interval." So when I talk of this technique of interval rotation I incorporated in my music, I must stress that it liberated me in my musical approach. It provided for me a freedom to move through the entirety of a musical composition and have there be something that is relatable throughout, even if I had not come up with a formally viable system. It is just the presence of the notion that this is what makes a musical idea, it is that fact that you have this shape, in a sense, helps me perceive music in an integral way, which helps me compose my musical works. And I keep that initial musical shape going, even if it becomes greatly altered, atomized or stretched out in part. I have learned how to create the contrasting elements in my music and to emphasize their distinction, because I stay as conscious as I can of the shape of the first element that is subsequently contrasted. It is probably one of the reasons why musical composition takes me so long.

A.R.: *This is a very viable approach, and I am sure that it must have affected the manner in which your compositions are written. Could you tell us about your individual musical works, and how they demonstrate your musical convictions?*

D.M.: I consider my Saxophone Quartet to be the first legitimate work I have written. I attempted to write musical compositions before, but this was essentially my first successful work. I wrote it before I knew anything about the twelve-tone technique. It is a one-movement composition that is entirely tonal in its harmony, quite lengthy in its duration—17 minutes long. It is endowed with a form that can be said to be derived from that which is present in the finales of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto and Saint-Saens' Cello Concerto—a variety of sonata-rondo form. Likewise, across my entire composition, there is a rondo aspect present, as well as an aspect of sonata form. Throughout the entire work, I find a way to mix these two forms, and it ends with a distinctive fughetta section. This work was premiered by the Mana Quartet, which played it a number of times after that. I was very honored that they put this composition on their concert program together with works by Philip Glass and Charles Wuorinen.

The first work I wrote after learning about the twelve-tone technique was the *Obstinate Duet* for flute and clarinet. When I learned about the twelve-tone technique, I thought that everything was going to change in my musical work habits. Before that, every composition I wrote took me a long time to compose. Then, when Richard Brooks asked me to compose a work for flute and clarinet, I came up with a twelve-tone row,

which I liked. I was not planning to get into the great depths of the twelve-tone technique, but wished simply to write a classical twelve-tone piece. I named my piece *Obstinate Duet*, because I wanted to continue incorporating the twelve-tone-related melody in an "obstinate" way, making use of the entire "magic square" formed out of the row. I thought that everything was going to change for me, because I wrote that piece from the beginning to end within a week. I had never composed any music I ended up approving of in such a short a duration of time. This provided a proof for me that I loved twelve-tone music. Nonetheless, I have never written another composition that quickly since then, either. I think it was just a floodgate situation. That piece simply had the melodies stated once on each instrument, and at the end of it, the last three notes of it suggested a transposition of the row, and then the two instruments start playing together. All the counterpoint, the hocketing and all the other development that the listener hears can be perceived strictly in the context of the twelve-tone row.

After that, I composed a work for oboe, bassoon and viola called *Trio in Two Parts with an Interval Between*. This original ensemble of instruments was thought of by me, the idea of it was to have a non-standard ensemble of two woodwinds and one string instrument, featuring an unusual blend of textures, including the particular nasal sounds from the woodwind instruments, and a middle-range filler instrument being the viola. This composition was performed at one of our New York Composers Circle concerts. In it, I did something I have done frequently since then—once I came up with a twelve-tone row, I had the wish to manipulate it differently from the standard twelve-tone works by other composers, as well as from the way I had incorporated twelve-tone rows before. In his late music, Stravinsky used twelve-tone pitch rotation, according to which the statement of a row could begin with a second, a third, or subsequent notes. In other cases, new forms of the row can be extracted in the "magic square" diagonally. In either case, certain segments of the row may be used to create vertical sonorities, or chords. So, following this train of logic, I decided to rotate the intervals, rather than the pitches of the row. Since this work, I have occasionally made use of this method in various other compositions of mine. If you rotate the intervals themselves, you achieve very different results, especially, if you change the directions. This changes the pitches from what they would be otherwise. Obviously, there is an interval between one pitch and the next one, so my approach involves manipulating intervals, rather than pitches. This creates the next task I am faced with—defining the directions of where the melodic sections in my works move and what kind of development they undergo.

Recently I wrote a piece called *Waiting in Six Lines* for soprano and flute, which was performed in one of the last season's concerts. The title involves a pun on the fact that it is on the fifth hexagram of the *I Ching*, the Book of Changes written in ancient China. In this book, the fifth hexagram is called *Waiting*, and hexagrams essentially have six lines. I always thought that hexagrams must have something in common with hexachords present in the pitch continuum. In the future, I plan to return to developing these ideas in other compositions for other instrumentations, using the *I Ching* to arrive at how a musical work is structured. I thought that piece worked out very well and I want to continue working along these lines. Another composition of mine is my *Fugue* for organ. This work is tonally centered around the pitch *D*, but it reaches out to a broad spectrum of diatonic and chromatic harmonies. In its pitch structure, it presents a fantasia on two pairs of z-related hexachords. The z-related hexachords occur, if you take twelve notes, and extract a hexachord from them. The remaining six notes most often form either some inversion, retrograde or prime form transposition of the first

six notes. In the case of the z-related hexachords, both have the same interval content. However, the first of the hexachords will transform itself into the other hexachord, no matter what you do with it or how you alter it. So, I thought that this would be an intriguing form to work with, in order to carry out these alterations of pitch content as present in the two respective hexachords. In the beginning of this work, only six pitches are used for a while, then at a certain point they are replaced by the other six. Even when they are transposed, the interval content always remains the same. During the process of the piece's development, I could transfer myself to the other z-related hexachord, if I felt the necessity of a change, either of chords, or of the tonal key or pitch center. This process ends up being very effective and works in its way, when applied compositionally.

Recently, I have composed a piece for solo violin, called *Couple au lit*. This work has an entire story behind it. During the pandemic of 2020–2022, I was looking for how to uphold our activities with the New York Composers Circle and provide alternate forms of activity for the composers, since we were not having concerts. We ended up organizing a series of recording sessions. Our sound engineer was Jeremy Tressler, who was an excellent master at the job. He has his own studio in Bronxville, where musicians could come in and record their playing. The composers were able to receive recordings of their works, instead of hearing them in live performances, which at that time was not possible. I was looking out for ways to reach out to the musicians. I told the members of the New York Composers Circle that if anyone has an idea that all the composers could get involved in, they should let me know. Composer Linda Marcel, one of our members, suggested me to contact violinist Dan Flanagan in California. He is an art collector who collects paintings and sculptures. He came up with the idea of making videos of himself standing before paintings and talking about them, after which he would play some musical work, for instance, by Bach. After that, he thought of the idea of asking composers to write music for him, suggesting them to look at the art works in his collection, and if anything inspires them, to write a piece of music about it. As a composer, I usually do not have the tendency of creating musical pieces depicting works of art or literature. Nonetheless, since Linda Marcel told me about this, I decided to involve myself in this project, and I told the other composers in our group about it. One other composer, beside me, also joined this project. Having looked through Dan's collection of paintings, I picked up the painting *Couple au lit* by Jean-Louis Forain, which I was very impressed with. It was a very eerie and surreal painting. While it was not that I immediately had music flow out of me when looking at this painting, nevertheless, I was happy to have this amazing art work associated with a musical composition I would write. This painting makes a particularly strong impression, partially because it is hard to see what is going on in it. There is a man sleeping, his face is a smudge, and there is a woman in bed next to him, but it is hard to discern if she is really a woman. Her ear that is facing him is very much lit up by the reflection of a light. It is even hard to tell whether or not she even is a human being. Another feature of the painting is that the room is completely bare, without any furniture, beside the bed, which adds to the surreal atmosphere of this art work. This is not a painting that would stand still, like some classical study; it is very emotional and stirring in its strange characteristics. I was delighted at the prospect of writing a musical composition that would be on the same plane as this painting. I proceeded to work intensely on this piece and added a fair share of colorful and extravagant instrumental texture to it. In addition, I endowed it with a very peculiar type of pitch organization based on numerical permutations: it has a centralized pitch center with various pitches surrounding it and departing from it at different

levels. This is a special kind of method of pitch organization devised by George Perle.

As the pandemic and the lockdown were continuing in their duration, the composers who formed our group were staying at home, composing their musical works, and some of them were inquiring me about my plans of writing this composition. At that time, I could perceive that I was not progressing in the least with composing it. I was speaking with Denise, my wife, who knew that I was on the verge of abandoning my plans to finish this work. As I was formulating this prospect to her, I had a sudden splash of inspiration, and the opening of that piece went right into my head. It was a particular musical idea involving the open strings of the violin. After that, I completed this composition fairly quickly. In this particular case, there were no twelve-tone rows present in it—I essentially caught a musical gesture, which turned out to be the appropriate one for this work. Although this piece has been labeled by some musicians as being twelve-tone, it is not so, at all. There are a number of spots in the work where the pitch organization of the piece approaches serialism, but it never quite reaches this level in full measure. It is based on textural development more than on pitch development. When I originally wrote it, I knew that I wanted it to be ten minutes long. It is very difficult in terms of instrumental technique. And this is not because I do not pay attention how to write for the violin. The violinist, who is an excellent virtuoso on his instrument, told me that he had to spend a lot of time learning this composition. Certain things were very trying for him, among them, left hand pizzicatos, of which I had plenty in the piece. He asked me to shorten the music, to make it easier for him, so I brought it down from ten minutes to six minutes. It was a little more elaborate in its first version, and there were a few ideas I had to take out, but as the result, it ended up having less repetitions than were present in its first version. As I was working on the piece, about two thirds done with it, and I already knew how it was going to end, there were only a few spots to be filled in, I found out that he was organizing a concert, now that the pandemic was over. He decided to sell various works of his art, so that he would have money. He had a concert program called "The Bow of the Brush" which was repeated in a number of venues in different cities in the US and various countries in Europe, including Carnegie Hall in New York. That performance in the latter venue was possibly the most prestigious one I have ever had in my life.

Elegy for Joey was written for my nephew, who, sadly, was killed while fighting in the war in Afghanistan, and it was performed at his memorial. This is the first piece in which I started working with z-related hexachords. I began elaborating them in order to generate some of the musical ideas for that piece. The opening gesture has the pitch content of one hexachord, which later on is supplanted by that of the second hexachord. At first, I became preoccupied with the pitch content, and afterwards it occurred to me that the piece needs to be understood by the listeners as an elegy. So I expressed the proper mourning emotions for it, including almost entirely romantic-era melodies, with which the piece concludes.

My *Five Mirror Canons* for violin and cello demonstrate my principles of serial writing at their very initial stage. The main area of focus in them is, particularly, the canon technique. I would begin a melody in one voice and have it repeated in the second voice. In this set of pieces, I used my theories to create substantive melodies that would break the old-fashioned rules. In the case of the mirror canons, it was going to be important, how to move the notes around from a high register to a low one, so that its mirror reflection in the second voice would move in a similar manner in the correspondingly opposite direction. That was actually a matter of practicality. Writing mirror canons was intriguing for me, because here I was presented with the constant challenge of

having the second voice follow the first one in reverse direction, i.e., upside down. It remained a mystery to myself, how I manage to achieve the results of maintaining the symmetrical structure in this set of pieces—it was a case of simple perseverance. The middle piece of the cycle, the third one, was performed on August 21 by itself by the Locrian Chamber Players. The entire cycle was performed in Moscow on February 12, 2023 at the Lermontov Library as part of the "Musical Bridges" concert series.

Following the same line of thought, I also wrote two *Table Canons* for two clarinetists. The *Table Canons* present musical material with canonic counterpoint occurring not only upside down, but also backwards. In a strange way, it was actually easier to write this work, because it was possible to hear the material of the music more clearly than in the *Five Mirror Canons*. In the case of these pieces, I just started writing them from the beginning, working on the complex contrapuntal development, because it was necessary to do so in a table canon. Proceeding straight ahead from the start, whatever the first instrument is doing, the second instrument will end up doing, from the beginning to the end, except that it will be upside down, or backwards, at the end. So I had to follow the two voices, as I was assembling them. The trickiest part of these table canons was the spot in the middle, because in them the two voices and the two directions will be converged. It was very difficult to carry all of that through in the right way. I wrote the piece for two Italian clarinetists, Guido Vanelli and Riccardo Benedetti, who are members of a clarinet quartet, and they played it at a concert of the New York Composers Circle. What is particularly noteworthy about it, which I never considered at first, was that when I was composing these pieces, I perceived them as very dry, modernist kind of conceptions, wherein the performers play each of the notes straight and receive what is generated. In a certain way, this corresponded with the precepts of ancient music, as well as the sound world Webern was striving for. But, being Italian, these clarinetists put in so much emotion into their performance, that the pieces ended up sounding very romantically, after all, since the players brought out an aspect of the music I had completely failed to consider in it, at first. Nonetheless, I ended up being very happy with this new dimension present in this music, having initially never thought of it myself.

In the *Suite in Ancient Style* for solo oboe, I was simply engaging in stylization of historically established stylistic musical patterns, using the old type of traditional tonality, which is engaging to do, at times. I also wrote a *Suite* for three trombones. One of its movements is called *Tribute*, and it is an homage to Webern and his Symphony, op. 21. No matter how varied my musical compositions are in their outward stylistic appearances, just about all of them adhere to the compositional principles I have told you about.

A.R.: *You have been active not only as a composer, but as an active member of the New York Composers Circle, having recently become its executive director. We would be happy if you could tell us about the history of the New York Composers Circle, from the time it was established and up to the present day. What have been the goals of this group historically, from the time of its inception?*

D.M.: The New York Composers Circle was established in 2002. Its founder was Jacob E. Goodman, along with a few friends of his. Goodman was an amateur composer—by profession, he was a mathematician, as it is written on his Wikipedia page, a specialist in "pancake theory" in permutations and geometry. The group started as a platform for composers to get together and talk about their works, become acquainted with other composers, and establish connections. It presented a rather humble approach, at first. The first events for contemporary composers organized were salons, where the musicians

presented the scores and recordings of their works and discussed them all together. We have conducted these salons from the very beginning up to the present day. Composers brought works they had already finished or were in the process of writing. The idea was even that a composer working on a composition, or who has just completed a work, could show it to his or her colleagues to receive some helpful advice about it. You are already familiar about how these salons go, since you have attended a number of them. At first, these salons formed the center of the group's activities, and composers meeting together in person presented a lively setting for the artistic growth and development of each one of them. During the pandemic, we were all forced to refrain from meeting personally, but, instead, to meet online through the platform of Zoom. Unfortunately, many composers have become so lazy as to continue tuning in through Zoom, rather than come to the meetings in person, even after the pandemic had ended. The problem with Zoom is that many people have grown accustomed to remaining at home, sitting in front of their computers, so they decide not to make the trip to attend meetings. However, it is so much better to meet in real space and talk to your colleagues in person. It becomes possible to know people, to become acquainted with them, and it results in having a great constructive environment. I am taking great efforts to induce all or most of the members of our group to return to attending the salons in person, as had been the case, originally.

At a certain point, Jacob Goodman had the additional desire of setting up concerts of contemporary music. The first concert, the only one to occur during that particular concert season, took place on May 4, 2003. It featured works by Deborah Kaye, Jacob Goodman, Patricia Leonard and David del Tredici, the latter being the most famous composer, among those present. But the group's concert activities were not in the least aimed at promoting famous names; they were directed at having works by New York-based composers performed, as good as you can get them, presenting them live to an audience. Another important goal on the part of the group was to add new members to it and give more composers the opportunities of having their music heard and meeting their colleagues.

As you know, we have been putting on concerts for some years. As it is currently constituted, the composers pay to have their works performed. Sadly, we do not have a situation in this country where the arts are supported, like they are in some of the European countries. Of course, one wishes there was more support for the arts available, but then the question arises: what kind of arts? In the rare cases the arts are supported, the pop arts get a definite priority, appealing to the state of the democratic notion of the predilections of the majority of the population. What we are trying to promote, chamber music, has a lengthy elitist history, so it gets frowned upon by many people, especially representatives of the foundations to which we apply for money. Jazz and rock music are supported to a much greater degree. In addition to that, the tendency is as such, that if an artist wants to engage in provocative behavior, or a musician presents himself as one that builds his own instruments, those artists have a greater chance of being supported by foundations. But if you want to perform "classical music," the majority of society will frown on you. In addition to that, we are a group of *composers*, which does not have much appeal. One thing that does get funded in this country are *performing groups*, not composers' groups. There are actually very few composers' groups existent, either in the cities or in rural areas. So we present a rare case of being a group of composers who support each other.

Now that I am the executive director of the group, I can say that what I and the board of directors are aiming for is really to make it a fine organization, where our concerts are organized

on a high-quality level, and members of the public, when they see the concerts of the New York Composers Circle advertised, they would feel that they have to attend them, since they would know they will experience some music that is new, relevant and created now. Even if any of the compositions in a concert program happens to sound old-fashioned, the listener would know that it has still been written recently for the purpose, and altogether, these varied works would comprise an interesting concert. The audiences that attend our concerts are very fond of them. Part of the reason for that is the assortment of different musical compositions, as well as that of various approaches to music on the part of the composers. Audience members who attend our concerts come up to me afterwards and tell me: "It was a remarkable experience. I have never been to a concert before where I had heard so many different and interesting musical compositions. When is your next concert?"

So, to get to the point, where this group is heading now—at the present time, without a sufficient amount of money to advertise and do other necessary things, it is very difficult to gather new audiences. Nonetheless, we are working on it the goal of solving this problem. The board of directors and I are making an effort to receive both public funding and private funding. There is a big push being made for that, on our part. A number of new people have joined our board of directors, who are ready to do new types of things I do not have the background in. I would not know how to tell you, how we are going to do things against the background of an outside environment where it is so difficult hard to receive appreciation, let alone, support for the arts. One day I hope to achieve the status quo where composers are not paying to have their pieces performed and we do things together where we have an increasingly higher bar,—not of professionalism per se, since it does not entirely matter if a certain composer is new at writing music, but of the quality and the excellence of their work, since it deserves to be heard by people. I have been increasingly interested in working with composers who have just completed their studies in universities or conservatories, and, frankly, even with those that possess very little musical literacy—personally, for me the latter does not matter so much, if they still have a musical talent. My approach is to support unknown composers on an equal footing with the famous ones. To give you one example, the John Eaton Memorial Competition has recently finished its annual session, and the winner was Robert Carl, who, while not being very famous, having been known only in a few circles, composed a musical work that was excellent. Another composer who won this competition was Yurui "Rain" Hou, who composed a work for clarinet, cello and piano. She has not been writing music long, but we were all fascinated with her trio. So worthy compositions have been written by composers, some of whom have been heard about by many people, while others were not, and we have represented both kinds.

Another idea with the New York Composers Circle was for it to form a sort of tent. If a person knows the name of New York Composers Circle, or if a person knows only the name of Robert Carl or Anton Rovner, then through looking at the New York Composers Circle they end up learning about many other composers whom they had not known about before. This aspect is very much demonstrated on our YouTube channel, where people can turn to for watching all the videos of our concerts, because they know about one of the composers and they will end up knowing many more. It must be emphasized that in the name of our group, the word "Composers" should be spelled without an apostrophe. At one time, I asked Jacob Goodman about this, whether he had left out the apostrophe, so that it would not look cumbersome in print, and especially on the internet. His response was that he purposely left out the apostrophe, because in English an apostrophe implies possession. And

the idea is not that it is a circle belonging to the composers, but rather that the composers *are* the circle.

A.R.: *What are your plans for the future regarding organizing new concerts, composing new works and having them performed?*

D.M.: I have an idea to compose a string quartet, which would actually be my first one. String quartets are the type of music that some composers decide to write very early, when they are still very young, and at times they turn out to be not very good pieces, while other composers wait for a while until they become very mature. I prefer to be among the latter, and that is why I have waited for so long to compose my first work in this genre, having written a saxophone quartet instead. I did not know any other pieces for saxophone quartet, when I wrote this piece. I did not want to commit the sin of composing something horrible for the medium. So now I hope I am equipped enough to write a good string quartet, I plan to write it in two movements, where the second of which would include a soprano. The piece is meant to be based on two serial rows. One of them, inscribed "Nine Tone Row" has a magic square utilizing nine tones to generate all the inversions and retrogrades and their transpositions. I wanted to write music, using just nine tones, without ever using the other three tones, no matter what. So there are no pitches *C*, *C♯* or *E* in the first movement. The second movement will feature a soprano singing vocal music on a poem by Amy Lowell titled *Night and Sleep*. I plan to use only a section of a poem. Amy Lowell began writing these book-length poems that would almost be comprised of chapters and breaks from that. They are hard to describe, but every now and then she would go into some poem or another. Amy Lowell belongs to the Imagist trend of American poetry, similar to Ezra Pound. In this style, all the words should be used for images and should be minimalized as much as possible. I think that it is an absolutely wonderful poem. It took a while for me to choose a poem, but I finally settled on the one I am using for the composition. *Night and Sleep* is a poem I want to put across as the deepening of experience. We have all had that feeling where the night can just become so much more real. Something about going down into ourselves. A certain haze the way the air can name the sound. There is something quite maddening on the experiential level about night. In the music I was looking for a couple of different ways I could get the feeling of this image. So one of them was using only a select number of pitches and leaving out three completely from the first movement. The tempo is definitely much more rhythmic. There will be much more in-time and in-tune aspects to that. And when it comes out and goes out into the night music, the plan is that the notion of time, of a set pace will go completely away. The players will have to agree to a pace and will go through chords and the overlapping they will have, but it will be a timeless feel. In terms of pitch, I will use the structure I have mapped out in the nine-note magic square. I have already begun to construct the melodies and background structures from the rows. As you can see, the note *C* is replaced by *B*-natural. Given my principles about which I have told you earlier, I do write strictly using the rows fairly often. If I find that I have got some ideas to use actual music unraveling which is not in the pre-compositional graph, I vary the pitch structure I had in the graph.

The second serial row is twelve-note and is based on z-related sets. There is no way you can form the notes of one hexagram from the notes of the other. I have labeled the hexagrams as z-a and z-b. The first two are z-a and the second two are z-b. They are distributed among the first violin, second violin, viola and cello parts. So the cello would play only four notes, the first violin would only play the next set of notes, and so forth. Subsequently, the pitches would be transposed at various levels, and various chords will be assembled. Much of the musical material would

be based on the set [0, 4, 8, 1, 2, 3], and the set [0, 1, 3, 4] would play an important role in the development of the composition; the available pitches would be assigned to each instrument in the order I would determine as interesting, and chords would be derived out of them. This is the sort of thing I am going to do in order to compose my string quartet. In fact, I have already started to put together the chords from these sets. Obviously, it depends on how you space them. If you put the viola above the second violin, you get very different textures. When it comes to textural parameters, I do not serialize those, it does not particularly interest me. I just go where the mood takes me and let all that happen. That is what I am working on at the moment.

As for the concerts for the New York Composers Circle, I am working on putting together the programs for the upcoming season now.

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