



An interview with the American composer Steven Mackey

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Abstract

The article presents an interview with composer Steven Mackey, now celebrating twenty-five years as professor of composition at Princeton University, one of the leading universities in the USA. The interview discusses details of the composer's education and career, and focuses on recent works.

Keywords

Composers – composition – contemporary music – biography – United States

Resumo

O artigo apresenta uma entrevista com o compositor Steven Mackey, com 25 anos de carreira como professor de composição na Universidade de Princeton, uma das universidades mais conceituadas dos EUA. A entrevista inclui detalhes da formação e carreira do compositor e focaliza obras recentes.

Palavras-chave

Compositores – composição – música contemporânea – biografia – Estados Unidos

Composer Steven Mackey is marking twenty-five years as part of the composition faculty at Princeton University, a faculty that has had a marked impact on the course of American music since the mid-twentieth-century. We spoke by telephone on February 17 and 18.

A Californian rock-and-roller, just a few years too young (b. 1956) for the Summer of Love, Steven Mackey is a guitarist whose early interest in physics proved transferable to pitch-class set theory and contemporary music. He studied composition with Andrew Frank at the University of California at Davis, with the late Jack Lessard and the late David Lewin at SUNY Stony Brook, and with Donald Martino and Martin Boykan at Brandeis University. After one year teaching at the College of William and Mary, Mackey moved (still in his late twenties) to the Department of Music of Princeton University, where he was recruited for the spot left vacant by Milton Babbitt (who, though retired from Princeton, would continue to teach composition at Juilliard). That was in 1985. Since then Mackey has seen the entire music faculty at Princeton turn over, with the exception of his senior composing colleague Paul Lansky, who arrived in 1969.

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Mackey has an extensive and various discography. An early work, the *Rhondo variations* (1983) is found on the CRI recital by cellist Rhonda Rider, and his quintet *Never Sing Before Breakfast* (1989) on the CD by the same name from the Quintet of the Americas. The nineties brought collaborations with the Kronos Quartet and works for the Marimolin duo, as well as commissions from many notable ensembles, including the Chicago Symphony. Releases of his music on disc in the last decade have included works with string quartet and orchestral works, including the electric guitar concerto *Tuck and Roll*. Mackey's unique esthetic, which converses with both the high modernist Princeton tradition he found on his arrival, and the multifarious influences of various folk and popular musics, not only rock and roll, has meant that the cutting edge of Princeton composition has moved to what he describes as "vernacular-based indie classical".

Tom Moore: How long have you been at Princeton?

Steven Mackey: Twenty-five years!

TM: Could you talk a little about where you were before Princeton, and how you got there?

SM: My father worked for the government, so we lived a lot of places, but settled in northern California for high school and college. I was an undergraduate at the University of California at Davis. I was playing in rock bands, and my fall-back position in case I didn't become a rock star was to be physicist somehow (I started out as a physics major in college). In the course of my college experience I for the first time discovered classical music. Literally. I am sure I had heard ambiently some classical music, but I had never really listened to it until my junior year of college, when I took a music appreciation course. I had to take something in the arts, and I thought it would help further my rock career, and so I was introduced to this fantastic music. I fell in love simultaneously with masses by Josquin Des Prez, madrigals by Monteverdi, J.S. Bach Passions, Mozart piano concertos, Beethoven string quartets, and Stravinsky ballets – all this stuff hit me, and it very literally changed my life. It was within the first two weeks of taking that class that I decided that I wanted to be a musician. As a result, it took me six years to get out of college, because I had to start from scratch. I ended up majoring in music, and going to grad school. I got a master's at [SUNY] Stony Brook, a Ph.D at Brandeis, and got my first teaching job at the College of William & Mary. All through this time I am composing with the zeal of a convert – my greatest talent as a composer is my ability to focus myself with 100 percent dedication. Then after one year teaching at William & Mary, I was offered this job here at Princeton, in 1985, and I have been here ever since.



TM: That would be your silver anniversary, I guess. To go back a little, what was Davis like in the seventies?

SM: It was great. It had a great science program, which was what the school really emphasized. If you looked at the catalogue in the area of music, say if you compared Davis with Humboldt State – on paper it looked smaller. I didn't know anything about music at the time, so I actually tried to transfer from what looked like a small music department at Davis to what seemed to be a huge music department, with harp teachers, and marimba teachers, etc. at Humboldt State, but I just missed the deadline. I actually drove up there with my application for a midyear transfer, and slept in my car, and overslept and missed the deadline. It was probably the best thing that could have happened, because, as it turned out, Davis was a Mecca with four or five serious composers. I got a lot of attention because they didn't have that many majors. It wasn't *known* for that – people didn't go to Davis to study music. An excellent faculty, a lot of attention – it was great.

The larger answer to what was Davis like in the seventies feeds into why I gave up physics, which was the zeitgeist of the time, which I was sympathetic to. I was a hippie – a hippie wannabe, a little too young to actually be on the streets of Haight-Ashbury, but that world view had permeated northern California, and I recall thinking “What am I going to do with a physics major? Am I going to join the military-industrial complex and design nuclear weapons for the next war?” That kept me looking around for what else I could do with my life at that point. That kind of thinking was certainly reinforced by the culture of Davis in 1975.

TM: A question one could still ask in 2010. Who were the composers at Davis?

SM: There was Andrew Frank, who had studied with George Crumb, there was Richard Swift, who taught for a semester at Princeton as a sabbatical replacement for Milton Babbitt, back when I was an undergraduate at Davis. He was a real twelve-tone aficionado, and very close to Milton. There was William Valente, who is Benita Valente's cousin. The atmosphere was one step removed from the real nexus of contemporary music, but for being out in rural northern California it was pretty good. There was Jerry Rosen, someone I never studied with, who wrote music for band. To this day UC Davis has a fine composition program.

TM: It must have been much less developed in the Central Valley then.

SM: Going back to Davis now is a trip. What used to be flat tomato fields is now car dealerships and malls.

TM: Then your masters' was at Stony Brook, and if I am not mistaken that was a period for a big boom in the New York state university system.



SM: Exactly. Stony Brook had a new performing arts center. It had been decreed by someone in Albany that Stony Brook would be a graduate school for music. It had a fantastic performing faculty of cellists and violinist and percussionists – Ray DeRoche, and Timothy Eddy on cello – which attracted great performance students. That made it a great place to study composition, because you had fantastic young performers. A lot of the teachers also taught at Juilliard. The students who went to Juilliard were looking for orchestral positions. The ones who went to Stony Brook, self-selecting, were those who were more interested in carving a more unusual niche for themselves in contemporary music and chamber music, so all my friends were performers and I got my music played. A fantastic place.

TM: Stony Brook is like Princeton in that it is not in the city, but it is close enough that you can go back and forth. Was there an important mentor or mentors there for you?

SM: Yes, there were two very important people. A fellow called Jack Lessard, a composition teacher who had an important influence on me, who passed away about five years ago, and David Lewin, also deceased, known more as a theorist, but who was also a composer. He had more or less given up composition by the time I encountered him, but was still an excellent composition teacher. He was at the cutting edge of theory, both tonal and non-tonal theory. Maybe because I had been a physics major, the analytic thinking and quantitative thinking that he did came easily to me, and I enjoyed it, so I impressed him a great deal, and in return he gave me a lot of encouragement, built up my confidence, and recommended me for things for years to come.

TM: That's an interesting nexus – the connection between physics and set theory, and music theory, and rock and roll.

SM: That's what distinguishes me, perhaps – that I have this rock guitar background. Half of my approach to music comes from my entry into music as a rock guitar player, namely a physicality of rhythm, directness of expression, boldness of ideas. On the other hand I have a physics background, which was then cultivated by David Lewin and others in terms of music theory and analysis, which also interests me. My head is working on the nuances of the language, syntax, form....so I am both an egghead and a meathead at the same time.

TM: Brandeis has been an interesting part of the Boston scene for a long time, with heavy hitters there in terms of composition. Who was teaching while you were in the doctoral program?

SM: I went there to study with Don Martino. I studied with him for two years, and then he went to Harvard, which gave me the opportunity to study with Marty Boykan.



There were some junior faculty around – Conrad Pope, Allan Anderson – whom I took seminars with.

TM: Seymour Shifrin is a name that I connect with Brandeis.

SM: Seymour Shifrin was gone by that point. Donald Martino had been hired for Seymour Shifrin's line when Seymour died, but Seymour was still quite a presence there. Harold Shapero, who was known as Sonny, a neo-classic composer, who had been somewhat ostracized by the new wave of serial composers – Don Martino and Marty Boykan – would speak very highly of Seymour Shifrin, as would Marty Boykan. Seymour Shifrin was the one place where these two camps – the neo-classic and the coming-to-be-dominant twelve-tone camp – could all agree.

TM: Shapero had been at Harvard before going to Brandeis.

SM: Yes, and Martino had been at NEC.

TM: How did those languages rub off on what you were writing?

SM: I was completely naïve in approaching concert music, but I was a good student. Starting at Davis and continuing at Brandeis, I was taught the language of twelve-tone and freely atonal music. But you can't take the rock out of the guitarist completely. People at Brandeis commented, some in a positive way, some in a negative way, that I had a way of moving from very dense, tight, more typically atonal harmonies, to very open, consonant, neo-classic harmonies. Some people would say that I had to purge myself of those neo-classic things, those open things, those brightly-colored things, but others, like Harold Shapero, and Don Martino, who was supportive, said yes, it makes sense that you go from this density to this openness, and I always thought that I heard in Mozart an enormous range, going from two measures of a cheerful Alberti bass to something dense and contrapuntal with 9-8 suspensions. So I took the comment that came from the dialectic of those two worlds, I took my ability to bridge those two worlds as something unique, and decided to go with that.

TM: For Ratner, meaning in Mozart comes precisely from the contrasts of these sections that are very different from one another.

SM: Yes. Mozart is my biggest hero, partly because it took me a while to come to him. At first it just sounded like ricky-ticky baby clichéd classical music, and then I realized, this music is about movement. It delineates all these different topographies, but still ties them together. Once I grokked that, it really excited me, and has been something that I have been pursuing ever since – music as movement. I would say the same thing about Stravinsky. Stravinsky is about juxtapositions, in contrast to



Mozart, who is about transitions – Stravinsky is about the different places. But they have in common that there is a big wide world uncovered in the music.

TM: Anyone listening to contemporary concert music over the last thirty years has seen this transition away from the serial music of Babbitt and that school towards more open possibilities, although there are certainly important figures from the generation a few years older than yours who continue to cultivate high modernism. You are perhaps exactly representative of this transition from Babbitt and Randall to Mackey and Randall, if one might put it this way.

SM: It's true. When I came here to Princeton I had the skill set that allowed me to be hired. I was basically succeeding Milton, so he wasn't on the search committee, but Peter Westergaard was a high American modernist. I had written a string quartet where every note was the vortex of twelve different trajectories, and spelled *Mother* in every direction. He appreciated that. In the course of my interview, Jim Randall and Paul Lansky found out that I played guitar, and Jim found out that I improvised, I got the job for a reason – that Paul and to some degree Jim were looking for a change from that high modernist arc. Peter needed someone who was conversant in that. He was sympathetic to the idea of change, but his window of change was smaller, so he couldn't hire someone who hadn't also written a dissertation about hardcore twelve-tone theory. I came to the right place at the right time, with the right kind of quirky interests. As I look back, I can say that I really tipped the balance. Paul and Jim were moving in a certain direction, and I tipped the balance. I started playing guitar, composing for myself, and Kronosand now Princeton is at the cutting edge of something else. We were at the cutting edge of serial high-modernism, and now we are at the cutting edge of vernacular-based indie classical.

TM: I think of Peter as a Romantic high-modernist. Would that be fair?

SM: A high-modernist whose passion was opera – two things which don't often go together. Peter was a hardcore trichordal composer, but at the same time he does lyrical, expansive opera.

TM: You were 28 when you got to Princeton.

SM: And I just turned 54.

TM: From my perspective at 53, that seems like a rather young age to become a professor at the Princeton department.

SM: It felt that way at the time. Luckily I was brash and naïve and didn't realize how hard it was. Princeton has always been a place for older graduate students – people get masters' degrees somewhere else, go out into the world a bit, and come back to



Princeton, where it's a very open program, there are no required courses, and depends on the self-motivation of the students. When I got here, most of the students were older than I was, including students who were in their forties, and very few younger than me. There was a petition from a certain faction of graduate students to the effect that Steve Mackey didn't go to Princeton and shouldn't be teaching at Princeton. They wanted to keep things the way that they had been – you get your Ph.D from Princeton, and then you start teaching there. I weathered that, won some of them over, and the others moved on. But it was difficult at first.

TM: Could you talk about a representative piece of yours from the eighties?

SM: At the very end of the eighties I wrote a piece that was the beginning of my voice, and no longer my teachers speaking through me, written in 1989 – *Indigenous Instruments*. I had been teaching at Princeton for four years, but the voices of my former teachers, and of my colleagues, Jim, Peter and Paul were as loud as own instincts. It took until 1989 for me to listen to myself, trust myself, and do my own thing.

TM: What was it about that piece which made it different from what had come before?

SM: One thing was the method of composition. I used my body more to compose it. I had been making charts, and thinking a lot. It was inspired, ironically, since I am saying it is a piece that came from my gut, by reading a dissertation about the mbira, which had extremely accurate transcriptions, showing microtones, and strange articulations, and I thought “this looks cool”, and wondered “what would that music actually sound like?” , since the dissertation had no accompanying recording. The guitar, it turned out, is a wonderful microtonal instrument. You have frets, so you have these predictable increments, but you can tune the string up a quarter-tone, or a third of a tone, which is what I did. I retuned a string, and improvised with it. There I was, with my mother-tongue, the guitar, but tuned so that everything was a little surprising to me. I kept thinking of mbira culture, and realized that I had started with vernacular music, with music, rock and roll, that is closer to the fundamental appeal, to the fundamental needs that humans have for music – to sing, to dance, to heighten transcendent experience. For this piece, I invented a vernacular music from a culture that doesn't exist. My other music had been more of a conceptual science experiment. That was a turning point for me.

TM: Who premiered the piece?

SM: The San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. It was a commission from Chamber Music America.



TM: And a representative piece from the nineties?

SM: I wrote a lot of music in the nineties.

TM: This was the beginning of your collaboration with the Kronos.

SM: We can mention a couple, and then if I have to stick to one, decide which it should be. *Physical Property* for electric guitar and Kronos, very important, from the early nineties – I toured the world with them in '92, '93, and '94. *Eating Greens*, which I wrote for the Chicago Symphony....

TM: With the pizza delivery.

SM: *Eating Greens* is a really colorful, fun piece. It's got stark moments, but it's got silly moments. It's pink and blue paisley wallpaper. After finishing the piece and being in touch with the Chicago Symphony about the premiere, which was scheduled to be conducted by Daniel Barenboim, I freaked out, thinking that I could have written a piece that this champion of Carter and Boulez would have liked....but he's going to hate this piece! But it so happened that Dennis Russell Davies conducted the premiere, and he was perfect for it. He got the piece, it was a big success, Dennis himself did it a number of times subsequently – it has been done many times. If *Indigenous Instruments* was the first piece that was really me, *Eating Greens* was a bold slap-in-the face for high modernism.

TM: Humor is so infrequently found in classical music – people just don't take to it well.

SM: Wit was important for Haydn – and for Beethoven – you have the third repeat of a scherzo that gets dropped completely and stops in mid-phrase –you have that sort of thing all the time. Somehow, in post-Darmstadt concert music, that was *verboten*. But I came to the realization that some of the music that really excites me – Stravinsky for example – there's lots of humor in there...

TM: [Sings trumpet call from *Petrushka*]

SM: Exactly! And similarly things that get interrupted in the middle, with some crazy dancing-bear tuba music coming through. I laugh at something, and at the same time I say "How did they think of that? Where did that come from?" That's also something that is not part of a modernist aesthetic, which is based on a sense of inevitability. But if you look back, even Brahms has all kinds of surprises. Economy of material is conventional composition wisdom, but the composers I have been mentioning have an extravagance of material. The experience of the music is full of variety.

TM: Touring with the Kronos must have been you some insight into what the reactions of the audiences would be, night after night, in listening to a variety of pieces.



SM: Absolutely. I heard a lot of music before I got on stage, sitting out in the house. We also played at high-end jazz clubs, such as Kimball's East in Oakland, where they would play two shows a night for a week, and I might only be on the second show. I heard a lot of different music that put me in a different milieu from my training. Having had a real uptown training, I was now swimming every day in an alternative approach to art music. I was on tour for the premiere of Steve Reich's *Different Trains*, music by African composers which they had had transcribed for them, world music – all kinds of stuff that was anathema to uptown academic music.

TM: What were the moments that communicated in those concerts?

SM: Their lighting, which people may have thought was unnecessary glitz, was something that I realized really helped to conceptualize the music. This music, whichever piece we are talking about, was written today, not in Vienna in 1903. Trying to preserve that kind of respectful chamber music environment was actually not helpful to understanding what the music was about. As much as I might have wanted to pooh-pooh the lighting as gimmickry, sitting in the audience I realized, yes, this is putting me in a better frame of mind to understand music that is written by composers of my generation, coming out of the sixties, with lava-lamps and lightshows – it was putting me in the right head-space. There was a piece, *The Water-Wheel*, by Hamza El-Din, with a long drone, and music that slowly unfolded. I would never have allowed myself to compose music like that. I had an ethic that you have to invest more sweat equity. Since then I have allowed myself to let a pedal tone ring out for some minutes, and take some time. The music is an experience that should live on a stage, not on my desk, or my teacher's desks. That's what all that travel with Kronos did.

TM: What piece would you choose from the first decade of the new century?

SM: A piece called *Dreamhouse*, which is not available on a commercial recording yet. It's been recorded and will probably be released in July 2010. It was premiered in 2003, and was commissioned by the Holland Festival. They were featuring the electric guitar at the festival, and they commissioned me to write a big piece for orchestra with a section of electric guitars. I added to that four amplified singers - microphone singers, rather than opera singers, straight tone, no vibrato, a more intimate sound, and I also added a tenor-performance artist-soloist. It was the culmination of a lot of things that I had been doing for the previous ten years, and if I do say so myself, I don't think there is anything like it. My collaborator on the piece is Rinde Eckert, with whom I wrote an opera in the mid-nineties called *Ravenshead*, and he and I together wrote the libretto for this piece. He is the tenor-performance artist who performs in it. It's an important work for me orchestrationally, with the



sound palette of amplified guitar quartet and vocal quartet sometimes singing vocalese, sometimes singing text. Occasionally members of the vocal quartet step out and do solos as well. It has quite a wide swath of orchestrational textures. The guitars are sometimes raucous and sound like death metal, at times twangy and country-western. It's a fifty-two minute, epic piece. When I play it for people, if I do a colloquium, people either really love it or really hate it. The criticism is usually along the lines that it is too Broadway – the declamation is relatively syllabic, simple text-setting – tunes, melodies.

TM: I wouldn't have put the words "Broadway" and "Steve Mackey" together.

SM: [Laughs] I own that criticism. The people who like it like the fact that there is an unabashed direct quality to it, which is what people who call it "Broadway" are referring to, and I will own that because frankly, as a way to sing a song, I prefer Broadway over post-Darmstadt or even Second Viennese school operatic singing, with hyper-disjunct lines and a sort of melodrama that doesn't fit the text - [sings] "I am going to the store today". It's not authentic to what I came from, as a rock musician. Broadway is some sort of medium between the non-singing of rock, which can eschew melody in a very different way, and the convoluted melody of Second Viennese school and beyond. I know it's meant as an insult, but I will take it as a compliment.

TM: All sorts of things are included in Broadway, including Leonard Bernstein.

SM: ...who people often detect as an influence. I have a big American language. There's a color to the orchestration, and profile to the melodies that has an American, not jazz per se, but an American feel.

TM: You have ensembles of vocalists and guitars, which are typically not members of groups.

SM: What I was thinking of in the sense in which guitars and vocals go together in rock music, Led Zeppelin for example. In that period, there was an archetype of the lead guitar and the vocalist, and both had the rock star/hero mystique in different ways – Robert Plant and Jimmy Page. It's hard to say who was the leader. There were searing guitar solos and really powerful vocals. The guitar imitates the voice, the voice imitates the guitar. In other music from that period, take the Byrds. The sound of twanging, ringing electric guitars with vocal harmonies – the combined resonance of these two things was something that I wanted to get at.

Both of these groups – the electric guitars and the vocalists – are soloists in the concerti grossi sense. They play off each other, and do similar kinds of things.

228 **TM:** Could you talk about the "book"?



SM: The governing metaphor is the idea of building a house. The performance artist/tenor soloist is the only named character in the piece – he is the architect. This was our 9/11 piece, in many ways. One key line in the libretto is “no matter how precisely stringed our lay, there will be foundations lost.” No matter how carefully you measure the perimeter and foundation, no matter how carefully you lay the concrete, a little flaw there is magnified by the time you get up to the eaves, to the mansard, the cockeyed turrets. There’s a lot of technical architectural language in the libretto, which really appeals to me, because there are interesting words to set, but there is also the appeal of setting the words aiming at the character and the color of the word, more than the understanding. I enjoy listening to Latin, sixteenth-century masses and motets, and I don’t understand Latin, so you hear the words for their color. I cowrote the libretto with Rinde so that I had the freedom to use the words as the orchestration for the voice. As important as the meaning of the word was the way that it shaped the singer’s mouth, its timbral qualities. You might associate that with Berio’s *Circles*, settings of e.e. cummings where the text is really deconstructed into sound. That’s *not* what I am going for. I am going for a vernacular singer/songwriter approach to composing where I am sitting on the edge of my bed playing my guitar, and I come up with a harmonic progression, and spontaneously sing a melody that comes out of that harmonic progression, and words that make an intuitive gestalt sense with that harmony, with that melody, with the tessitura of the voice. An example I think of is Neil Young – this peculiar voice, and the song “Helpless” [sings] – a whining, strumming, somber chord progression, the high falsetto voice whining, the words are “helpless” – the sound of everything is a real marriage of what you glean about meaning, although the text is not narrative, but imagistic - it opens up windows – doesn’t declare things, but opens windows for the listener to peer out of. I should clarify, *Dreamhouse*, with its kaleidoscopic orchestration, sounds nothing like the music of a singer-songwriter. I am merely trying to explain how I was moving away from the art song approach of reverently setting and existing text toward an approach to text setting in which the text and music were constructed together. That’s what I was going for, and why Rinde and I decided we should cowrite. He wrote a synopsis, and I had the freedom to use this word rather than that, because it felt like the right syllable to sing with that harmony. There are many details of sonic fusion such as diphthongs that interact with the bending of the guitar string.

TM: There are people who take an architectural approach to composition, laying out a ground plan, and then filling in the details. And then there are people who begin from the details, and let those lead them to the structures, in the way that a novelist might let the characters take the plot to an place that was unexpected when he first sat down to create the novel.



SM: I would say that I am more the latter, occasionally the former, since not every piece is the same. Composing for me is not just about the finished product. It's the activity of my daily life, so the process is very important. I really enjoy discovery. I would use the same analogy you did – you sit down and discover some musical characters, and I allow myself a good period of time without deciding what is the beginning, what is the middle, what is the end, what the piece is about – I am simply exploring musical character in a free way. I come up with sketches, which suggest to me what the story is that these characters can tell, and what the larger shape or architecture will be. Once I have a plausible architecture for the piece, I can stand back and see that there is a piece emerging for which details are still missing. At that point the process becomes similar to what I would have done had I set out to construct a shape. The reason that I prefer working that way, letting the details suggest to me what the form should be, is because I come up with more interesting forms. If I just sit at my desk and think of architecture, I fall into archetypes. I like to think of form as a verb rather than a noun. It is something that forms itself. When it forms itself out of the nuance and the direction of the musical characters I invent, it can be a lot more interesting and less likely to fall into these particular patterns – rondos, ABAs, etc. I am very interested in forms that are intrinsically expressive. The shape of a piece can be provocative. I need the details to suggest to me “this should be interrupted here”, “this should be a flashback”. Those things come to me in the details, not as part of planning. Hopefully when it is done it is a satisfying form. My formal goal is something that is balanced, but with very asymmetrical and unbalanced components. Like juggling a chainsaw, a tennis ball, a mixing bowl and a roll of toilet paper – things of different masses, and different levels of intensity and danger – and somehow keeping them all floating in the air together.

TM: Looking back, it seems like rock and roll and jazz both hit dead ends in around 1980, but classical concert music continues to diversify in various directions. Where would you see your music going in the next twenty-five years?

SM: I hope I can't predict that. The last couple of things I have done and have been working on – a piece called *Beautiful Passing*, which is a violin concerto, and a piece which will be premiered in March, *It Is Time*, a quartet for So Percussion – these pieces, the percussion quartet, certainly, go against what I tell my students – they are only playable by this particular group, it is really written *on* them, and in that way it's a lot like rock music. Rock music is about the persona of the performer, as much as it is about anything else. Janis Joplin singing “Summertime” is all about Janis Joplin. Leontyne Price singing “Summertime” is all about George Gershwin. I am writing music with very complicated materials – concert music in the sense that



you have to sit in a chair facing forward and really concentrate on it – and they are big, expansive pieces that try to get to heavy philosophical places, and yet have no “legs” at all. Up until this point a litmus test for success has been “are other people playing my music?” I don’t care about that any more. I am more interested in a collaboration that will yield something really special, but has very little chance of being played by anybody else. I think I will keep going in that direction, because you can come up with really special things that are the product of a unique and singular collaboration.

TM: In a sense that is what a Bach cantata was –he wrote a piece for a particular person who would play that solo on a particular Sunday, with *no* expectation that anyone would ever play those pieces again.

SM: Of course, even though I am saying this, So Percussion says that in fifty years this piece will be a challenge for people to attain, that their performance and my writing for their performance will be a model. I don’t rule out future performances, but it’s a different mindset to think in terms of *their* performance, rather than in terms of practicality for others. A lot of my teaching over the past twenty years has been helping students convey their musical ideas to a general performing audience. While I hope that this music doesn’t die with the individuals for whom it was written, it’s a different mindset to achieve this *one* thing at this *one* time, here and now. Ten years ago, in writing an orchestra piece, I would be thinking of writing a piece that any orchestra could do.

TM: Does this have implications for what you write, that is, what gets down on paper, and what doesn’t?

SM: I suppose it does. I am not sure what all the ramifications are. I am taking more chances now, taking more risks musically, not just the kinds of techniques that I am asking the performers to execute, but the narrative of the piece – crazier, more far-reaching, quirky. It’s allowing myself to have wilder fantasies – “let’s try this!” Part of it is age, like late Beethoven – he took more chances. Not worrying about practicality, trying to go far out there, take people on a trip.

TM: There was an eighteenth-century writer on music talking about Louis-Gabriel Guillemain, and he reported that every day Guillemain worked on making his music stranger.

SM: I can relate to that. For me, the craziness is not a tirade of lunatic screaming, because I am drawn to lyricism. It’s a “to-hell-with-it” attitude; it’s about being crazy, and being really simple. Eschewing all the paradigms and taboos that I grew up with, that you have ringing in your ears, and trying to do things that I really like,



and that my collaborators really like, and that's all that matters. We are on this adventure together.

It's an interesting place to be. I think my music has always been quirky, but this percussion piece is forty minutes long – who is going to want to do that?

TM: Was that size something they asked for, or something that came from your end, or both?

SM: Both. They wanted something to be the second half of their program, so I was thinking big from the beginning. It appealed to me, because I like the idea of getting that far away from home. What do you discover twenty minutes into a piece? It sounds different than if you heard that in minute two. To go down a long road, turn off the road onto a hiking trail, and turn off the hiking trail, go straight cross-country, climb up a rock-face, peer over the other side, and see a lake there – you have to go through all that to get the kind of thrill that I am after. Take that same lake, put it in Central Park – it's not as thrilling.

TM: Context is everything. This is "It Is Time". When is the premiere?

SM: March 25, at Zankel Hall.

TM: Will the recording be issued on CD?

SM: They will tour the piece, and give it a year or so of settling in before they record it.

TM: Future plans?

SM: I have a one-year old baby now, and my career is suddenly taking a back seat. It doesn't mean I am any less passionate about composing music, but that's what is leading to this "f— it" attitude. You can be passionate about music, but at the same time not care so much about your career, and it's actually quite liberating.