

Myron SILBERSTEIN

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MYRON SILBERSTEIN DISCUSSES HIS CAREER AS PIANIST AND COMPOSER WITH WALTER SIMMONS

WALTER SIMMONS: *Many serious listeners are aware of your remarkable series of recordings – in particular, first recordings of important works by American composers. But such listeners may not realise that your discography actually goes back some 30 years, to a Connoisseur Society CD recorded when you were just 20, which featured music by Franck, Bloch and Giannini – not exactly the standard debut programme. The recording at hand, however, is the first to feature your own music. Your career has not exactly followed a typical path. Review for us something of your chronology thus far – your early attraction to classical music, period of study, and how it evolved from there.*

MYRON SILBERSTEIN: My first musical memories are of my grandmother, an excellent amateur pianist. When I was about three, she'd sit down at the piano and play whatever was on the music stand: an anthology of classical music, my dad's book of Judy Collins songs, or the *Sesame Street* songbook. Around that time, my father bought me a toy piano with about fifteen numbered keys, along with a little play-by-number music book illustrated with Disney characters. It seemed magical to me that by pressing the keys on this toy piano I too could produce songs. When I was about six, I went to my parents' actual piano – which did not have numbers on the keys – and tried to play whatever was on the music stand – which did not have numbers in the centre of the notes – and discovered that I couldn't. I remember this being incredibly frustrating. But my father came to the rescue with a first lesson in note-reading. He created a chart of all the scales and key-signatures that was so abstract and laborious that it shouldn't have worked – but somehow it did. Something clicked for me when I saw that chart, and I quickly became a very good sight-reader. Clearly, I was attuned to the patterns that form the building blocks of classical music.

I began taking lessons with a series of local teachers in the Long Island area where I grew up. The most advanced of these teachers was a hugely supportive and

warm person who seemed to be thrilled to work with a kid who genuinely loved classical music. Chopin was my favourite at the time, and I could sight-read through the easier preludes and nocturnes without making too much of a mess.

I enjoyed consistent praise during most of my childhood and adolescence, but I didn't face very serious demands, and I stayed at the talented-but-unpolished-child level for those years. But then my teacher referred me to someone who taught more advanced students, and who had more challenging standards. At our first lesson, he asked how much I practised and how I practised. I told him that I played the piano a fair amount, and that my teacher had suggested I practise slowly, but that I mostly just enjoyed playing through pieces over and over until I felt I knew them reasonably well. He complimented me on recognising the difference between playing and practising and on being honest enough to acknowledge that I didn't practise at all. He then told me I needed not just to practise but to know *how* to practise, and promised to teach this to me. And then he announced: 'By the end of this summer, I expect you to be practising – properly – four hours a day, or you can go back to your teacher at home and keep being just talented instead of skilled.' I was inspired by this challenge. Now I wanted to become a pianist.

This was the summer after ninth grade. I had barely two years to prepare for college auditions, and that was not quite enough time to build a conservatory-level technique from the ground up. Ignoring the advice of family and high-school teachers to give myself a backup, I applied only to the three New York conservatories and to Peabody in Baltimore. I was rejected immediately by the three New York schools. I decided to get a one-room apartment in New York City and work with my teacher for another year and perhaps re-apply the following year. A month after I moved in, I received an acceptance letter from Peabody. But having just signed the lease on the apartment, I decided to pass on Peabody.

How did your enthusiasm for relatively contemporary music come about?

During my audition preparation, I received feedback from a number of piano teachers. It soon became apparent that my playing of twentieth-century music was garnering the greatest praise. I now felt that I had a mission: having often heard that audiences

gritted their teeth through the obligatory twentieth-century work on standard recital programmes, I decided that I was going to make them *glad* the twentieth-century work was on the programme.

The following summer, at a small festival in Italy, I won a studio prize for my performance of Chopin's *Polonaise Fantaisie*. But throughout the festival I was hearing comments from faculty members who were struck by my performance of Shostakovich. The studio prize came with an invitation to play a full recital the following summer. I included Charles Griffes's *Roman Sketches* on that programme. Though the audience responded favourably to all the pieces, they seemed especially impressed by my performance of the Griffes. I then decided that by programming strategically I was going to make audiences love recent, unfamiliar – but judiciously chosen – music just as much as any of the pieces they already knew and loved.

My teacher, who had studied at Juilliard during the 1950s, appreciated my enthusiasm for twentieth-century piano music. When I told him that I wanted to work on a twentieth-century piece that deserved to be loved but was not, he handed me Ernest Bloch's Piano Sonata. By this time I was nineteen years old, happy with my progress at the piano, a recipient of a European prize, and not at all interested in the various requirements a school curriculum would impose on me. Financially, private lessons, theory and ear-training classes and monthly rent and food added up to a lot less than school tuition. My parents agreed to fund these expenses, although they had some reservations about my taking such an unorthodox path. But they were willing to go along and see how things developed. So, having given a European recital, the next step was to give a New York recital. I reserved a date for Weill Hall, part of Carnegie Hall.

Now, despite my enthusiasm for pursuing twentieth-century music, I was still being trained as an all-around competition-ready concert pianist. But a debut recital gives some leeway that competitions do not. So although I included some standard repertoire on my recital programme, I also included the Bloch Sonata, along with Lowell Liebermann's *Gargoyles*, which had been written only four years before.

The hope for a New York debut is that *The New York Times* will review it. But neither it nor any other newspaper did. However, my teacher had invited Alan Silver, who ran

the discophile label Connoisseur Society. Not only did he like what he had heard, but he had been enamoured of the Bloch Sonata since his own student days at Juilliard. So he invited me to record the Bloch for him. But we needed to fill out the programme. Soon after my debut I had begun learning Franck's *Prelude, Choral and Fugue*. I knew that Bloch had studied with Ysaÿe, who had studied with Franck, so that was a sensible choice. I wanted to include another relatively recent piece, and told my teacher I'd like to find something very different in tone from Bloch, just to highlight the breadth of styles within the twentieth century. My teacher mentioned that his former professor, Vittorio Giannini, had written a romantically styled piece called *Variations on a Cantus Firmus*.

Locating and getting access to the printed music wasn't easy, as it was, technically, 'out of print'. But I was able to obtain a photocopy from Giannini's erstwhile publisher, who informed me that much of his music was unpublished and was held at a bank vault in North Carolina; he gave me the phone number of the estate administrator. This was my introduction to the adventure of tracking-down unknown, neglected and otherwise buried repertoire.

When I presented my planned programme of Franck, Bloch and Giannini to Alan Silver, he initially resisted the inclusion of Giannini, whom he seemed to regard as 'an academic'. But when I played him a tape of my reading of a portion of the *Variations*, he was captivated. 'This is music of quality. It's almost like Franck', he said. When the disc was finally released in 1996, not only did critics appreciate my playing, but they also praised the programming: both the balance between familiar composers and neglected composers and the connections among the composers.

Despite this reaction, my teacher felt the next step should be something to show that I could play standard repertoire just as well as any other young pianist, cautioning me against the dangers of becoming a 'niche pianist'. I did record a Liszt CD, but I was timid about the result, as were critics and concert-managers.

This must have been extremely disappointing. What did you decide to do next?

At this point I was in my early twenties. I was not becoming famous, and any further concerts or recordings would require money that I did not have. So at that point

I decided to return to school and applied to colleges all across the country. My high-school transcript was fine, but my application essay about attempting a career as a concert pianist and then regretting how much I'd lost without the intellectual stimulation of a liberal arts education was a huge asset. As it happened, I was offered several full-tuition-plus-room-and-board scholarships.

So this really meant putting your career in music on hold, didn't it?

Well, yes and no. I decided upon the University of Pittsburgh for my undergraduate education but then proceeded to register for a class in music composition. You see, during the period preceding my entrance to college, the thought of composition, which had always interested me, started to become prominent in my mind. Part of my love for my favourite composers was their expression of feelings that I could identify with – up to a point. But I wanted something fully representative of my own emotions. Over the years I had occasional ideas for pieces, but I felt that before I could continue in this direction, I needed some focused guidance. But while I was excited to take composition lessons, I had firmly decided that I was not in college to develop a music career. As far as I was concerned, that was a path I had already taken. I went into college undeclared and took whatever courses interested me. For example, I signed up for a seminar on Nietzsche in my first semester, along with a course on Sanskrit. In my sophomore year I was surprised to discover that I had nearly completed both a philosophy and a religious studies major.

Music was now a background interest, although it certainly remained important to me. In 2002, during my senior year, I took a seminar called Greek Tragedies and Opera and wrote a substantial paper on Giannini's masterpiece *The Medead*, which was subsequently published in the *Pittsburgh Undergraduate Review*. Because much of my writing in college dealt with multiple subjects simultaneously, a favourite professor recommended that I look into interdisciplinary programmes for graduate school. I applied to several and won two national fellowships: the Andrew R. Mellon Fellowship in Humanistic Studies, and the Jacob K. Javits Fellowship, which was a four-year award. I chose the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, where I intended

to explore intersections between literature, philosophy and psychology. I was also glad that the University had a strong Sanskrit programme, which had become a significant interest of mine.

While in graduate school I took some more composition lessons but was too distracted by my academic work to give it adequate attention. Meanwhile, given the extreme interdisciplinarity of the dissertation I attempted to put together – an effort to explore how the use of pseudonyms and stories-within-stories helps convey theories of love and romance in Plato's *Symposium*, Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*, and Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara* – it was hard to find an approach that satisfied the disparate members of my committee. So when my fellowship money ran out in 2007, I was loath to go into debt and once again decided to reassess what I was doing.

Sounds like you were at a major crossroads. How did you find your voice as a composer? And when did you decide to return to serious performing on the piano?

I had had a good friend throughout my childhood, Christian Carey, who had graduated from high school with me and gone on to become a composer. During my first efforts at composition in the mid-90s, he helped me understand ways to develop musical ideas. Between my recollection of Christian's guidance and the techniques I learned in my composition class, I was beginning to write music.

Looking for opportunities in Chicago to earn money through music, I discovered that there were quite a few that seemed suitable. So in 2008 I re-entered the music world and managed to cobble together enough work to support myself. I also decided to refresh and restore my piano technique through laborious exercises until I reached the point that I felt confident that I could handle any repertoire that I wanted.

One side-benefit of my hiatus from performance was that I was now too old to apply for young artists' competitions and so was finally free of their repertoire requirements. I decided to concentrate solely on the neglected composers who had been my primary interest all along. But I continued to be haunted by the urge to compose. Although I had been developing greater fluency, I still found composition to be a considerable challenge. Around this time, I developed a new interest: studying the manuscripts of some of

my favourite composers. So I got back in touch with the bank administering Vittorio Giannini's estate, and purchased photocopies of several of his unpublished operas, along with numerous other unperformed works.

Giannini's handwriting was hard to read, so I soon realised that if I wanted to play through this music, I would need to transcribe it into notation software. And somehow, after months of doing this, the mechanics of composition began to click for me. I had always thought the tales of Bach learning his craft by copying out scores by Vivaldi to be sheer nonsense – ritualistic absurdities touted by composition teachers as some kind of magic trick. But I think there's genuinely something to it. Doing this helped me to develop confidence in my own inner voice, which – interestingly enough – sounded nothing like Giannini. Composition now became more natural for me. In 2015 I completed a song cycle, *This Blue Dark*, and a Sonata for Clarinet and Piano. These proved to be breakthrough pieces that finally felt 'authentically mine'.

At the same time, with my piano technique back in shape, I decided to divide my attention between composing my own music and recording music by composers whose works appealed to me and would, I hoped, appeal to others. In addition to Giannini, I focused on music by Vincent Persichetti, Peter Mennin, Norman Lloyd and, more recently, Paul Creston. I was pleased to find that these recordings drew positive reviews from critics – not only for my performances, but for the repertoire as well.

Now, with all this broad and deep cultural study behind you, what would you identify as your goals – both personal and aesthetic – for your own compositions?

I aim to express emotions in my writing, and to do so in a way that will elicit similar emotions in listeners. I don't think that a composer needs the kind of academic history I've had in order to succeed at this, but I do feel that my studies have deepened me as a person, introducing me to resources that have enriched my understanding of myself and the world I inhabit, as well as my perspective on music as a language. Studying foreign languages teaches us that many words do not have simple one-to-one translations. In music, the same is true when one attempts to express an emotion in a musical passage. What a chord communicates depends on what comes before and after it. Over the years,

I've found that certain combinations of harmonies, textures, rhythms and melodic shapes – and the interactions between all of these – suggest certain emotional content to me, but not in an airtight, one-to-one fashion. My hope is that I might be able to express something that listeners have felt in their lives but have not experienced in music in quite the way they have sought. That is what my favourite composers have offered me, and what I hope I can offer listeners.

I'm struck by your bold admission of the expression of emotions as a compositional goal. You are probably aware that viewing music as a means of expressing emotions is generally considered to belong to an aesthetic rooted in the nineteenth century. (Didn't Stravinsky claim that music doesn't express anything?) But the musical language of your compositions is not at all based in nineteenth-century practice. What are your thoughts about this?

Well, Stravinsky later walked that statement back a little and said that music doesn't express anything external; it expresses itself, and what it expresses goes beyond verbal description. But I'd argue that, while music goes beyond verbal description, going beyond something is not the same as having absolutely no overlap with it. I may get some flak for saying this, but Stravinsky's original assertion strikes me as a bit disingenuous. By 1936, when he had made his statement, he had already written the *Symphony of Psalms*. Why would you write Psalm settings if you didn't feel that music would enhance the spiritual experience that a listener might have of the Psalm texts? There are certainly times when Stravinsky's joy is in exploring new sonorities, but even self-referential joy, in which music takes delight in its own capacity for sound, qualifies as joy.

My music sounds nothing like Stravinsky's. But you're right that I don't treat harmony the way nineteenth-century composers do, or even the way composers like Barber or Hanson do. I do think that my aesthetic goals are similar to those of someone like Barber: I value lyricism, introspection and something that I might call intimacy with the listener. My aim is always to share something of myself rather than, say, to present discoveries I've made about musical structure or acoustics. But how does this work within a harmonic language that might not be immediately familiar to listeners? For one thing, I rarely stray entirely from triadic harmonies. My triads might have notes added

to them or another triad on top of them, but there is always at least an echo of a triad in my harmonic usage. There's even, in very broad strokes, the concept of a home key, with a path away from it and back toward it in all my pieces, though the intermediate steps do not operate the way common-practice harmonic progressions do.

You can see the tonal structure in something like the first movement of my Third Piano Sonata [15]: the first theme gives a strong impression of B minor, though it soon goes far afield. The second theme is in D major, and the recapitulation returns to B minor. But that information amounts to a tangent – a 'tonal map'. During the process of writing, the question at the forefront of my mind was how to amplify the warmth, friendliness and generally sunny demeanour that I found in that first theme.

Another entry point into my language is to think in terms of brightness and darkness. Modality and polychords are two usages that I find to be extremely expressive in this regard. Dorian mode, for example, is a favourite: it has the nocturnal quality of minor-key harmonies, but more warmth, more elegance, more sensuality. Polychords based on triads a whole step away from each other, for me, magnify the effect of the basic triad.

Now, though much of my harmony goes well beyond standard triads, this is never because I'm looking for an unprecedented sound or aiming to invent a new chord or a new technique or process for writing music. Triads have not exhausted their expressive utility. They're not a thing of the past; they will never have an expiration date. I think of them as part of a fundamental, shared vocabulary, and they are downright necessary at the root of my music. But when they're ornamented, altered and combined, that may put a sharper point on the emotions I'm aiming at. More important, I believe that those emotions are intrinsic to music. So in one sense, I would agree with Stravinsky: music is presenting itself rather than something external to it like a sunset or a chicken-salad sandwich. But I disagree with Stravinsky regarding the idea that emotion is one of those external things that music cannot represent. I'm not saying that, taken out of context, a major triad by itself is joyous. But I do believe that sounds, in context, imply and express emotion as a property of that particular organisation of sound rather than as an allusion to something divorced from that series of sounds. However, for those emotions

to communicate clearly, some common ground is necessary for the listener to have an entry point into the harmonic language the composer is using.

Perhaps this takes us into the music on this recording. What would you like to tell us about these compositions?

Well, before going into the individual pieces, I'd like to make a few general comments. Many of my recent pieces are based on either one motif or a short melody and its accompaniment. I rarely write pieces with several unrelated themes, preferring to develop an entire piece from just a few notes. I do this for several reasons – most importantly, to unify a large piece, even over the course of several movements. But more than that, once I have a motif I like, it becomes like a 'friend'. I want to get to know it in every possible facet and configuration. To discover that a craggy theme can also be an agent of warmth with minimal alteration, or that something idyllic can become silly or triumphant is as profound an experience as discovering over time that a peripheral acquaintance has become a close friend. Although I am, of course, the composer, much of my composing involves a deep look into an initial idea to find what it can tell me about itself.

That's very interesting. What fascinates me is that while you are the composer of your music, once it 'comes to life', so to speak, it begins to develop a life of its own, with which you need to familiarise yourself. It's really quite analogous to a parent's relationship with his or her offspring.

That's a great analogy! And to carry it further, though my music has a life of its own, my job as a composer is to nurture it, guide it and discipline it so it matures into the best version of itself it can – but also to be sensitive to what it really is, despite what I might want it to become.

Four Impromptus (2022)

While preparing to record Paul Creston's *Three Narratives* and excerpts from his *Rhythmicon* in 2022,¹ I read through his *Principles of Rhythm*. The book enhanced my

¹ Released on Toccata Classics TOCC 0674.

appreciation of the subtleties of rhythmic interactions. I was also pleased to see that I had already been using some of the advanced rhythmic techniques outlined in the book. After completing the Creston recording, I decided to write a series of pieces that would focus on rhythm. I wanted to see what Creston's techniques would sound like if I explored them in my own musical language. I did nothing programmatically; I began by writing what I heard in my mind, then stopped, figured out what it was that I had done, and used that information to carry me the rest of the way. About eight measures into the First Impromptu [1], I realised that what I thought was a simple, jaunty tune actually changed metres in every bar; so I adopted that as the plan for the rest of the impromptu. The Second Impromptu [2] repeated a sombre chord progression in the left hand in $\frac{4}{4}$, but the melody wanted to come out in $\frac{3}{4}$. The Third Impromptu [3] started with a gentle melody in $\frac{5}{8}$, but the counter-melodies I put against it were in varying metre; in a contrasting section, I used the $\frac{5}{8}$ melody as an accompanying *ostinato*, and the simple stepwise melody I put above it felt like it belonged in $\frac{11}{8}$. The jazzy, energetic Fourth Impromptu [4] grounds its improvisatory right hand with bass patterns that are largely in $\frac{3}{2}$, but the right hand divides each measure however it wants and bleeds into the next measure whenever it isn't quite done by the time the bass pattern starts over.

I'm struck by the fact that, while you acknowledge the influence of Creston's approach to rhythm in these pieces, the music doesn't really sound anything like Creston. In fact, despite your immersion in the music of composers like Giannini, Creston, Mennin and Persichetti, your own music doesn't resemble theirs at all, at least to my ears.

Composers have musical fingerprints. Everything I learn from other composers' music gets filtered through my own sensibilities. Even if I've used a way of working with music that is similar to that of another composer, my fingerprints wind up all over the music itself.

Piano Sonata No. 1 (2016)

My First Piano Sonata was also my first piece for solo piano. I tried to use the piano both expressively and pianistically; there are some genuine virtuosic challenges in the piece.

The first movement [5] begins with a breezy five-note gesture that later becomes the calm, wavelike undercurrent of the questioning second theme. Light repeated chords in the first theme almost suggest a tonic-dominant progression, but added notes leave the harmonies a bit ambiguous. The energy builds but leads to an introspective, plaintive treatment of the first theme, after which the five-note motto overlaps with itself in canon to build to a boisterous conclusion. The second movement [6] is based almost entirely on the second theme of the first movement, now treated as a recitative and aria. The mood is bleak but builds to a statement of passionate warmth before sinking back into gloom. The third movement [7] revisits accompanying material from the first movement, but transformed into energetic arpeggios instead of lightly repeated chords. The five-note motto becomes expansive and lush in the central section, and the previously mournful second-theme material brings the sonata to a triumphant conclusion.

My fellow pianist, composer and music critic David Owens gave the premiere of Sonata No. 1 on 29 April 2018 at the Performing Arts Center of MetroWest, Framingham, Massachusetts.

Piano Sonata No. 2 (2018)

Autumn 2017 was a very happy time for me. I had been commuting between Pittsburgh and Chicago in a long-distance romance with my future wife, but she had finally moved to Chicago; I had replaced a theatre job with a higher-paying and more convenient church-organist position; and I was helping several very promising young singers prepare their graduation recitals. My Second Piano Sonata is an excellent refutation of the common assumption that a musical work is a reflection of the composer's mental state. Certainly, I have experienced the fury and outrage, the disappointment and misery that pervades the sonata – but not while writing it. The introductory measures [8] occurred to me while I was walking through the neighbourhood, running errands on a lovely October day. I imagined a rumbling pedal tone, the tonal implications of which would change from measure to measure as different powerful chords rang out above it; and I envisioned a half-step motif that would either snap downward with propulsive rhythm or wail in sustained tones. As I began to write, numerous other motifs emerged:

the half-step went upside down and led to an augmented second; militant fanfares of repeated notes appeared, and the harmonies frequently involved conflicting triads in each hand combining to create polychords. The first movement moves from a thickly scored introduction to a bracing, toccata-like subject, followed by a more lyrical (but sinister) theme in which the half-step motif forms an ominous undercurrent in the left hand. These combine in increasingly fraught ways throughout the movement, which reaches an explosive finish. The second movement [9] also begins with an introductory passage – a recitative over sustained chords – before the bleak songlike music that comprises the bulk of the movement begins. The finale [10] races out of the starting gate with wild scales and fanfares and gives only momentary respite in a desolate lyrical passage at its centre. Echoes of the first movement bring it to a decisive conclusion.

Four Winter Landscapes (2022)

As with my Second Sonata, these delicate miniatures do not reflect what was happening when I wrote them; it was April when they came to mind. On weekday mornings I practise the piano, and during five-minute breaks in my practice, I often try out chords or textures that pass through my mind. These brief periods of experimentation allow me to earmark ideas that I might want to return to later, but also force me to leave them alone after a few minutes, so that they can percolate in the background until I'm ready to compose with them. During one of these breaks, I hit upon what became the opening measures of 'Bare Trees' [12]: a quietly pulsing series of two-note chords in the treble below a sustained, mournful melody. I didn't have an image in mind when writing the piece, but when it was nearly done, I felt it evoked something wintry and something absent – like a tree without its leaves. When my next experiment with sonorities resulted in a slow series of stacked fourths and fifths of crystalline brightness, it felt like a musical impression of sunlight on snow, and I now consciously chose to aim at wintry evocations for the remaining miniatures. 'Afternoon Shadows' [13] pits dark inverted minor triads against steadily repeated octaves. These parallel triads form a melody that appears in the left hand of 'Bare Trees' (though I did not realise this until after the piece was written). 'The Frozen Lake' [14] elides the 'Bare Trees' motif with one prominent in 'Sunlight on

Snow’ [11], in a spacious, aria-like treatment, accompanied by stately, steadily descending inverted triads. I premiered *Winter Landscapes* on 7 February 2025, at a Lake Forest College faculty recital.

Piano Sonata No. 3 (2019)

I wrote my Third Piano Sonata between December 2018 and April 2019. The opening measures [15] are deceptively simple: a scale fragment that grows with each repetition, climbing higher and higher, over gentle thirds descending in steady eighth notes in the left hand. But as the distance between hands grows, counter-melodies (which later take the foreground in the lyrical second theme) appear, the chords become thicker and richer, and the harmonies move far from their initial key-centre. The music cuts off, and a series of strong, stark octaves, alternating with reminders of the opening measures, lead to the second theme. These octaves presented a compositional puzzle for me: they felt inevitable and necessary, but they didn’t strike me as a full-fledged theme, and they didn’t relate musically to the other themes in the movement. But they kept coming back throughout the development, and they felt like they were more than simply transitional material. Indeed, they give the first movement its decisive ending. So I felt I owed it to this music to see what role it wanted to play in the sonata. In the second movement [16], which grows out of a much slower, idyllic treatment of the first-movement opening, this octave figure comes as the culmination of three of the most passionate stretches of music in the movement; it is also the countermelody when the quiet opening returns. It is in the third movement [17] that the figure finally finds its ultimate place: sped up and thinned out, it is the high-spirited, mischievous motto of the entire movement. This finale also features one of my favourite techniques: its second theme consists of the motto repeated at high speed over and over again in the middle of the piano while the left hand crosses above and below it in countermelodies of sustained tones. This is the mirror image of Thalberg’s famous three-hand effect, which kept the melody in the middle, surrounded by figuration on either side. The sonata ends with the theme placed against itself in an uneven canon – its first five notes as an *ostinato* in the left hand

against its first six notes plus a rest as an *ostinato* in the right hand – until the two hands converge for a final statement in tandem.

Prelude and Fugue (2018)

I wrote my Prelude and Fugue immediately after my Second Piano Sonata. I had had the idea of a very slow movement followed by a very fast and much briefer movement that would use the same themes. The Prelude [18] begins with an unaccompanied melody that suggests F sharp minor; but when it descends to its tonic, the A sharp minor harmony that enters forces it to descend further, to an E sharp. A second unaccompanied phrase seems to lead upward to confirm A sharp minor, but it is made to sink yet again when a new harmony enters in A minor. Throughout the Prelude, harmonies at what should be the culmination of phrases pull the melodic line toward distant keys. The Prelude ends in a mood of acceptance and resignation. The Fugue subject [19] combines a countermelody from the Prelude with a chirpy, cheeky treatment of its primary theme in an energetic rhythmic flurry.

Some listeners, upon hearing your piano music, have observed an influence of jazz – particularly in your avoidance of conventional cadences. My own thought is that some listeners who are familiar with jazz of a certain period make this connection – not just with your music, but with that of other recent composers as well. But much of the language of twentieth- and 21st-century ‘classical’ music has absorbed the harmonic and tonal language of mid-twentieth-century jazz to the point where these usages have simply become part of the general language. What are your thoughts?

I have to admit that, aside from a casual appreciation, I have minimal knowledge of jazz, so I doubt there’s any influence. But I can point to one early observation that shaped my understanding of cadences. When I was young, I happened to hear Puccini’s *Il Tabarro*. I was struck by how definitive the final chords sounded in that opera. These chords did not outline a traditional cadence but were a succession of A minor to C minor, although they were used to serve a dominant–tonic function. This led me to realise that a composer has considerable freedom in the lead-up to a final chord, so long as the emotional build-up conveys finality.

Piano Sonata No. 4 (2019)

I began work on this sonata in August 2019, a few weeks before my wedding – but it is not ‘about’ my upcoming marriage, though it has a largely joyous, warm demeanour. When I began the sonata, I had just completed a wedding song for me to sing at the ceremony: a setting of the famous verses from the Book of Ruth: ‘Where’er you go, there I will go’. Though I’d anticipated I would be composing that piece up to the day of the ceremony, it practically wrote itself, and I was done with weeks to spare. This made me nervous, because I didn’t have an immediate idea for a new project. Like many writers and composers, when no new project occurs to me while I’m between pieces, I worry that perhaps I’m entering into a fallow period, and I didn’t want those kinds of concerns to intrude on our honeymoon. So I tried to produce some ideas at the piano, but I was not at all happy with what came out. Everything I did sounded forced – because it was; I was trying to manufacture ideas, almost as if under duress. Frustrated, I lay down and tried to nap. As I drifted off, a snippet of music crossed my mind that seemed so simple and so obvious that I almost dismissed it as an idle thought. But I got up and went to the piano, and promptly realised that the simple snippet practically begged for development. I wrote about half of the first movement [\[20\]](#) before the wedding. Incidentally, though this is not a piece about marriage, its primary motif, which forms the basis of all three movements – a descending second followed by either a descending fifth or an ascending fourth – later became the primary motif of the love duet in my opera *The Prophetic Pictures*. The tempos and textures are so different that I hadn’t realised it at the time. But, for me, one sign of a solid musical idea is that it can serve multiple purposes within a piece – so it’s no surprise that sometimes my motifs come back, unsolicited, in other pieces, too.

***Transformations* (2021)**

In 2021, while I was deeply immersed in composing a song-cycle, a completely unrelated idea came to mind, and I suspected it would be the start of a new piano piece – but I couldn’t get to it right away, so this embryonic theme stayed in the back of my mind for several months. It was a gentle theme, pulling simultaneously toward G major and

G minor but without tension between the two options. Its melody happened, once again, to involve a descending second and an ascending fourth, but at a level of saturation that distinguished it from my other pieces in which that melodic shape appeared. It was lyrical in mood, almost sultry; perhaps it would be a nocturne. When I was finally able to begin work on the piece, and when I got to the end of the theme, it was clear to me that what should come next was not a contrasting theme but a wildly different perspective on the theme. This was no longer the nocturne I had planned, but a series of variations [23]. Sets of themes and variations had long fascinated – and frustrated – me. At their best, they offer a deep immersion in a theme’s inner life; at their most common, they plod through a laundry list of ways a composer can modify a melody. As my first variation on the theme began, I noted how far it was moving from the tone and textures of the original theme. What I was writing was more akin to a transformation than a variation: rather than moving gradually away from my theme with each successive variation, I was taking a kaleidoscopic approach, in which each variation would diverge significantly from what had come before – and that the piece would be complete when the materials had come full circle and the theme was recognisable again. Of particular note is the extended sixth transformation, which uses wide melodic intervals in an unusually lyrical fashion. Also, in the march-like seventh transformation, the theme provides both melody and accompaniment, and the harmonies stem from mirror writing, thus triply pitting the theme against itself. Craig Ketter premiered *Transformations* on 12 June 2022, at the fiftieth-anniversary concert of the Long Island Composers Alliance.

Piano Sonata No. 5 (2020)

When the first few measures of my Fifth Piano Sonata [24] crossed my mind, I thought they might be the start of a Neo-Baroque suite. The cheery lightness of the first melody, and the way the left hand filled in the dotted rhythms of the right hand, reminded me of a dance-movement in a partita. But I soon found that this dance-like quality was just one of the aspects of this melody. The same was true of the initial left-hand accompaniment: rendered more slowly and treated melodically less than a minute after the opening, it became achingly bittersweet. At that point I realised that I needed to be alert to what

other qualities these two musical ideas might reflect. It became clear that I was writing a cohesive multi-section work rather than a series of dance pieces. Such unanticipated changes of direction are ways that subconscious realisations guide my creative process. The bright, boisterous second section explores different segments of the initial melody at warp speed; the poignant ‘slow movement’ uses the first few notes of the melody as a ground against which the dotted portion of the melody forms a meditative song; and the finale takes the themes and turns them upside-down. At the end, the various sections come back in reverse order. The quote from the first segment is triumphant now, as if rejoicing over having generated so much variety beneath the surface of what had initially seemed a pleasantly unassuming theme. Craig Ketter premiered Sonata No. 5 on 11 June 2023 at the annual spring recital of the Long Island Composers Alliance.

The final piece is something I have high hopes for: a short morsel that I find irresistibly catchy. It will make a great encore piece.

***Jortunioca* (2020)**

Thank you! I think *Jortunioca* [25] is great fun to play. In 2020, musicians were desperate for connection. As miserable and terrifying as the early days of the Covid pandemic were, they also spurred many of us to new collaborations. In June of that year, a long-time friend and soprano with whom I had previously worked came up with the idea of starting an educational video series for young children about the music of Latin America. She needed music for the opening credits and asked if I could write something that would involve rhythms from multiple Latin dances. Not being Latino, I was hesitant to write something that attempted, inauthentically, to mimic Latin dance-music, so I asked if I could write something that incorporated the rhythms into my own musical language. The title *Jortunioca* is a portmanteau of the three dances whose rhythms I quote within the piece: the Joropo, the Son Montuno and the Carioca.

Walter Simmons, musicologist and critic, has written extensively on American composers who maintained an allegiance to traditional musical values. He is the editor of a series of books, “Twentieth-Century Traditionalists”, published by Rowman and Littlefield. He wrote the first two volumes himself

(under the Scarecrow Press imprint): *Voices in the Wilderness: Six American Neo-Romantic Composers* (2004), *which considered the lives and works of Barber, Bloch Creston, Flagello, Giannini and Hanson, and* *Voices of Stone and Steel: The Music of William Schuman, Vincent Persichetti and Peter Mennin* (2011). *He is also active as a record producer, responsible for more than a hundred first recordings.*

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MYRON SILBERSTEIN Piano Music, 2016–22

Four Impromptus (2022) **7:48**

- | | | |
|---|---------------------|------|
| 1 | No. 1 Warm | 1:53 |
| 2 | No. 2 Lamenting | 2:31 |
| 3 | No. 3 Contemplative | 1:42 |
| 4 | No. 4 Vigorous | 1:42 |

Piano Sonata No. 1 (2016) **7:37**

- | | | |
|---|----------|------|
| 5 | I Light | 2:34 |
| 6 | II Quiet | 2:12 |
| 7 | III Bold | 2:51 |

Piano Sonata No. 2 (2018) **13:33**

- | | | |
|----|----------------|------|
| 8 | I Declamatory | 5:19 |
| 9 | II Reflective | 4:42 |
| 10 | III Tumultuous | 3:32 |

Four Winter Landscapes (2022) **5:53**

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------|------|
| 11 | No. 1 Sunlight on Snow | 1:19 |
| 12 | No. 2 Bare Trees | 1:45 |
| 13 | No. 3 Afternoon Shadows | 1:16 |
| 14 | No. 4 The Frozen Lake | 1:33 |

Piano Sonata No. 3 (2019) **12:15**

- | | | |
|----|---------------|------|
| 15 | I Lively | 4:23 |
| 16 | II Gentle | 4:21 |
| 17 | III Brilliant | 3:31 |

Prelude and Fugue (2018) **4:11**

- | | | |
|----|---------|------|
| 18 | Prelude | 2:58 |
| 19 | Fugue | 1:13 |

Piano Sonata No. 4 (2019) **11:41**

- | | | |
|----|--------------|------|
| 20 | I Graceful | 4:52 |
| 21 | II Calm | 3:06 |
| 22 | III Vigorous | 3:43 |

23 *Transformations* (2021)

6:42

24 *Piano Sonata No. 5* (2020)

7:31

25 *Jortunioca* (2020)

1:38

Myron Silberstein, piano

TT 78:52

FIRST RECORDINGS,