An interview with composer David Ludwig

Tom Moore

Composer David Ludwig is presently on the composition faculty of the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where he is also acting chair of musical studies, and artistic director of the 20/21 Contemporary Music Ensemble. He comes from an illustrious musical family – his uncle is Peter Serkin, his grandfather Rudolf Serkin, and his great-grandfather Adolph Busch. He studied composition with Richard Hoffmann, Richard Danielpour, Jennifer Higdon, Ned Rorem, and John Corigliano.

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Tom Moore: You come from an eminent family. I have spoken to composers who are the first musicians in their family, but that is not the case here.

Daniel Ludwig: It's true – it's a very musical family. Peter Serkin is my uncle – we're close. Rudolf Serkin is my grandfather, who passed away when I was about sixteen. My great-grandfather was the violinist and composer Adolph Busch, who was very well-known in the thirties and forties, and came here to the United States as a matter of conscience. He was not Jewish – he is my one non-Jewish great-grandparent. He came in defiance of Hitler, but his career suffered once he got here. He is still fairly well-known – he founded the Marlboro Music Festival.

T.M.: Yes, indeed.

D.L.: He was a wonderful man, who died before I was born. His brother, Fritz Busch, was a very well-regarded conductor. He wrote a book talking about his grandparents, who were also musicians – I guess it goes back a long way. I know that Peter has distinguished himself by playing repertoire that my grandfather would not have played or been involved with – Peter is so invested in contemporary music, and my grandfather was not, at least later in life.

For myself, I grew up musically separate from the family – I wanted to do my own thing, and make my own way, so that I could feel, later in life, that my accomplishments were my own. I think it's important for people to have ownership of whatever they do.

I knew my grandfather very well as a grandfather, and would go to his concerts, of course. Now that I am older, and have some of my own work going on, I feel really privileged to come from this family because there is such a great musical tradition, and great musical values for me to continue and be a part of.

For a while it looked like I was the only one of about twenty grandchildren doing music, but I have a cousin who is a very accomplished bassoonist, who is about twenty-three. She is going to do great things. It is nice to have another relative in my generation out there making music.

T.M.: Would you think that there is some reason that your generation would be less involved in music than the previous two?

D.L.: It's a good question. In any family, where people pursue a particular profession, there will be a lot of ambivalence toward it, and because music is so highly revered in my family, people will take it very seriously if they are going to pursue it. I wouldn't be surprised if in the next generation there will be more musicians. It is something that is passed down.

T.M.: You could say that the bar was set pretty high.

D.L.: Even if it is not people's profession, it's a very important part of the lives of just about everyone in my family.

T.M.: You are from the Philadelphia area. Did you grow up in Bucks County?

D.L.: Yes. I lived there until I was about twelve, and then I lived in New York City for high school, and went to Oberlin after that, when I was about sixteen or seventeen.

T.M.: Were there musical experiences outside the family? Ensembles? Choruses?

D.L.: I started putting pen to paper to write music when I was about eight years old, started playing with notes, seeing how they sounded. In high school I was involved in all the music programs that I could be. I actually did not go to Oberlin as a music major, but as an art history major, which is a curious thing. I did that partly to satisfy my family – I don't know why they thought that art history would be a more secure route than music. I also went to Oberlin because I knew that I would be able to sneak into the conservatory, which is just what I did. I graduated as a composition major.

T.M.: What was your first instrument?

D.L.: Cello, when I was seven or eight years old. I played cello for a bit, but classical guitar was what I really settled on, and that I played for a number of years. I wore a lot of hats – played a bit of clarinet, a little flute, some wind instruments, just to have the experience, which I think is good for a composer. I conducted a bit as well, and sang in choirs.

T.M.: What was it about guitar that attracted you?

D.L.: I like a lot of different kinds of music, and I could play them on guitar. I was in various kinds of bands while I was in college, and at the same time could also play more serious repertoire. From a composer's point of view it is important to play a harmony instrument. The guitar is an interesting instrument because it is much more limited than the piano. You are limited by what your hand can reach – you only have one hand that is playing harmony. You are limited in both color and range in ways that the piano isn't. It gave me a good education in counterpoint and moving lines, because composers who write well for guitar have to have a very good sense of those limitations, and how to work around them.

T.M.: Limitations are not necessarily limitations, but incentives, since you have a universe of possibilities which need to be narrowed done.

D.L.: When we talk about someone's limitations, that's usually a negative thing, but with creative work, they are necessary.

T.M.: Was there popular music you were involved with?

D.L.: My brothers and sister listened almost exclusively to pop music, so I feel like I got a very good education in pop from them, and it's always been important to me. I know composers who are not familiar with much popular music, and it seems bizarre to me, since to think that Mozart and Beethoven and Bach were not familiar with popular music is crazy – they certainly knew the popular music of their day. That doesn't mean that the music that I write has to be commercial or popular, but certainly there's an influence there. I love it. Everything has its place – there is room for all kinds of music. While I might not be listening to popular music for deep artistic reasons, I get immense pleasure from listening to it and playing it. I played in a lot of bands, on a lot of different instruments, all the way through high school and college, and had a great time doing it. I get nervous when I hear about people excluding certain types of music from their lives, categorically. From anything that someone creates we have something to learn.

T.M.: Please talk about studying composition at Oberlin.

D.L.: I graduated from Oberlin in '95.

T.M.: By then the tide of serialism was long gone?

D.L.: It's an interesting question, because my teacher at Oberlin was one of Schoenberg's very last students – Richard Hoffmann – who was a terrific, terrific teacher, and he taught many important musicians. He was Bob Spano's teacher, Richard Danielpour worked with him, Christopher Rouse worked with him, Gregg Smith, Pierre Jalbert – the list goes on and on.

By that time he was not insisting that his students write serial music, but he used it as a teaching tool. The first piece we wrote together was an unaccompanied clarinet sonata that was serial. He used serial technique not in a dogmatic way, but as a way of helping me organize thoughts and my musical materials. He never insisted, and that was one of two serial pieces that I wrote in my life. When I was at Oberlin, I got to work with him in Vienna, and study in Schoenberg's house. That was a trip for me, because it was where my grandfather had studied with Schoenberg as well. It was a very meaningful, profoundly moving experience. I became very familiar with the music of the Second Viennese School then. I still love. I don't know if the music that I write shows that, but I adore that music. I find myself coming to its defense an awful lot.

T.M.: It seem like in other places the transition from serialism to postmodernism had taken place

quite some time before, but in Ohio you were still exposed to the twilight of this style. Did you study with other composer when you were there?

D.L.: Well, you study with various people from the department, but he was my principal teacher there. I learned a great deal from him – he was a wonderful mentor, a sort of outrageous person, very important in music history, and a terrific composer.

T.M.: What other music would you say was formative in terms of what you were listening to at that point?

D.L.: College is a time for people to explore and get to know themselves – what music resonates with you, what time of day do you do your best writing, what are your habits, what is the most natural way of working. It's hard to say, because Oberlin is a school of many individuals who happen to be together. I was lucky to have friends not just from the conservatory, but from the college and the town, all of whom were very passionate about many different kinds of music. I was hearing experimental music of the nineteen sixties, the Bulgarian womens' folk choir, whatever sort of pre-grunge rock that was happening, the classical literature, and contemporary masterpieces as well – anything that was being performed, and things were being played constantly there.

T.M.: It's interesting that you mention the Bulgarian Voices, since this is something that was immensely influential in the seventies, and by now is completely unknown.

D.L.: That's surprising to me, because it is such impressive music, in every sense of the word. I play it for my twentieth-century music class at Curtis, when we talk about Bartok, and nationalism in music, and folk music from Eastern Europe, and they are always blown away. I am surprised at how few know about the music beforehand.

T.M.: I recall that when it was big, there would be women's groups with no connection to Bulgaria whatsoever which would get together to sing this music, and no one with a clue as to what they were singing about. They didn't understand Bulgarian, but the music was so compelling that they just had to do it….

D.L.: We had groups like that at Oberlin, I recall.

T.M.: You mentioned your piece for unaccompanied clarinet. Is that still in your catalogue?

D.L.: No. I think the earliest piece that is in my "catalogue" is my clarinet quintet from 1998. It has been played by some great clarinetists, and was premiered at Marlboro. It was a commission – I received four hundred dollars for it. It was a great experience – I was a

student at Curtis when I wrote it. That's the oldest piece that I still permit to be out there. I do a lot of self-editing.

T.M.: Would you say that that is your "opus one"?

D.L.: That's a good question. I don't put opus numbers on my works – I don't know why. Lowell Lieberman is a friend, and I know that he does, and is up to a pretty high number. I guess you could call it that. I don't know what my opus 2 would be, however. If I were to choose one, I would end up taking things out that don't need to be heard anymore.

T.M.: Another way to phrase it would be to say "is this the piece with which you are speaking in your mature voice, no longer the voice of a student?"

D.L.: It was my first commissioned work written for professionals, the first time I was getting paid and had to assume that kind of responsibility. In terms of the question of mature voice, that is something that is evolving for me. Listening to that music there is a lot that makes me say "that composer is very similar to me – he does a lot of things that I do". And yet it still feels like someone else wrote it.

T.M.: Take me, please, along the path from Oberlin to Curtis.

D.L.: I went to Manhattan School in between, for a couple of years, and had the opportunity to apply to Curtis, and thought a lot about it, deciding about whether I should stay in school, and realized that for a composer it is very good to stay in school, as long as you can. You make contacts, you have a venue, it's like a big padded room for you to write music in. I applied to Curtis, and was very happy to get in. It's a tough program to get into – the first year that I wanted to apply, straight out of Oberlin, there were no openings. There are only six students in the department. I got my masters' at Manhattan, and got into Curtis. I was delighted to come back to the area, probably because I am a zealous Phillies fan, and wouldn't have to listen to Mets games on the radio anymore.

There was a lot of meaning in it for me, because in a way I took the same path that members of my family had taken, but through a very indirect route. I didn't know the people who were teaching at Curtis, I didn't know Gary Graffman, who was the director at the time – I was just a composer applying to the school. When I got there, and people got to know me, and found out that my grandfather had been the director of the school, it meant something to them, but it hadn't even meant something to me until I started studying there.

For me, I knew that it was a learning opportunity – that I would be able to have my music played at the highest level. When that happens, for a composer, there is nowhere to hide.

You can't say, or even think "well, this is a deficiency of the player" – it's almost always a deficiency of you the composer if something is not working. That's why I applied there, and I re-discovered my own roots in the process. It was a wonderful experience to be able to do that.

T.M.: What was your idiom when you arrived at Curtis? If you are an American composer, almost anything is possible. How do you choose what speaks to you?

D.L.: Curtis is a very practical school, and has always been a school that pushes a high level of output from the composers. Not only do they want high quantity, they want high quality. There's a lot of training that is demanded, and a lot of work. I hadn't gotten to experience that until Manhattan School. Oberlin was for me a much more theoretical place, where concept mattered a lot more in my mind. In a way, I was very lucky to have both sides of that, since both sides are important in making music.

The possibilities available make our lives as composers free and exciting, and also a lot harder. If you are only writing with one sort of style or technique, you only have to be really intimate with what you are doing. Being able to take everything in, and to let that filter through you, is a lot more work in the end. My biggest influence in that regard is after Curtis, I went to Juilliard, and studied with John Corigliano. John is an incredibly eclectic composer, and I remember him saying "I write whatever the music demands." I think about pieces of his, where he uses serialism, aleatoric music, minimalism, neo-Romantic sounds, all in the same piece, as the piece progresses. I had already been in that mindset, so I felt a very good fit with him. In a post-"ism" world – I guess you could call that post-modernist – we can write whatever suits us, whatever is demanded by the drama, the musical narrative of the piece. That's a terrific freedom that we have, that composers didn't have as much fifty or sixty years ago. I had already written an oboe quartet in 2003, and the middle movement is neo-medieval, and the outer movements are polytonal, with a much more contemporary language. But that is what this middle movement wanted, because of the subject matter.

Another thing he said to me a lot was "let the notes be slave to the music – don't let the music be slave to the notes". Let the notes that you are writing contribute to the idea, to the drama driving the music. Don't let the fact of "this chord" or "this harmony" dictate what everything around it has to be. The idea is more important than the specific details of the music.

T.M.: Two compositional approaches: an architectural approach, where the structure is conceived first (like a drawing by Oscar Niemeyer), and the details filled in, in accordance with the overarching structure, or a narrative/organic approach, where the story/organism builds upward from the details. Which approach would you say is closest to your practice?

D.L.: I definitely work the first way as much as I can. Composers are writers. Most writers have a pretty good idea of what is going to happen in their story before they get down to writing it. I remember going to one novelist's studio at the MacDowell colony, and she had laid out these gigantic pieces of paper on her floor, with all of the names of her characters there, a sort of flow-chart almost, with arrows showing actions along the way, ways in which they were transformed and emerged at the end. I was impressed by that, because I recognized that as what I do, and what a lot of us do, in the act of composing.

I am interested in the idea of just sitting down, writing something, and seeing where it goes, but I think it is very hard to develop coherent thoughts and narratives over a larger canvas that way. If you are writing shorter pieces, miniatures, and I have actually been doing a lot of that lately, maybe they are more improvisational, and it works well, but if you are writing anything with a longer narrative, it's to one's benefit to know where the piece is going, to know what happens. The trick is that you have to be flexible with it, because if you are too married to the architecture beforehand, you are going to get in trouble if you didn't plan it out well, if something comes up or if you have a better idea. The better idea should take precedence. In that way we move away from the more orthodox systems and pre-compositional planning of the past. We do think about it as architecture, but in the process of making the building we decide that this room would be better here, or this shelf better there, but we still have a very good idea of what is in the house as we are building it.

T.M.: Could you talk about a representative or successful piece? Radiance was a work that struck me.

D.L.: That was a piece commissioned by oboist Katherine Needleman. It's funny that I brought up Lowell earlier. Lowell got to be a flute composer as flutist came to know his music, and loved it, and he got a lot of commissions for flute. But I don't know if he's attached one way or the other to the instrument. Eric Ewazen is the same way. He says "I don't even *play* a brass instrument!", but he wrote pieces that brass players took notice of. This was a piece for oboe and string orchestra that Katherine commissioned, and then she commissioned a sonata and a quartet. Now I am working on some English horn music for another oboist. I've been fortunate that *Radiance* and the sonata and the quartet have been played all over the place.

I wrote *Radiance* while at the Yaddo artist colony. It was about the summer, the radiant beauty of everything around me, the twilight of warm nights, and how everything had a glow about it. Some of my music is about concrete subject matter, but that one is just about a feeling, which I wanted to capture over the course of the nine minutes of the piece.

T.M.: You mention summer nights, but the sense that I get from the work is a deep melancholy, a sadness.

D.L.: That's there, something nostalgic, wistful. When I think about the summer, in the fall or winter, I look back at it very fondly, because for me I have always been connected to a school year. If there's sadness, I think melancholy is a nice word – it is a sweet kind of sadness, hopefully.

T.M.: Perhaps we could talk about some recent works.

D.L.: I just wrote my first symphony. That was done in January. That was just put up on Instant Encore a week ago.

T.M.: Who was it commissioned by?

D.L.: Meet The Composer funded a residency for me with the Vermont Symphony in 2004. I wrote a cello concerto for the orchestra that went very well, and I think they were very pleased with the residency, because they gave us three additional years, and funded me to write several more pieces for the orchestra, and to work with them very extensively. The director of the orchestra is Jaime Laredo, and since he is one of the legendary violinists, he does a lot of playing with the orchestra too. He and his wife, Sharon Laredo, who is also an extraordinary cellist, work together a lot, so they have commissioned many double concertos. They commissioned my double concerto, which is probably my largest orchestral work. It's for large orchestra and is nearly a half-hour long. It's about different views about love – the three different kinds of love that the Greeks talk about – *eros*, *agape* and *philia*. It was a vehicle for me to explore some stories that I had been interested in and had been thinking about. That piece was recorded, and will be released commercially at some point – the recording that I have now is from the live performance.

My last commission for the orchestra was a symphony. It's a smaller-scale symphony – about twenty-five minutes – and it is for double winds, a couple of horns, timpani and strings. It's called "Book of Hours", and like a medieval book of hours, it's a sort of contemporary prayer-book. I used poetry to inspire the movements. Some of the poetry is written by contemporary poets. There's a young Persian poet who I have collaborated with named Sara Goudarzi, there's e.e. cummings, there's the Japanese Zen poet, Ryokan. There are seven movements in all, like the seven offices of the traditional book of hours. It starts with a daytime-inspired movement and ends at night. There are a lot of quotations from the poetry that inspires each movement. The last one is a Hebrew prayer, with soprano, which represents the night-time – a Hebrew version of "Now I lay me down to sleep".

T.M.: This is "Hashkivenu", yes?

D.L.: Yes, that's it. That was a wonderful project to work on for me. The movements are short, almost miniatures, because there are seven of them, and it is only twenty-four minutes long. I feel like I was able to say what I wanted to say in that process. I was very pleased – the orchestra played it several times. It was paired with the Emperor Concerto played by Andre Watts, so they joked that it was a Ludwig and Beethoven concert.

T.M.: You mentioned that Busch was your only non-Jewish relative, so I will have the chutzpah to ask to what extent your Jewish identity shapes or is reflected in or is important for your creative work.

D.L.: I was raised Quaker – as we say, "some of my best Jews are Friends" – there are a lot of Jewish folks who are attracted to Quakerism, for various reasons, so I was raised in the Society of Friends, and later I discovered my family's struggles during the Second World War, and the history of that. It's something that has happened organically in my music because I have had people who have identified *me* as Jewish. I hadn't even identified as Jewish, but they identified me, and asked for pieces on Jewish themes, so there is a Kaddish, and an entire cantata for Hanukah that the Choral Arts Society commissioned. I think the tradition of it, the ancient wisdom, a lot of the liturgy is very compelling to me, and very moving. I feel very comfortable setting it and exploring it, and I am exploring a tradition that belongs to what I come from. Sometimes composing for others is really all about discovering yourself. Am I using traditional modes from Hebrew chant? Not intentionally. Sometimes these sounds come out in the process of exploring the subject matter. As I said earlier in our conversation, being any kind of writer is a process of self-discovery – you collect things that resonate with you, you make note of them as you go through life, what, for whatever reason, strikes a chord within you, and then you explore that. I have been exploring a lot of Persian music, because for whatever reason, it is very appealing to me in ways that other music might not be.

T.M.: Upcoming projects?

D.L.: I have a lot going on, so I can tell you about just next season, at this point. I have some things happening in Philadelphia – I am writing a flute piece for Marina Piccinini, and also something for Settlement Music School, which I am very excited about, because it is one of the great community music schools in the country, and that kind of work is very important to me – to be able to collaborate with community musical organizations. Composers *need* to do that.

I am writing a trio for a residency in Chicago, for the Trio Cavatina. They just won the Naumburg prize last year – a great young group of musicians. I am writing a piano work

for the 92nd Street Y for a young pianist named Benjamin Hochman, a terrific player. And I am writing something for Mimi Stillman's group Dolce Suono.

The last work for next year is a concerto for Jennifer Koh and Jaime Laredo, with string orchestra. We are out there getting groups together on the consortium, which has been a really interesting process. Having this much work for such great players is a tremendous privilege, and I couldn't be more excited to be out there doing it!

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