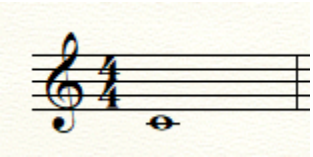
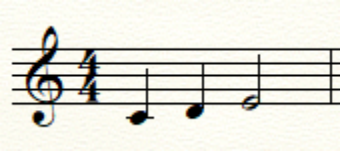
My Life as a Composer

Childhood

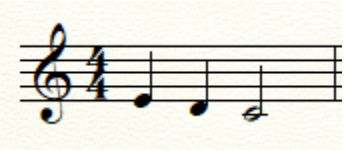
I was born in Chicago in 1955, at the height of the baby boom. I was the second of four children. My father was a professor of physics at the University of Chicago and my mother was a homemaker. I had a secure and comfortable childhood, but other than fighting with my younger brother, I kept mostly to myself. My musical education began at the age of 10, when I was given piano lessons. My parents came to this decision when we were visiting my father's sister in Massachusetts. They had a grand piano, and at a family gathering, an elderly aunt showed me middle C on the piano, explaining that all the notes on the piano started from there. With one finger, I poked that note out.



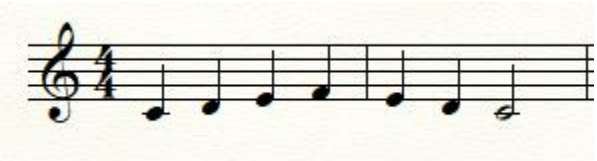
Then, since I was at the starting point, I headed north a couple of notes, all played with the same finger.



After thinking a second, I headed back down to C.



Then I went up and down again, one note further this time.



The elderly aunt turned to my mother. "He has talent," she declared. "You should give him piano lessons."

And so they did. I was sent to study with the wife of a colleague of my father's at the University, Judith Wharton. Mrs. Wharton had studied composition as well as piano, and felt strongly that children should be encouraged to compose. I studied with her for three years, receiving instruction in music theory and

composition as well as piano technique and performance. I had a composition exercise to complete each week, in addition to working my way through the piano course books.

By the time I was 13 I was starting high school and venturing into the easier Beethoven sonatas. Mrs. Wharton felt I was ready for a more advanced teacher. She sent me to Gavin Williamson, an older gentleman who lived in our neighborhood, Hyde Park, and had had a distinguished career as a harpsichordist and pianist. I found out only recently that he was one of the first American musicians in the 20th century to perform in public on the harpsichord. Mr. Williamson had two harpsichords in his living room, which left room for a couch, a chair, and not much else. In what would have been the adjoining dining room, he had two grand pianos, which left room for nothing else at all. I would sit at one piano and he would sit at the other, giving me direction from there. I studied with Mr. Williamson all through high school, and by the end, was working on fairly difficult pieces, which I played with great feeling and shoddy technique. Mr. Williamson didn't teach composition, but I still wrote a little on my own here and there. I didn't have much time to write music, as I was also taking clarinet lessons, appearing in school plays and musicals, and taking singing classes in high school. I'm not sure now how I managed all that, though now that I think of it, I don't actually recall doing much home work for my other classes. As you can see, music played a big part in my high school days.

By this point it was becoming clear that there were other kids my age playing the piano who were progressing a good deal more quickly than I was. In fact, a friend of mine from summer music camp had already won a competition and performed in public with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, playing the first movement of the Schumann A minor piano concerto. For some reason, my fingers just wouldn't move as fast as theirs. But I soldiered bravely on. I took a year off between high school and college, spending six months in a French language school in Lausanne, Switzerland. My father found a piano teacher for me at the Lausanne Conservatory, and I took lessons and practiced there. My knowledge of the piano literature was expanded somewhat, but my technique was no better when I left than when I started.

Kyriena

The big turning point in my study of the piano came the next year, 1973, when I started college at Harvard. My teacher from high school, Mr. Williamson, knew a pianist on the faculty of the Music department at Harvard, and contacted her about taking me on, so I could continue my studies. When I got to campus, I made an appointment to see the faculty member. "Oh, so you're here for a recommendation for a piano teacher," she said when I introduced myself. This took me by surprise, as I was under the impression I was going to study with *her*. But I went with the flow. I played for her for a couple of minutes, and her reaction was quick and decisive. "You have poor technique. I can give you two recommendations for teachers that stress technique. One's at Boston Conservatory, and one's at the Longy School." Now, Harvard College is in Cambridge, which faces Boston on the other side of the Charles River. Boston Conservatory is in downtown Boston, two subway lines away. The Longy School of Music, on the other hand, is in Cambridge, about a five minute walk from my dorm. So that question was easily settled. The next week I had my first lesson at the Longy School with Kyriena Siloti, and my life was never the same.

Kyriena was 82 when I started studying with her my freshman year at Harvard. She was the daughter of a famous Russian pianist and conductor, Alexander Siloti, who had himself studied with Liszt and had taught Rachmaninoff. At my first lesson at the Longy School, she sat me down at the piano to hear me play. Shortly after I started, she stopped me. "We have an expression in Russian for people who play like you do. 'У него нет пальцев.' – He has no fingers. Your fingers barely move. They are like an old tired weak person who can barely walk. Your fingers need to move like a young person: full of life and energy." To demonstrate, she jumped up from the bench and strode vigorously around the room. It was a message I clearly needed to hear, and as it came from an 82 year old woman addressing a 17 year old, it was impossible to ignore.

Thus began my six years of study with Kyriena. I didn't have much time to practice the piano while I was at Harvard, but I did my best and took weekly lessons. Kyriena taught the technique she learned from her father. It's nowadays called "Russian technique", but Kyriena told me that her father learned it from Liszt. In any case, it usually involves forcing your fingers into stiff, uncomfortable positions while demanding heroic efforts from your muscles. It feels almost impossible at first, but gradually your muscles get used to it. The resulting sound is very clean and powerful. Russian technique also provides a method for producing a very rich, warm singing sound.

More important than the specifics of Russian technique was her attitude toward music. She was a perfectionist and a strict disciplinarian. No shortcoming in my posture went unremarked. "Your knuckles are too high." "Relax your shoulders." "Lower your wrists." "Sit up straight." Nor, for that matter, did any oversight in my interpretation. "You missed that staccato mark." Kyriena was never cold or cruel in her criticism of me, simply factual. She never praised me. She had in her life heard all the great pianists of the time, some of whom she had known personally, and held up those standards as models for her students. For me to play something and receive in response nothing more than a nod was a triumph beyond description. It meant I had played it as it should be played. Now that I think of it, I can only remember that happening once.

The summer after I graduated from Harvard in 1977, I found an apartment to live in for the summer with a classmate ($150 dollars a month, provided we paint the living room, which we did). I had a part-time job as a cashier in a cheese store in Harvard Square, and I spent much of my free time practicing at Longy School. Two remarkable things happened that summer. My piano technique made rapid progress for the first time in my life, doubtless due to the fact that I was practicing several hours a day for the first time in my life. In addition, I started to compose again. It seems my academic life had silenced that voice in me, and when the studies stopped, the voice started up again. It happened after I attended a concert on campus with my roommate, where a piece by Dvorak was played. After I got home that evening, my head was full of scraps of music that sounded rather like Dvorak or Brahms, but were clearly my own ideas. The next day, the ideas kept coming. I found one of my music notebooks and started writing them down. I didn't start writing any pieces, I just kept collecting little scraps of music: some just a few notes, some entire themes.

While still at Harvard I had applied to graduate school in linguistics and been accepted at Stanford. That summer I decided not to go to graduate school in linguistics after all, but to go to a conservatory, get a

master's degree in piano performance, and embark on a career as a pianist. My parents were not entirely thrilled with this decision when I announced it to them, but they went along with it. Since I made this decision in August, it was too late to attend a conservatory in the next school year, and I needed to practice anyway to prepare for the auditions. The summer sublet being concluded, I moved to an apartment in Beacon Hill in downtown Boston. My building was an eighteenth-century townhouse converted into apartments, on a cobblestone street where all the buildings were eighteenth-century townhouses. It was the most beautiful neighborhood I've ever lived in, even with the minefield of dog droppings that covered the sidewalks. (I suppose in Revolutionary days, those would have been horse droppings.) I continued to work part time at the cheese store and practice at the Longy School. That spring, 1978, I applied to Juilliard and the Eastman School of Music, perhaps the most prestigious conservatories in the US at that time. My ambitions were lofty, but my technique was not. So I didn't get accepted.

I decided at that point that I should move from Boston to New York City, get my own piano, spend another year practicing like a madman, and try one more time. And so I moved to New York, the epicenter of classical music, and began the next phase in my life.

One of the reasons that I decided to move to New York was that my piano teacher Kyriena lived in New York, not Boston. She had been commuting weekly by bus from New York to Boston when I studied with her at the Longy School, but as she started to feel her years (she was close to 90 at this point), she only came every two weeks. Kyriena lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, the same neighborhood her friend Rachmaninoff had lived in, and home to countless other classical musicians, as well as psychologists, academics, authors, and actors (successful ones, not the wannabes). The studio apartment I had managed to find for myself was on the Upper East Side, so when I had my piano lessons (now weekly again), I would walk all the way across Central Park. I was thrilled to be in the Big Apple, and determined to make my mark on the city, if I could only figure out how. Well, clearly the first step was to get into music school, so I used some savings to buy a grand piano, the same one I have now in my living room. It took up about 20% of my studio apartment, but I saved some space by sleeping on a mattress on the floor under the piano. And I practiced hours a day.

New York

The spring of '79 I applied only to music schools in New York City. I had no intention of moving again to some other city, not with a grand piano. I applied again to Juilliard and was rejected again (you can call me persistent, or just foolish), but I was accepted at Manhattan School of Music. So I started the master's program in piano at Manhattan School in the fall of '79.

I stayed at Manhattan School for three years and received excellent musical training, but never completed a degree program. My piano teacher was Seymour Lipkin, who had been a brilliant concert pianist in his youth, but was now approaching fifty and had changed his focus from performing to teaching. Mr. Lipkin had been present at my audition, along with the rest of the piano faculty, and after I left the room (as I found out later), had been the only faculty member interested in me. The others found my technique entirely inadequate, but Mr. Lipkin saw something appealing in me and took me on.

When I received the acceptance letter from Manhattan School of Music, no mention was made of the fact that I had already been assigned to Mr. Lipkin. Instead, the names of the piano faculty members were listed and I was asked to indicate my preference. Be it coincidence or fate, I picked Mr. Lipkin entirely by mistake, confusing his name for that of someone else entirely.

As I started lessons with Mr. Lipkin, he was somewhat taken aback by my technical proficiency, or rather, lack thereof, but we soldiered bravely ahead together. After a semester, Mr. Lipkin came to the conclusion that I really shouldn't be in the graduate program at all, but should be working on an undergraduate degree. He went to talk to the school administration about getting me shifted back to the undergraduate program, but they said that it simply couldn't be done as I had already completed a semester of master's level courses. They recommended instead that I become a "non-matriculated graduate student". As explained to me, that meant that I still took the same graduate level courses, but I didn't have to take the dreaded "juries", where students performed for the assembled faculty members in their instrument in precisely the same state of terror that they experienced when they auditioned for acceptance. This would continue until my teacher felt I had advanced enough to qualify for the master's degree.

So I stayed three years at Manhattan School, learning a tremendous amount about all sorts of subjects (orchestration, Baroque performance practice, jazz harmony, etc.) and making some friends for life. It was at Manhattan School that I started composing seriously. After taking the course in orchestration mentioned above, taught by composer and conductor Giampaolo Bracali, I asked Mr. Bracali if I could take private lessons in composition with him, and he agreed. At my first lesson, I pulled out my notebooks filled with all the scraps of music that had been tumbling into my skull since that summer in Boston. He looked through them and nodded. "Well, what are you going to do with these?" he asked. "Uhh … I thought, maybe, put them into a piano quintet." That idea had been bubbling in my skull along with the scraps for several years now. "OK. So start it and bring me something to look at next week." I gulped, and got to work. And that became my Opus 1, as it were, a piano quintet (that is, string quartet plus piano) in four movements that sounds a lot like Dvorak or Brahms.

At the end of my third year at Manhattan School, Mr. Lipkin felt I was ready to go back into the master's program and get my degree in one more year. But there was an unanticipated difficulty. It appeared that by becoming a non-matriculated graduate student, I had actually relinquished my acceptance into the master's program. To get my degree, I had to audition for the assembled piano faculty once more, and I would be competing with everyone else who was auditioning for acceptance into the program that year. (So much for skipping the juries.) I did the audition, and received unwelcome news. The piano department had recently raised their standards for technical proficiency. Under the old standards, I would have been re-accepted, but, not under the new standards. Of course, I was welcome to continue paying full tuition indefinitely as a non-matriculated graduate student.

I figured three years was enough. At this point, I was 26 and still taking money from my parents. I felt it was time to get a job and start supporting myself. I realize that living off of your parents at age 26 is nothing unusual nowadays, but back in the baby boomer generation, this was not good. At all. So I said goodbye to Manhattan School, and after some effort, got myself an entry level job as a computer

programmer at a bank in the Financial District of Manhattan. By this time I had met and moved in with the man who would eventually become my husband. And that became my life for the next 34 years: going to work, keeping my boyfriend->lover->partner->husband happy (the terms changed over the years), practicing my piano technique, and composing.

The Singers Forum

Just around when I left Manhattan School, I got a job teaching an opera performance workshop at a small school called the Singers Forum. The students in the workshop, all singers with limited training in classical music, studied scenes from operas, sometimes whole acts, and performed them at quarterly recitals in front of an audience in the school's theater. My job was to teach them the music and the pronunciation and meaning of their lines, which were always sung in the original language of the opera. Another teacher directed them on stage. At the performances, I played the orchestra part on the piano. I spent around ten years teaching the opera workshop at the Singers Forum, and remember those days very fondly. I think of them as forming the last phase of my musical education. It was at the Singers Forum that I learned to play with deep feeling. Up to that point in my life, anytime I played for someone else, I felt that my playing was subject to comparison with whatever masterful performance(s) my listener may have heard before, be it recorded or live. Being thus judged and found wanting, in my own mind at least, I was never able simply to let go and think of nothing but the music itself. But at the Singers Forum, judging me was the last thing on the students' mind. They were struggling with their own issues as they sang and took it for granted that I was playing the orchestra part correctly. My playing there was not about me: I was only there to support and inspire them. What the singers needed from me as I played was pure, intense emotion, poured forth in glorious waves of music that they could lose themselves in. It was an entirely secondary matter, of no interest to anyone but myself, whether or not I played the notes precisely as they were written on the page. Thinking back on it now, I suspect that those ten years of playing opera scenes for three hours a week (plus dress rehearsals and performances) was a formative factor in shaping my personality as a composer. Listeners often comment when they hear one of my pieces that it seems very theatrical, as if it described characters and followed a plot.

After preparing and accompanying ten years of Opera Workshop recitals at the Singers Forum, I had learned a good deal of the operatic literature, and was starting to repeat scenes I had done in earlier years. So I bid the Singers Forum farewell, expecting that some other musical opportunity would come along to take its place in my life. However, none did. I lived for some years in a musical vacuum, as it were, writing piano sonatas and other pieces, but rarely playing them for anyone.

Carnegie Hall

While I was still working at the Singers Forum, I took one of those weekend-long self-improvement workshops in an attempt to motivate myself to find a niche for myself in the classical music world. With the motivation I derived from the workshop (which was enthusiastic but short-lived, I'm afraid), I booked Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall for a recital of my works. The program consisted of three art

songs, my cello sonata, and my first piano sonata. I hired a publicist, a singer, and a cellist and got a music critic to come. The recital was a great success. The publicist managed to fill the house, and I received thunderous applause and a standing ovation at the end, which at the time still meant something special. However, nothing came of the recital: no notice by critics, no new supporters in the classical music world. At least I can say I played Carnegie Hall, even if I had to rent the room myself.

Redemption

A change came in the mid-nineties. For years I had been hanging out twice a week with friends of mine in their apartment, going over in the evenings after dinner, smoking weed, drinking coffee, playing board games and improvising on their modest piano. One hazy evening, my friend Carol suggested I record some improvisations and send them to New Age record companies. At the time, there were several popular performers who did solo piano pieces on New Age CD labels, and Carol thought that might be a niche for me. So I went to a recording studio and recorded several sessions of improvisations. I believe I had 40 or more tracks by the time I was done. I picked out the best ones and transferred them to cassettes, filling up two. I then hired a recording industry lawyer (a college roommate of my brother's, if the truth be told) whose firm had connections in the recording industry. He had me prune the two cassettes down to one, and then sent copies to various record companies. The response I got was that the record companies didn't need any more solo piano performers – they already had all they could use. However, "live" piano music combined with electronic and synthesizer sounds was now hot, so if I had any of that kind of thing, they'd take another listen.

This was moving well beyond my own sphere of expertise. Another friend suggested I find a record producer to help me put the new improved album together, and she recommended an acquaintance of hers named David Stone, who had years of experience producing albums. David and I hit it off right off the bat. David listened to the full two cassettes of improvisations and cut me down to eight. We then studied each improvisation carefully. I first would copy out a rough score of the piece in a notebook. David and I would then plot out what type of orchestration we would add. Using synthesizers, I could have any orchestral instruments I cared to use, and David had all sorts of ideas for exotic percussion instruments. David had also won me over to the (to my mind) highly unorthodox notion of using sounds from the natural world (animal and bird cries, fire, ice cracking, wind, etc.) as if they were individual musical instruments, with their own lines in the score. Each track would start with the natural sounds and the piano would then emerge and take center stage, as it were, accompanied by the "orchestra". Natural sounds would highlight transitions and particularly intense moments in the music. Frankly, I've never heard anyone else do something like this. Usually, non-musical sounds form a continuous unchanging background to the music, almost like an alternative drum track, rather than behaving as a solo instrument that interacts with others.

After months in the recording studio, the album was complete. I was very proud of it. My lawyer sent it back to the record companies, who were impressed by its sophistication, musical range and emotional intensity. "I played it for all my friends", said one executive. However, due to its sophistication, musical range and emotional intensity, they all felt they'd have a hard time selling it to the public and declined to pick it up. So, I ended up taking matters into my own hands. I got a CD cover designed and had 1,000

CD's of the album printed, entitled "Redemption". I sold some to friends and family but most of them I still have.

Rasputin and the Romanovs

This was a project that I worked on for over a year, but never brought to completion. It started shortly after my "Redemption" days when an old student of mine from the Singers Forum days invited me to her house for dinner. She also invited her voice teacher, whom she wanted me to meet. Let's call him "AF". I brought one of my "Redemption" CDs, and my student played a track after dinner for AF to hear. After hearing one track, he announced decisively that I had talent and that the two of us should collaborate on a Broadway musical. He proposed the subject of Rasputin. I was delighted to be working on a project with a collaborator and agreed. AF would write the book and lyrics, and I would write the music. Within a couple of months, we had signed a contract, and AF had sent me a draft of the first couple of scenes. I got to work and composed the overture and the first scene. But as new drafts came, I found myself making more and more frequent changes to the lyrics AF wrote. By the time we got to the end of the first act, I was ignoring AF's material entirely and writing entire scenes of my own. Needless to say, AF did not appreciate my efforts, and our collaboration never got as far as Act II. But I'm very pleased with the numbers I did write for Act I. The muse in my brain seized on the Russian motif and pumped out a steady stream of the most Russian-sounding melodies. I hope some day to work this material into a finished piece of music, be it opera or something else. Actually, I did get a chance to use one number: a love duet I wrote for Tsar Nicholas and Tsarina Alexandra. At the insistence of my partner, I rewrote it for tenor and baritone, made some adjustments to the lyrics, and had it performed at our wedding. Seeing as Nicholas and Alexandra were put to death by the Bolsheviks, I had some reservations about using that particular composition, but I kept those to myself. The performance of the duet brought tears to the audience's eyes, but given the other things going on at the time, perhaps I can't take credit for all of those.

Home Recitals

After "Rasputin and the Romanovs" fell apart, I went into a compositional funk and didn't write anything for a number of years. There didn't seem much point to doing so if no one was ever going to hear what I wrote. I kept practicing the piano and working on various pieces other composers had written, but the impetus to write had vanished. I came out of my funk in the 2000's. Oddly enough, the same former student from the Singers Forum whose voice teacher became my Rasputin collaborator now called me out of the blue and offered me a job writing a score for an off-off-off Broadway revival of a play from the 20's or 30's (forgive my faulty recall) called "Come of Age". The original production had an orchestral score which accompanied the dialog on stage, but this had been lost. The producer was looking for a composer to recreate the music and my former student, who was doing costumes for the show, recommended me. I happily took the job, wrote the music, taught it to the actors, played the piano for the two-week run of the show, and was left with many happy memories and a renewed interest in writing music. Shortly thereafter, my friend Sharon died and I was moved to write a piano sonata in her memory, which became Piano Sonata #4. So I was back in the groove. After finishing Piano Sonata #4, I

wanted to perform it, and decided that the simplest thing to do was just to give recitals at home and invite people I know. So that's what I did. And that's what I've been doing ever since. I write music for solo piano or small chamber ensembles. After I finish writing a piece, I learn it, if needed hire musicians to play other parts, perform the piece at home several times, and then record it in a recording studio. After I have the recording, I put it up on my website.

The Future

I'm fortunate to have lived long enough to see a time when musicians can publicize their work on their own, without having recourse to an agent, publishing company, or recording company. Having now retired comfortably from my IT career, my strategy is not to pursue the agents, publishing companies, and recording companies, but to focus my attention on building a presence online. People do that all by themselves, these days.