



ECM+ Interviews Emily Hall

Why do you write music?

For many, many reasons, but here are two:

(1) There's a lot of destruction in this world. Composing is the opposite. It creates something that otherwise wouldn't be there. Everyone has his or her own calling, and for me, I need to create.

(2) Above all else, I am a listener, even before I am a composer. I write music to engage people to listen more closely. We will never reach a point where people listen too closely to the world, to themselves, or to one another. As a reminder that listening brings greater wisdom and awareness.

Where is the place for new music in our society?

In the classroom, in the music lesson, on the radio, in films, on the iPod, in the concert hall....everywhere!

How and/or when did you know you would be a composer?

I didn't fully think of it in this way until much, much later. I always bypassed the question by focusing on my desire to create music, as opposed to the title itself. Even when I was officially a student taking a degree in composition, I had a hard time calling myself a composer. It seems kind of silly now, but the title appeared oh so lofty to my 20-something sensibility. Even though the act of composing still sends tingles down my spine, I now realize a composer is just someone who writes music. It's as simple as that. Whether I get work for this is another question, but it isn't the defining piece of the equation. I still want to create music, so I do. The real question is what kind of music? I never stop confronting this question.

What are some of your most striking musical memories/moments/experiences?

- At a distillery, improvising music with my parents. Our instrument? A 100,000 litre metal tank.
- At the top of a Swiss church tower with the ringing bells. I remember getting lost in the endless permutations of partials emerging in close succession.
- Practising on a beautiful 9-foot Steinway in the quietest place in all my life: a 13,000-acre Wyoming ranch. My studio was entirely made of logs and used to be a one-room schoolhouse. I opened all the windows and doors to feel the fresh autumn air, without a hint of sound from a car, person, or even birds or insects. Nothing but the silent deer at my window and the faintest sound of the creek flowing behind the studio. With this much silence, my sonic thoughts reached a new level of clarity.
- The unique voice of my grandfather, lilting and lyrical, high and soft-spoken.
- Hundreds of live new music concerts, many here in Montreal - there are so many talented and passionate musicians, and so it's impossible to highlight one.
- Hearing the Russian Orthodox liturgy at the Alexander Nevsky Church in Copenhagen.

How and when did you discover new music?

When I was 5, I begged my parents for piano lessons. I instantly liked to play "classical" music. I remember, with fondness, that back then I naively called all music "songs." Like most kids around me, I was heavily into popular music; I always had a Walkman or ghetto blaster nearby.

But, my interest in new music was sparked relatively late; it wasn't because it took me time to acquire a taste for it, I simply did not know of its existence. It wasn't playing on the radio or appearing in my music lessons. Aside from popular music, I didn't know composers and the creation of new music – as an extension of the classical, baroque, and romantic compositions that I was playing on the piano – existed today.

Not until age 19, my last high school music class, was I introduced. I loved it right away. I discovered an LP of R. Murray Schafer's choir music at the library. On one side was "Threnody," an anti-war protest with text of children's eyewitness accounts of the Nagasaki bombing. The same year I was researching in history class the atomic bomb and World War II. That music could express emotions beyond the capabilities of words was certainly not new to me by this time, but I was completely hooked in this new realisation that music could resonate with issues of present-day concern.

But then, I didn't know how to go from there, where to listen. There were always other distractions and more familiar obsessions to take up my spare time. At that age, as with most new things, you need teachers to really guide you. Later in my bachelor's degree, we covered 20th century music in history class, where everything opened up. I was introduced to even more unknown genres such as electroacoustic music, and it didn't seem to matter what the genre was: new music immediately resonated deeply with me, even though I was listening to it for the first time. It was at that point I took composing more seriously.

All these stories tell about my discovery of new music and living composers, which is in itself something that does not happen to everyone in our society. I sometimes wonder who slips through the cracks, and if so, how or do they eventually find new music?

February 2013