

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a gold sequined dress, is singing and gesturing with her hands. She is wearing large diamond rings and a necklace. The background is dark.

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Positively Mona Lyn Reese

MARK ALBURGER

Mona Lyn Reese is a neoclassic composer based in San Jose, California, who has spent much of the past decade in Germany and India. Her husband Thomas Hassing has served as her librettist in several operas. I caught up with Mona at her comfortable home in the north of town on January 13, 2011.

ALBURGER: So, you've only been back from India for a couple of years.

REESE: We got back in July of 2008. And then Tom started working at Global Foundries, where he's the Director of Intellectual Property.

ALBURGER: And meanwhile he writes.

REESE: Yes, he does. He was actually in the last production of *The Three Fat Women of Antibes* at San Jose State. The part that he played was a supernumerary who only appears at the end, and only in one piece. The director said, "We're having a hard time finding someone to play the part." So I said, "Tom will do it." "Really, do think so?" "Well, he's going to be there anyway, so, why not? He knows the lines!" Then I came to find that Tom had never been in a play in his life, not even as a child. Not even a Nativity play at church; he hadn't even been a shepherd. But he does a lot of acting classes. When I worked with young kids, getting them to write their own operas (at one of the places I've worked in that capacity: The Twin Cities Opera Company), Tom was helping with the writing. He was great; he was playing the mirror game -- he was fantastic! We've been together for 25 years, and I never knew that he had never been on the stage!

ALBURGER: So, how'd he do?

REESE: He was good.

ALBURGER: Good?

REESE: He wasn't great. He was terribly nervous. He was really nervous. Fortunately, for him, the person who was the director is a really good friend. We were friends with Daniel Helfgott and Barbara Turner before we did this project. So Daniel and Tom had to have a little coaching, and their coaching was to go for a long walk, without Barbara and me. And then Tom got a hat that he was supposed to wear.

ALBURGER: Something to help him be in the character.

REESE: To be in the character. And, once he had his hat, which we got him pretty quickly (he was supposed to be a 1930's playboy-prince, with a white hat, and once he had it to make gestures, it was....

ALBURGER: Magic. The Magic Feather.

REESE: A magic thing! He went from stiff and horrible to...

UNISON: Good.

REESE: Yes, not great...

ALBURGER: But good.

REESE: The improvement was marked. And once we got to the performances... he was good.

ALBURGER: So that series of performances was in...

REESE: 2009.

ALBURGER: 2009. What else has been happening?

REESE: Oh, I finished recording *Choose Life*, with the San Jose Choral Project and San Jose Chamber Orchestra. It's an hour long I-really-don't-know-what-to-call-it. It's for chorus, soloists, and orchestra. There's a Gregorian chant choir and a narrator. When it's performed, everybody dresses up. It's about the Holocaust, and everybody dresses up like people of the time -- some rich, some poor. And it's staged. The people sing from the music, but directors usually have them -- depending on the size of the space -- moving around.

ALBURGER: Kind of like an opera-oratorio.

REESE: Kind of like an opera-oratorio. It was done in 2000 at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis, which was the organization that commissioned it, a long time ago in the 90's. It's been performed quite a lot. In this recent production, they had dancers for some of it, with modern dancers from Notre Dame, who choreographed a couple of the pieces that were just really moving. So that finally, finally, finally happened, after years of trying to get the money, and get organized, and find somebody that could do it that wasn't going to be in the Czech Republic, or something like that. I don't mind working with European groups along those lines, but I wanted to do this in the United States, if I could. So I finally finished that. We just finished it in October.

ALBURGER: Finished it in terms of the performances?

REESE: Finished recording it at Skywalker Studio.

ALBURGER: Oh, wow.

REESE: Yes, because it's been performed a lot, and everybody does it differently. Now there's going to be a performance of that piece -- I don't if they're doing the whole piece, with all of the choruses -- by a group in New York. So, I've been doing that, and then I've been working on getting the promotions for *Three Fat Women* ready -- mailing lists...

ALBURGER: And that's going up again?

REESE: Well, excerpts from it, in a similar fashion as with San Francisco Cabaret Opera, at Bluegrass Opera, in Kentucky. The Bluegrass people are going to do six sets of new opera excerpts, and after they see how the pieces go and what the audience response is, they're going to choose two of the operas over the summer. But I've been working on the marking for *Three Fat Women*, and my daughter, who's also an opera singer, is really good at Excel and Word, and she's making a big mailing list, so I can market it. Because, if nobody knows about it, they why did I bother? Tom and I are also working on a new opera, but we're just in the libretto stages.

ALBURGER: Working title?

REESE: It's an unimportant book called *The Glimpses of the Moon*.

ALBURGER: *The Glimpses of the Moon*.

REESE: It's a romantic comedy. I don't like tragedy. I am a happy girl! I am a happy girl, and I don't... see... why... You know, almost every single new piece is this doom and gloom... So depressing. *Nixon in China*, or that man who was killed by the pirate terrorists, I can't think of the name...

ALBURGER: You mean *The Death of Klinghoffer*?

REESE: *Klinghoffer*! Yes, I do! Depressing...

ALBURGER: So that's not your thing?

REESE: Nah, no. So here I am, just telling you about my Holocaust Oratorio!

ALBURGER: Right! Well, so there you go!

REESE: But, you see, that was a commission!

ALBURGER: So, you naturally gravitate towards the happy, but you'll do a sad on spec.

REESE: Sure, but I'll tell you that the commissioners -- the Temple Israel, the Basilica of St. Mary, and the College of St. Benedict -- didn't want a horror story.

ALBURGER: Right. So, they wanted something uplifting.

REESE: A situation in which you would feel good -- or feel cleansed or uplifted -- by the end.

ALBURGER: Catharsis.

REESE: Yes, so that's what we did. And that's why we titled it *Choose Life*.

ALBURGER: *Choose Life*.

REESE: It's from Deuteronomy. There's a verse, "Today I will choose life."

ALBURGER: So that, would you say, would be a through-line in your work: the positive?

REESE: Yes.

ALBURGER: And where did this all start? Your background in music -- where did you get the spark?

REESE: Oh, you know, I'll tell you something: I always wanted to be a composer! I just did. I'm so dumb, Mark, that I thought... Listen, this is what I really and truly thought, that, if you wanted to compose music... Or, you know, if you wanted to major in English, you would go to the English Department and they would teach you... In music, they would teach you how to write... music. That's why you went to music school... I mean, of course, obviously, I knew that people wanted to, you know, play better, and so on, and I knew that that was part of it, but I really and truly thought that it was about composition. And, of course, it's true, you do go to music school and learn how to be a composer.

ALBURGER: Yes.

REESE: You do. But that was so much in my brain, that I couldn't imagine why anybody would go to college and major in English who wouldn't want to write stories, or write novels. Because, people that went to art school wanted to paint pictures, right?

ALBURGER: Sure.

REESE: And sculpt things and, you know, make macramé plant holders, or whatever. And I thought that's what you would do analogously in music. And I was in music school for the first two years or so, and I finally went up to a teacher. I went to the University of Minnesota at Morris, which was a very small school, and my parents lived in that town, and I lived a home. And I went to the head of the theory department, who was also a composer, and I knew that, because we had played his music in the concert band that I was in. And I said, "Dr. Johnson, I want to write music, and when do we take a course in composition?" He just looked at me, because most of the kids wanted to be music teachers. They were in education. They had their music, and that's what they were thinking about doing. My father was a barber. I said to my parents, "I really want to do this." They didn't know what to think. I knew, but I didn't know how to tell anybody, in a way. And, it's my mother's fault, because she always took me to concerts and such in Minneapolis when I was a little girl. She took me to Orchestra Hall when I was six, and I was sitting there, "I wanna do this! This is what I want!"

ALBURGER: What were some of the pieces that made the first impressions on you?

REESE: Oh, Handel. Our town orchestra did *Messiah* every year, and I remember looking forward to that all year long. I was a really tiny little kid. It was my thing. My father didn't care about that stuff. I had two brothers, and they were little, and didn't want to go. But I can remember going when I was six. Because I was sitting like this, you know? [demonstrates]. When you're six, and you're sitting in the adult chairs at the auditorium?

ALBURGER: Yes! Edith Ann....

REESE: And I didn't fall asleep. My mom took me when I was 12 to see *Tosca*. The Metropolitan Opera would come to Minneapolis -- they used to; they don't anymore. There was a traveling Metropolitan Opera. They came, and I saw Renata Tebaldi. I've never forgotten. I thought, "I wanna do that!"

ALBURGER: But not "sing that." "Write that."

REESE: Yes, I never wanted to sing it, but I wanted to be in it, somehow.

ALBURGER: You knew you wanted to buy into it in some way.

REESE: Yes. I wanted to be that. I wanted to do that.

ALBURGER: How far away is Minneapolis from your hometown?

REESE: A three-hour drive.

ALBURGER: It was a pilgrimage.

REESE: Kind of. Except that my grandmother -- my mom's mother -- lived there.

ALBURGER: So you had other reasons to go.

REESE: Yes, occasionally we would go just to attend. But usually it wasn't as if we would drive for three hours and see the event and come home.

ALBURGER: You'd stay.

REESE: We'd sleep over, or we'd go the day before. I know my mom's friend, Maxine, and her daughter also enjoyed the concerts. Plus we'd go to nice restaurants, matinees, and attend the Guthrie Theater. My mother really liked drama.

ALBURGER: In general, however, yours was a small-town rural situation.

REESE: Morris, Minnesota, but there's a branch of the University there.

ALBURGER: A small town with culture.

REESE: Yes, lot's of professors hanging around. At the time I lived there, it was quite a vibrant town. Now, I wouldn't say it's a ghost town, there's still lots of manufacturing...

And the University is still there -- they've got a great campus - - a very vibrant life. But, previously, there were all of these great stores and restaurants, back in the 50's and 60's. And now, there's nothing.

ALBURGER: So you were born...

REESE: August 24, 1951.

ALBURGER: So the town was vibrant enough then for a good undergraduate education?

REESE: Yes, and then, for graduate school, before which I took some time off doing other things...

ALBURGER: The other things being?...

REESE: I went and I lived in Key West, Florida, for a little while, and just I was a lifeguard. I had done four years of academics in three years of school, and I had still graduated with honors, and I was fried.

ALBURGER: So it was time to do something different.

REESE: And I didn't know where I wanted to go to graduate school, so I went and I lived in Florida for a couple of years.

ALBURGER: Well, being in Minnesota for a certain length of time, it seems like Florida...

REESE: It seemed like it would be a great idea. So I did go there, and then, after that, I went to the University of Kansas, and I got my Masters in Music Composition.

ALBURGER: What were some of your earliest compositions? Were they done at the University, or before in Florida?

REESE: I never wrote anything in Florida. I didn't have a piano. I'll tell you, sometimes you can get really academically tired. And I was academically tired. I played my guitar and I didn't do anything musical except apply to graduate school. I did that.

ALBURGER: The Florida stint was?...

REESE: Just a year and a half.

ALBURGER: You had earned an extra year...

REESE: Yes, sort of like that. So then I was looking for a place to go to school, and I liked the composition program at the University of Kansas. I was accepted, I had done well -- my undergraduate marks were good. I studied there with John Pozdro and Edward Mattila -- my two main teachers. One is about a hundred by now.

ALBURGER: Another Elliott Carter. What about those first pieces?

REESE: I'm trying to remember. Pieces from grad school, some of them I still like.

I wrote some songs, a piano piece, and some small chamber ensembles...

ALBURGER: Any titles come to mind?

REESE: I'm trying to think... This is terrible... Oh, I know. One song cycle that I wrote was called *Love Poems to the Moon*. Oh, I wrote a song that I still like -- I still like. And I get in trouble with ASCAP for it, too. It's a poem by Arthur Rimbaud called *Le dormeur du val*. Which is "The Person Sleeping in the Valley." It's an anti-war piece that he wrote some time in the 19th Century. It's a very good piece. It's a good piece. People still perform it, and I like it a lot. There's a pop artist from the 50's or 60's, his name was Yves Montand -- this French singer, who recorded a jazz version of music on this same poem. So they keep sending me his checks! I keep saying, "This is not my piece. This is not my piece."

ALBURGER: You never tried to cash one of those checks.

REESE: Well, yes, the checks are written out to me, because...

ALBURGER: They think it's your piece.

REESE: They think it's my piece, because he's a singer. But I didn't write that version. He was the lover of Edith Piaf, or somebody like that...

ALBURGER: Well, you're very honorable. Because, I've got to admit, when I have checks with my name on them from ASCAP, I cash them!

REESE: Well, you know what? It's easy to do, because sometimes there are a bunch of pieces, because I've done lots of arrangements for the Minnesota Orchestra when I lived in Minneapolis, and I might do Prokofiev. Well, I'm not really allowed to do an arrangement of Prokofiev, because he's still under the copyright. But they're only doing, you know, an excerpt for a children's concert; I'm not going to worry about it. But the orchestra could get in big, big, big, trouble if anybody from that publisher found out about it, and so could I. So that money, if it's going to anyone, is going to Prokofiev's heirs. So I just tell them, I did an arrangement of that, and they say, "Fine, fine, fine." We're not talking about a lot of money. This money I got from the anti-war piece was maybe a hundred dollars. It's nothing. iTunes sells an album of it for 99 cents, and somebody buys that song, and I get a check for 35 cents, or something. So there was that piece. And I wrote the big composition called, *Three Moods for Piano*, or something like that. You write these pieces...

ALBURGER: Do you keep a works list?

REESE: Oh, yes. And around this same time, I did get my first professional composition commission at 24, when I had not yet graduated from Kansas. I just had my thesis and defense to do. I had done my recital. Everything else was done.

ALBURGER: And this was for your Masters? Doctorate? Both.

REESE: I have a master's. I don't have a doctorate. So I worked in the Art Department. I was an art model.

ALBURGER: Ah.

REESE: I tell you that now that my parents are dead. They would be just shocked! They're rolling now, I'm sure! Yes, anyway, I worked in the Art Department, and was a model. I got to know the professors -- a lot of them very well. This one professor knew that I was a music student. The music department had lots and lots and lots of student concerts, usually held in large classrooms. Because, otherwise without recitals, if you don't hear your music and you don't get critiques, what's the point? You can't learn anything until you see what happens. So this teacher had come to hear my piece, just because he knew me from the art department. He liked what I wrote a lot, and he was making this documentary on different folk arts in Kansas -- people that make wavy sheets that go [makes a whirring sound], and have their whole yards full of these things -- all kinds of folk arts. He asked me to write the music for the film, and I was really surprised and pleased. He was able to get the Kansas Woodwind Quintet, from their Symphony Orchestra, to play it, with percussion.

ALBURGER: Woodwind quintet with percussion.

REESE: Yes. Woodwind quintet with percussion. I could have picked anything else, I guess. But at that time I was most comfortable with winds, because I was a flute player. That was easy for me. I knew I wouldn't screw up.

ALBURGER: When did you start playing flute?

REESE: Oh, I was eight. I was terrible.

ALBURGER: What?

REESE: I said "I'm terrible."

ALBURGER: Really?

REESE: I don't like to play. I can't say that's true. I wasn't terrible -- they gave me a degree in music! So, clearly, I wasn't terrible.

ALBURGER: Well, your focus was somewhere else.

REESE: I didn't get a degree in Music Composition as an undergraduate, because they didn't offer a Composition degree.

ALBURGER: Let me guess: They probably had Music Ed and Music Performance. Period.

REESE: Yes. That's it, so I got the latter. They didn't have a Composition degree.

ALBURGER: Well, I have a degree that just says, "Music," from Swarthmore College. It's not specific at all.

REESE: Right. And, of course, when I went to the University of Kansas, I have a Master of Music in Theory and Composition. But the other one doesn't say anything. It just says, "Bachelor of Arts," and that's what I have.

ALBURGER: Sure.

REESE: So, it wasn't my joy. It was fun, I liked it. But I graduated, I got that degree in Flute Performance and I never played again.

ALBURGER: Wow, how about that.

REESE: Yes, I never did. I just wanted to write.

ALBURGER: Well, clearly, you were not great, you were "good."

REESE: I was good when I was 22, and then, if you never play again, you're not good anymore.

ALBURGER: That's true. But it gave you the behind-the-music experience, such that you were particularly comfortable writing for winds.

REESE: Yes. Actually, I can't say I never played again. I did, of course I played again. Oh, I played the double bass, too, when I was an undergraduate. When I lived to Key West, and I said, "I didn't do anything in music," well, that's not true, because the town was going to do, guess what?, my favorite piece, *Messiah*, and the town orchestra and choir (they were really terrible) didn't have anyone to play the bass. And I said, "Well, I know how to play the bass, but I don't have one." And so I got a bass from the school -- someone let me borrow one. I was not very good, but I was better than nobody.

ALBURGER: Well, yes, sure. Writing for woodwinds and percussion would suggest that you certainly by this time were now attuned to many composers beyond Handel.

REESE: Oh, sure. I was in graduate school.

ALBURGER: Were there 20th-century composers that particularly impacted on your reality?

REESE: You know, I really like Harry Partch.

ALBURGER: How about that? Me, too.

REESE: I love Harry Partch, you know, and he's so out there. And Lou Harrison.

ALBURGER: Those crazy Californians!

REESE: Well, we studied those composers. I went to a small school, but it didn't mean that they had idiots working there. They were good teachers and fine musicians.

ALBURGER: So you were even exposed to such composers as an undergraduate?

REESE: Oh yes, and I liked them. Do you remember those great big computers with punch cards?

ALBURGER: Yes.

REESE: We were doing a unit on computer music, and I had a boyfriend at the time who was taking computer at school -- a math major, computer, engineer, something like that. So we tried to get the computer to generate music for us. We didn't know what we were doing. It wasn't to make the computer play the music but just...

ALBURGER: Compose it.

REESE: And we had as mixed success as many doing this, but we did it. And it was fun.

ALBURGER: And that was as an undergraduate.

REESE: Yes, I suppose was maybe 19. And we had all these punch cards, and we'd get them in a line. And we couldn't have to print out on music paper, it would be numbers, and the numbers would mean certain things.

ALBURGER: And then you'd have to translate them.

REESE: Yes.

ALBURGER: That's a long time ago.

REESE: It's a very long time ago.

ALBURGER: I remember doing related things with spaceships orbiting the moon, with punchcards, and my spaceship "orbiting the moon," went right through the center of the moon.

REESE: Oh, good. Did it crash and burn?

ALBURGER: It must have. Multiple times. I guess that's why I turned away from computers for quite a while, but now I'm back.

REESE: Now you're back.

ALBURGER: Full guns. So, you got this first commission when you were still a graduate student, so that's good.

REESE: Well, yes, but I was done. I was done. I had to do my what-do-you-call-it-they-stand-up-and-ask-you-a-bunch-of-questions...

ALBURGER: The defense of your dissertation, or thesis...

REESE: Yes, that. Oral examination. That's what I hadn't done yet.

ALBURGER: Well, suddenly the world is before you. What happens next?

REESE: After that? I had moved to Minneapolis, because that's where my family was. I stayed with my grandmother for a few weeks, while I found an apartment. I got a job in a music store, signed up to play and sing in choir, just got connected. I got a job teaching theory for people who didn't read music -- for guitar players in rock bands, and so on. There was an alternative school called The West Bank School of Music, and I got a job teaching there.

ALBURGER: So it was basically moving to Minneapolis to seek your fortune.

REESE: Well, I moved to Minneapolis because I could know I get a job. I certainly wasn't going move back to Morris. There was definitely nothing for me there, because I didn't have a doctor's degree, and I wouldn't be able to get a job at the University.

ALBURGER: Maybe even if you had a doctorate.

REESE: Well, I wouldn't want to live there. I wouldn't want to live there. But I never wanted to be a teacher, either. A lot of people think, "I'd like to be a university professor." I certainly would have done that. I went on one job interview, and I just thought to myself after the interview (because at that time you didn't need to have that Ph.D. -- you just needed to have a master's degree, and they cared more about whether you were good), "Golly, I don't want to do that." So I thought, "OK, fine. Well, I'll think of something. I'll do something." And I just thought, "I'm going to compose music," and I composed music, "That's what I'm going to do, I'm going to compose music." And so that's what I did. I mean, I did all sorts of other crappy jobs, too. And I worked at that music store, and I worked at the West Bank School of Music, and I gave guitar lessons at Golden Valley Lutheran College, and worked at a department store. All those kinds of things that musicians do.

ALBURGER: Sure.

REESE: And I kept getting commissions, and I kept doing that.

ALBURGER: So the commissions kept coming in, that's great.

REESE: They did. Not enough to pay very well...

ALBURGER: But enough to keep you interested.

REESE: Well, and the lessons...

ALBURGER: And like so many people, just kind of putting the career together out of various components.

REESE: Yes, and I did that until the time that Tom and I got married. And Tom makes a boatload of cash, so I don't have to do the icky stuff anymore. Oh, and you know, I did all these arrangements for the Minnesota Orchestra -- tons of them, it seems like there were hundreds of them. Well, it was OK. I actually wrote a piece for these kinderconcerts, in which they use an ensemble of nine musicians, and they put the children

on the stage (we're talking about people who are four and five years old), and the musicians are seated amongst them. The kids are right there. They play a bunch of different pieces, short. A slice of Prokofiev to get the good part -- you know, the theme. Each piece is maybe five pieces long, or two minutes long -- dozens of those. But I wrote one of those pieces, where they have a narrator -- a new piece for that ensemble. That piece is really taking off. Right now, the Atlanta Symphony is playing it.

ALBURGER: And that piece is called?

REESE: *The Mitten*. I'm sure you've read that story. It's about a little boy who goes to gather firewood and he's in some cold country -- Sweden or Norway or the Ukraine, or some place like that -- and he drops his mitten in the snow. In comes a little mouse, and she pops in there to get warm, and pretty soon a frog and an owl and a whole bunch of animals, until finally there's a bear. And they're all squished together in the mitten, and the last animal that comes is a little cricket. And she jumps in the mitten and it explodes. It just pops.

ALBURGER: I think I've come across that.

REESE: I'm sure you have, because it's a very popular story, and it's a folk tale type. I love that piece, it turned out really well. I was in my 30's when I wrote that, so it was real professional piece. It was a real piece... does that make sense?

ALBURGER: Sure. So, how much have you written on *The Mitten*?

REESE: Ten minutes.

ALBURGER: That's a pretty substantial piece for a children's concert, with short attention spans.

REESE: But it's a story, it's like *Peter and the Wolf*.

ALBURGER: Stories help.

REESE: It's one of the pieces that I'm transferring to Finale and Sibelius after using other programs.

ALBURGER: Do you notate by hand, or directly into the computer?

REESE: A little of both. When I'm thinking, I write by hand.

ALBURGER: You approach that by pencil and paper?

REESE: Yes. I do a lot of singing when I compose. I'm not a terribly wonderful pianist, I play.

ALBURGER: By now thought, you're probably better at piano than flute.

REESE: No, I don't know about that.

But I sing it all, and get the notes that I want, and I write it down and work on that, then after a bit, if I want to massage or sequence it, I'll put it into the computer.

ALBURGER: A lot of people still do that. Erling Wold, who's much more high-tech than I have, does something similar. But my handwriting is so bad, the moment I got a music-writing program in 1993, I never looked back. As a consequence, I have virtually no sketches anymore.

REESE: I have sketches, and most people that I talk to do. But you write very differently than I do; yours is a real different approach.

ALBURGER: Yes. So there you are in Minneapolis, and you're putting together a career, and where does Tom come in?

REESE: I was married once before. I moved to Minneapolis, I met my husband Frank, and we got married in 1979. In 1982, we had our daughter. And then after some time, I can't exactly remember when, we split up. That happens to people.

ALBURGER: Yes, what was his profession.

REESE: He was a violinmaker. I met him in church. I did, because I was singing in this wonderful choir. It was an auditioned group, and he was in it. His family was from Minneapolis. So I met him, not because we were both particularly religious, but just because we were in that.

ALBURGER: But you do have a religious background. Just growing up in the upper Midwest might suggest Lutheranism?

REESE: Lutheran, that's what I was. I did become an Episcopalian later on, just because I thought Lutheranism was... boring. I'm not religious at all. I'm not religious at all. It was a while ago, and I never felt particularly religious. But I liked going to church. Especially I like liturgical thing. I like the music. If there isn't any music, I'm not interested.

ALBURGER: And the Episcopalians are probably going to give you more of a run for your money.

REESE: Well, actually, you know, the one I went to was pretty liturgical.

ALBURGER: Yes, Lutherans can be.

REESE: But I was not a church-going individual, apart from the music. And I did a lot of church gigs, you know, because they pay you. They pay you to go to church.

ALBURGER: Right. Why not!

REESE: Why not! I said that one time to my daughter when she was going through a period when she was feeling religious, and I said, "I don't go to church unless somebody pays me." That was like blasphemy! She was really upset! Oh my goodness, she was terribly upset.

Then about two years ago -- she's now 29, so she's gotten through a lot of that (I think that she was 19 or 20 when I said that to her) -- she called up, and I asked her if she was singing High Holidays this year. She's an opera singer; she lives in Chicago. And she said, "Ah, it's just more trouble than it's worth." And I said, "What about Christmas?" and she said, "I'm not going to church unless anyone pays me."

ALBURGER: She's come around.

REESE: And then finally she stopped doing High Holidays and Christmas. And she said, "I'll just do a solo spot."

ALBURGER: Your daughter is named...

REESE: Greer Davis.

ALBURGER: And you're still living in Minneapolis at this point. Did things get easier when you were married?

REESE: Not really. No, it was about the same, because Frank was a violinmaker. We weren't rolling in money, but we were fine. And I dated Tom for a terribly long time, and we got married in 1997, and moved out here that same year.

ALBURGER: Divorced in...

REESE: In the late 80's. We separated, and we didn't get the divorce for a while. It might have been 1990, or 89. The big bump up to my career was that I was the Composer-in-Residence at the Minneapolis Opera, starting in 1992.

ALBURGER: Wow, that is a big bump. That's great. You had been working with the Minnesota Orchestra previous to this. Was there a connection made between those two?

REESE: No. Not really. Actually, I got the opera job because of Libby Larsen. Libby Larsen had been asked to do this project with the Twin Cities Opera Guild, which is a less wonderful group than Minnesota Opera, and she didn't have time. And she told them to call me, because she said, "Mona could do that. She'd be really good at that. She'd do it." I haven't seen her in a long time, but we lived kind of close to each other, and we'd have coffee, and stuff like that. So she said, "Ask Mona to do it." And they did, and I did. And I said, "OK, yes, I have time, and it will be great fun, and I'll do it." So I called up the person who was Composer-in-Residence at the Minnesota Opera, and asked him if he would help me in my new position at Twin Cities. His name was Stephen Houtz. He was the main Composer-in-Residence, and they had somebody else that would do some of the gigs, too. Because there were too many school gigs for him to do all of them. The other person that they had, unbeknownst to me, was horrible (not Stephen), and they fired her. And Stephen said, "We've got to get someone else." And Stephen was going to move to a different position at the opera, and they were going to let him do it, and he said, "I know who you should get." Because I had had that interview with him, and he had come to see one of my gigs. And he said, "That's who you should have." And their Director of Education, or whatever, called me one day, and I practically fell on the floor, because you don't get those jobs.

You don't apply for jobs like that, because, otherwise, they'd never get to the end of the applications. But, you know, that's how art business works. You get from this to that, and so on. So that's how I got that job, and I stayed there for a long time. In fact, I was there when Tom and I got married, and we moved to California, and I resigned. And they said, "You can't quit; we don't have anybody." And I said, "Yeah?" This was '97, and I'd been there since '92. And they said, "Just do two, three more gigs for us." And I did two, three more years.

ALBURGER: Wow, so you'd fly back?

REESE: I'd fly back.

ALBURGER: As Composer-in-Residence, did they ever do any of your pieces?

REESE: No, of course not.

ALBURGER: Isn't that a funny term?

REESE: What you were supposed to do, and what you actually ended up doing were not the same thing.

ALBURGER: Still, it's a wonderful title. And a great experience, I'm sure.

REESE: It was. I did arrangements for them when they used to take pieces on the road, I did *Magic Flute*. A whole orchestra of however many it is and I reduced orchestrations for 20-30 people. And I gave little talks before the operas. They needed a composer on staff, because you need somebody that can "do things" -- that kind of stuff.



Chronicle

January 11

The Knights present the premiere of Yotam Haber's *New Ghetto Music*. Baryshnikov Arts Center, New York, NY. "During a 2008 residency at the American Academy in Rome, Mr. Haber uncovered a cache of tapes featuring Roman Jewish cantors recorded from the 1940's to the 60's. For *New Ghetto Music* he drew on the penetrating emotional delivery he heard on the tapes, combining it with modern orchestral techniques and a bracing rawness inspired by tenors vocal traditions from Sardinia. Featured in Mr. Haber's piece was Christina Courtin, a Knights violinist and an admired indie-pop singer and songwriter, who sang her own lyrics and those of Barbara Ras, a contemporary poet. Ms. Courtin loosed her plaintive, affecting yelp in urgent, incantatory gushes over her frenetic fiddling. Behind her, vivacious, odd-metered dance rhythms paced a kaleidoscopic orchestral roil. The performance, ably conducted by Eric Jacobsen, had its rough spots, but intensity, exuberance and commitment more than compensated. . . . Gracious instrumental versions of two Schubert songs -- *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, orchestrated by Lev Zhurbin (known as Ljova); and *Des Baches Wiegenlied*, reworked by the violinist Colin Jacobsen (the conductor's brother) -- preceded Mr. Haber's work. After it, dance held sway in a pert account of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella Suite* and the intoxicating whirl of *Ascending Bird*, a Persian folk melody arranged by Colin Jacobsen and Siamak Aghaei" [Steve Smith, The New York Times, 1/13/11].

Renée Fleming. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "[A] fascinating recital . . . with the elegant German pianist Hartmut Höll, who has been her frequent accompanist since 2001. . . . Fleming took her audience into the artistic circle in Vienna in the early years of the 20th century [in a repertory] that centered on the composer Alexander Zemlinsky. Born in Vienna in 1871, Zemlinsky was championed in the mid-1890s by Brahms. Around the same time he gave lessons in counterpoint to Schoenberg, who was only three years younger. Zemlinsky's sister Mathilde became Schoenberg's first wife. Focusing on music written in 1907, Ms. Fleming sang a single song by Schoenberg, *Jane Grey*, and Five Songs by Zemlinsky. *Jane Grey* sets a poem by Heinrich Ammann about the young noblewoman who was elevated to queen of England for nine days in 1553 before being executed for treason. In this lush, texturally murky music you hear Schoenberg roaming unmoored through new harmonic waters. The vocal line shifts from stretches of elegiac lyricism to bursts of Expressionist anguish, which Ms. Fleming sang with an alluring blend of plush colorings and expressive restraint. Zemlinsky's *Fünf Lieder*, settings of five poems by Richard Dehmel, tells a tortured story of an adulterous affair. The year Zemlinsky wrote this work Mathilde began an affair with a painter that nearly wrecked her marriage to Schoenberg. If not quite as daring as Schoenberg's *Jane Grey*, the Zemlinsky songs speak a similar musical language. In the piano passages thick, wayward chromatic chords are pierced with twisting inner voices, played here with a rich sound and suppleness by Mr. Höll. . . .

To end the first half she performed three songs by Korngold, born in 1897, and another Zemlinsky student. After the Schoenberg and Zemlinsky works, the lush Korngold songs sounded almost like Puccini. . . . Fleming leapt to a work from 2005, *Songs From 'The Book of Hours: Love Poems to God,'* settings of Rilke texts by the jazz pianist and composer Brad Mehldau. As performed here Mr. Mehldau's harmonic language, dense with wayward chords, seemed like a latter-day riff on Zemlinsky and his circle. Except, that is, for bursts of Ellington energy and some restless Mingus-like bass lines. Mr. Mehldau clearly wrote these songs to showcase Ms. Fleming's voice. . . . No music suits Ms. Fleming more than Strauss, and she sounded terrific in four Strauss songs that ended the program. Familiar fare came only during the encores, with the Korngold aria *Marietta's Lied* and Bernstein's *I Feel Pretty* from *West Side Story*. The audience cheered the Bernstein, though I found it overly theatrical and a little goofy. But I cannot remember hearing a more exquisite performance of Strauss's *Morgen*, her final encore" [Anthony Tommasini, 1/12/11].

January 17

Haven String Quartet and S. Luke's Steel Band. St. Luke's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT. "The concert . . . will . . . offer works of hip-hop-inspired classicism and classically inspired rap relevant to them . . . [T]he Haven String Quartet . . . will perform two pieces on its own: the *Lyric Quartet*, a three-part suite in the Debussy mode written in 1960 by the African-American composer William Grant Still, and *Rosa Parks*, part of *A Civil Rights Reader*, an ongoing project of the Haitian-American violinist and composer Daniel Bernard Roumain. . . . The decision to focus on Mr. Roumain, 40, who seems as comfortable writing string quartets as he was appearing with Lady Gaga on *American Idol*, is an apt one. Told of Music Haven's decision to play *Parks*, he expressed appreciation, noting that the piece was his fifth for string quartet, and a sixth had been commissioned by Community Music Works in Providence, R.I. . . . For a work with credibility in the classical world, *Parks* -- especially the second movement, *Klap Ur Handz*, which instructs the musicians to clap and stomp in a kind of call-and-response pattern -- generates unusual enthusiasm among young urban audiences. When the Haven String Quartet previewed the movement at a recent 'performance party,' one of the gatherings at which Music Haven students play for family and friends, the crowd spontaneously clapped along. . . . The mixing of string quartet and steel band cultures is not the only collaboration that will take place at the concert. Netta Hadari, a London-born violinist of Israeli heritage who spent much of his adolescence in South Africa, will bring his experience to the table with *Music Haven Rap*" [Phillip Lutz, The New York Times, 1/14/11].

January 18

Diotima Quartet. Frick Collection, New York, NY. Also January 19, Austrian Cultural Forum. "[T]he Diotima offered works from around the edges of the standard repertoire. . . . The Frick performance closed with a supercharged, tightly unified account of the Ravel Quartet, but as driven and dazzling as the outer movements were, the reading's most memorable moments were in the slow movement. The haunting juxtaposition of a dark-hued theme and its tremolando accompaniment was perfectly balanced, and muted passages played with a vibratoless, almost organlike tone were especially affecting. At the Austrian Cultural Forum the quartet put its modernist side on display. The ability to switch gears quickly and fluidly, as it did in the Janacek, served it particularly well here, and that talent was tested immediately in the restlessly assertive String Quartet No. 6 (2010) by the Scottish composer James Dillon. Mr. Dillon's sound world is variegated and changeable: sudden crescendos evaporate in pianissimo chords; quiet pizzicato passages unfold into sequences of descending slides that evoke whining, at times, and exoticism elsewhere. After the Dillon, Webern's Five Movements (1909) sounded like an antiquity. It was not that the players underemphasized Webern's free use of dissonance and spare, often eerie timbres; they reveled in them. But they also made the most of occasional backward glances that, even where they last only a bar or two, offer what in this reading seemed a wistful memory of a vanishing world. Roger Reynolds's *Elliott* (2008) opens with an exquisite soliloquy for violin -- given a virtuosic reading by Mr. Zhao (the two violinists alternate in the first chair) -- and expands into a concise but intense meditation that has elements in common with the Dillon score. The quartet closed its program with Thomas Larcher's spacious, five-movement *Madhars* (2007), a work it recorded for an ECM compilation of Mr. Larcher's music, released last year. It is an extraordinary piece: like the Dillon, it is rich in effects, and its language can be abstruse, even terrifying. One section seemed to combine the avian swarm of Hitchcock's *Birds* with the violin stabs in Bernard Hermann's *Psycho* score. Yet these tense sections often melt into something entirely different -- modal, folksy melodies, refracted through lightly dissonant harmonies, for example, or unabashedly shimmering Romanticism. The score, inspired by the White Mountains of Crete, was both familiar and otherworldly, and left a listener eager to hear it again" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 1/18/11].

January 21

Pianist Jonathan Biss. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "On this snowy winter night he drew an enthusiastic audience and played very well . . . his program [including] Janacek's *Sonata I.X.1905* [and] a recent work by Bernard Rands . . . The Moravian-born Janacek's mesmerizing sonata, subtitled 'From the Street,' was written in reaction to a wrenching public event in 1905: a young carpenter was killed during a demonstration to demand an autonomous university where courses were conducted in Czech, not German.

Janacek was an early enthusiasm for Mr. Biss, and he gave a rhapsodic account of this elusive work, which alternates spiraling, misty outbursts with staggered phrases of elegiac melodies. Mr. Rands wrote *Three Pieces for Piano* last year for Mr. Biss, who has been playing them on tour. This was the first New York performance. The pieces were inspired, Mr. Rands notes, by the piano music of Scriabin, Debussy and Ravel. In a way Scriabin's restless flights, Debussy's intense tranquillity and Ravel's dazzling colors are evoked at once. *Caprice* is all runs and riffs and fitful chords. In the slow middle piece, *Aubade*, melodic fragments are woven into strings of thick yet lucid chords with hints of Berg, Messiaen and Bill Evans. *Arabesque* is an exercise in quick repeated notes and skittish spurts. Mr. Biss played this brilliant 13-minute group of pieces with nimble technique and myriad colorings" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 1/23/11].

January 29

Death of Milton [Byron] Babbitt (b. 5/10/16, Philadelphia, PA) at 94. Princeton, NJ. "[He was] an influential composer, theorist and teacher who wrote music that was intensely rational and for many listeners impenetrably abstruse Babbitt, who had a lively sense of humor despite the reputation for severity that his music fostered, sometimes referred to himself as a maximalist to stress the musical and philosophical distance between his style and the simpler, more direct style of younger contemporaries like Philip Glass, Steve Reich and other Minimalist composers. It was an apt description. Although he dabbled early in his career with theater music, his *Composition for Orchestra* (1940) ushered in a structurally complex, profoundly organized style that was rooted in Arnold Schoenberg's serial method. But Mr. Babbitt expanded on Mr. Schoenberg's approach. In Mr. Schoenberg's system, a composer begins by arranging the 12 notes of the Western scale in a particular order called a tone row, or series, on which the work is based. Mr. Babbitt was the first to use this serial ordering not only with pitches but also with dynamics, timbre, duration, registration and other elements. His methods became the basis of the 'total serialism' championed in the 1950s by Pierre Boulez, Luigi Nono and other European composers. Mr. Babbitt began exploring this path in *Three Compositions for Piano* (1947) and *Composition for Four Instruments* (1948), and adhered to it through his entire career. He composed prolifically for chamber ensembles and instrumental soloists and created a substantial and varied catalog of vocal works. He also composed a compact but vital group of orchestral pieces and an enduring series of works for synthesizer, often in combination with voices or acoustic instruments. Mr. Babbitt liked to give his pieces colorful titles, often with puns (*The Joy of More Sextets*, for example), and said that in selecting titles he tried to avoid both the stale and the obscure. Yet when Mr. Babbitt explained his compositional approach in essays, lectures and program notes, they could be as difficult to understand as his music. In one program note, he spoke of 'models of similar, interval-preserving, registrally uninterpreted pitch-class and metrically durationally uninterpreted time-point aggregate arrays.'

He often said in interviews that every note in a contemporary composition should be so thoroughly justified that the alteration of a tone color or a dynamic would ruin the work's structure. And although colleagues who worked in atonal music objected when their music was described as cerebral or academic, Mr. Babbitt embraced both terms and came to be regarded as the standard-bearer of the ultrarational extreme in American composition. That reputation was based in part on an article published by High Fidelity magazine in February 1958 under the title *Who Cares if You Listen?* The headline was often cited as evidence of contemporary composers' disregard for the public's sensibilities, and Mr. Babbitt objected that it had been added by an editor, without his permission. But whatever his objections, the article did argue that contemporary composition was a business for specialists, on both the composing and listening end of the transaction, and that the general public's objections were irrelevant. 'Why refuse to recognize the possibility that contemporary music has reached a stage long since attained by other forms of activity?' Mr. Babbitt wrote. 'The time has passed when the normally well-educated man without special preparation could understand the most advanced work in, for example, mathematics, philosophy and physics. Advanced music, to the extent that it reflects the knowledge and originality of the informed composer, scarcely can be expected to appear more intelligible than these arts and sciences to the person whose musical education usually has been even less extensive than his background in other fields.' Listeners who overlooked Mr. Babbitt's philosophical abstractions and thorny analyses -- who simply sat back and listened, rather than trying to understand his harmonies and structural processes -- often discovered works of great expressive variety. These range from the intense emotionality of *A Solo Requiem* (1976) to the shimmering surfaces and eerie pictorialism of *Philomel* (1964) and the poetic flow of some of the solo piano works, which have the spirit of advanced jazz improvisations. Indeed, in his *All Set for Jazz* (1957), for winds, brasses and percussion, he achieved a freely improvisatory feeling within an atonal harmonic context. . . . Babbitt . . . grew up in Jackson, Miss. He began studying the violin when he was 4 but soon switched to clarinet and saxophone. Early in his life he was attracted to jazz and theater music. He was making his own arrangements of popular songs at 7, and when he was 13, he won a local songwriting contest. Although the music he went on to write rejected the easily assimilated tonal language of popular music, Mr. Babbitt retained a fondness for theater songs all his life and was said to have an encyclopedic knowledge of the style. 'If you know anybody who knows more popular music of the '20s or '30s than I do, I want to know who it is,' he said in an Internet interview with the New Music Box in 2001. 'I grew up playing every kind of music in the world, and I know more pop music from the '20s and '30s, it's because of where I grew up. We had to imitate Jan Garber one night; we had to imitate Jean Goldkette the next night. We heard everything from the radio; we had to do it all by ear. We took down their arrangements; we stole their arrangements; we transcribed them, approximately. We played them for a country club dance one night and for a high school dance the next.' In 1946, Mr. Babbitt tried his hand at a musical, a collaboration with Richard Koch and Richard S. Childs called *Fabulous Voyage*.

The work was not produced, but in 1982 Mr. Babbitt published three of its songs, which showed a firm command of the idiom and considerable charm. But Mr. Babbitt set his course toward serious avant-garde composition in 1932, when he played through the scores of some Schoenberg piano music that an uncle had brought home from Europe. At the time, Mr. Babbitt was a 16-year-old philosophy student at the University of Pennsylvania. The next year he became a composition student of Marion Bauer and Philip James at New York University, and in 1935 he began studying privately with Roger Sessions. In 1938, Sessions invited Mr. Babbitt to join the Princeton composition faculty, and Mr. Babbitt succeeded him as the William Shubael Conant Professor of Music in 1965. Mr. Babbitt was also on the faculty of the Juilliard School, where he began teaching in 1973, as well as at the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies; the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood; the new-music academy at Darmstadt, Germany; and the New England Conservatory in Boston. A series of six lectures he gave at the University of Wisconsin was published as *Words About Music* in 1987. Mr. Babbitt's articles about music were published as *The Collected Essays of Milton Babbitt* by Princeton University Press in 2003. His students included Mario Davidovsky and John Eaton, who have followed essentially in Mr. Babbitt's atonal path (although Mr. Eaton later broke away), and the theater composer Stephen Sondheim. During World War II, Mr. Babbitt taught mathematics at Princeton and undertook secret research in Washington. He also evolved his extended form of serialism during these years. But immediately after the war he pursued a split musical path, exploring his rigorous serial style in his abstract concert works, on one hand, and completing "Fabulous Voyage" and a film score, "Into the Ground" (1949). In the 1950s Mr. Babbitt was hired as a consultant by RCA, which was developing the most sophisticated electronic-music instrument of the time, the Mark II synthesizer. The Mark II became the centerpiece of the new Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center in 1959. Mr. Babbitt was one of the center's first directors, along with Sessions, Vladimir Ussachevsky and Otto Luening. Mr. Babbitt's earliest electronic pieces, *Composition for Synthesizer* (1961) and *Ensembles for Synthesizer* (1964), were as intensely organized as his instrumental music had been. Indeed, he saw the synthesizer as a kind of liberation from the physical limitations of living performers. 'The medium provides a kind of full satisfaction for the composer,' he said in a 1969 interview with The New York Times. 'I love going to the studio with my work in my head, realizing it while I am there and walking out with the tape under my arm. I can then send it anywhere in the world, knowing exactly how it will sound.' The early synthesizer pieces have become classics, but Mr. Babbitt quickly moved forward, writing works in which electronic soundtracks accompanied live performers. Particularly striking are the vocal works *Vision and Prayer* (1961) and *Philomel*, and *Reflections* (1975) for piano and tape. He stopped composing music with an electronic component in 1976, when the Columbia-Princeton studio was vandalized, and it was decided that restoring it would be too expensive. Many of Mr. Babbitt's works have been recorded, and he has always had the loyalty of performers willing to devote the effort required to render his music sensibly.

Among his earliest champions were the soprano Bethany Beardslee, for whom he wrote many of his vocal works (*A Solo Requiem* was written in memory of her husband, Godfrey Winham); the Juilliard String Quartet; the pianists Robert Miller and Robert Helps; the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble; and the Group of Contemporary Music. In the 1970s and 1980s, a generation of young instrumentalists inured to the complexities of contemporary music became eloquent champions of Mr. Babbitt's music. Among them are the pianists Robert Taub and the guitarist David Starobin, who have commissioned and recorded Mr. Babbitt's works. Mr. Babbitt's orchestral music is so exceedingly complex that both the New York Philharmonic, in 1969, and the Philadelphia Orchestra, in 1989, postponed premieres when the available rehearsal time proved insufficient. He did, however, have champions among top-flight conductors, the most notable being James Levine, who in 1967, as a 24-year-old fledgling conductor, led the premiere of Mr. Babbitt's *Correspondences*. Mr. Levine later recorded Mr. Babbitt's music with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and commissioned his *Second Piano Concerto* for the Met Orchestra and Mr. Taub in 1998. He regularly included Mr. Babbitt's chamber works on his Met Chamber Ensemble programs, and in 2004 Mr. Babbitt dedicated his *Concerti for Orchestra* to Mr. Levine and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which commissioned it. Mr. Babbitt received a special Pulitzer citation for his life's work in 1982, and in 1986 he was awarded a \$300,000 MacArthur Fellowship. His earlier awards included the Joseph Bears Prize from Columbia University, for his *Music for the Mass* in 1941; the New York Music Critics Circle Awards, for Composition for Four Instruments in 1949 and for *Philomel* in 1964; and the Creative Arts Award from Brandeis University in 1970. He was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1965" [Allan Kozinn, 1/29/11].

Comment

By the Numbers

Anthony Tommasini's Top Ten Classical Composers
(January 21, 2011, The New York Times)

J.S. Bach
Ludwig van Beethoven
W.A. Mozart
Franz Schubert
Claude Debussy
Igor Stravinsky
Johannes Brahms
Giuseppe Verdi
Richard Wagner
Bela Bartok

