

Allen Shawn

An American Original

Mark Lehman



Born in 1948 of a distinguished family—his father William Shawn was for 35 years editor of *The New Yorker*, his brother is well-known actor-playwright Wallace Shawn—Allen Shawn is equally gifted and productive. He's a much-praised author, composer of an impressive body of music, and expert pianist with many stunning recordings to his credit.

But composing remains Shawn's true love and the focus of his most demanding and sustained efforts, a claim evidenced in Albany Records' recent issue of a two-CD set that includes his five piano sonatas and two other multi-movement piano cycles. Like all his compositions, these sonatas and cycles reveal the composer's sophisticated craftsmanship—he studied with Leon Kirchner at Harvard and Nadia Boulanger in Paris—as well as his individuality and expressive range, which extends beyond “classical” music to include dance and theatrical music as well as jazz. The dialect, rhythms, and exuberance of such vernacular styles often appear in his works at various levels of subtlety, though with no compromise to the highest standards of taste or finish. The result is music that is consistently well made, imaginative, engaging, and expressive, as well as immediately identifiable as the work of a thoughtful, distinctive, and deeply “American” artist.

Shawn's works that adopt or evoke explicitly popular genres, as for example *Four Jazz Preludes*, *Three Dance Portraits*, and *Blues and Boogie*, are catchy and vivacious, with neo-classic clarity, rhythmic bite, and elegance derived as much from French as from American examples, and enlivened also by a daunting level of adventurous complexity and complication that often goes far beyond their generic inspirations. The five sonatas and two cycles on this new Albany release (all of them played by the composer) are, as you'd expect, even more ambitious, serious, and searching, especially notable for combining the freedom and wayward unpredictability of jazz with the use of carefully constructed and proportioned large-scale “classical music” forms and procedures.

Every composer worthy of the name, of course, has to find his own ways to unite the aesthetic need for invention, fantasy, contrast, and emotional release with the countervailing requirements of consistency, continuity, clarity, and formal logic. Surprise must also be inevitable; passion must also be shapely. Shawn is highly aware of these contrary drives, and one of the most interesting things in his more “classical” music is how he balances them. The movements often evolve from motivic or melodic ideas that flower and interweave in a seemingly free and unpredictable semblance of “organic” growth happening before us as we listen, as if the music is being improvised and shaped by deep, turbu-

lent emotion instead of any pre-existing outline; yet, once the overall arc has revealed itself, the form seems perfectly thought-through and unified. The result is a musical artifact that mimics a note-perfect free-jazz improvisation, with richly-colored harmonic clashes, highly varied textures and dynamics, and gripping expressive power all carefully derived from an initial impulse as it's spun out into a satisfying, pre-ordained destiny before our ears.

Listen, for example, to the six-minute opening slow movement of Shawn's Second Sonata. It begins with a quietly yearning, lovingly sculpted single melodic line in the piano's high register, adorned by delicate ornaments that, we soon discover, will recur as motivic turns of phrase throughout the movement's unbroken journey from its dreamlike beginning through a sonorous, impassioned climax and finally to a return to the serenely singing opening as it subsides into silence. Everything is connected into an unbroken span, radiant with a complex mix of longing, wonder, and melancholy. Looking at the musical score reveals how dissonant and chromatic this music is, yet it never sounds discordant or harsh, but instead glows with tender, exquisite nuance. And even a first listening confirms another salient quality: this is music that sounds like no one else.

Shawn's allegros, packed with kinetic energy, offer apt contrast, and though sometimes punctuated by unexpected pauses or slower interludes, these only increase the forward-driving tension, whether balletic and vivacious or aggressive and volatile. Climatic points ring out in big, plangent, Coplandesque statements of wide-spanning chords that set off a barrage of jumpy syncopations and pinwheeling roulades that rocket up the keyboard in glittery profusion, or subside into elaborate cascades. Shawn's First Sonata begins with such a movement, and his Fourth Sonata ends with one: a celebratory moto perpetuo with rippling waves of ostinato-like figurations from which emerge tuneful fragments that could almost have come from the finale of a Broadway musical comedy, reminding us that in his earlier years Shawn wrote music to accompany various dramatic performances.

A more prismatic idiom shows up in other fast movements, as for instance in the seventh of Shawn's remarkable recent set of nine Etudes (included, along with Five Piano Pieces, on the new Albany release). Some of these display echoing superimpositions of Ligeti-like intricacy; others recall—if distantly—the harmonic asperities and Cubist angularity of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. And then there's the last of the Five Piano Pieces:

an almost-simple lullaby, innocent and pure, its child-like melody pealed out slowly in unadorned octaves over gently clashing tones that here convey consolation rather than discordance or unease. But it all comes out as pure Shawn: stylistically chameleonic, wildly varied in mood and method, density and continuity, showiness or reticence, but always emphatically the work of a stubbornly uncompromising and singular personality.

Listeners who enjoy Shawn's works for solo piano will be glad to know that his oeuvre includes much music for larger performing forces. He's written quite a bit of chamber music, many symphonic and concerted works including a piano concerto recorded by Ursula Oppens, recent concertos for violin, oboe, and cello, and two chamber operas in partnership with his brother Wallace. (See the list of recommended recordings at the end of this article.) Shawn's four books reveal another aspect of his artistic interests and intellectual perceptivity. Two of these are memoirs that describe his and his sister's struggles with psychological handicaps (Shawn suffers at times from debilitating anxiety, his sister is institutionalized due to crippling autism). The other two books are astute, beautifully written, and marvelously revealing biographies of two great modern-era musicians: *Arnold Schoenberg's Journey* from 2002, and *Leonard Bernstein: An American Musician* from 2014.

Bernstein's world-wide renown as a composer of Broadway classics and symphonies, conductor and champion of neglected composers from Mahler to the most contemporary creations, and charismatic mass-media educator give the biographer a vast territory to cover. Shawn presents a compact but comprehensive view of his endeavors, including discussions of his many lesser-known compositions often overshadowed by the huge successes, as well as wonderful descriptions of his televised and on-stage tutorials, so vivid, straightforward, and infused with the sheer delight of revealing how composers actually build music. Bernstein's relentless ambition, vitality, intensity, self-indulgence, and self-centered discontent also come through strongly, as do his need and gift for intimacy, his generosity and gentleness, his exuberant showmanship and sadness, his long battle with tormenting demons. Despite huge gifts, unstinting labor, and multifarious accomplishments, he seems somehow a uniquely dazzling disappointment: a great man who by being too good at too many things never quite lived up to what he, at least, thought he might have achieved.

Shawn's approach to Schoenberg is similarly fresh and penetrating: he concentrates on describing the music as it's heard and enjoyed by the listener rather than on analyzing its recondite technical features—giving it, as he puts it with apt irony, “a more superficial treatment than it has hitherto received.” He also offers a notably comprehensive and sympathetic portrait of the complex and fiercely independent human being beneath Schoenberg's not-as-forbidding-as-it-might-at-first-seem exterior. (Can anyone listening to the opening march of Schoenberg's *Serenade* think that hilarious quadrille for drunken robots forbidding? Or its wordless “Lied” any less than infinitely tender?) Shawn is the best sort of teacher: erudite but inviting as he shows, in his de-

tailed, evocative descriptions of Schoenberg's compositions, that the meaning of the music is not hidden in its underlying structure but rather right before us, “in the experience you have when you listen to the work.”

One can see why these two 20th-century giants appealed to Shawn, who clearly adores them both while seeing them whole, their great strengths partnered with weaknesses, conflicts, and failures. Like them, he is extraordinarily versatile, articulate, and probing; he crosses musical boundaries and remains open to all sorts of genres and idi-

oms; he reveres honesty and self-expression; he acknowledges the complexity and abundance of human life, its pain and confusion but also its sweetness, its surprise, its playfulness, the delight and the love that we feel for the people who share our lives on this beautiful blue-green planet whirling through the endlessly mysterious miracle of creation. All this shines through Allen Shawn's conversation, his books, his pianism, and his music. (To hear Allen Shawn talking about his own music, view the YouTube video titled “A Conversation with Allen Shawn.”) **tas**

Allen Shawn: Recommended Recordings

- **Piano Concerto** (Ursula Oppens, Albany). This showpiece brims with vitality and invention. The first movement recalls Prokofiev at his most glowering, the slow movement is a long-lined, ethereal nocturne, and the two fast movements are muscular and rambunctious.
- **Five Preludes; Four Jazz Preludes; Reveries** (Julia Bartha, Coviello). Brilliantly played and gorgeously recorded renditions of Shawn's gemlike preludes.
- **Cabaret Music; Childhood Scenes; String Quartet 4** (Yoshiko Sato, Albany). *Cabaret Music* is a delicious charmer, its allegros spiked with Stravinskian bounce, the central *andante* a wistful lament.
- **Serenade; Blues and Boogie; Three Pieces** (all cello and piano) (Albany). *Blues and Boogie* is far more complex, inventive, and demanding than the title suggests; *Three Pieces* is likewise ambitious and far-ranging despite compact dimensions.
- **Piano Trio; Sextet** (Ursula Oppens, Northeastern). The *Sextet* (with winds) recalls Poulenc, while the superb *Trio* puts a haunting, mysterious *adagio* before a robust, tuneful *allegro*.
- **The Music Teacher** (Parker Posey/Bridge). Sentiment, irony, and elegy intertwine in this tuneful chamber opera with libretto by Wallace Shawn.