



# Classical Album Review: Allen Shawn — An American Composer of Vivid and Varied Imaginings

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By Ralph P. Locke

*Allen Shawn is one of the great composers of piano music in America today, with seven piano sonatas, various suites and shorter pieces. An astounding concerto of his has been recorded by the remarkable Ursula Oppens.*

Allen Shawn, *Improvisation Diary 2020*. Allen Shawn, piano. Albany TROY1906. 60 minutes.

Allen Shawn, *Fantasia, Aria-Caprice, Summer Suite, and In Memory Of*. Sheila Reinhold, violin; Maxine Neuman, cello; Holger Michalski, double-bass; Jo-Ann Sternberg, clarinet; Laurie Stubbs, bassoon; Jim Stubbs, trumpet; Julia Bartha and Genevieve Feiwen Lee, piano. Albany TROY 1907. 67 minutes.

Click here (<https://albanyrecords.com/products/mp3/TROY1906.mp3>) or here ([https://www.albanyrecords.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Store\\_Code=AR&Product\\_Code=TROY1907&Category\\_Code=a-NR](https://www.albanyrecords.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=AR&Product_Code=TROY1907&Category_Code=a-NR)) to purchase or to hear a track.

Here's a pair of CDs that together raise interesting questions about what it means to compose music. Lots of composers improvise at the piano, let ideas bubble up, then shape them, discard some, begin writing others down, and finally move to a desk to shape the piece or movement — perhaps revising it several times, over succeeding days, months, even years.

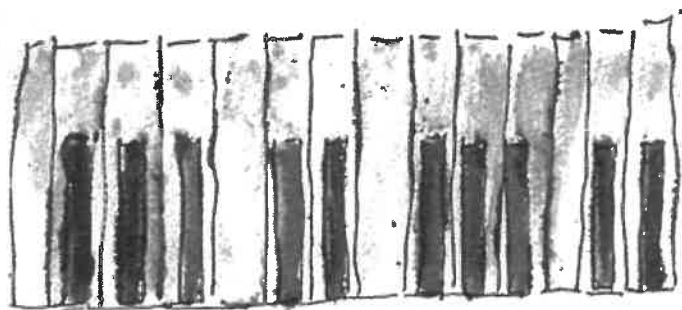
Allen Shawn (b. 1948) is a New York native who studied at Harvard (with Leon Kirchner and Earl Kim) and in Paris (with Nadia Boulanger). For some years, he made a career as a freelance composer in Manhattan, especially doing incidental music for plays directed by Joseph Papp, James Lapine, and others. He wrote the music for the award-winning 1981 film *My Dinner with Andre*. Since 1985 he has been living in Vermont and teaching at Bennington College. But he, as his many recordings

make clear, maintains active contact with remarkable performers located hither and yon. (One of the pieces that I'll mention was recorded in the Canadian city of Sidney, British Columbia; another in Leipzig, Germany.)

In 2020, during the early months of enforced isolation that the Covid-19 pandemic brought, Shawn began to record his own improvisations at the piano. Now he has brought 19 of these together (does the number honor the name of the virus?) in an hour-long CD that I found immensely engaging. I listened to it straight through with pleasure and ever-renewed wonder, then came back to it a few days later, now choosing a few tracks at a time. Shawn is one of the great composers of piano music in America today, with seven piano sonatas, various suites and shorter pieces, and an astounding concerto that has been recorded by the remarkable Ursula Oppens. (There are also another dozen keyboard pieces: for two pianists, for harpsichord, or for organ.) Shawn's keyboard figurations are often fresh and imaginative, and one can hear in this recording how organically they arise from his love for conveying various contrasting emotional states.

This CD is truly a record of Shawn's "mindset" at a given moment — mindset or whatever one wants to call the spark that sets things percolating as a composer sits down at the piano. Contrast is a prominent feature of Shawn's larger works. (Previous commentators reliably point out a variety of styles: free atonality, Stravinskyan motoric rhythms, jazz, and so on (<https://allenshawn.com/learn-more>)). In *Improvisation Diary 2020* one notices the contrast more from the juxtaposition of one short piece and another, which of course will rely on which tracks one is choosing to play after which other ones.

## ALLEN SHAWN piano

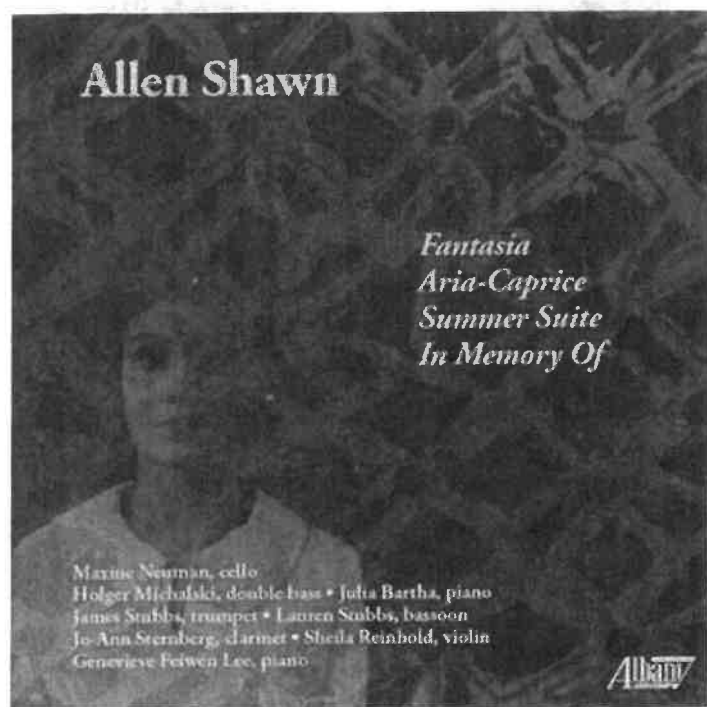


## IMPROVISATION DIARY 2020



Some of the tracks are a minute or two long, others top out at around four or five minutes. Throughout, one senses Shawn's love of the piano, his comfort with it, and his easy command of what seems like a thousand stylistic manners (which never degenerate into mannerism: the brevity of the pieces helps in this regard). The 19 titles that he gave them hint at the variety on offer here: e.g., "Jaunty," "Jitterbug," "See-Saw," and "Cross-Porpoises." (Shawn is an immensely talented writer, famous for four books (<https://allenshawn.com/books>): two volumes of memoirs — at least one of which is also available as a podcast — and important assessments of the lives and output of two wildly different composers: Schoenberg and Bernstein.)

Many of the pieces are closer to traditional tonality and popular-music styles than one finds in Shawn's more formally constructed pieces (such as several of the aforementioned piano sonatas). Specific allusions seem few, though I think I caught a phrase from "Chattanooga Choo-Choo" in "C Major Obsession." In this sense, it seems that, during those grim months in 2020, Shawn "reverted" to a certain comfort zone of earlier life-impressions, much the way that many of us found solace in watching familiar TV shows or cooking oatmeal or stew. But oatmeal or stew can be nutritious, and so are these 19 tracks, each one a short but satisfying adventure.



I turn from that CD to a CD of four chamber works: one work is from 2006, the others are from the years 2018-20. The works involve a variety of instruments, to whose specific colors Shawn is keenly attuned. My favorite, perhaps, is *Summer Suite*, a set of four pieces for trumpet and bassoon, played here by the married couple for whom Shawn composed the work, Jim and Laurie Stubbs. Trumpet and bassoon make for a challenging combination, because a brass instrument can so easily overwhelm a double-reed instrument. But Shawn manages things handily: sometimes the trumpet plays softly, with a mute, while the bassoon answers in its beautifully plangent high register (familiar to classical-music lovers from the opening of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*).

*Aria-Caprice* is for double-bass and piano, and is played here by, again, its dedicatees (another

married couple). Julia Bartha made a previous CD of piano pieces (<https://www.prestomusic.com/classical/products/8045809--allen-shawn-piano-works>) by Shawn and is clearly "into" his contrast-laden style; Holger Michalski plays with exquisite intonation, something that is extremely difficult on a bass.

*In Memory Of* is for the same combination of four instruments that Messiaen used in his *Quartet for the End of Time*. I hope this helps it receive more performances, because it is a fascinating and moving work. Shawn composed it soon after the death of his mother and, hearing it now, he realizes that it is "a portrait of my mother in all her many moods, and not just an expression of grief." Indeed, there is much shifting from mood to mood in these four movements, which together amount to a kind of 24-minute-long symphony for chamber group.

The late Maxine Neuman (1948-2022) is the astonishing cellist in *In Memory Of*, and she also plays the 18-minute *Fantasia* for Cello that opens the disc. Neuman was a frequent collaborator with Shawn across much of her lifetime. I strongly recommend Shawn's *Trio for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano* (1981-84); the recording also features renowned clarinetist David Krakauer (Opus One CD 157 ([https://www.broinc.com/record-label/opus-one/page/2/?orderby=\\_sku\\_str\\_desc](https://www.broinc.com/record-label/opus-one/page/2/?orderby=_sku_str_desc))). That Trio derived from a double-concerto that Shawn wrote on

commission from the great jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman, who, however, died before it could reach performance. The concerto finally got an airing recently with the Rutgers University Orchestra; an immensely attractive piece, it well deserves a recording and further performances.

The *Fantasia for Cello* is, like *In Memory Of*, a memorial piece. (Those of us in our 70s encounter dying and death on a daily basis. Relatives, friends, even if, hopefully, not ourselves.) The piece was commissioned by Maria Fisher — a mutual friend of Neuman and Shawn — in memory of her mother Angela, who had immigrated to the United States from a small town in Italy, worked as a nurse despite serious eyesight problems, lost her husband suddenly, and then died of cancer at 59. The *Fantasia* is a challenging listen — it is one 18-minute-long movement. But I recommend setting the time aside and putting oneself into a contemplative state. I “rode” the piece several times, over several days, and got to enjoy the changing views more and more, including a lyrical section (around minute 5, reflecting Angela’s love of Italian opera) and an engagingly sardonic passage, somewhat Shostakovich-like (around minute 10). Neuman’s intensely responsive (and responsively intense!) playing helped guide me along the way.



The late cellist Maxine Neuman. Photo: Audio

In fact, all the performers on this second disc are utterly admirable. How lucky Allen Shawn is to have such devoted interpreters — and how smart they are to ally themselves with a composer of such vivid and varied imaginings!

**Ralph P. Locke** ([https://www.esm.rochester.edu/faculty/locke\\_ralph/](https://www.esm.rochester.edu/faculty/locke_ralph/)) is emeritus professor of musicology at the University of Rochester’s Eastman School of Music. Six of his articles have won the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for excellence in writing about music. His most recent two books are *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (<https://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/music/music-general-interest/musical-exoticism-images-and-reflections?format=PB>) and *Music and the Exotic from the Renaissance to Mozart* (<https://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/music/music-general-interest/music-and-exotic-renaissance-mozart?format=PB&isbn=9781108448413>) (both Cambridge University Press). Both are now available in paperback; the second, also as an e-book. Ralph Locke also contributes to *American Record Guide* (<http://www.americanrecordguide.com/meet-the-critics/>) and to the online arts-magazines *New York Arts* (<https://newyorkarts.net/2017/12/two-new-releases-lohengrin-part-1-knappertsbuschs-recorded-lohengrin-available-first-time/>), *Opera Today* ([http://www.operatoday.com/content/2019/01/gottfried\\_von\\_e.php](http://www.operatoday.com/content/2019/01/gottfried_von_e.php)), and *The Boston Musical Intelligencer* (<https://www.classical-scene.com/2018/12/05/opera-cd-2018/>). His articles have appeared in major scholarly journals, in *Oxford Music Online* (<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/>) (Grove Dictionary), and in the program books of major opera houses, e.g., Santa Fe (New Mexico), Wexford (Ireland), Glyndebourne, Covent Garden, and the Bavarian State Opera (Munich). He is on the editorial board of a recently founded and intentionally wide-ranging open-access periodical: *Music & Musical Performance: An International Journal* (<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/mmp/>).