
Myron Silberstein Discusses His Career as Pianist and Composer

BY WALTER SIMMONS

Many serious listeners are aware of your remarkable series of recordings—in particular, first recordings of important works by American composers. But such listeners may not realize that your discography actually goes back some 30 years, to a Connoisseur Society CD recorded when you were just 20, which featured music by Franck, Bloch, and Giannini—not exactly the standard debut program. At the time, Peter Rabinowitz described it in these pages as a “revelatory release” (20:2), praising your “bold, unapologetic, even extravagant performances that, without obscuring the music’s logic, nonetheless respect its grand rhetorical sweep....” He was struck by “playing of remarkable confidence, color, and elasticity of phrasing, all bound together with a tech-

nique that's more than capable of meeting anything [the] composers demand." The recording at hand, however, is the first to feature your own music. Your career has not exactly followed a typical, predictable path. Could you review for us something of your chronology thus far—your early attraction to classical music, period of study, and how it evolved from there?

It's a funny thing: most of my career has followed quite an unusual path, yet much of my background and relationship with music follows a very familiar outline. My first musical memories are of my grandmother, an excellent amateur pianist who, in retirement, became semi-professional, playing for local dance schools. When I was about three, she'd sit at my parents' piano and play whatever was on the music stand: an anthology of classical music, my dad's book of Judy Collins songs, or the *Sesame Street* songbook. I was transfixed when she would play—especially by the realization that she could reproduce songs from *Sesame Street*. This led me to want to do it myself. I have distinct memories of going to the piano and attempting to mimic what I had heard my grandmother do. I was especially impressed by the Rachmaninoff Prelude in C# Minor; I could tell that this was somehow a different category from *Sesame Street* music.

Around that time, my father bought me a toy piano with about 15 numbered keys, which came with a play-by-number music book illustrated with Disney characters. It seemed magical to me that by pressing the keys on this toy piano I too could produce songs. When I was about six, I went to my parents' actual piano—which did not have numbers on the keys—and tried to play whatever was on the music stand—which did not have numbers in the center of the notes—and discovered that I couldn't. I remember this being incredibly frustrating. But my father came to the rescue with a first lesson in note-reading. He created a chart of all the scales and key signatures that was so abstract and laborious that it shouldn't have worked—but somehow it did. Something clicked for me when I saw that chart, and I quickly became a very good sight reader. Clearly, I was attuned to the patterns that form the building blocks of classical music.

I began taking lessons with a series

of local teachers in the Long Island neighborhood where I grew up. The most advanced of these teachers was a hugely supportive and warm person who seemed to be thrilled to work with a kid who genuinely loved classical music. Chopin was my favorite at the time, and I could sight read through the easier preludes and nocturnes without making too much of a mess.

I enjoyed consistent praise and encouragement from this teacher for most of my childhood and adolescence, but I didn't face very serious demands and I stayed at the talented-but-unpolished-child level for those years. But then my teacher referred me to someone who taught more advanced students and had a professional concert career himself. At our first lesson, he asked how much I practiced and how I practiced. I told him that I played the piano a fair amount, and that my teacher had suggested I practice slowly, but that I mostly just enjoyed playing through pieces over and over until I felt I knew them reasonably well. He complimented me on recognizing the difference between playing and practicing and on being honest enough to acknowledge that I didn't practice at all. He then told me that I needed not just to practice but to know *how* to practice, and promised to teach this to me. And then he announced: "By the end of this summer, I expect you to be practicing—properly—four hours a day, or you can go back to your teacher at home and keep being just talented instead of skilled."

I was taken aback by his sternness but figured there'd be no harm in trying things his way for one summer. And indeed, learning how to practice effectively and doing so consistently led my technique and musicianship to develop quite rapidly. This upsurge in skill clinched it for me: I had vaguely dreamed of being a pianist before, but now I wanted without question to be a pianist, and felt it was within my grasp to become one.

This was the summer after ninth grade. I had barely two years to prepare for college auditions, and that was not quite enough time to build a conservatory-level technique from the ground up. Ignoring the advice of family and high school teachers to give myself a backup, I applied only to the three New York conservatories and to Peabody in Baltimore. I was rejected immediately from the three New York schools. I decided to

get a one-room apartment in New York City, work with this teacher for another year, and perhaps re-apply the following year. A month after I moved into my apartment, I received an acceptance letter from Peabody. But having just signed a lease, I decided to pass on Peabody.

How did your enthusiasm for relatively contemporary music come about?

My audition preparation, which included sample lessons with several conservatory teachers, taught me something important about my musical interests. My audition program consisted of Bach, Beethoven, Liszt, and Shostakovich. I noticed both that I garnered the greatest praise for how I played the Shostakovich and that I was especially pleased when teachers enjoyed my Shostakovich. The following summer, at a small festival in Italy, I won a studio prize for my performance of Chopin's *Polonaise Fantaisie*. The prize came with an invitation to play a full recital the following summer. Among pieces by Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt, I included Charles Griffes's *Roman Sketches* on the program. Though the audience responded favorably to all the pieces, they seemed especially impressed by my performance of the Griffes.

I now felt that I had a mission: having often heard that audiences gritted their teeth through the obligatory 20th-century work on standard recital programs, I decided that I was going to make them *glad* that the 20th-century work was on the program. I further decided that I was going to make audiences love recent, unfamiliar—but judiciously chosen—music just as much as any of the pieces they already knew and loved.

My teacher, who had studied at Juilliard in the 1950s, taking theory and ear-training with some of the greatest American composers of the time, appreciated my enthusiasm for 20th-century piano music. When I told him that I wanted to work on a 20th-century piece that deserved to be loved but was not, he handed me Bloch's Piano Sonata. By this time, I was 19 years old, happy with my progress at the piano, a recipient of a European prize, and not at all interested in the various requirements a school curriculum would impose on me. Financially, private lessons, theory, and ear-training classes, plus monthly rent and food, added up to a lot less than school tuition. My parents agreed to fund these expenses.

es, although they had some reservations about my taking such an unorthodox path. So, having given a European recital, the next step was to give a New York recital. I reserved a date for Weill Hall, part of Carnegie Hall.

Now, despite my commitment to pursuing 20th-century music, I was still being trained as an all-around competition-ready concert pianist. But a debut recital gives some leeway that competitions do not. So though there were some familiar Romantic warhorses on my Weill Hall program, I also included the Bloch Sonata, along with Lowell Liebermann's *Gargoyles*, which had been written only four years before.

The hope for a New York debut is that the *New York Times* will review it. But neither it nor any other newspaper did. However, my teacher had invited Alan Silver, who ran the discophile label Connoisseur Society. Not only did Alan like what he heard, but he had been enamored of the Bloch Sonata since his own student days at Juilliard. So he invited me to record the Bloch for him. But we needed to fill out the program. Soon after my debut I had begun learning Franck's *Prelude, Chorale, and Fugue*. I knew that Bloch had studied with Ysaÿe, who had studied with Franck, so that was a natural choice. I wanted to include another relatively recent piece, and told my teacher I'd like to find something very different in tone from Bloch, just to highlight the breadth of styles within the 20th century. My teacher mentioned that his former orchestration professor, Vittorio Giannini, had written something called *Variations on a Cantus Firmus*. "You'll love it," he said. "It's just like Puccini for the piano."

Locating and getting access to the printed music wasn't easy, as it was, essentially, out of print. But I was able to obtain a photocopy from Giannini's erstwhile publisher. A staff member there informed me that much of Giannini's music was unpublished and was held at a bank vault in North Carolina; he gave me the estate administrator's phone number so that I could inquire further into Giannini's inventory.

This was my introduction to the adventure of tracking down unknown, neglected, and otherwise buried repertoire. The bank's administration of Giannini's music was very cloak-and-dagger. My contact indicated that the bank had an

inventory of manuscripts in its vault, of which he would send me a photocopy, but I had to promise not to photocopy it myself, and to return it in two weeks. The same rules applied to photocopies of any manuscripts I might request. I felt like a hero in a spy thriller!

When I presented my planned program of Franck, Bloch, and Giannini to Alan Silver, he initially resisted the inclusion of Giannini, whom he seemed to regard as "an academic." But when I played him a tape of me playing a portion of the *Variations*, he was captivated. "This is music of quality. It's almost like Franck," he said. When the disc was released in 1996, not only did critics appreciate my playing, but they also praised the programming: both the balance between familiar and neglected composers and the connections among the composers.

Despite this reaction, my teacher felt the next step should be something to show that I could play standard repertoire just as well as any other young pianist. He cautioned me against becoming a "niche pianist," warning that people would assume that if I played Bloch instead of Liszt, it must be because I wasn't very good at Liszt. This was, of course, nonsense. Bloch is every bit as hard on the fingers as Liszt is. But I did record a Liszt CD. I tried to be creative with the programming: *Mephisto Waltz No. 3* instead of the famous *Mephisto Waltz No. 1*; rarities like the *Goethe-Festmarsch* and the *Berceuse*. Once again, I felt the most enthusiasm for these unusual pieces, and less for the pieces I included largely to prove something to critics and managers, which is precisely why the recording did not prove something to critics and managers.

This must have been extremely disappointing. What did you decide to do next?

At this point I was in my early 20s. I was not becoming famous, and any further concerts or recordings would require money that I did not have. Having been out of school for six years, I found myself missing classroom discussion and writing. I was also still just young enough that becoming a college freshman would not be impossibly awkward socially. So at that point, I applied to colleges all across the country. My high school transcript was certainly respectable enough to earn admission, but

my application essay about attempting a career as a concert pianist and then regretting how much I had lost without the intellectual stimulation of a liberal arts education was a huge asset. As it happened, I was offered several full-tuition-plus-room-and-board scholarships.

So this really meant putting your career in music on hold, didn't it?

Well, yes and no. I decided upon the University of Pittsburgh for my undergraduate education and proceeded to register for a class in music composition taught by Eric Moe. You see, during the year or so between "retiring" from the piano and entering college, the idea of composing, which had always intrigued me, started to become prominent in my mind. Part of my love for my favorite composers was that they expressed things I had always wanted to express. Part of my frustration was that they only expressed 95% of what I wanted to express. Throughout my years as a pianist, I had had occasional ideas for pieces but struggled mightily to get anything on the page. But during this interim period, I had significant time on my hands and committed to writing something and to completing it, no matter how difficult. I ultimately set a Psalm text, which turned out to be quite a satisfying experience. But I knew I needed some focused guidance if I was going to write more.

So, while I was excited to take composition lessons, I had firmly decided that I was not in college to develop a music career. As far as I was concerned, that was a path I had already taken. I went into college undeclared and took whatever courses interested me. This means I did everything essentially backward. For example, in my freshman year, I took a seminar on Nietzsche instead of Intro to Philosophy. I enrolled in Sanskrit because it was offered only every two years and I didn't want to miss out on an opportunity that might or might not be interesting. The result was that I discovered in my sophomore year that I had nearly completed both a philosophy and a religious studies major.

Music was now a background interest, although it certainly remained important to me. In 2002, during my senior year, I took a seminar called Greek Tragedies and Opera and wrote a substantial paper on Giannini's masterpiece *The Medead*, which was subsequently published in the *Pittsburgh Undergradu-*

ate Review. Because much of my writing in college dealt with multiple subjects simultaneously, a favorite professor recommended that I look into interdisciplinary programs for graduate school. I applied to several and won two national fellowships: the Andrew R. Mellon Fellowship in Humanistic Studies, and the Jacob K. Javits Fellowship, which was a four-year award. I chose the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, where I intended to explore intersections between literature, philosophy, and psychology. I was also glad that the University had a strong Sanskrit program, which had become a significant interest of mine.

While in grad school, I took some more composition lessons but was too distracted by my academic work to attend to whatever inner voice might have guided my writing, and I devised some esoteric methods of getting notes onto the page that resulted in some very bad music. Meanwhile, given the extreme interdisciplinarity of the dissertation I attempted to put together—an effort to explore how the use of pseudonyms and stories-within-stories helps convey theories of love and romance in Plato's *Symposium*, Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*, and Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara*—it was hard to find an approach that satisfied the disparate members of my committee. (Sanskritists have a way of arguing a point incompatible with that of specialists in Germanic or Greek philosophy.) So when my fellowship money ran out in 2007, I was loath to go into debt and once again decided to reassess what I was doing.

Sounds like you were at a major crossroads. How did you find your voice as a composer? And when did you decide to return to serious performing on the piano?

I had had a good friend throughout my childhood, Christian Carey, who had graduated high school with me and gone on to become a composer. I had shown him the beginning of my Psalm setting in 1997 and lamented that I didn't have any more musical ideas to keep the piece going. Christian felt that I had actually verged on presenting too many musical ideas, pointing out half a dozen motifs on that first page of music. He led me to see ways that I could use these motifs as the building blocks of a composition. This enabled me to complete my Psalm

setting the following year. When I began to compose again after graduate school, my recollection of Christian's guidance and of the techniques I learned in Eric's class helped me make the first steps toward compositional fluency.

Since I had come to Chicago with academic goals, I had never investigated what opportunities there might be for musicians here. I now discovered quite a few that seemed suitable. I had done a good deal of collaborative work with singers during the first phase of my career; now, I immediately found several art song organizations in need of a pianist. I learned that a theater company that worked with incarcerated teens was looking for a music director. Various opera companies needed pianists to play for auditions held in Chicago. So, starting in 2008, I re-entered the music world and managed to cobble together enough work to support myself. I also decided to refresh and restore my piano technique through laborious exercises until I reached the point that I felt confident that I could handle any repertoire that I wanted.

One side benefit of my hiatus from performance was that I was now too old to apply for young artists' competitions and was finally free of their repertoire requirements. I decided to concentrate solely on the neglected composers who had been my primary interest all along. But I continued to be haunted by the urge to compose. Although I had been developing greater fluency, I still found composition to be a considerable challenge. Around this time, I developed a new interest: studying the manuscripts of some of my favorite composers. So I got back in touch with the bank administering Vittorio Giannini's estate, which had now dispensed with secrecy and was happy to sell me photocopies of several of his unpublished operas and numerous other unperformed pieces.

Giannini's handwriting was hard to read, so I soon realized that if I wanted to play through this music, I would need to transcribe the manuscripts into notation software. And somehow, month after month of doing this led the mechanics of composition to click for me. I had always thought the tales of Bach learning his craft by copying out scores by Vivaldi to be sheer nonsense—ritualistic absurdities touted by composition teachers as some kind of magic trick. But I think

there's genuinely something to it.

And more than the mechanics of writing, this immersion in Giannini's manuscripts helped me to develop confidence in my own inner voice, which—interestingly enough—sounded nothing like Giannini. I had previously been blocked by insecurity about the value of the ideas that occurred to me. I now realized that fundamental motifs don't have to be wildly original. It's OK if your melodies are stepwise. If they're the melodies that occur to you, they're *your* melodies. If you have a broad harmonic vocabulary and a sense of its emotional resonance, a stepwise melody isn't going to come out like "Yankee Doodle." Of course I still gave considerable thought to my motifs and put considerable work into developing and refining them. But if an idea struck me as obvious and necessary, I would now basically go with it.

In 2011, while on a train in Austria, a melody and its harmonies popped into my head along with some lines from a Shelley poem. When I got home, I immediately returned to this idea, and the whole setting came together for me. I now knew what it felt like to tune in to my inner voice. As I continued transcribing Giannini's manuscripts, and also discovered a video in which Nicolas Flagello described his process of composition, things finally started to click with my own composing. In 2015 I completed a song cycle, *This Blue Dark*, and a Sonata for Clarinet and Piano. These proved to be breakthrough pieces that finally felt "authentically mine."

At the same time, with my piano technique back in shape, I decided to divide my attention between composing my own music and recording music by composers whose works appealed to me and would, I hoped, appeal to others. In addition to Giannini, I focused on music by Vincent Persichetti, Peter Mennin, Norman Lloyd, and, more recently, Paul Creston. I was pleased to find that these recordings drew positive reviews from critics—not only for my performances, but for the repertoire as well.

Now, with all this broad and deep cultural study behind you, what would you identify as your goals—both personal and aesthetic—for your own compositions?

I aim to express emotions in my writing, and to do so in a way that will

elicit similar emotions in listeners. I don't think that a composer needs the kind of academic history I've had in order to succeed at this, but I do feel that my studies have deepened me as a person, introducing me to resources that have enriched my understanding of myself and the world I inhabit, as well as my perspective on how music communicates. My efforts in Sanskrit translation, for example, have made vivid the impossibility of finding a one-to-one correspondence between one language's vocabulary and another's. I find something similar when attempting to convey emotion through music.

What a chord communicates depends on what comes before and after it. Over the years, I've found that certain combinations of harmonies, textures, rhythms, and melodic shapes—and the interactions between all of these—suggest certain emotional content to me, but not in an airtight, one-to-one fashion. One reason is that I don't believe there is such a thing as a pure emotional state; and there's no word for that state which is 43% joy with 27% contentment and 12% trepidation that the joy will be fleeting plus 5% regret that it can't be shared with an absent loved one plus 3% pride that one has done the necessary things in one's life to achieve such a pleasant state. And there's no way to know when someone is experiencing precisely that state rather than a state that's reasonably similar to it; we're always working with an analogy to our own experience. So if I write a passage of music that expresses something akin to the feeling I've just described, it doesn't do so precisely, and the listener won't pick it up in precisely the way I have intended. But my goal is that listeners will pick it up in a way that they recognize as familiar and relevant to them.

My hope is that I might be able to express something that listeners have felt in their lives but have not experienced in music in quite the way they have sought. That is what my favorite composers have offered me, and what I hope I can offer listeners.

I'm struck by your bold admission of the expression of emotions as a compositional goal. You are probably aware that viewing music as a means of expressing emotions is generally considered to belong to an aesthetic rooted in the 19th century. (Didn't Stravinsky

claim that music doesn't express anything?) But the musical language of your compositions is not at all based in 19th-century practice. What are your thoughts about this?

Well, Stravinsky later walked that statement back a little and said that music doesn't express anything external; it expresses itself, and what it expresses goes beyond verbal description. But I'd argue that, while music goes beyond verbal description, going beyond something is not the same as having absolutely no overlap with it. I may get some flak for saying this, but Stravinsky's original assertion strikes me as a bit disingenuous. By 1936, when he made this statement, he had already written the *Symphony of Psalms*. Why would you write Psalm settings if you didn't feel that music would enhance the spiritual experience a listener might have of the Psalm texts? There are certainly times when Stravinsky's joy is in exploring new sonorities, but even self-referential joy, in which music takes delight in its own capacity for sound, qualifies as joy.

My music sounds nothing like Stravinsky's. But you're right that I don't treat harmony the way 19th-century composers do, or even the way composers like Barber or Hanson do. But I do think my aesthetic goals are similar to those of someone like Barber: I value lyricism, introspection, and something that I might call intimacy with the listener. My aim is always to share something of myself rather than, say, to present discoveries I've made about musical structure or acoustics. But how does this work within a harmonic language that might not be immediately familiar to listeners?

For one thing, I rarely stray entirely from triadic harmonies. My triads might have notes added to them or another triad on top of them, but there is always at least an echo of a triad in my harmonic usage. There's even, in very broad strokes, the concept of a home key, with a path away from it and back toward it in all my pieces, though the intermediate steps do not operate the way common-practice harmonic progressions do.

You can see the tonal structure in something like the first movement of my Third Piano Sonata. The first theme gives a strong impression of B Minor, though it soon goes far afield. The second theme is in D Major, though I add a sixth, seventh, and raised fourth to the

tonic chord. The development begins in F# Minor. And, in the recapitulation, both themes are in B. But that information amounts to a tangent—a tonal map. While writing the movement, the question at the forefront of my mind was how to amplify the warmth, friendliness, and generally sunny demeanor that I found in that first theme.

Another entry point into my language is to think in terms of brightness and darkness. Modality and polychords are two usages that I find to be extremely expressive in this regard. Dorian mode, for example, is a favorite; it has the nocturnal quality of minor-key harmonies but more warmth, more elegance, more sensuality. Polychords based on triads a whole step away from each other, for me, magnify the effect of the basic triad.

Now, though much of my harmony goes well beyond standard triads, this is never because I'm looking for an unprecedented sound or aiming to invent a new chord or a new technique or process for writing music. And there are a few instances in which I do use completely unadorned triads: the *Prelude* from my *Prelude and Fugue* has several, and they're quite stark in their effect.

Everything that can be said with triads has not yet been said. They're not a thing of the past; they will never have an expiration date. I think of them as part of a fundamental, shared vocabulary, and they are downright necessary at the root of my music. But when they're ornamented, altered, and combined, that may put a sharper point on the emotions I'm aiming at. More important, I believe that those emotions are intrinsic to music. So in one sense, I would agree with Stravinsky: music is presenting itself rather than something external to it like a sunset or a chicken-salad sandwich. But I disagree with Stravinsky regarding the idea that emotion is one of those external things that music cannot represent. I'm not saying that, taken out of context, a major triad by itself is joyous. But I do believe that sounds, in context, imply and express emotion as a property of that particular organization of sound rather than as an allusion to something divorced from that series of sounds. However, for those emotions to communicate clearly, some common ground is necessary for the listener to have an entry point into the harmonic language

the composer is using.

Some listeners, upon hearing your piano music, have observed an influence of jazz—particularly in your avoidance of conventional cadences. My own thought is that some listeners who are familiar with jazz of a certain period make this connection—not just with your music, but with that of other recent composers as well. But much of the language of 20th- and 21st-century “classical” music has absorbed the harmonic and tonal language of mid-20th century jazz to the point where these usages have simply become part of the general language. What are your thoughts?

I have to admit that, aside from a casual appreciation, I have minimal knowledge of jazz, so I can't claim it as an influence. But I can point to one early observation that shaped my understanding of cadences. When I was in my late teens, I listened to Puccini's *Il tabarro* for the first time and was struck by how definitive the final chords sounded in that opera, though they were clearly not a traditional cadence. I later browsed the score and saw that the progression was from A minor to C minor, but that Puccini had assigned this progression a dominant-tonic function. This led me to realize that a composer has considerable freedom in the lead-up to a final chord, so long as the emotional buildup conveys finality.

You seem comfortable discussing some of the “nuts and bolts” aspects of composing. Aside from those for whom compositional method is the main point of their efforts, few composers in my experience have been inclined to discuss these “nuts and bolts” aspects. Do you mind if we pursue this a little bit more?

Not at all. What sort of things do you have in mind?

Can you talk about the steps you follow in getting started?

Well, typically, I start by writing something I have heard in my mind. Then I stop, look at the various potential qualities of what I've done, and get a sense of where that material might take me.

You've spoken a great deal about becoming confident in your ability to generate thematic material. Do you typically come up with a group of motifs, or do you try to draw your material from a single motif?

I rarely write pieces with several unrelated themes, preferring to develop an

entire piece from just a few notes. I do this for several reasons: most importantly, to unify a large piece, even over several movements. But more than that, once I have a motif I like, it becomes like a friend. I want to get to know it in every possible facet and configuration. To discover that a craggy theme can also be an agent of warmth with minimal alteration, or that something idyllic can become silly or triumphant is as profound an experience as discovering over time that a peripheral acquaintance has become a close friend. Although I am, of course, the composer, much of my composing involves a deep look into an initial idea to find what it can tell me about itself.

That's very interesting. What fascinates me is that while you are the composer of your music, once it “comes to life,” so to speak, it begins to develop an independent life of its own, with which you need to familiarize yourself. It's really quite analogous to a parent's relationship with his or her offspring.

That's a great analogy! And to carry it further, though my music has a life of its own, my job as a composer is to nurture it, guide it, and discipline it so that it matures into the best version of itself it can be. So I need to be sensitive to what it really “wants to be,” regardless of what I might want it to become. I may set out in a particular direction, but if I get a clear sense that it “wants” to become a different piece entirely, I have to go in that direction.

It's amazing how analogous those two processes are.

Do you find that life experiences influence the pieces you're working on, or do life and composition follow different tracks?

Everything I write is an expression of my personality and my emotions, which have been shaped by my experiences, but my music does not generally come directly or immediately from my experiences. For example, Autumn 2017 was a very happy time for me. I had been commuting between Pittsburgh and Chicago in a long-distance romance with my future wife, and she had just moved to Chicago; I had just replaced a less desirable theater job with a higher-paying and more convenient church organist position; and I was helping several very promising young singers prepare their graduation recitals. My tempestuous Second Piano Sonata is all the proof

anyone should ever need that music is not a snapshot of the composer's contemporaneous mental state. Certainly, I have experienced the fury and outrage, the disappointment and misery that pervade the sonata—but not while writing it. The introductory measures occurred to me while I was walking through the neighborhood, running errands on a lovely October day. I imagined a rumbling pedal tone, the tonal implications of which would change from measure to measure as different powerful chords rang out above it; and I envisioned a half-step motif that would either snap downward with propulsive rhythm or wail in sustained tones.

This leads me to suspect that, when examining a particular piece of music, rather than considering what was happening in a composer's life while composing that piece, it may be more fruitful to ask what facets of the composer's personality are revealed in the piece. Composition, for me, is self-revelation, but in an internal rather than an autobiographical sense.

I see. Thank you for this illuminating interview.