The Experimentalist

Through encounters with atonality and tonality, serialism and computer music, rock and rap, Paul Lansky finds his voice.

By Mark Mobley

AFTER THE GRADUATING Tigers sing “Old Nassau” this spring and all the caps and gowns are put away, Princeton University will say goodbye to a retiring faculty member who didn’t just teach the sweep of twentieth and twenty-first-century music—he lived it.

In his own work, Paul Lansky, who turns seventy in June, journeyed from the algebraic atonality of Milton Babbitt through the painstaking programming of early computers to emerge, decades later, as a composer of bright, friendly and decidedly tonal music for traditional instruments. Along the way he became known for such electronic pieces as Table’s Clear (which includes mealtime hijinks by his children) and Notjustmoreidlechatter (which transforms Lansky’s wife reading Jane Eyre into a massive chorale prelude).

The orchestral, chamber and solo piano pieces on Lansky’s latest album, Notes to Self (Bridge Records), form a sort of musical diary. The pastoral Arches for strings revises and expands a previous piece for string quartet. Partita for guitar and percussion extends Lansky’s long collaboration with guitarist, producer and label head David Starobin. And the title work has elements that nod at composers from Ravel and Stravinsky to Hindemith and Messiaen as well as a pair of Lansky’s teachers, Babbitt and George Perle.

“When I entered Princeton,” Lansky says, “I was very involved in pitch structures as a successor to tonality.” It was 1966, and he was a graduate of Queens College and New York’s High School of Music and Art, as well as the French horn player in the Dorian Wind Quintet. “It was very exciting. Milton

Babbitt was in his prime. There was a whole revolution going on and people thought that serialism and twelve-tone music would be the way of the future.

“I was not that interested in it, but I studied the craft and tried to compose a computer piece. It was a very liberating experience, because I worked on the piece for a year and a half and then finally one day I listened to it and I said, ‘This really stinks.’ So I stopped doing it until about four years later when I started up again and did Mild und leise.”

The eighteen-minute computer piece, named for the opening line of the Liebestod from Tristan und Isolde, was made on what was then, according to Lansky, the only Princeton campus computer. It was an IBM mainframe that — despite costing hundreds of thousands of Nixon-era dollars — ran on punch cards and had just one megabyte of memory. (For comparison, an iPhone 4 has eight thousand times more.)

The piece won Lansky a League of Composers–International Society for Contemporary Music award and the opportunity for the piece to be issued by Capitol Records, whose New York studio his father happened to run. Lansky’s work concludes the album Electronic Music Winners (on Capitol’s Odyssey label). The record is long out of print, but not so obscure that Radiohead guitarist Jonny Greenwood couldn’t snag a used copy and then incorporate ten seconds of Mild und leise into “Idioteque,” which is on the band’s 2000 album Kid A.

In a brief essay on Lansky’s website (paul.mycpanel.princeton.edu), the composer wrote, “What’s especially cute, and also occurred to Jonny Greenwood, is that I was about his current age when I wrote the piece — sort of a musical time warp.” Even before the band approached Lansky about sampling his music, he knew about them, having been introduced to them by his students. It’s a process that replicated Lansky’s own campus evangelization for another English band more than thirty years before.

“I loved rock ‘n’ roll in the fifties,” Lansky says. “And then I became interested in more ‘serious’ music, let’s say, and immediately the sound of fifties rock became repulsive to me. I couldn’t take it. It just wasn’t music. And then the sixties came around and The Beatles basically did a take on fifties rock — a lot of the early Beatles deals with Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis, Chuck Berry — and the music all of a sudden started to sound good again, especially through The Beatles’ ears.”

But as fresh and influential as The Beatles were, and despite existing examples of classical-popular fusion from Ives to Gershwin to Copland, there was still resistance in the academy to assimilating rock.

“The Beatles in a funny way changed everything.” Lansky says. “The graduate students were keen to convince the faculty that there was some virtue to this music. My father was still working for Capitol Records at that point, so I could get free LPs and I gave Beatles LPs to bunch of people. The whole shift, the blurring of the lines and demarcation between classical and popular cultures changed a lot as a result of The Beatles. They became an emblem of a new approach to thinking of tonality and the kinds of music that one would want to write. I still think Paul McCartney is one of the great songwriters.”

One trait Lansky shares with McCartney is a family musical partnership. Linda McCartney collaborated with her husband on the album Ram, and, as a member of Wings, co-wrote the Oscar-nominated hit single “Live and Let Die.” The voice of Lansky’s wife and muse, Hannah McKay, has appeared both unadorned and electronically in his works, in which it was — to borrow a Waffle House phrase, — “scattered, smothered, chunked and diced.”

‘The blurring of the lines and demarcation between classical and popular cultures changed a lot as a result of The Beatles.’
“The first thing I did with her was the Six Fantasies on a Poem by Thomas Campion,” Lansky says. “I had been sort of allergic to rhythmic approach to speech in music and I decided at that point to do a piece in which I was setting a text, but I was really interested in the contours of the spoken rendition of the text, so I just set her up with a tape machine and went and had a cup of coffee while she recorded it.

“She is trained as an actress, went to The High School of Performing Arts, and before we had children she did movies and commercials in New York City. The thing I like about her reading is that it doesn’t sound like somebody is reading. There’s a very natural ring to it. I think it’s very hard to read. There are a few composers who can do it, like Robert Ashley and Laurie Anderson. You can’t just talk naturally, but you can’t overdo it.”

McKay, Lansky says, “had a very graceful and delicate way of reading. That was the first piece I had ever written that I felt I was going to keep. Then I did a piece with her, we called it As it Grew Dark, and that was the setting of text from Jane Eyre, where Jane tells Mr. Rochester about meeting his wife in the attic.”

Then Lansky and McKay embarked on a series of “chatter” pieces, beginning with Idle Chatter, largely because of a chance encounter at a stoplight.

“I was driving into New York with [composer] Frank Lewin to talk to his class at Columbia and we got out of the Lincoln Tunnel,” Lansky says. “At that point, this was in eighty-three, eighty-four, the Manhattan end of the Lincoln Tunnel was something you had to navigate because the poor people would come up and try to wipe your windshield. I saw a group of teenagers standing around a cop, sort of bouncing up and down. And the cop had a smile on his face, so I rolled down the window and listened to what was going on and it was amazing.

“I had just become aware of rap and I thought that was a fascinating use of speech. It was highly artificial speech, but it was sort of an interesting rhythmic approach to speech, so I decided to do something like that on the computer and I took the data set from As it Grew Dark and chopped it up into little bits and sort of put them together into Idle Chatter.” This piece was eventually choreographed by Bill T. Jones and is on Lansky’s second album for Bridge, Homebrew, along with just more_idle_chatter and Notjustmoreidlechatter.

As Lansky entered the new century, his priorities began to shift, as he explained in the keynote address of the 2009 International Computer Music Conference in Montreal—an entertaining speech that can be read at his website. “After spending nearly forty years doing little but computer music,” Lansky said, “I found myself doing none, and came to the realization that as a senior I had probably changed my major.” His conversion was surprising enough to merit a feature in the New York Times, and new Lansky works continued to emerge for performers as varied as the Alabama Symphony Orchestra, the Yale Concert Band and forward-looking chamber ensembles like Eighth Blackbird and Sō Percussion.

“There is a whole new generation of young composers who are doing wonderful, wonderful things,” Lansky says. “This sounds strange to say, but they are composers who probably really like the sound of their own music. When we were writing complicated, serial-based pieces, there was often sort of a sense of, it’s not the surface that you wanted but sooner or later, maybe you can learn to love it.” As he moves forward, Lansky has found a way to love not just his wife’s voice, but his own.