Paul Lansky

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Paul Lansky is one of the most prominent and accessible of modern American composers who write primarily for the medium of computer-generated sound. He has made advances in purely technical areas, especially those of Linear Prediction Coding, which he developed for his own first computer-generated pieces, and Cmix (in the 1990s), a set of programs which he has made freely available. In the areas of theory and analysis, Lansky has collaborated closely with George Perle, a former teacher of his, in developing the latter's ideas of "twelve-tone tonality," a way of combining serial techniques with pitch-centered motion. Lansky is a thoughtful and articulate writer and speaker, and has written extensively on his own music. The metaphor most often used by Lansky to describe his use of the computer is as an "aural microscope" (sometimes a "camera"), with which he "tries to make the ordinary seem extraordinary, the unmusical, musical. [I] try to find implicit music in the worldnoise around us." Like photographs, "recordings of real-world sounds ... create a nostalgic ache in that they almost capture events which are, in reality, gone forever," and Lansky's music can be extremely affecting.

Lansky began his musical career, after graduating from Queens College in 1965, playing French Horn in the Dorian Wind Quintet for two years. His first compositions, which were entirely acoustic, date from this period. They are all for chamber ensembles, though curiously (considering his later interest in manipulating sounds created by people, and especially vocal sounds) none use the voice. In his pieces from this period Lansky was mostly concerned with expanding on George Perle's ideas of twelve-tone tonality.

Lansky returned to school, and received a PhD in composition from Princeton University, where he has taught since. In the early 1970s, Lansky continued his use of Perle's technique in his instrumental writing, but also began to compose music solely for tape, such as *mild und leise* (1973). In this piece Lansky uses a few ideas which were to become very important in his later development. For example, timbre is used as a structural element (similar timbres tie together parts of a piece, much as a returning melody helps the listener with the structure of a classical piece). As well, Lansky uses previously written music as a jumping-off point for his work, a hallmark of his later style. In this case the music is that of Wagner (whose "Liebestod" aria from the end of *Tristan und Isolde* begins with the words Lansky uses as the title of this piece), and specifically the "Tristan chord," a half-diminished seventh chord. Similarly, in the 1978 piece

Crossworks, for piano, flute, clarinet, violin, and cello, Lansky uses the relatively famous opening chord of the second of Arnold Schoenberg's *Fünf Orchesterstücke*, Op. 16 as a basis for a whole piece. Lansky thus was moving away from the manipulation of abstract pitch sets (he co-wrote the article, with Perle, on "Set" for the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*) to working with fragments of music that already had built-in associations for the listener.

The *Six Fantasies on a Poem by Thomas Campion*, completed in 1979, mark a turning-point in Lansky's career. Since this piece, Lansky has written almost solely for computer-generated tape (Lansky first combined computer-synthesized tape with traditional acoustic instruments in *As If* for string trio and tape, completed in 1982, and since then has composed only occasional pieces involving acoustic instruments, such as *Values of Time* (1987) for string quartet, wind quartet, and tape; almost all include a computer-generated tape part). There are several compositional and technical concerns, which have become central features of his music, which made their first appearance in this piece. Lansky based this piece on a reading of the poem "Rose-cheekt Lawra" (published in 1602). The reading is by Lansky's wife Hannah MacKay, who has been the original voice upon which a large proportion of Lansky's music is based. Lansky has written that he sees a strong similarity between the reading of a text and the performance of a musical score, so that he uses both as sources for his computer-generated extrapolations. All his music after the *Six Fantasies* is based in some way on the manipulation of previously generated sound: usually a musical performance or reading of a text, although Lansky often uses conversations as well. The *Six Fantasies* also marked the first time Lansky used the Linear Predictive Coding (LPC) algorithm to alter his given sonic material, and this technique has been common in his music since. LPC, which has also been used by other composers (Andy Moorer and Ken Steiglitz, for example), was originally developed at Bell Telephone Laboratories to compress speech for efficient transmission; it is designed especially for modeling and manipulating the human voice, and so fits naturally with Lansky's compositional concerns. Lansky has written that "[his] goals are not mainly to achieve relative mastery of one form or another ... as they are to experiment," and his music throughout the 1980s and 1990s is quite varied. However, the pieces can generally be divided into several distinct, though related, streams, based on the subject matter used as a basis for manipulation: previously existing music, ambient urban sounds, or the spoken word (either the reading of a text or an improvised conversation). The main factors in common to his pieces are that the original sound is created by human activity, and that they "all attempt to look at ... familiar things from new vantage points, using a novel perch to gain a fresh perspective on

things we may have come to take for granted." "For me," he has written, "success means creating new ways of listening and hearing."

Lansky used found music most often in his earlier computer-synthesized tape pieces, such as the *Folk-Images* suite from 1981, which consists of settings of folk melodies from Cecil Sharp's anthology (with one original piece in a folk style). Lansky later added eight pieces in 1991-93 to make the album *Folk Images*. Among other things, his goal in these pieces has been "as in many of my other pieces, where I attempt to confront our perceptions of things which we take for granted, these highly filtered images of folk music are meant to develop new perspectives."

Lansky has used ambient urban sounds in only a few pieces, and they have tended to be not quite as successful as those based on music or speech. In *Night Traffic* (1990), Lansky processes the sounds from a local four-lane highway, while in *Quakerbridge* (1990) he uses the sounds of a shopping mall as source material. More interesting has been the combination of voice and other sounds in *Table's Clear* (1990), an interpretation of the sounds of his two sons clearing the table after dinner. Lansky has written that composing for tape entails very different strategies than composing for a live audience, which are needed to make his works (which exist only on recording, thus staying exactly the same with each "performance") "remain lively on repeated hearings." Lansky's most successful solution to that problem has been his music based on the spoken word, perhaps because either the text or the speaker has personal importance for him. Usually, the speaker is Lansky's wife Hannah MacKay, a trained actor. Often she is reading a text that Lansky has written (as in *Things She Carried* (1996), a "computer 'opera' "). Equally often, Lansky has set conversations between himself and his wife (as in *Smalltalk* from 1990), using the words to "trigger" music, by activating the pitches implicit, though not heard, in the spoken word - the effect is similar to that of Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (1988), where the pitches of short phrases of speech are reiterated by a string quartet. Lansky's goal is, as always, to make the listener hear the music behind all voices: "I fundamentally believe that voice, speech and music are inextricably intertwined."

Another strategy Lansky has developed to engage the listener is worked out in the series of "idle chatter" pieces:*Idle Chatter* (1985), *just_more_idle_chatter* (1987), and *Notjustmoreidlechatter* (1988). Lansky uses recordings of people speaking, with the words cut up so that they are (just) unintelligible, with the effect of a huge, chattering crowd (the sound is curiously similar to that of Jean-Michel Jarre's *Zoolook* album from 1984). His intent is for the listener to "lean forward" to try to understand the conversations, "not to bewilder, but rather ... the randomness and complexity of the texture creates a listening environment which encourages the ear to wander and be curious."

Lansky has described his theories of how technology is changing the relationship between listeners, performers, and composers. For one thing, he says, "the respective roles of concerts and recording have been switched. Recording is the norm and concerts are glorifications of recording." This reversal of roles, Lansky believes, has implications for everyone involved in music that have not been sufficiently thought through. Technology has also resulted in more people being able to contribute to musical life, especially "instrument builders" (a term he uses to describe both designers of acoustic instruments and music software programmers) and "sound givers" (anyone who distributes recordings), though Lansky has distanced himself somewhat from the latter concept.
--David McCarthy -- mccarthy, david\lansky.txt, All Music Guide

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