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# Pretty World

Berkshire pianist Larry Chernicoff has traversed the musical globe in search of a freer free jazz

By **Jeremy D. Goodwin**



Flipping through a dog-eared musical composition book to find a song he's been working on lately, Larry Chernicoff describes his process as one of "archeology." A student of music in a quite literal sense, the cultural polymath—graphic designer, musician, radio host and sometime photographer—makes a practice of taking bits and pieces of musical evidence and combining them into a new shape.

Sitting at a weathered but precise Steinway grand piano in his combination home/office/studio, the Berkshire-based artist gently picks out a simple ascending melody, and explains that the work-in-progress is influenced by the form of the Indian raga. His left hand repeats a tight figure meant to simulate the drone of an Indian stringed instrument; his right hand plays little splashes of melody, alternating between bright statements and somewhat ominous ones, narrating the changes in mood as they occur.

The earliest hand-scrawled date for this piece on the composition paper reads "1997." He's been chewing on it off-and-on since then, and now presents it as a new song. Though he freely reappropriates partially finished nuggets of song from his three-odd decades of composition, Chernicoff is interested in some much older influences as well.

Dressed in a black-and-white checkered shirt and blue jeans, with close-cropped silver hair and subtle glasses, he talks about his affinity for ancient musical fragments.

"I don't see any reason why I shouldn't be able to use Gregorian chant, or ancient melodies musical scholars have found on inscribed on stone tablets in what was once Sumeria" he says, "and to use those instead of jumping off from, say, a Charlie Parker melody. It's all the same—there are only 12 notes. What's the difference really?"

Straddling the worlds of European classical music, jazz, and touches of various world music traditions, Chernicoff's work might be categorized as chamber jazz—but he notes that the term was often a dismissive one used to describe the music released on German label ECM, a personal favorite of his for years, and one that has featured other artists' carefully constructed syntheses of jazz, classical and historical musical forms.

"I'm a music addict. I'm just as happy listening to Cyndi Lauper as I am listening to Beethoven," he says, instantly surrendering any claim to highbrow snootiness—despite the academic flair with which he pursues influences. "I'm so far beyond believing in musical categories or genres, or saying that I don't like one and I do like another."

Chernicoff has performed and recorded only sporadically over the years, but his work has become a carefully savored delicacy to critics and music fans in-the-know. His self-released 2004 album *October*, shortly to be relisted on CD Baby after having gone out of print, even won best title honors from the now-defunct Surround Sound Music Awards, beating out (among others) a special edition of the Rolling Stone's *Live Licks*. A review from WAMC once said his hybrid of classical and jazz flavors was "making quiet history."

Living in a particularly bucolic corner of southern Berkshire County—the tiny village of Alford—with wife Billie, a yoga instructor (their daughter Lydia is pursuing postgraduate studies on the violin), Chernicoff has reached this point in his life and musical tastes through a circuitous route. He earns his livelihood as an independent graphic designer under the name Windhorse Creative, but is also an avid photographer (he's self-published a collection of snaps). He's also host of *Beauty and the Beat*, an eclectic, two-hour radio show broadcast weekly on Great Barrington's WBCR-LP 97.7 that has been known to attract loyal online listeners from places as far-flung as Rio and Australia. As a composer and bandleader, he performs with decreasing frequency but maintains a scrupulous dedication to meticulous arrangements and top-flight sidemen.

Among his long-running projects are Larry Chernicoff's Miniature Orchestra, an ensemble ranging from seven to 10 players who assemble periodically to take his latest charts for a spin, and his quintet, who next will play (with an added musician in-tow) in October at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown. The four regulars have been playing together since 1982, a fact he describes as "sort of miraculous." A particularly casual side band is Bell'Accordo, a quartet devoted to traditional Italian music, for whom Chernicoff plays drums. (He tends toward piano and vibraphone otherwise.) Bell'Accordo will play on the terrace at Mazzeo's Ristorante in Pittsfield tonight (Thursday, June 23) from 7 pm to 10 PM, in an appearance its members hope will grow into a regular summer gig. Oh, and he's also worked up a duet act called Jazz and Jest with the popular local performer Roger the Jester. Whatever works.

It was something else entirely that brought Chernicoff to the area in the early 1970's. After abortive tenures making the scene in Berklee and Berkeley—the school of music in Boston and the California countercultural capital, from which he had observed the then-thriving acid-rock scene—the fledgling guitarist wound up taking a class on improvisation at the New School, taught by the great German bassist Karl Berger. Ornette Coleman had been the instructor the previous year, and Berger shared a similar aesthetic. Chernicoff became enmeshed in the world of free jazz and was invited by Berger to head overseas and tour the European festival circuit.

After playing with a host of greats like trumpeter Don Cherry, Chernicoff wound up as a student, teacher and employee of the innovative Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, co-founded by Berger and Coleman. And it was as a house pianist for a dance class that he first began composing.

It's been a long musical journey from there to here. He has lost his taste for free jazz, the idiom in which he earned his first bona fides, and has moved all the way along the spectrum to intensely planned arrangements for strings and woodwinds, among various other voices in his various miniature orchestras.

Chiefly, he now sets out to achieve beauty with his music. With a chuckle, he cites an old review from the pages of *Metroland* that described his work as "unashamedly melodic and pretty."

"It's as if a jazz musician is not supposed to play music that's melodic and pretty—or that you're supposed to be ashamed of it if you do," he says. I've come to a place where I really appreciate art that lifts us up in some way," he continues. "So pretty is often good."

His signature work by no means sounds casual or tossed off, but neither does it feel belabored or academic. (Though an otherwise-very-favorable notice in *Downbeat* once called him on the occasional bit of "stodginess.") On a MacBook Pro placed atop a workhorse Kurzweil PC2 synthesizer, he cues up

“Hexagram 57,” a track from his 1983 album *Gallery of Air* that earned the aforementioned plaudits from *Downbeat*.

After a few minutes, a group of horns comes in on a plain, unobtrusive melody. Chernicoff identifies it as an Egyptian hymn to the sun. In another spot, a third-century Christian hymn from Greece makes an appearance. As the linear composition progresses, he cites the bits and pieces of ancient music he’s seamlessly integrated with his own composition and vibraphone improvisations.

“I took the contour of a Gregorian chant melody and turned it into this bassoon solo,” he explains matter-of-factly, seeming happy to unpack the scholarship that underpins the song. He notes the changing time signatures in a vibraphone part and how it serves as counterpoint with a synthesizer.

“It’s not a literal representation of Indonesian gamelan music, but it’s got the same spirit. The way the vibraphone and piano throw these accents around—it’s sort-of Balinese,” he says with a wry smile and a dry shrug.

Beneath it all, he’s right: It is pretty. Just don’t try to figure out what musical category to put it into.