

## An Interview with Composer, Justin Henry Rubin

T.I.I.: Although you are clearly recognized primarily as a composer, you are also a performer – on both piano and organ. Can you talk about some of your experiences performing and how performance situations may, or may not, have affected your writing?

J.H.R.: Well, you've actually hit on a really important point in my work. You see, one has become inseparable from the other. I started composing in honest when I began piano lessons at age fourteen or so - when I began going to Manhattan School of Music prep classes on Saturdays. My teacher there, Phil Kawin, started me out with the Mikrokosmos (which is *really* complicated once you dig into the pieces). Of course my compositions up until I was a lot older were really imitation pieces, so I started thinking in terms of Bartok's manner of putting music together. But it didn't attract my ear as much as other music so I brought in Schönberg's Op. 11 and he had no problem with working on it with me. Then came Ruggles' *Evocations*, then Webern's *Kinderstück*. All of this playing and thinking about the sounds of these pieces led me to write pieces that, at best, reminded me of the originals. But you see, when I like to play a composer's work, I immediately feel compelled to get my hands on recordings and books and scores of *everything* about that composer. So while playing Op. 11, I studied *Moses und Aron*, read Paul Griffiths Second Viennese short book, went to out-of-print record stores in NY (paying a good deal) to get the old Craft Complete Schönberg series, went to Patelson's to get scores of *Pierrot*, the *Serenade*, *Ode to Napoleon*, and anything else I could afford... *De Profundis*, whatever. I would record my progress playing the pieces on tape. I even made a private (meaning for myself) concert of the Op. 25 Suite, which I learned in only a few weeks, along with the other Schönberg pieces I was working on (Op. 19, Op. 11 #1&2, Op. 33a). The same went for all the other composers. Whatever I couldn't afford I'd get from the Manhattan School library. I guess I was a lot different than most prep students at MSM - I didn't start practicing piano when I was very young, I was genuinely interested in the vast literature of music (especially modern music) and enjoyed being there (with my Dad) for the nine or so hours you had to be there every Saturday. I met a few interesting students and teachers, but only Kawin made a lasting impression - it was like a guru situation, or maybe a master/apprentice one - I felt he was passing on to me all that he knew, not just giving me lessons and fingerings. He was sensitive to what I wanted to play... and to compose. When I graduated from MSM prep, all his students played in a group concert. I played one of the *Evocations*, Op. 11 #1, and the Webern piece (op. post.) *Kinderstück*. But then one of his other students didn't show up! So there was a gap and I asked if I could play the *Alcotts* [from Ives' *Concord Sonata*] as this was one of my father's favorite pieces and he was in the audience. Kawin agreed and it became the first high point in my career. I just got up there and didn't think or plan, I just played my heart out - as a gift to my father primarily. He had introduced me to music and had brought me along to this point. He was the one who really taught me about music and sensitivity towards sound. He gave me Distler, and Perotin, and Bach, Gesualdo, Ockeghem, Pettersson, Varese, Penderecki, Haydn, and all the others. He made his love for music grow inside me. I was even given the opportunity in high school to lecture on music history. I was listening almost every day to David Munrow [early music specialist] records and then teaching an apathetic humanities class about all of it.

The teacher even told me in confidence that I was more knowledgeable than the resident music teacher, and I knew that. It was just I didn't DO music as well as I knew it. I could teach isorhythmic motet at seventeen but felt very inadequate in other ways.

T.I.I.: But you were composing as well as practicing and listening. What were these early student pieces like?

J.H.R.: I was grasping at straws in my compositions when I was seventeen and eighteen. But, before I began playing, when I was twelve or thirteen I began writing these fugues - yes I just jumped right in and wrote these rather ambitious contrapuntal works for all sorts of mediums - mostly modeled after the Baroque models I liked most then, Buxtehude, Bach, Schein. But I couldn't play yet so I entered them onto my Atari 800XL using a prototype music program I got from a Long Island programmer that Atari recommended to me (I was really interested in computers when I was young and even thought that that was what I wanted to go into at one point). Then I could hear and modify and experiment to my heart's desire - the pieces really became quite harmonically adventurous and chromaticism crept into the language as I developed more. The only thing was that the pieces rarely modulated; I always felt, even when I was really young, that modulation seemed sort of forced when I tried it. I liked the music to just stay in one place (I came back to this idea later). Some of these pieces I still like a great deal and I feel them to be real representations of myself, just at a different time in my life; they were naïve but introspective. Then when I discovered 20<sup>th</sup> century music it all changed. I moved away from experimenting with the sounds, and began just applying techniques and systems and experimenting with them. That began a long period where I feel I went astray. What I didn't get was that Schönberg was really hearing his music, and adjusting it, and modifying the *musical* materials - I was just going through the motions. He wrote that exquisite piece for soprano, harp, celeste, and harmonium, and so I wrote a piece for harmonium and cello. He wrote the most extraordinarily devastating piece for string trio (which convinced me to be a composer for good), and so I wrote a piece for piano and string trio, and so on. Although the actual musical materials I was working with were not of any real integrity, I *did* begin thinking about form, and development of ideas, so in a way I was covering a portion of education that you just don't get in music schools (where all they're interested is in eight bar pieces in the chorale style). I got very caught up in Webern and thinking that way when I was seventeen and eighteen. My dilemma was that the 12-tone system didn't give any hints at harmonic unity, so I tried to control harmonic balances through a system that I developed coming from the dodecaphonic idea. This led to tiny pieces for two voices that lasted ten or twenty seconds. It was an awful feeling. I would spend weeks on them. I tried to expand the idea to the chamber orchestra and it made me get into an even deeper hole. I would spend all night, literally from midnight to four every day working on the music. I'd fall asleep in school and could barely wait to leave. It was an exhausting period for me.

T.I.I.: And that forced you to change your mind about the serial technique?

J.H.R.: You'd think so! But I was stubborn about it. The summer before entering college...

T.I.I.: At the State University of New York at Purchase...

J.H.R.: ...Yes, at SUNY, I stopped writing completely – I just couldn't go in this direction even though I felt that this had to be the right one – it's kind of funny when you think about it. Well, I started reading a lot that summer – Joyce, Melville, Ginsberg, Browning, Kerouac, a lot of the people you don't really get to in high school. And I started listening to more contemporary music - Crumb, Xenakis (I didn't realize how important his work would be to me later but at MSM his orchestra music from the 60's was introduced to us in a composition class), Maxwell Davies, and others. What I began to get hung up with was where I think *history* was telling me to go rather than listening to my own likes and dislikes. It's the whole Schönberg attitude. Well, it led me to stop writing altogether. I didn't know where to go from here, and so I started writing with words.

T.I.I.: Like the authors you were reading?

J.H.R.: Yes - Kerouac mostly. But it was just a phase, an outlet when I stopped composing.

T.I.I.: So you stopped composing completely yet you were going to college for composition?

J.H.R.: Yes! I had an audition with Alvin Brehm (then Dean of the School of Music at Purchase) a couple months before the atrophy had set in. I played the Op. 11 for him and some of the piano reductions I had made of the Webern Op. 5 [String Quartet] and my own chamber orchestra music, and some other stuff that I can't remember. I do remember that it was in January and my parents drove me up there from Long Island in a terrible snow! Anyway, even before I got a chance to think about it, Alvin told a secretary that I would be coming to Purchase rather loudly so I could hear. And that was that.

T.I.I.: So you turned your hand to writing prose...

J.H.R.: Well, that sort of prose/poetry that Kerouac had been doing late in his career. I was working where my father was that summer, in a tool and die plant in a bad part of the Bronx. It was an awful job in some respects, extraordinarily dirty, and hot - I sat in this box in the back of the plant with these messy caustic chemicals cleaning and carrying and setting up carbon rods to burn images into plates. I was always afraid of hurting my hands but nothing ever serious happened. More importantly, I began to meet interesting people. There was a Frenchman there who fought with the Resistance in WWII, a cricket player from Guyana, a man who's brother was in jail for murder - I mean it was really great! I spoke with them all at length and saw how their interesting lives wound down into these terribly stifling and filthy jobs. I began to think about social issues (which would effect my musical concerns later) and wrote about them. I didn't have to travel across America ten times to find out about people and life, I was finding out about it here

this summer. Most interesting and sad was my foreman, Wes Branick. His father died of black lung (was an immigrant coal miner from Poland) and his son was killed in a car accident. He was about my age when it happened so Wes saw me as his own kid in a way - it was very sad. He was this little guy, always yelling and smoking and carrying on - made some anti-Semitic remarks even on a couple of occasions, but I never got mad because I knew in his heart how he saw me. Anyway, I would write a memorial piece for him after he died a few years later from throat cancer. He meant a lot to me in some ways.

T.I.I.: Then you entered college.

J.H.R.: Yes - I said my good-byes and left for school. I was at a certain stage in my career (whatever you would call it at that time) and needed a really special teacher who would be sensitive to that. At MSM prep the composition teachers were interested in teaching systems and stylistic principals, but there was little insight into materials and formal development. But at Purchase, after talking with a few teachers about studying with them, I found Richard Cameron-Wolfe in the Dance Dept. He was the musical director there and had the right frame of mind for me. He said that if I was having trouble writing music and I was reading a lot right now, that I should not write for a while and just continue reading. Meanwhile he introduced me to composers that I didn't know much about before or had little exposure to (Christian Wolff, Ornstein, Alkan, Sorabji). Concurrently he led me to reading pre-Socratic philosophy, *A Rebours* by Joris-Karl Huysmans, *The Painted Bird*, things like that...works that make you really think. It was an exciting time and eventually I came back to composing. I had only done a handful of pieces that first year but I came back to music with such a new point of view. By the end of the year I had composed a landmark piece, for me at least, *Flying Buttresses* for guitar ensemble and two violins. It used analog, or clock, time, was microtonal, and had a structure based on the architecture of Gothic Cathedrals. It was played immediately after it was done and caused a strange combination of reactions in myself and the audience. I don't know if it was really a good piece or not but it was like a release after so many years of thinking about numbers - I could be intuitive again like in my early teens.

T.I.I.: What happened to that piece? Did more like it follow?

J.H.R.: More followed in the same frame of mind. That was part of my problem - when I had an idea I felt like I had to write a whole body of literature implementing it. Realize that I grew up counting the numbers of Bach cantatas, Schubert quartets, Mozart Köchels and I felt that I had to do the same sort of thing. I couldn't just write a piece and move on. It took me a long time to learn that. After all, I really find 95% of Mozart to be bland and uninspiring. They're predictable without being inevitable, just easy ways out to lengthen the material in time. But that 5%, maybe less, maybe a dozen pieces or so, are unbelievably extraordinary. I thought about the way Ruggles worked but that wasn't for me either. Most of my other pieces I discarded. Actually, I tried desperately to get *Buttresses* into some type of final shape, even ten years after I first conceived it, but it remains in various sloppy drafts that will probably remain in that form. Maybe I'll come back to it later.

T.I.I.: So your works don't fall neatly into 'series'?

J.H.R.: Well, sometimes – and in different ways. For instance, when I was in Arizona I wrote mostly chamber music. And this series evolved using instrumental relationships: a piece for clarinet and string quartet, then one for piano and string quartet, then clarinet, piano and string quartet, then piano and clarinet, and it went on expanding into using bass clarinet and saxes, etc. Also, while in Arizona I wrote a piece in three movements for Native American flute, flute, viola and cello (commissioned by now close friend and advocate of many of my pieces, James Pellerite). The last piece was entitled *Incantation* as it held for me an element of ritual...and timelessness. A number of subsequent works, for completely unrelated instruments and styles, that I found shared this same quality I entitled *Incantation* – which may be difficult for a catalogue (just look at all those pieces by Feldman for piano called *Piano!*) but a simple, direct, and pretty accurate word to represent what the piece is trying to capture. More and more composers I think are trying to interpolate ritual into their music – this is something that was really ignored for centuries outside of some sacred music. [Meredith] Monk for one has really created a religious music, just without the religion or connection with a single time/place. That's what I'm trying to get after by calling it ritual music. Come to think of it, Cameron-Wolfe's music I think has a heavy ritual component to it; pieces like *Kyrie-Mantra* for flute and prepared piano (which was premiered almost thirty years ago by none other than Pellerite in Indiana... small world). Maybe this is where my interest in it comes from, because I know I had little interest in it in high school.

T.I.I.: How long did you study with Cameron-Wolfe?

J.H.R.: Three years – that's how long it took me to graduate. You see, all those years at MSM gave me a great head-start on my classmates and I was in Senior ear-training my Freshman year. But I developed a lot over the years with Richard, he became a friend more than a teacher though and we would spend lessons talking more than looking at what I brought in. Still, we had a lot in common so there was a lot to talk about. He had been a great pianist at Indiana in the 70's until he had an accident that badly damaged one of his hands. He played all the same literature that I did, and then he introduced me to *Eonta* and *Herma* by Xenakis (two pieces I would later play and even record!). He also learned to play again after the injury, but I couldn't imagine how well he must have played before. He is *so* very sensitive to sound.

T.I.I.: So you also studied keyboard with him?

J.H.R.: No. We would just talk about playing and he would give me hints. I played on my own until I returned to my interest in Baroque music during my 2<sup>nd</sup> year there. I got a key to the organ practice room. There were no organ students but yet Tony Newman was teaching there, so go figure. I took to the instrument quickly and began lessons with Robert Fertitta, another wonderful player who was as stringent about practice techniques as Kawin. I needed that and I began playing all the literature I liked as a kid but began to explore all sorts of early music (this love for finding new music from familiar ages

also came from my father). This led to my dedication to early Portuguese music, and Weckmann, and also to Distler. However, it didn't influence my composing. It was as if I neglected some of my likes and concentrated on my other likes just because of how I felt history wanted music to go. Imagine that! I was writing all the time now though, which was good, but most of the pieces were aleatoric or serial or something like that. The music was *conceptual* but had no interest in the moment to moment aspects that make music wonderful to me. Earle Brown was in the area of Purchase and needed an assistant. So I called him and went to his house. I met his father there, which was an interesting experience since he must have been about 100 then. That made more of an impression on me than did Earle. I mean, I liked his ideas but actually had heard little of his music. I was surprised when I found out what he wanted me to do. He first wanted me to figure out how to write a quintuplet over a bar line, then we sat an electronic keyboard playing with the drum sounds. It all seemed odd and a bit juvenile, playing with the tambourine sounds and smiling at their differences. It was like watching someone in one of those shopping mall piano/organ stores screwing around. Then he told me that he needed to write this aleatoric piece for Europe somewhere *and he needed notes!* I was flabbergasted to say the least. I was to pick out notes on the keyboard and write them down vertically. Then he would arrange how they were to be used, like who would play what parts and when. After that, I quickly gave up writing aleatoric music. Here was an icon whom I had read about in countless books and here he is asking me to give him notes. I didn't continue working for him because I saw it as a dead end. In retrospect writing aleatorically was good for me in some respects: I didn't think about pitches or harmony, or any of the usual business. I thought about structure, balances, textures, raw emotional states, that sort of thing. I've only kept a couple of those pieces from being stashed permanently in the drawer, but I learned a lot.

T.I.I.: How did you move on from there?

J.H.R.: Well, I was playing organ a lot and began thinking about organ music. I even continued giving guest lectures like I did in high school, but this time on organ and to a semi-interested audience. I wrote some conceptual pieces for the instrument, but always with precise pitch organization. They were Feldman-ish with odd-end repetitions but with a close sense to the sound. Some were good, some really terrible. I remember I even buried one one summer with my friend and composer David Macdonald out in Long Island in a remote area it was so bad. The problem with them was that I was so concerned with unity of material and the single-mindedness of an idea, that there was no variety or drama.

T.I.I.: So you turned to sacred music?

J.H.R.: Not yet. I relapsed back to serial procedures, but in a more limited way, with rows of four or five *intervals* - you see with this you had a choice of two notes with each move, either ascending or descending such-and-such interval. I could do more interesting things with it now, but this didn't last long either. What really got me back on the right track was playing in my own ensemble. First, I had just graduated from college and was looking for graduate school. I went to Eastman to audition but was met there by a very

disapproving Samuel Adler. I brought some of my serial pieces, but also some of my aleatoric ones and an analog time one. They were all very sloppy probably. He asked me who I liked and I told him Xenakis and Feldman. He angrily retorted that they were not musicians and they were no one to look up to. That was the end of the interview just about. However, I did audition on organ and they said that I was a very intuitive player and that I could go there for organ. But it just wasn't the right place for me. There were these violinist girls all playing different orchestral excerpts next to each other in the lobby with their cases propped open on a desk and boys carrying on as to who could write the best fugal subject. This was not the place for me after a breath of fresh air like SUNY. So I continued on at Purchase. There was a new teacher there named Dary John Mizelle who I was taken by after hearing a piece of his at a concert. He was very much a part of the avant garde, which is what I wanted to become involved in. He played with Cage for god's sake! How could I not want to get to study with him. The summer before beginning my work with him Cage died. I was shaken in a way. How could *he* die? Who would take over such a post as ambassador of American music after him? Well, Dary John invited me to Cage's memorial service at Merce Cunningham's loft downtown. Of course I went! It was the oddest thing, no music except for a lady with a drone organ under her shoulder who occasionally would sing what sounded like an Irish sea-shanty while weaving in and out of the crowd. Anyway, the old avant garde was there - David Tudor with crutches under his arms, fading away. It was a very sad affair, Merce though looked the worst. Earle Brown was there and we locked eyes for a moment, nothing was said, and then we parted - it was actually really funny.

T.I.I.: Did Dary help your creativity become more focused.

J.H.R.: Yes and no. I was leaning away from what I had been doing for years, but he encouraged me to continue in this frame of thought. I tried but other things took me further away. Let me get back to that ensemble comment I made.

T.I.I.: Yes, what was that all about?

J.H.R.: Well, the summer after Cage died, a good friend of mine, John Merigliano (who is an excellent artist), introduced me to the music of Philip Glass. Well, actually I had been a fan of the trilogy operas for a number of years, but had never known the early pieces. He has an amazing ear and transcribed *Music in Fifths*, *Contrary Motion*, and others. That summer I was working at a music camp for young kids and would commute back and forth from LI every day. I'd spend the mornings accompanying the kids, teaching recorder, and having them improvise on given emotional states (like happiness going to sadness, etc) - It was really fascinating to see what they'd come up with. But on the way home in the afternoon, I'd go to John's house and we'd read through his transcriptions - myself on keyboard and he'd play flute. It was a great time for me. I really enjoyed playing the music and we got the idea for a faux-Glass Ensemble. So we just did it. We organized the *John M. Corps* (in his honor - he always would sign 'John M.' on video games when he'd get a high-score) which grew to an extended group of performers interested in music with lots of repetitions. Paul DeSilva, another long-time friend, played sax and keyboards. Miyako Tadokoro (now Tadokoro Xeng), who

actually sang in the chorus in a production of *Einstein*, played piano. That was the core, but students Nell Detko and Cameron Smith sang with us, and my apartment-mate Peter Scartabello and another student Eric Helmuth played percussion. We had others do solos as well. We did our first live concert in December 1993 and it was exhilarating. In addition to standard minimalist fare, I wrote two pieces for the concert. *Hymnus de Resurrectione*, for voices and organ, and *Second Piece for Two Percussionists*. Now this was a real turning point for me, especially *Hymnus*. I was composing back at the keyboard, testing out all the sounds I wanted, and worked almost entirely on intuition. Actually it was a breakthrough piece and one of my best works up until then. Well, it was the best thing I had done and I had not labored on it or anything - it just came out in a flood. Just two days and there it was. These pieces also got an audience reaction that was very positive, and this was a welcome thing since my recent pieces I had almost been embarrassed about - I think most of the applause had been out of courtesy...or pity, who knows...certainly I hadn't felt the sense that anyone was gratified by my work up until then. Another thing was that the performers actually enjoyed performing these pieces, though challenging. Up until then it was more of a labor for them and I could tell that. I was starting to make the connection but that was still some time off.

T.I.I.: Were you still performing on piano?

J.H.R.: Well, that's just it, I was and I think in a way that was holding me back. I was performing Webern's Op. 27 *Variations* and Op. 25 *Three Songs* with Nell (from the ensemble - she is a versatile and extremely elegant singer), I was playing *Herma* by then well, and two days after the *Corps* played, I performed excerpts from Mizelle's *Transforms* which is pyrotechnically even harder than *Herma*, and that Sunday I'd be playing Pachelbel at a local church (I had begun playing organ at church services in 1992 to subsidize my graduate theory TA stipend). I felt like I was being pulled in many directions at once. What I needed was time to realize that my catholic tastes would benefit me. Rather than choosing one mode of thought or the other, I could draw collectively on all the things that fascinated me. But not to say that poly-stylism was what I was after like Schnittke or 60's Maxwell Davies, but a language that could engage a vast array of materials in an integrated and satisfying way.

T.I.I.: How did you finally get to that point in your writing?

J.H.R.: It took another three or four years, really. The last great dichotomy was in 1994-5 when I was concurrently working for a major church in New York City, Holy Trinity Lutheran on West 66<sup>th</sup> and practicing for a Xenakis concert. It actually was two major breaks at the same time that led to this conflict of interests. Let me back up. The summer of '94 was a real Bohemian summer I spent with friends, including Paul from the *Corps*, in a summer house not too far from Purchase (I graduated that May with an MFA in composition). I practiced all summer, advancing to more difficult organ literature (Widor, Reger, Distler), and wrote a great deal (none of the pieces amounted to much though). Then, I think in June a friend invited me to a Xenakis concert he caught in the paper down in the city, so of course I went. Well, it was the *ST/X Ensemble Xenakis USA*. It was an awesome experience seeing the stuff live for once by a real pro group. I



noticed that there were no pieces featuring piano, though. So, afterwards I went up to the conductor, Charles Bornstein, whose intense interpretation of the music I found thrilling, and asked if there was one needed. He said yes and I told him I played *Herma* and he became more excited, because you see I didn't know it at the time but he was actually orchestrating the piece for his ensemble. He came up to White Plains where I was living and I played it for him and got the role on the spot. It's funny how life can take such unexpected turns from such humble beginnings. Of course at the same time, I was playing at this small but very nice Congregational church in Connecticut. At the end of the summer I came back from a shortened Fulbright to Denmark (very disappointing experience for me) without work (I had quit the Connecticut job). I had planned on going to the University of Arizona had I not gotten the Fulbright but also didn't immediately want to go back to school. So I started to look for practical work in NY, which as you can imagine is not an easy task, in music. Almost miraculously, though, I got that Lutheran church job. You see, their regular organist had resigned the day before I sent them my letter of interest (sent a million out I think). So I was first on the list, subbed a couple of times, and then was offered an Interim position as both organist and choir director. Amazing, actually. Here I was, 23 with only one semester of organ lessons and little background in real church music working for the largest Lutheran church east of the Mississippi.

T.I.I.: So you were the pianist in a contemporary music group and playing, I suppose, much more tame literature on Sundays.

J.H.R.: Well, I didn't want it to be tame. The Xenakis deal was really only sporadic. We wouldn't be having another concert until the following May, so there was plenty of time to practice that stuff as it was way off. I had to concentrate on the church music. It's kind of weird: here I am a Jew, but really an atheist (although I had a stint for a few years as an agnostic), playing this pious music all the time. But for a while I thought this would be my calling. I mean, you don't just get breaks like this all the time. I wanted to make this Interim-ship a permanent thing. I almost totally forgot about Arizona, and just dove head-first into sacred music.

T.I.I.: What was that experience like? Did it effect your writing, or were you still writing at all?

J.H.R.: Oh yes, I was writing! But I must tell you that working for the church full time drove me bananas. I would never want to do it again. I came in thinking that I could exert some personal tastes into what I did and had some semblance of creative freedom. This was continually a point of contention with the pastor, but not the choir. For thirty years they had been doing all the Bach cantatas at Vespers. But after that much time, you'd think something else would spark their interest. Now don't take this like I suddenly wanted to do Boulez for an offertory, I just wanted to do Schein or Schütz. I mean, really, they're better pieces than the Bach cantatas and more dramatic and have more interesting harmonies and...they're just superb in every way. But only after being there for almost six months could I squeeze one or two in. Everything was questioned. I was turned off to the whole idea of church music, it was a very boring, repetitive job after

all. What got me was that the emotional state had to be repeated ad nauseum every week. Yes, towards Christmas and during Lent it kind of changed, but not that much really. Church music scenes are just not really a part of the mainstream of artistic musical endeavor. After three months, I knew something else beckoned. However, the one good thing that came out of it all was how my audience changed. I still wrote, but now for choir, or organ chorales or organ and instruments (I had touched on the chorale slightly during my masters study but was not convinced it was a way of going forward with my work). You see, my audience was a lay audience. I was not writing for the academy, but for people who were musically attenuated, just in a different way. It made me rethink my writing style - to make it more, in a word, tonal. For years I had tried to stretch all the boundaries that were set for me (when *Newband*, a microtonal group, offered to do a reading of student works, one of their members said that they don't have a problem with quarter tones - so what do I do, write everything in eighth tones! I was interested in Scelsi at the time, so...). Now I had to conform in some ways, but I did not want to sacrifice what I felt was musical integrity and my own creative process. I had tried to mimic the *Hymnus* numerous times, but as I said before, that always led to nothing. After all these years of avant garde activity, I had to start from scratch. In effect, the style of music that I appreciated for so long but did not want to allow into my canon of musical thought, I could no longer ignore. So I really wasn't starting from scratch, after all I had an excellent training writing models of those compositions under Tony Newman. It's just that now I took it seriously. But of course, there was still Xenakis...

T.I.I.: So you wrote in two styles at once.

J.H.R.: Essentially, yes, but at different times. I'd compose a work for an organ recital at the church on a chorale, very much influenced by Distler, sitting at the keyboard the whole time, improvising, and reworking material, then I'd sit in a chair and start a piece for mixed ensemble using quarter tones and ratio-rhythms up the wazoo and never once trying the sounds out. It was all conceptual - improvising on paper, if you will. What eventually happened was that the larger percentage of the audience appreciated the works that I'd improvise with the sounds beneath my fingers, and personally, so did I.

T.I.I.: So that's the direction that you took?

J.H.R.: Yes. I just dropped all the other work. I actually went back to doing simple pieces using two or three voices and worked up from there.

T.I.I.: Didn't the context of sacred music contradict your own personal beliefs?

J.H.R.: Well, let me say that I used this newer dimension in more than just music for the church. Also, the context, meaning where it was played, and for whom, didn't matter to me that much. It was still a listening audience to some extent. And the words, another context, didn't matter. The words in this type of music never mattered much to me - who understands them anyway? The words were the timbral shades that were given to the voices. That's why I would often never care about how they were meant to be spoken, just how they sounded in conjunction with the music. I'd take words apart over phrases,

elongate others. It really isn't that much different than what the Notre Dame School had done 700 years ago. My job was to write pieces to intensify the emotion of the moment.

T.I.I.: This then is how your style today developed?

J.H.R.: Almost. I went to the University of Arizona to study with someone finally who wasn't wrapped up in the NY avant garde scene. Someone practical, a symphonist. I found this in Dan Asia. He mainly guided me back to the enjoyment of writing music. Also he helped me find a language that was equally enjoyable to play. You won't get a performer to do a piece of yours more than once if it doesn't sound and *feel* good (although that can mean a lot of different things - I for one enjoy playing Xenakis, even though it is physically draining more than anything else I know - his stuff still sounds great). Andrew Hull, a wonderful guitarist, commissioned me for some works (actually it was the first time I was paid to write) which he went on to play across the country. He got excellent reactions from both lay audience members and academics. I realized that this was the path for me to take, after all it's about communication. I was finding a voice that I could speak with without bending the sounds out from where I wanted them to be. I could use a wide gamut of sounds without making some more prominent over others.

T.I.I.: So do you have a set way of making your music now - time of day, place...?

J.H.R.: Not at all! Although sometimes I wish I had that kind of day - a work habit like Glass or someone, where it seems like you go to the office and punch a card and write for a certain duration, and then you punch out at the whistle. For me, sometimes it's after a practice session on piano, or organ; it can be during the day at school between classes or lessons, or at midnight with headphones on at my digital keyboard. Sessions can last from five minutes to five hours. Sometimes I don't write for two weeks, and then other times I can finish a few short pieces in as many days. I don't call it inspiration, though, as I never 'hear a tune in my head' and need to dash it off in the heat of the moment - I always need to experiment with my hands on an instrument and use my mind's instincts to choose what stays and what goes. Sometimes I'm more generous with what I take, other times I can sit for an hour and get nothing down. It all depends. It comes and goes. It's never predictable, either. If I get a commission, though, for some reason the switch usually goes on pretty easily. I think it gets down to the fact that life is not regular, at least not for me. Balancing teaching and enjoying time with my family and preparing for performances and finding the time to compose can create a strange focus - when I know I have little time I can accomplish more than I thought I could, and then it usually takes a lot of self-convincing that the material, coming so quick off the pen, has any real merit. This self-doubt, though, I think is good for an artist. I hope never to lose it.

T.I.I.: Where are you today?

J.H.R.: The one thing that has opened my writing up considerably today has been writing orchestral music. I had tried numerous times before but nothing of any quality. It's interesting about orchestration - in college I didn't get the training and technique handling the orchestra in any comprehensive way, just learn the ranges and arrange

chorales for brass quintet, that sort of waste. But real orchestration is a little like movie special effects – when it's done right and is integral with the plot, then it makes for a wonderful experience, but when the plot is thin, the effects try to cover this up. Writing orchestra music wasn't something that my teachers before Dan Asia were involved in to any extent. But Charles Bornstein has been the most helpful here. He has an amazing ear for the orchestra and comes down on me as hard as Kawin did, just he's a friend and an associate more than a teacher. Another thing that happened was during my final two years in Arizona, I was asked to teach an orchestration class (without really learning it myself first!). This forced me to really analyze methodologies and functions and couplings and how it *reflected* the writing. Composing for it myself was a more daunting task. You see, the orchestra allows for more activity, plain and simple, and I was getting stuck with just writing what I could play. I mean, I can play any of the parts of my orchestral music on the piano, just not at the same time. I was worried about it at first, but have come to hear it better now, as well as understand the way that the orchestra works better. Also, I've come not to try to repeat successful works in similar ways. The second and especially the fourth movement of the *Sketches of an American Past* just won't happen again. I tried this bi-tonal stratification between the soloist and the strings in the fourth that worked exceptionally well. I'll try something completely different next time. This is what happened with *Hymnus*, too. Lately I look at my work and say to myself, "But is there *development*?" and then I think about Solage and Baudier. I now allow the piece to generally wind down – just let the material run out of steam.

T.I.I.: What piece of yours would you like to be remembered for at this point?

J.H.R.: The highpoint of my compositional career is undeniably the *Passacaglia Tenebrosa* for large orchestra. I began composing it the summer I arrived in Duluth for my first academic appointment in 1998. I felt extremely confident as a composer at that point and had just finished some piano pieces that really connected for me. I always wanted to write for orchestra and had made many heartfelt attempts – with the outcomes being pretty damn poor, if not downright horrific (*Faulkner Stories* [1993-4], *Symphonic Panels* [1995-6], *Symphonic Hommage* [1996], *Kangen* [1997]). However, I tried my hand at it again. But this time I spent enormous amounts of time on every detail and by the end of the summer had the theme and three variations. As school began, other projects with immediate performances in mind took precedence. Also, with this position being my first full time teaching job, I had to get used to the ropes and I knew that I needed a tremendous amount of concentrated time to do the piece right. I just didn't have it starting off, so I put it away until the next summer. In the interim I had written a lot of new music for piano and took ideas from one of them as a central motive (the *Interlude* material in the *Passacaglia Tenebrosa*). It was chosen to be read and recorded by the Minnesota Orchestra in October 1999 as part of an "emerging composers" forum. I had been studying the Allan Pettersson symphonic scores to pieces that summer too and his outlook had been a deep influence. Also the passacaglia form appealed to me as I had played dozens being an organist. I needed a real Classical mold in which to pour my musical language, which by this time I honestly felt had matured to the point where I was willing to present my work to a large audience. Remember Schönberg, too, returned to Classical models to work out his twelve-tone technique developments once it was truly

forged (like the Piano Suite Op. 25, or the sonata movements in the Quintet Op. 26 and others - Boulez thought it was a bunch of bologna to use a new set of materials in an antiquated format, but for me, ever the inclusionist, that's exactly what I'm after – also I think that some forms transcend style, and the passacaglia is one of them). Anyway, Aaron Kernis presided over the affair. He gave me a lot of excellent pointers about the piece and suggestions on how to change it to make it better. I took a few ideas and most of the others I disregarded outright, although I was polite as anything during the whole process. My father adores the piece, and I take his advice over anyone else's – he's the model listener for me: educated, broad tastes and a deep sense of the meaning of music.

T.I.I.: What about your playing? You still do contemporary music internationally and perform organ recitals.

J.H.R.: Yes, but that's about it. I always try now to program some of my own music when I'm concertizing, but it's more a part of the compositional process – the end part: performing for an audience. And about others' music, well, it was just wonderful meeting Xenakis after performing *Herma* in 1998 in Paris, but I'm glad it happened when it did. If I had met him in '94 or '95, I would have been overwhelmed and maybe awestruck. Maybe I would have gone back on that trail that had led me so far from where I subconsciously wanted to be. I'm over it now. I'm still out there playing his work as well as Sorabji, Scelsi, Distler, Coelho, Buxtehude, and all the rest. But now it's more like visiting friends rather than inviting them into your own house for an extended stay – I can leave when I need to without any regrets. After all, I'm a composer.