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In Conversation with... James Romig

by Chelsea McBride

A little preamble: I'm a masters' student interested in pursuing academia after almost a decade of freelancing in the music business. I've wanted to go back to school for a long time, but luckily projects kept gaining momentum, and it just made sense to stay "in the scene" for as long as I possibly could. After 8 successful years teaching, playing, touring, writing music, and of course the pandemic, I decided to start my masters' degree in 2022 at the age of 30 (!) and realized quickly after that that there was a place for me in academia. When I did decide to go back to school, I did a TON of research over the course of a number of years, interviewing people about various programs and making a long list of options before narrowing it down to the five I applied to. So, I'm doing the same thing with doctoral programs, and collecting as much advice as I can, and that's where this conversation comes from!

C: Let's start from the beginning. Tell me a little about your educational background—I'm primarily curious about doctoral studies, but I don't know anything of where you came from before that!

J: My undergraduate degree at the University of Iowa was in percussion performance, which probably explains why I became a composer. Because of the nature of that particular school, at that particular point in time, I heard and performed an enormous amount of new music while I was in Iowa City. I spent far more time with Cage, Xenakis, and Reich than I did with Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, and I had constant exposure — both as a listener and as a performer — to freshly-written works by both established and emerging composers. Looking back on it now, it seems that it was the perfect place for me to be at that stage of my musical life. By the time I was finishing my undergrad degree I had pretty much made up my mind that I wanted to pursue composition instead of performance, but a lucrative graduate assistantship had opened up in the Iowa percussion department, so I decided to stay for another couple of years. Though I was teaching percussion, I turned my primary focus toward composition, and the preparation of a portfolio of pieces appropriate for doctoral applications.

C: OK, so, why go for a doctorate at all?

J: I suppose it was mainly because I wanted to learn much more about composition than I had during earlier degrees. Perhaps if I had done undergrad and master's study solely in composition I might have felt that I had learned everything I wanted to know, but since composition studies were always tangential to percussion studies, I knew that there was still much to understand and experience. By that time I think I had the notion that I wanted to be a college professor, and even back then it was clear that a doctorate was necessary to open that door.

C: You have your doctorate from Rutgers. What drew you to the Rutgers program?

Choosing Rutgers was actually a relatively simple matter for me: I thought that Charles Wuorinen was a brilliant composer and I wanted to study with him. Wuorinen had some Iowa ties, so I heard a lot of his music while I was in school. I was also tremendously fond of his book *Simple Composition*. Further, I knew that Rutgers would provide access to New York City, and I wanted to experience all I could of the musical life there.

C: Something I'm always curious about when I talk to people: what is your impression of New York City, especially now that you've come and gone?

J: I suspect that everyone feels like "their" New York City was the last "great" New York City, but — value judgements aside — I'm certain that things are very different today when compared to the time I was there in the late 90s and early 2000s. For example, I experienced something bizarre in 2019: I was at Copland House, and I took the train into the city for a concert. I wanted to buy a copy of *The New Yorker*, but I couldn't find a newsstand! I mean, there were the same kiosks that were there in the 90s, but now they only sell candy bars, sports drinks, and maybe a few run-of-the-mill publications. And don't get me started about trying to find a good bialy in Manhattan. But of course the museums are still there, and so are the cultural events. That will never change, though we can quibble about the performance standards and repertoire choices of the major ensembles. At any rate, when I was a student in the metro area I tried to take advantage of as much as I could: I enjoyed going to Carnegie Hall, The Met, and the Philharmonic, but some my favorite memories are of going to the City Ballet, which was the best place to hear (and see, of course) live performances of late Stravinsky and Wuorinen. I heard rock performances ranging from Prince to Gwar, and I attended some sporting events, too, seeing Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neill, Martin Brodeur, and others. I spent both academic and social time with Wuorinen and Babbitt, and I also met Carter and Xenakis. Looking back on it, I can't imagine having a better experience there. That said, I'm happy to be a visitor now as opposed to a resident. I live a much slower, quieter life

here in the middle of the Illinois prairie, and though I always love being back in New York I'm also just as happy to return to life in the slow lane. And now I'm inspired to ask: what is New York City for you, these days?

C: New York City is a place I'm not done in! I've struggled for a long time to articulate how I feel in New York City. It's the one place in the world where I feel like I am constantly at my highest highs and lowest lows, and as someone who struggles with mental illness, that's an exhausting place to be in all the time. It's everything it's cracked up to be in some ways, and everyone important is here or comes through here, but "making it" in New York is not some magical thing – everyone is just barely getting by. The city's grimy, the traffic sucks, the people can be cold. But at the same time, there are all these warm pockets of community, and the way I've been adopted into the jazz large ensemble scene in particular has been really meaningful to me. I've found real, deep, interesting people here—lifelong friends—but not everybody's like that. Saying it's complicated feels like a cop-out, but to me, this place is everything and nothing all at once. I think the one thing that remains true, and something that shattered a bit of the magic of New York for me, is that this isn't the only place you can find good talent. Great performers and composers are everywhere, and while New York is a boost to the resume, it's not the only place you're going to find your community. I spent the school year in New York and then traveled across the US and Canada last summer, and I found friends everywhere I went—including some way deeper relationships than anything I've ever had in New York. This is a lot of words to say...it's important, it's meaningful for career clout, it's magical. It's the only place in the world like it. But there are other places, and you can have meaning without ever stepping foot in Manhattan. (Or Brooklyn, depending on your people.) That said, this is largely informed by my experience in jazz spaces, not in spaces like where we met. My practice lives largely in the jazz world, but I have a huge interest in third stream/genre crossover land. I'm curious to hear you talk a bit more about your creative practice, but also if you have any advice for someone like me who's trying to cross over between jazz & classical. This could be specific grad programs to recommend, but also just general advice for things to look for and do.

J: I'm afraid I don't have any specific programs to recommend, though I'm sure you'll be able to do your own research there. And I don't have any advice about "crossing over." What I would say, though, is that it has been my experience that genre boundaries are blurring these days. I have no experience with dipping into the jazz world, but a recent composition of mine was commissioned, performed, and recorded by a heavy metal guitarist. *The Complexity of Distance* is an hour-long work that I composed for Mike Scheidt — guitarist, vocalist, and songwriter for the Oregon doom-metal band YOB. Working with Mike was a fascinating experience because, up until the time of our collaboration, he had almost zero experience performing music that he hadn't composed himself. Further, he doesn't ordinarily read music,

so he ended up taking guitar lessons for months in order to learn to read the score I created for him. For my part, I had to study up to learn some of the intricacies and specificities of writing for guitar, which had always been an intimidating mystery to me. Needless to say, he and I both learned a lot over the course of our project, and we've become close friends. Neither of us is likely to get rich as a result of our collaboration, but creating something strange and unique with a friend, and then sharing it with others, is pretty good as far as personal artistic satisfaction is concerned. At any rate, the resulting piece is genre-fluid and pretty much unclassifiable. It was released on CD and digital by New World Records, the venerable "classical" label that had previously released my big piano piece, *Still*. But a year later the heavy-metal label Relapse Records released the work on vinyl. The vinyl release actually reached #8 on the Billboard chart in the classical crossover category, which was both fun and bizarre. Adding to the surreality, a brewery in Seattle called Holy Mountain Brewing created a namesake beer (a saison that they sold both on tap and in cans) and hosted the world-premiere live performance (by Mike, of course) last August. I'm curious to know what your "crossover" thoughts are. Does a healthy attitude toward this sort of thing come naturally to all saxophone experts? Your instrument, after all, is at home in a wide variety of genres, right?

C: The more interesting thing about the saxophone is the places it's not welcome, I think. It's not welcome in the symphony orchestra outside of pops night, it's definitely not invited into some churches, and it's too loud to be a good chamber wind I think, although that's not to discount the incredible classical saxophonists I know. So saxophonists and composers like me have naturally had to find places where we are welcome—jazz, for sure, but even saxophone quartets in the chamber world, or concert band. The other thing about training in jazz saxophone is that you're heavily encouraged (if not forced) to double on clarinet and flute (and to a lesser extent, double reeds), which is sort of a back door into the classical/chamber world. Some of us do this better than others—I am a solidly above-average doubler on single reeds, but I'm pretty evenly competent across my woodwind instruments, and I never got into double reeds. I was encouraged from a very young age to be versatile—I started playing piano and singing, got into saxophone and clarinet and flute in high school, was always encouraged to double instead of soloing. There is a gender piece at play here, for the record: women are socialized to be good team players, and we're less likely to jump into the spotlight for a chance to solo. In fact, most of my friends will tell you I'm uncharacteristically forward and confident compared to most of my femme colleagues, but I think that's a product of constantly being surrounded by the audacity of men! I just realized at a very young age that this is what I wanted to do (play and write music), but I didn't care how I got there, and I said yes to every opportunity that made sense. I've played on prog-metal recordings on bari sax and chamber-folk concerts on clarinet; I've done backup vocals, hand claps, and our department chair, the inimitable Dr. Payton MacDonald, never misses an opportunity to hand me a gong or a shaker (percussion is easily my weakest instrument family). And on the writing side: I was a singer-

songwriter before I was a jazz arranger/composer, and I was a composer before I was an arranger. Now, I'll try pretty much anything once. I don't think of my practice as particularly experimental—I'm really attached to tonality! But I'm constantly trying to find new ways to put notes on the page and make a musical statement, in any available genre, and as such I make it a point to listen to music that I don't like, or music that makes me uncomfortable, along with the stuff that I do like. I feel like 80% of what I do is totally by-the-book, within the capacity of the instruments and players that I write for, familiar and/or accessible. And the other 20%...it could be anything. Currently on my desk: a very short concerto for saxophone, vibraphone, and percussion quintet, featuring either bows or mallets with stuff in them (exact stuff TBD); a chamber septet piece involving winds, brass, and percussion; a Great American Songbook-style song; a good old-fashioned pop-punk song for a boy. I like it all, but I'm enjoying the abundance of short works currently; doctoral studies likely mean larger-scale works, and I need a break and a good concept before I feel ready to jump into that world. When we met, you were presenting one of your evening-length works for solo guitar (commissioned by Matt Sargent). Can you talk a little bit about your process with evening-length works, in both the creative scope sense and the business sense? I'm curious about how these ideas come from idea to piece, and then how you present that to the rest of the world.

J: My first extended-length composition was a 2012 work for two pianos called "Time Seems To Pass," but in the beginning that piece was only something like 13 minutes in duration. What I realized, after I had composed it, was that the sections in that piece could be rearranged into a formal pattern that would extend the length of the composition considerably (the extended version is about 35 minutes long). So even though it was something of a happy accident that I discovered a system that generated something interesting (to me, at least!) over a long span of time, once it happened I started to think of ways to do it again. In 2016, I composed "Still," an hour-long piano solo that was conceived from the very start as an extended-length piece for Ashlee Mack to perform as a standalone concert work. Ashlee and I are married, and had worked together many times in the past, but this concert-length collaboration was a new experience both of us.

C: OK two questions here. First of all: say more about this musical marriage, because you definitely just threw that in there, and I'm always curious about how musician couples make it work.

J: I'm sure that each musician couple is different, but in our case the fact that Ashlee and I share a common interest in new music is a huge benefit — not only because we occasionally collaborate but because we are often able to travel together. Spending time in new environments is something we both enjoy, and we've been very fortunate that new music has provided opportunities for us to visit many places in the USA and Europe where we might not have thought to (or been able to) go if music wasn't leading the way. And travel to new places

of course leads to new friends, new museums, and new foods, and those things are just as important to the two of us as music is. For example, we recently spent a week in the Czech Republic at the Prague Quiet Music Festival, where Ashlee gave a solo recital and I had a quartet premiered by the PQM Ensemble. Swiss composer Jürg Frey was featured at the festival too, so we had a good time getting to know him and hearing a lot of his music. And then on top of the music and good company there was the food, the beautiful surroundings, and the mental reset that a change of scenery and routine often provides.

C: And secondly: tell me more about this piece, since we're on the topic.

J: The piece, as you might know, is inspired by the paintings of Clyfford Still — specifically the collection of his works housed in Denver's Clyfford Still Museum. *Still* comprises 43 segments of music, each about 75 seconds long, that are related to one another in different ways that create cross-references and connections throughout the composition. Ashlee made a lovely recording of the work, which was released by New World Records and has garnered some gratifying attention. In all, Ashlee has performed the work at least thirty times over the past few years, and a handful of other pianists have played it too. As you can imagine, this is a rare situation for a composer to be in, and a very happy one. I feel fortunate that this piece has caught people's imagination just a bit, and I guess that the positive reception — in terms of press, awards, and repeat performances — has in a way provided me with some "permission" to indulge in other long pieces. So when my friend Mike Scheidt, who I mentioned earlier, asked me to write something for him, the result was similarly extended. While putting the finishing touches on "The Complexity of Distance" for Mike, I got a friendly email from Matt Sargent, who I had met when I visited the University at Buffalo while he was a PhD student there. Matt, who had no idea that I was in the middle of a guitar piece for Mike, asked me if I might be interested in writing a guitar piece! I told Matt about the one I was writing for Mike, and the two of us decided that it needed a companion. "The Fragility of Time" was eventually created, and Matt premiered it last March. This led to the happy coincidence of you and I meeting and starting this conversation — which has taken on its own extended length!

C: I'm curious how you choose your collaborators and find new people to play your music as well.

J: I've been very fortunate throughout my career to have some amazing performers that have taken an interest in my music. I think every composer has a different route to finding collaborators, but in my case it was seldom through prizes, or calls for scores, or being awarded commissions out of the blue by important organizations or ensembles. Instead, I found myself working with friends and colleagues who just happen to be really fine musicians. To name just a few... I met percussionist Tony Oliver when I was a first-year undergraduate at

the University of Iowa and he and I have been collaborating ever since. Another person I met at Iowa was cellist Craig Hultgren, who's been a constant musical friend, performing countless numbers of my works countless numbers of times (he and I are currently at work on a new piece for electric cello and chamber orchestra). I met flutist John McMurtery when I was a PhD student at Rutgers: he was an early performer in my new music ensemble The Society for Chromatic Art, and we've been working together regularly for 25+ years. Ashlee Mack played piano for the SCA, which is how she and I got to know one another in the first place. Other musical friends are, I'm delighted to say, too numerous to mention here, but all — or at least many — are connected to one another in various ways. It's quite organic, and in fact I suspect that I could draw a "family tree" of people who have performed my music and it would have distinct and almost-predictable branches. Of course, now that I've been around for a while and my music is a little bit more widespread than it was when I was starting out, it occasionally happens that a performer will discover and present my work without any sort of personal or friend-of-friend connection, but even now that still tends to be the exception, not the rule.

C: Can you expand on this "family tree" a bit? One of the things I've been circling back to in my conversations with people has been networking and building connections. How much has school played a role in finding your people? Are all connections created equal? How do you build your network in a genuine way, without coming off like you're just doing it for clout?

J: Your question is a good one, because young artists are frequently told to "build a network," which can lead to the notion that phony, insincere behavior toward so-called "important" people is key to success. Perhaps that's true for some, but in my estimation it's usually a pointless endeavor. Obviously, one should be respectful, kind, and generous whenever possible, to EVERYONE, without hope of getting something in return. I've personally found that treating others well is its own reward: I simply feel better at the end of the day knowing that I haven't behaved like a jerk. Whether that redounds in gigs, etc., is beside the point. I like your term — "finding your people" — much better because that sounds far less cynical than "making connections." And the good news is that it's easier than ever for us to find our people: thanks to the internet and social media, it's possible for each of us to find the handful of folks that might be interested in what we do. And those can be very meaningful connections, since people who like what we like are apt to be doing things themselves that are of interest, and then that web can continue expanding. A perfect example of "finding your people" is this chat that you and I are having right now... As I mentioned previously, I met Matt Sargent at Buffalo when I was giving a guest presentation there. One thing led to another and a decade later Matt performed my music at William Paterson, where you happened to decide to attend the show. And not only did you attend, but you also stuck around after the concert to chat. It's always good to meet fellow travelers, so the three of us have kept in touch. Whether we all end up working together on a musical project, or we just meet up for a meal at a diner

sometime, our lives are already enriched by having intersected. Our little “network” isn’t likely to lead to fame, fortune, or glory, but it is VERY possible that it will make our lives happier and more interesting. And — once the bills are paid — that’s almost certainly more important.

C: In more practical questions: what does your post-doctoral work life look like? Has it shifted over the years? In a general sense, where do you get your income from?

J: I went straight from Rutgers to a visiting assistant professor position at a small university in Kansas where the composition professor was on sabbatical for a year, and then I was lucky enough to secure a similar position the next year at Bucknell University. From Bucknell I moved into a tenure-track job at Western Illinois University, and I’ve been there ever since. At the time I was applying for these jobs, the outlook seemed bleak. But of course now the situation is even worse: it’s an acknowledged fact that there are far more good candidates out there than there are good university jobs, and this is more than a little bit worrisome. At WIU we try to be very clear with our composition students — and our music students, generally — about the realities of the world we’re currently living in. As for income, my primary revenue stream is from my university position. The money that comes in from commissions, royalties, publishing, recordings, etc., is icing on the cake. Because I don’t need to rely on my compositions to pay for rent, groceries, and health insurance, I’m able to pick and choose the projects and collaborations I accept without having to worry about whether they are financially lucrative or not. And, as you can imagine, writing experimental concert-length works is not necessarily the path to earning vast sums of money. My “day job” allows me to follow this strange path and still manage to buy groceries.

C: Being in New York, there’s a sense from many of the people that I talk to that if you’re not here (or in LA), you’re not necessarily doing anything important. Now I think we both know that to not be true, but I’m curious how living in NYC contrasts to being somewhere like Kansas or Bucknell or Western Illinois. (For the record, I’ve never even been to any of these places—and I’m very much a city person—but I’ve been cautioned that relocating is something I need to be prepared to do if I want to work.)

J: Yeah, the NYC obsession is real. I get it. I wasn’t thrilled to leave, and I thought moving away from the center of the musical universe would have a negative effect on my career. And you know, maybe it has in some ways: I certainly won’t complain about how my career has unfolded, but I do wonder sometimes whether more awards, grants, and other opportunities might come my way if I lived in a more prestigious zip code. But the honest answer to that is “probably not.” I think all of us artists feel underappreciated and undersupported some of the time (maybe MOST of the time), but that’s probably more a societal problem than a geographical problem. I would suggest to you that relocating is not necessarily something you

need to *prepare* to do as much as it is something you might *consider* — as an option. In my case, I have learned to appreciate the life that is possible away from a big city: Ashlee and I own a modest but very comfortable house that overlooks a forest preserve. Our college-professor schedules, combined with the simplicity of life in a small town, allow for great flexibility. We are able to have dinner together every night, and we have plenty of free time for travel to places that have a wider variety of cultural events, restaurants, and shopping. We spend the majority of our “city time” in St. Louis, Chicago, and Denver, but we manage to keep up appearances in New York, Paris, London, etc. In fact, I’m pretty sure that some of my NYC friends don’t have any idea that I’m in Illinois: they just assume I’ve been in the city all this time and they simply haven’t seen me in a while.

C: Off the board, but my favourite question to ask people: I feel like the only thing I’m sure about in my life right now is wanting to do more school, and that’s something I’m super solid on, but the rest of my life feels a lot messier. What advice would you have for someone who’s trying to find their bearings as they move on to higher ed, or out into the real world?

J: My advice would be to make sure that whatever you’re doing — creatively or academically — speaks to you on a personal level and is satisfying to you in and of itself. What I mean is that it seems there are no guaranteed outcomes anymore (maybe there never were): getting a doctorate in composing or playing an instrument doesn’t guarantee an eventual job. Because there is no automatic light at the end of the tunnel, my thought is that we should all learn to enjoy the tunnel itself. So, if you’re choosing a doctoral program, I’d suggest that you make sure you’re studying with someone you want to learn from (as opposed to someone who you think will eventually find you a job), and make sure you’re studying at a school in a place where you want to live for a few years. The experience of school needs to be personally satisfying and something that you’ll treasure for the rest of your life. It’s an investment, for sure — but not necessarily an investment in future wealth or fame: it’s an investment in future happiness and fulfillment that might or might not involve making money. That said, though, I still think that there are paths out there for creative and talented people who are able to recognize opportunities and are ready to take advantage when those opportunities present themselves. Finding one’s bearings is probably more difficult now than it has ever been, but the same things that have always been important are still crucial today: know your craft inside and out, stay focused but flexible, take care of your mental and physical health, strive to be kind and generous, and work at being grateful for whatever musical life you’re able to cobble together. With a little luck, something will work out — but you’re unlikely to be able to predict it.