

## A Conversation with Vivian Fine: Two Composers Talk Shop

by Elinor Armer

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*Composer/pianist Vivian Fine is a distinguished figure in contemporary American music. She has received many honors, including grants from the Ford, Martha Baird Rockefeller, Alice B. Ditson, and Guggenheim Foundations, and election to membership in the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Her varied and generous output includes a significant body of work for strings.... She shared her thoughts on writing for strings, education, and the life of a composer with her friend and fellow composer Elinor Armer.*

*I notice that strings feature prominently in your works. You have more pieces for solo strings than I realized; you've also used strings in a variety of combinations with other instruments. But more often than other composers, it seems to me, you've combined strings with voice.*

Fine: Yes. In fact, my earliest published work was a group of four songs for voice and strings—the first for voice and viola, the second for voice and two violins, the third for voice and string quartet, and the fourth for string trio and voice.

*Was this a special commission?*

Fine: No, I conceived of the work that way. I was only 19 years old at the time; I didn't know a great deal about string writing and wrote some very difficult things, including one piece with many harmonics.

*Was this your way of learning about string writing—to do it?*

Fine: Not exactly. I just wrote whatever I heard in my head and plunged in, and lo and behold, it turned out to be playable.

*Your Missa Brevis is another example of strings with voice.*

Fine: Yes, that was done much later, for an interesting combination—four cellos and taped voice. I first heard four cellos when I was a colleague of cellist George Finkel at Bennington College. I loved the sound of four cellos, and the idea occurred to me of writing this Mass. The tape part was sung by Jan de Gaetani. Four different vocal tracks were made initially, then freely combined; I composed *with* the tracks, so to speak. That worked very well, one voice singing four tracks with the complementary four cello parts.

*It can also be done with eight cellos.*

Fine: Yes, even 16, although that tends to overpower the voice. Eight work very well.

*What are your earliest recollections of hearing string music?*

Fine: I first became acquainted with string sound when I heard my sister Adelaide practicing. She's three years older than I, and by the time I was five, she was studying violin. This early experience of hearing someone practice the violin was critical. Later I remember very well her playing the Vivaldi Concerto in A Minor as I accompanied her on the piano. And I remember all those études for violin. It made me comfortable with string-writing for life.

*That explains a lot, since your principal instrument was piano. Did you ever study string playing at all?*

Fine: I had exactly two lessons. When I was eight, my sister was still studying violin. One day I went with her to her lesson and the teacher discovered that I had absolute pitch. He figured, "Jascha Heifitz has absolute pitch—she too will be a great violinist!" So he offered to teach me for nothing. I proved to be a very untalented pupil, I think partly because I'm totally left-handed and it's hard for me to bow with the right hand. Anyway, after two lessons the scholarship was dropped.

*When did you begin studying composition?*

Fine: During my teens. Ruth Crawford was my first composition teacher. I heard her Violin Sonata no later than 1927, when I was 14 years old. It made a great impression on me, especially her freedom with string writing. I realize now that this sonata was influential, in that it gave me an idea of another kind of string sound besides the classical one, both in expression and technique. (I later recorded this piece with Ida Kavafian.) As a young composer I had to find my own way writing for instruments other than piano, because I didn't have the opportunity to hear my compositions played. Later, when I was 17, I did hear a piece of mine for violin and piano performed at a student concert in Chicago; I think it was influenced by the very fine and somewhat neglected Sonatina by Carlos Chavez. I later revived the Crawford Sonata, at the Library of Congress. Both these works gave me a concept of modern string writing and the freedom to compose in a new way.

*Can you characterize what you mean by "modern" string writing?*

Fine: Well, it's not like Vivaldi. Specifically, non-tonal.

*Didn't you also have "older" sounds in your head from having studied piano? Usually young composers proceed in a conservative way, getting on the shoulders of the older composers and only gradually evolving a style or a voice of their own. Yet you set out to be "modern" as soon as you could.*

Fine: Almost from the beginning. The language of contemporary music was perfectly natural to me. Ruth Crawford was also a student of my piano teacher. Djane Lavoie-Herz,

who had worked with Scriabin, and there was a Scriabinesque influence in some of her early works. Scriabin had actually left tonality and much of his harmony was built around fourths; that was the language I was used to. Then later on, in the 50s, the violinist Matthew Raimondi said something very liberating to me when I showed him my violin sonata: “Don’t worry. I’ll find a way to do it.” He made no issue of having to cross strings or jump around, whereas earlier in my career I had shown a work for cello and piano to a cellist who balked at double-stop fifths. You won’t find a string player today who would do this.

*Do you think that contemporary techniques have expanded among string players?*

Fine: Enormously. Young people today can play anything.

*I know that massed strings are an attractive medium for you, too. In Drama, the work commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony in 1983, for instance, or After The Tradition, which the Bay Area Women’s Philharmonic did a couple of seasons ago, the strings were quite rich. Even though it’s not strictly 20<sup>th</sup>-century tradition to feature strings prominently in orchestral music, you do. I’m thinking of Stravinsky and other composers in the first half of the century who experimented with shifting the balance a little. Of course, strings are making a comeback with the “new Romanticism;” but you always enjoyed that sound.*

Fine: Yes, I like that luscious, full string sound. My *Concertante for Piano and Orchestra* is another example. I’ve often told orchestration students that you can’t get that opulent quality with any other instruments. They sometimes try to avoid clichés by reducing strings and featuring brass or winds, then wonder why it doesn’t sound more “orchestral.” There’s nothing quite as satisfying as having all the strings in the orchestra playing at once.

*In your string writing now, do you go in for a lot of effects and techniques which are considered especially contemporary, such as Bartók pizzicato, glissandi, bowing behind the bridge, and so on?*

Fine: Almost none.

*In other words, the actual sounds are produced in the old way.*

Fine: Yes. I’ve had the good fortune of playing with some very good string players—violinist Ida Kavafian and Daniel Kobialka, and the violist Jacob Glick, for example. All this interplay with the performers has an effect on one’s writing, because you’re not listening as an audience would, but actually participating. The intimate knowledge of the instruments that I gained this way has been invaluable.

*Do you sometimes revise your pieces as you’re working with the performers?*

Fine: Not often. Occasionally they will suggest things, but usually what I write is quite playable. This summer I had the interesting experience of writing a work for string quartet and trumpet—*Madrigali Spirituali*—and I was a little concerned about the balance. But with the players I had it worked out beautifully—Ida Kavafian on first violin, Pamela Frank on second, Toby Appel on viola, Warren Lash on cello, and Stephen Burns on trumpet. I was immensely gratified; there were no balance problems at all.

*Have you done any other unusual combinations of this sort using strings?*

Fine: I have a Capriccio for Oboe and String Trio from 1946, the same combination as the Mozart Quartet in F Minor. I knew the Mozart work, what the combination sounded like, and the problems involved. Actually, I think one could write for string quartet and anything—trombone, for example.

*I agree. The blending capacities of strings that make them so useful in orchestra also work in chamber music, whereas you couldn't do the reverse—brass quintet, say, and violin.*

Fine: That would be a little difficult!

*In the biographical entries that I've read about you, it pleases me to see that they can't categorize you into early, middle, and late periods. Reference is made to a "stern, atonal" style at the beginning of your career, then you are said to have expanded your expressive range in recent years. How do you view your stylistic development, and where do you think it has arrived at this point?*

Fine: From about 14 through 19, I did have a rather severely dissonant, atonal style. I didn't use 12-tone techniques; I doubt I even knew about them, but I was familiar with atonal music, as I said, and I was severe as only young people can be severe. Then, in the mid-30s, there was a great shift in almost everyone's music. Copland, for example, went from the modernism of his Piano Variations into his "American" style. It was part of a whole cultural and political manifestation, and my own music became quite tonal for a number of years. I was very involved with dance then and this tonal trend showed itself particularly in the ballets I wrote for Doris Humphreys and Charles Weidman. Then, in the mid-40s I turned to a style that was always anchored in some way to tonality, but not triadic tonality. I did admit a triad now and then, which would have been strictly forbidden in my earliest period!

*In these later years, then, you weren't composing by avoidance, so to speak.*

Fine: No. And I think this tempered atonality has remained characteristic of my music. One listener referred to it as "mutating" tonality, which describes it very well, I think; the music veers off constantly into unaccustomed tonal relations. Another element that has remained constant in my music is its principally contrapuntal, linear approach. The harmonies fall where they fall; I hear them, but I rarely start out with a harmonic scheme.

*I love that quality in your music. There's freedom and coherence at the same time, a combination that seems characteristic of your life. I understand you didn't actually have the so-called normal high school experience.*

Fine: No. I was just beginning to compose when I came to high-school age. Classes were large, and I found myself in a social studies course where we had to memorize the number of post offices in the United States. A very wise voice inside me said, "I don't want to learn this. I don't want to *know* this!" So I stopped going. While today I'd be rushed off to a psychiatrist, my parents accepted this readily. They themselves were Russian Jewish immigrants who had not had the opportunity of going to school but had educated themselves. They didn't associate education with school. There were, after all, such things as books. My mother once hid me in the closet when the truant officer came around.

*But you nevertheless had a tremendous mental appetite at that age, didn't you?*

Fine: Yes. I was very busy taking piano lessons, buying music, or getting it out of the library, and composing. This life gave me the chance to compose five hours a day. It's only now that I've retired from teaching that I have the same luxury.

*So you've come full circle.*

Fine: Exactly. Only I don't have my mother to prepare my meals; I have to do that myself now.

*You spent a number of years teaching, didn't you? At Julliard, New York University, Bennington.*

Fine: Yes. I was at Bennington for 23 years, with perhaps three years off for various leaves and sabbaticals. It was extremely gratifying. I liked it tremendously. I had very supportive colleagues, both instrumentalists and composers, and much of my chamber music was premiered there. Teaching was not the central thing in my life, but it was always an enjoyable activity.

*Did you ever get to the point where you felt that it was cutting into your composing life?*

Fine: I was never resentful of teaching, perhaps because I wasn't responsible for supporting my family. I knew I could leave it I wanted to, although that never happened. It was a connection to the world; far from resenting it, I cherished it.

*Do you miss it now that you've retired?*

Fine: No. Now it's time to do something else.

*You seem always to have known what you needed to do. I think that sureness and that authority mark your music. There's a real voice there, of a person who knows herself, who has something to say and says it.*

Fine: I didn't call myself a composer for a long time, even after I'd had performances. But I always knew that no matter how many diversions came along, including important ones like family and children, composing was central in my life. That was not only sure, it was unshakable.

*That you didn't call yourself a composer at first is interesting to me. Nowadays there are a number of people who make a big issue of calling themselves composers, more than of composing. There's more emphasis now on image and P.R. and certain carefully-chosen career steps that will put one in the public eye and ear—winning the right prizes, getting the right grants, acquiring an agent, and so on. You never seemed to hustle in that fashion. Somehow, the world beat a path to your door.*

Fine: If you hang in long enough, that will happen. There were many hard times artistically when I didn't get many performances. That's all I ever wanted, really—to write the music and have good performances of it. These are the two components of a good life for a composer. Now almost everything I write is on commission from excellent players, so I'm assured of both.

*What about recordings and publication?*

Fine: They're all right when they come along, but they don't do the same thing for me at all.

*They're not the reason you compose.*

Fine: No. Some people have more of a talent for promotion than I have. I've learned one thing, though, and that is: Never say no. I've taken almost all the commissions that have come my way. Sometimes I'll even offer a work to a group that doesn't have any commissioning money. One such, called Music from Angel Fire wanted to do some of my older works, and I said, "With musicians like that, I want to write something new." So I did. There is nothing more gratifying than hearing fine musicians play your music. It's the great experience.

*Nevertheless, publication and recording allow people to avail themselves of your music, also to "hear how it goes" should they want to play it*

Fine: Of course. And the more of that, the better. But I never went so far as to have an agent. Most composers I know don't. Certainly it would be nice to have someone to answer the correspondence that accumulates, someone who knows your life and is involved with what you are doing.

*Someone did say once that every composer needs a wife.*

Fine: I keep my own network going by having a very yea-saying attitude.

*I like the idea of a career happening organically, as you describe. Yours is certainly thriving. Are there any biographies of you other than the Groves article?*

Fine: Yes. Judith Cody has written a book called *Vivian Fine, a Bio-Bibliography*, which is coming out soon from Greenwood Press.

*And what have you been working on recently?*

Fine: I recently did a piece for violin and piano called *Portal*, commissioned by a young violinist, Pamela Frank, who won a commission as part of an Avery Fisher Grant. She premiered it at Alice Tully Hall last spring. In July a new piece, *Songs and Arias*, for French horn, violin, and cello, was premiered at Chamber Music Northwest by David Jolley, Erika Sato, and Fred Sherry. Later, the work was performed at the Bravo! Colorado Festival. During the summer I was also busy writing a commissioned work for the Williamstown (Massachusetts) Chamber Concerts, and a version of *Madrigali Spirituali* for string orchestra and trumpet which Karen Baccaro performed with the Bay Area Women's Philharmonic in the fall of 1990.

*All of these works involve strings. And as you know—this is where we came in—Composers, Inc. presented Missa Brevis on their opening concert in October.*

Fine: Yes, I'm pleased about that, especially that the performance was dedicated to the memory of Jan de Gaetani.

*All told, then, you have described a wonderfully rich repertoire of activities. You must be enjoying this time in your life.*

Fine: I am. It's the most productive period I've known.

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