JANICE GITECK: MUSIC IN MIND

by Alexandra Gardner

March 1, 2012

A conversation at Cornish College of the Arts, Seattle, Washington: January 31, 2012—7:00 p.m.

Transcribed by Julia Lu

Introduction

Sometimes a composer's personality can speak volumes about the music she or he writes. Tranquility mixed with pointed curiosity fits both the outward persona of Janice Giteck as well as the character of her work. Her compositions, which focus on chamber music but also include orchestral works and film scores, combine the rigor of Western European musical training with a meld of Buddhist, Hasidic, Javanese, and African influences. Though born in New York, her music clearly fits within the "West Coast" tradition, both because of its sonic nod towards Pacific Rim cultures as well as its sense of spaciousness.

Giteck began moving west as a teenager when her family relocated to Arizona, and she kept traveling in that direction until settling in Seattle, where she has been a professor at Cornish College of the Arts since 1979. From 1962 to 1969 she studied with Darius Milhaud both at Mills College and the Aspen Institute, then, with the support of a grant from the French government, she went to France to study with Olivier Messiaen at the Paris Conservatory. While it might have seemed unusual for a young woman to study composition at that time, she points out that the gender ratio hasn't really changed that much over the years. "There were, I think three women in the class to about twenty men," Giteck recalls. "And that ratio stayed the same, no matter what, all the way through school, up to today when I'm teaching."

Giteck's constant inquisitiveness—directed both inward and towards the outside world—has led to numerous compositions that grapple with social issues and dramatically affected her life path. *Om Shanti* for chamber ensemble with soprano,

which is dedicated to people living with AIDS, was composed after a three-year period of compositional silence; a silence which led Giteck to study psychology (resulting in a master's degree and work with patients in a mental hospital), and brought to her musical consciousness an emphasis on the link between mental well-being and music-making. She has also scored seven feature-length documentary films that address social issues, including Emiko Omori's *Rabbit in the Moon* and Pat Ferrero's *Hopi, Songs of the Fourth World*; her composition *Ishi* for the Seattle Chamber Players relates the life story of the last Yahi Indian, who became a much-loved figure in San Francisco.

Whether through writing music, discovering what her students think is important to learn in 2012, improvising with fellow musicians, or even waiting through a time of compositional silence, Giteck seems to find her greatest inspiration in the energy of the present moment. "I just have to wait to see what is it that's going to emerge," she explains. "And I'm not going to push it. I'm going to see."

Interview

Alexandra Gardner: We're here at Cornish College of the Arts, where you've taught for many years. You've taught more than a generation of students. Do you feel that you have a particular message to impart to students? For instance, things they should strive to learn or understand when they are composing?

Janice Giteck: I've been teaching about 35 years, if I count UC Berkeley and Cal State Hayward before I moved here from California. So that's really more like two generations of composers just about, which is just unbelievable when I think about it. I feel that the sincerity I hear in students' work is very compelling, and these days there's such a wonderful urgency about including what is current. Students 20 years ago or so were still trying to really get the classical infusion or transmission into themselves. But now technology has changed our lives completely. Young composers are working at a computer a lot of the time. They can hear immediately what they've composed. We all know this is nothing new. So what I try to do is to see how their values are shifting. What they value as being important to know. In a way, I'm letting the students lead me. And that's actually been the way I've always taught. What do you need to know to be able to communicate what you want to communicate? There are still all the basics of theory and harmony. There are some

students here who come primarily as electronic music composers, and it's like pulling teeth to have them become interested in classical harmony. But I think it's good to have a foundation in what the Western lineage has been. I remember when Jim Tenney came here as a guest years ago, and he was sitting in a theory class, and he said that he thought it was only necessary to study 100 years back in a music school: that if you had 100 years back, that should be adequate for you to have a sense of where things came from (of course, there'd be specialty classes in early music or whatever). And I've taken that to heart somewhat. You have to keep going with the times. I like to point out to students what things I think work really well, and things that don't work well. There was a Bang on a Can concert I went to in New York that was all chamber music, but it was all mic-ed. This was at Symphony Space. And there was a nine-foot grand piano on the stage, and I thought, this is ridiculous, to mic this. Particularly since that piece did not ask for the instruments to be amplified. I'll give an example like that to students and say, "What do you think about it? Why would you choose to mic an instrument, or not mic an instrument?" Trying to bring those kind of contemporary ideas into the sound of things.

AG: Speaking of teachers, you studied with two of the 20th century's greatest French composers; Milhaud and Messiaen. What were your experiences like with them, and what do you feel you learned from them that has been particularly important for you?

JG: Well, I feel really, really fortunate. I met Milhaud when I was 16. I went to Aspen in the summer between my junior and senior year of high school. I met Darius Milhaud and he always had a lot going on in his house—many guests and visitors all the time. His classes that he taught were in his house as well. Students were there, kind of in the milieu of whatever was going on. A lot of different types of composers would come through as guests in Aspen. I was getting an exposure to Berio and Britten, Messiaen and Persichetti, and I could just go on. Krenek.

There were, I think three women in the class to about twenty men. And that ratio stayed the same, no matter what, all the way through school, up to today when I'm teaching. It's pretty much the same still. So that's been really interesting. However, Milhaud in particular, but Messiaen as well, were very pro-feminist. Very pro-women being strong, creative, passionate musicians. After the years in Aspen, I

went to Mills and studied with Milhaud there. And that's a women's college, and he had me in his graduate level class from the time I was a freshman. So that was pretty amazing. Again, I was very young in comparison to the other students. But I learned so much by being around him for seven years, all together. To compose what is truly my own. Not to try to sound like other people. To study really hard, but then put it all aside and just write what's my own. That's something I've internalized as a teacher. Study really hard, and then put it all aside and just write what's you. With Messiaen, I was only at the Paris Conservatory for one year, and it was very dramatic. There was a class full of French students, and three foreigners, and I was one of the foreigners. Again, I think there were only three women in the class. We had the likes of Xenakis come and talk to us about the LP set of all his music that had just come out. Messaien emphasized rigor—to be very rigorous—but he would be the first person to toss away, you know, 12-tone to a tee. He couldn't even be pinned down to being a serialist composer, even though it was his early work that changed so much for the composers after him. So, I liked this kind of fresh, non-dogmatic approach to things. And there was also a lot of playfulness. Milhaud had one of those little Legion of Honor buttons that he wore all the time. Messiaen had three different levels, and he wore them all the time. He'd wear these very formal suits, but he'd wear these big flowery shirts, with the lapel open.

AG: Your work incorporates quite a few different types of music. Gamelan, African drumming rhythms—all sorts of different voices appear in your work. How did you come to those and start incorporating them into your compositions?

JG: The very first time I heard gamelan was at a concert of Debussy preludes. Jeanne Stark—a Belgian pianist—brought a small group of people and gamelan instruments into the concert hall. This was at the Museum of Art in San Francisco—this big, cavernous room. For the first 40 minutes of the concert, they just played traditional Javanese gamelan music.

Then they put everything on these carts and wheeled it out, and she sat down and played Debussy preludes. I had never heard a gamelan before in my life and it was like *whoa*. I had read about this in history books, but I had never heard this connection. And then I had a chance to play in a gamelan in the Bay area at a summer program that the city of Berkeley would run. It's called Cazadero Music

and Arts Program out in the redwood forest. Incredible place. We had the Berkeley Gamelan there every summer. So I started learning gamelan with Daniel Schmidt, who was the director then. He's also an instrument builder. And then of course, with Lou Harrison being in the Bay area, I would hear concerts of his music and became very enamored by his work. He came up to Seattle in '79, and the first thing that we did was we built an aluminum gamelan here, à la Lou Harrison, with Daniel Schmidt helping a bunch of faculty build it in the night hours after the furniture shop from the design department was locked and closed. It was the first set of instruments for Gamelan Pacifica. And then one of our students, Jarrad Powell, got very, very interested in gamelan. He graduated from here, went to Mills, studied with Lou Harrison, then went to Indonesia and had a gamelan designed and built, which we now have here. It's beautiful. So I've had gamelan music in my life for over 30 years now.

There was also African percussion at the Cazadero Music and Arts Program, first introduced by Paul Dresher—traditional Ewe music from West Africa. My former husband and I were asked to come here and re-vamp the whole music department at Cornish in 1979, so Paul came with us, and he started some African percussion classes. Then we had a West African master drummer, Obo Addy. I just hung around Obo Addy as much as I could and I would play in his ensembles. It was the greatest way to learn. It wasn't out of a book. He would teach you the rhythm on your shoulder, and stay there with you until you got it into your body. I feel so lucky to have had those kinds of introductions to the music.

AG: Do you feel that there is a "West Coast" style of composition? When I think of West Coast composers, I think of Lou Harrison, Harry Partch, Terry Riley, names like that. I'm interested to know whether you feel that there is a school of musical thought that is very specific to the West.

JG: Yeah, that's a great question. Well, I was born in New York; I lived there until I was 13. I studied classical everything. We'd go to concerts at Carnegie Hall. I studied piano, and then we moved to Arizona. The first study I had that was more advanced was in Aspen, which was directed towards Juilliard summer school, so to speak—a European, East Coast way of thinking. When I went to Mills, it was kind of the beginning of that feeling of, well, there really is something unusual in the San Francisco area. And then I would say over the years, I really identified more

and more with Pacific Rim and Asian philosophy, certainly in terms of Buddhist practice and the kind of values that one is exposed to so immediately and readily on the West Coast—particularly the Northwest. I became quite close with Lou Harrison on a personal level, and he was always challenging me to be feeling where is it that I'm identifying with, because he also had a very rigorous European training although his heart was in Chinese music from the time he was a little boy. I would say that the spaciousness and the less competitive environment is true of the West Coast. I don't know that it's as cutthroat.

Maybe I'm just romantic about it, but there might be a little more space for more kinds of people stylistically on the West Coast. It's something that the music faculty at Cornish feels very strongly about; to just let people blossom wherever they're going and that any style is fine. We've had students who are doing hip hop and taking on the marketplace. And we have students who are classical pianists teaching little kids piano. Lots of string quartets are getting written here. Every style under the sun. I say that I lean more towards being west coast, but I was so trained with the values of European music, especially studying with Milhaud and Messiaen.

AG: Early in your musical career you wrote the piece *TREE* for the San Francisco Symphony, but it seems that since then you have preferred to focus on writing music for smaller forces. Is that correct?

JG: I think that I've always felt more excited about the kind of intimacies of chamber music than writing for a really big ensemble. I also feel that when I'm working on a piece, I burn so hot that it feels like it could kind of burn me out, you know. I don't think that it would be that good. I don't have bad health. I have excellent health. I just feel that working more delicately is where I've found my excitement. And some of that is living on the West Coast. I live in the most amazing place. I live on Penn Cove, which is part of the Pacific Ocean. My house is literally right on the water's edge. And this area of Whidbey Island was inhabited by the Lower Skagit Indians 15,000 years ago. It comes out of the last Ice Age. It's very exquisite and kind of magical. And the tempo of being there has a huge influence on me.

AG: But you have written some long-form chamber music. *Breathing Songs from a Turning Sky* is a substantial ten-movement work, and more recently you wrote *Ishi* for the Seattle Chamber Players, an evening-length work which also has a film component, as well as some theatrics and audience participation. Can you talk a little about Ishi for those who don't know who he was?

JG: Ishi was the last member of the Yahi tribe of northern California Indians that had been around for between 4,000 and 6,000 years. We don't really know. He was literally the last person of that tribe and that language. They had been roaming around the foothills of Mount Lassen for many, many years. They spent decades in hiding because they were being hunted down by gold miners. Ishi lived with this small band of people, and he was their doctor, their surgeon, and their spiritual leader. One by one, they all died off, including his mother and his sister, and he left Mount Lassen and made the choice to come into Oroville, which is a little tiny town at the foot of the mountain. He chose to go to try to live, even though he was surrendering to white people in the town. There are photographs from that very day. And this was exactly 100 years ago this year. This is the centennial—in 1912 Ishi stumbled into Oroville. What he did in the next five years was so amazing. He became close friends with Alfred Kroeber, who was an anthropologist at University of California, and one of the first anthropologists to begin to see natives as completely human. Alfred Kroeber took him in, and Ishi decided to go with him and live in the anthropology museum and tell them everything he could possibly tell them through an interpreter who knew the language of the next tribe over. So there was some linkage of the languages. And he became a very beloved and famous person in San Francisco.

Ishi had such forgiveness in him. He became friendly with a surgeon at the University of California medical school. He would go on the rounds with this surgeon to visit patients who were in recovery from surgery. He would chant and sing to them.

AG: Wow.

JG: It was very important to sing to people when they were healing.

AG: That's amazing.

JG: Yeah, and the doctor would be glad for him to join him.

I recently had a performance of this piece at the Other Minds Festival and when I was in a panel just before the performance, I asked if anybody knew about Ishi. At least 200 people out of at least 350 people raised their hands. So they knew. And afterwards, a few different people came up to me and told me their Ishi stories, including Bob Shumaker, who is an audio engineer. He told me that his stepfather had known Ishi when his stepfather was a little boy. And Ishi would play baseball with the children on the street, because he wanted to learn baseball. So I mean, these stories were still coming down about who this Ishi was who would sit out in front of the museum and make arrowheads for children out of obsidian because he was just so interested in people. He never wore shoes, even to the San Francisco Opera. He went barefoot. He just felt that it was unsafe to go anywhere wearing shoes. So I incorporate that into my piece as one of the few theatrical gestures. The violinist takes off his shoes, rolls up his pants, and walks around the stage and into the audience playing his violin.

Emiko Omori, a filmmaker from San Francisco, and I went up to where Ishi lived his 40 years on Mount Lassen. We went there in February, and it was completely covered with snow, except for Deer Creek, which is where he lived. We filmed for a few days, and Emiko put together a little film that is at the end of the chamber music piece.

AG: Speaking of films, haven't you've scored several over the years?

JG: Yeah, I have enjoyed very much working on this collaborative approach to making something. And with really extraordinary filmmakers. They've all been documentaries—I've scored seven feature-length documentaries, mostly with folks in the Bay area. I don't know how we've done it, but I've lived up here and worked, you know, flying stuff back and forth, and then eventually sending things via computer. Then going to a recording studio up here and having people fly here, back and forth. It's worked out pretty well. The thing that's so wonderful about it is that it's completely different than writing a piece from scratch. If I am invested or interested in the subject of the documentary, I can just pour my heart into it and give everything that I can give as a composer to some purpose, or cause. They're mostly social issue pieces. One is *Rabbit in the Moon*, which was a 90-minute

documentary made for PBS about the Japanese-American internment during World War II. That was an amazing project working with Emiko Omori, the same filmmaker I mentioned earlier. It was really her personal family story because she was in one of the camps as a little child. It was the political story and the cultural story that was going on amongst Japanese-Americans, all layered together. She trusted me to be the sound component to tell that story, so that's pretty thrilling.

AG: In everything that you've been talking about, the common thread seems to be that your mission is for music, in one way or another, to provide some sort of healing experience.

JG: For me, making music is like a channel, or a language that's different than words. And it's very immediate; and it's very, very personal; and it can connect something that's deep inside of me outward in an effort to connect, an effort to speak. Music can be healing in a lot of different ways. I see the young rockers and jazzers here at Cornish who are just banging away on the drums, and they just feel so fantastic after they've been playing together like that. It's not meditative or gentle. No, their hearts are racing. I would say that's healing, in that moment. Music has been used for healing all sorts of neurological problems. There's the Oliver Sacks book *Musicophilia*. I mean, it's just amazing, the things that he's putting together for masses of people to know about. Babies listening to music in utero and having an immediate association with music of that nature once they're born. It's just amazing. It's a channel. I don't know that it's a language. I think it's a pre-verbal communication.

AG: In addition to your musical training, you have a master's in psychology, right? That's a pretty big switch from serious composer life.

JG: Immediately after I wrote Tree, which was a piece commissioned for the San Francisco Symphony, I got a commission to write a piece for viola and orchestra with the Mid-Columbia Symphony Orchestra in eastern Washington. And about halfway through writing that piece, I didn't have any ideas! It was like this idiot savant had lost the savant part, or something just turned off. I had a copyist (in those days we had copyists). She would come to my house and sit in my dining room, and I would be sitting at the piano, and she'd say, "Janice, I need the next page for the clarinet part." Or, "I need the next four measures, could you…?" It's

like I literally depended on her ego structure, psychologically speaking, to get me through that piece. It was a complete disaster, as far as I was concerned. And I took the piece, and I put it on a shelf, never to be played again. After that piece, I stopped writing for three years. Completely. Nothing. Zero. And I thought it was over. I thought, I don't have anything to say in this language anymore. So I decided that I was very interested in getting into therapy and studying my mind more. And I thought, O.K., I'll go and do that in a very systematic way, as well as going into therapy. So I did. I went and studied psychology for three years and came out of that with a master's with an emphasis on working with music as a potential link between well-being and communication and music-making. I continued to teach at Cornish, but I also worked part-time for about six years at Seattle Mental Health Institute with very mentally ill folks, developing music programs and working one-on-one with clients and a music group. I was just trying to find out, well, what is the common denominator for all of us humans on this earth. What is it in music? What is it as a communication? How can music help to bridge different people? And so I was studying my own mental health as well as working with these people. I also started playing in a group with three other musician-composers. Two of them had been students of mine, and we would meet once a week, and we would improvise with no form. We wouldn't talk; we'd play together for about two hours, and that was it. I loved it. It had nothing to do with writing down notes. It was absolutely expressive, and I could practice following people as well as leading people, which I had already been pretty good at as a teacher. But I found the beginning of a whole fresh way of teaching, and of noticing myself. Then after three years, the Seattle Movement Therapy Institute, which had just lost their director to AIDS, wanted a piece from me that could be used for AIDS benefits that was in honor of him. So I wrote *Om Shanti*, and it flew out of me in about two or three weeks. It's a five-movement chamber music piece with soprano, and it was very fresh for me. I didn't think about it much. It just came out, and then I had another like 20-year run after that piece. And now, I've been in a silence again for a few years. I don't know what's going to happen with that. But it's very powerful to surrender to it, and see it as part of how life is. It's not easy. But it's very powerful.

AG: That's very interesting. It's probably healthy to have periods like that where you're not writing anything, or rather, that you're not worrying about writing anything.

JG: I crave that silence. I've just been asked to write a string quartet by an ensemble in this area, and I would love to. I love string quartets. It's probably one of my favorite all-time ensemble sounds. It's just the simplicity and purity of it. I just have to wait to see what is it that's going to emerge. And I'm not going to push it. I'm going to see.

AG: So you said maybe.

JG: We're talking about it. I'm also working on a book—it's a book about composing and about learning composing and about teaching composing. There's a lot to it already, so I think there will be a book there, after 35 years of teaching. I've been encouraged by some of my colleagues to do this book; there's nothing out there, practically. It's an interesting time. I have no interest whatsoever in pushing my career out at this point. And I don't have a feeling of fading, or like something's over per se; it just feels more spacious.

AG: You have such a different take on existence as a composer than so many people. Trying to figure out what's going on inside your head seems to have had a positive effect.

JG: Thanks. I'm still trying to figure things out: What am I doing? What is music? Is music the notes that you write on a piece of paper? Or is music the sound that's made in the present moment connecting with an audience, or with another person? It's when it's happening, is what I'm coming to know more. What is a composer? Are we missing something by composing in isolation and then handing it over? Where do we get our juice from? You know, each day when we sit down to work? Where's that coming from? Are we making music? I don't know if we're making music or we're making something that will then be translated into somebody making music. I don't know! These are big questions.