

The Whole Story of My Earliest Instrumental Composition and How I Came to Revise It

Dually features the very first music I had ever written for a stand-alone instrumental composition intended for others to perform, but this music never received a performance when I originally wrote it and probably never would have were it not for a variety of events that have transpired since December 2016. When I began composing it back in 1979, I was not yet 15 years old and had only just begun to be curious about classical music, largely because of a teacher I had at New York's High School of Music and Art named Lionel Chernoff (formally Dr. Lionel Chernoff, less formally Lee, more on that later) who, in his enthusiasm for an extremely wide range of repertoire (from Medieval motets to contemporary works), made me realize that classical music covered a lot more ground than just the 18th and 19th century fare which didn't speak to me at that time. To this day, I credit him with making my mind receptive to an extremely broad range of musical aesthetics as well as to the notion that history need not be frozen in time. (I remember a few years after I first met him, he got so excited about Blondie's song "Call Me" that he transcribed it for recorder consort and had our class play it.) Before I describe how my first piece of chamber music originally came to be, I should explain some earlier history.

Growing up I never had any real interest in or affinity for so-called classical music (which I had assumed from fleeting encounters was just music by dead people from the 19th century). Though I was raised mostly in New York City, my exposure to music was primarily through Top 40 radio, network television, and a somewhat random collection of sheet music, mostly for 1920s-1970s American popular songs, that belonged to one of my mother's sisters who also had an upright piano that was badly in need of tuning. I learned to read treble clef when I was very young and I eventually could eke out the melodies for most of those songs on that piano (an instrument I never formally studied) while faking simulacra of accompanying harmonies based on the chord symbols included on most of those song sheets. (It always helped if I had previously heard the song.) Or I'd strum through those chords on a cheap guitar (which I had been taught to play through private classes in the back of a music shop in a Miami shopping mall when I was nine, hence the knowledge of the chord symbols) and I'd sing along. That was the pretty much the only music I knew, but I wanted to create my own. By the time I was a teenager I had composed probably dozens of songs, some of which I wrote down—mostly only in lead sheet form—so I'd remember them. From time to time, I also attempted some solo piano tinkering around various chord progressions that mostly never made it to the written page. These activities proved enough to get me admitted to Music and Art high school where I soon gained a much broader awareness of what music was and could be. At the time, I was chiefly interested in writing for musical theater. By the time I was in junior high, I had discovered Broadway musicals (since I lived only half a mile away from most of the theatres and tickets were only twice the admission to a movie at that time) and I had begun several attempts to create my own. But my imagination was far more advanced than my notational chops. Nothing ever gelled until the summer after my sophomore year in high school which I spent completing my fully written out piano/vocal score for a musical. But before completing that project, I had already written something else which ultimately proved more important for the direction my life took—my first multi-movement instrumental chamber music composition. It seems to have been something I did only to prove I could do it. In 10th grade, thanks to Lee Chernoff's music theory class, I got exposed to harmonic possibilities that went beyond chord symbols and to formal structures that were way more elaborate than verse and chorus. Having all this new information at my disposal, I thought I'd try my hand at writing a sonata.

One of the first things that grabbed my attention about classical music was how instruments were always specified in the scores. Printed sheet music for popular songs would feature only a piano part with additional guitar chord symbols, even if those songs were intended for different instruments. So instead of writing a piano score, I decided to write for other instruments to prove that this was no longer popular music. My aforementioned aunt, in addition to having that sub-par upright, had a collection of cheap wooden flutes and fifes, some of which she gave to me. I was able to get a pretty good tone out of one of them which led me to think the instrument deserved to have a sonata written for it. Since I had some functional understanding of the guitar, it seemed like an appropriate accompanying instrument. It also helped that both instruments were notated in treble clef since my knowledge of bass clef was still tenuous at that point. Pretty much everything I wrote was something I had worked through directly on those two instruments.

Thus was born a four-movement piece I called Sonata for Fife and Guitar. It's quite a hodgepodge of various elements, but I can trace many of them to the influence of Chernoff. The first two movements were a strange amalgam of A-B-A song structure mixed with very simplistic and intuitive variations; they also contained a lot of willful repetition. I was working on this music around the time that Chernoff encouraged me to watch a short PBS documentary about Philip Glass, which blew my mind. I couldn't yet wrap my brain around the notion of

process-based variance, but the third movement was a rudimentary effort at minimalism. One of the structures that Lee Chernoff first made me aware of—and which I soon became deeply enamored with—is rondo form. As a result, for the concluding movement I wrote a frenetic rondo which I suppose was also inspired by hearing Glass for the first time but not quite understanding how his music was put together. I know that I did not take Chernoff's Medieval and Renaissance performance class until the following year, but he must have also played some early music in his music theory class since the music I wrote occasionally seems more indebted to modality than to functional tonality, although at that point in my life I was clearly still under the sway of the even stronger influences of MOR '70s radio fare, Broadway show tunes, and the soundtracks of Francis Lai.

I remember showing my finished composition to Chernoff who, while encouraging, took me to task for calling it a sonata since I didn't use "sonata form" in any of the movements. I wasn't really able to wrap my brain around its formalities at the time, and I still haven't found a way to weave themes and modulations together using such a road map in a way that feels true to my own musical voice. But the problems with the Sonata for Fife and Guitar went far beyond whether it was a bona fide sonata. Many of the guitar lines were boilerplate, transitions were mostly awkward, and some of the material was downright sappy, although some of what I thought were the better tunes in it have remained lodged in my head to this day. Over the next year, I composed two additional duo sonatas that weren't exactly sonatas for equally off-kilter combinations—first piano and organ, then cello and snare drum. After that, my music grew decidedly more experimental, so I never looked back at this piece and never pursued getting it performed by anyone. Years later, I didn't even consider it a formal "opus 1." (That honor, for what it's worth, goes to a song cycle I completed in 1982 called *the nurturing river*, which is based on 14 sonnets written by my other mentor during those years, my high school math teacher, Jim Murphy. But that's a story for another day.) So this first effort at long form composition is more akin to a "WoO 1." However, since I've very rarely destroyed anything I've written, I still have the handwritten score for it I completed back in 1979, though it remained in a folder that I hadn't looked at for decades. Recently a chain of seemingly unrelated events led to my unearthing this music and finally coming to terms with it.

First was a phone call I received from Peter Chernoff, the son of Lionel Chernoff, telling me that his father died after suffering from Alzheimer's for several years. I had stayed in touch with Chernoff long after I graduated from high school in 1981. For decades he showed up at performances of my music, whatever the style—contemporary classical, musical theater, bluegrass—just from seeing listings in newspapers when I was lucky enough to be included in them. Afterwards he always found me in the audience and inevitably offered valuable comments about what I had written. I rarely had the good sense to actually invite him, even though it turned out that I didn't have to. But I do remember specifically writing to him about a little over ten years ago to let him know that David Starobin would be performing a short dodecaphonic bossa nova I wrote for solo guitar, since I knew that Chernoff was obsessed with Brazilian music and it was the first time I had followed him in that obsession. He came to hear it and it made me so happy that he liked what I had done, but he didn't look well and it turned out to be the last time we ever saw each other. I sent him a letter at one point after that, but it was returned in the mail. I had no idea what had happened to him. Despite how easy it seems to find anyone these days by doing a series of internet queries, I came up empty-handed. I had no idea he had been ill for so long, but I will always remember and be grateful for his sharing his musical health and wealth with me. I was unable to attend his funeral since I was out of town at a music conference. Peter (who had found me thanks to the internet) asked me to write some words about his father which he read at the service, but I felt I needed to honor him in a bigger way somehow.

A couple of weeks after this, on New Year's Eve, my wife and I discovered that a pipe had burst in our apartment above the closet where I keep most of my musical instruments. It made for a pretty traumatic conclusion to 2016, though thankfully almost nothing was damaged beyond hope. But since I was thinking about Lee Chernoff, I thought again about that old Sonata for Fife and Guitar. Before I thought about opening the envelope where I kept my original score, I thought I'd pull out that fife and see if I remembered any of the melodies I had composed for it. But it turned out that I no longer had it.

Then I was asked by Chamber Music America to serve as a mentor for first time attendees during their annual January conference which I have been going to now for nearly 20 years. One of the people assigned to me was a saxophonist named Joseph Murphy, who with guitarist Matthew Slotkin performs as Duo Montagnard. The duo, which has performed tons of works by living composers, was featured on one of the CMA showcases. I was floored by their musical sensitivity and, in particular, was struck by Murphy's almost flute-like tone on the saxophone. So, with the original fife forever lost to me, I thought about reworking my ancient sonata for them as a tribute to Lee Chernoff. But when I pulled out the score, I realized I needed to do much more than just transpose the fife part up a major sixth so it could be read by an alto saxophone player; it also seemed like I

should take advantage of an instrument that had a much wider range, both in terms of pitch and expressivity. While I delighted to find some things in it that I still found compelling, other things needed to stay in the envelope forever. There were, after all, compelling reasons why I never pursued a performance for this piece.

Then as I was working through this music and trying to turn it into something I could be proud of now, I discovered something astonishing about some of the material I had written which hinted at even deeper connections to Chernoff. The emotional climax of the first movement—one of the tunes that has remained stuck in my head all these years—was a melody that sequentially descended by seconds. It starts by outlining an F major seventh chord and ends up on a C major seventh (hey, it was the '70s): F major seventh followed by e minor seventh, then d minor seventh, and ultimately C major seventh—F-(E); E-(D); D-(C); C-(B). It's a pretty basic progression, but it also outlines—in descent (FEDCB)—the first five notes of the Locrian mode (BCDEFAB), which was a forbidden mode in Medieval times due to its tonic triad (BDF) being a diminished chord. It was a scale that was avoided in Western classical music until Bartók, something I also recall learning from Chernoff back then. Now here's where it gets weirder. Another thing I learned at that time was that Alban Berg constructed thematic material for his Chamber Concerto from the initials in the names of Schoenberg, Webern, and himself which could correspond to musical pitches—with H being a B and B being a Bb (as is German language practice) plus S being Eb. I remember thinking that was really cool but not really remembering anything else. However, one day as I was thinking through the rewrites, I pondered the musical possibilities of the name Chernoff and realized that it would be: C – B (for the H) – E – D (for the R which could be interpreted as "Re" as in "Do Re Mi") – and finally (after the useless N and O), F and another F. These are those same five pitches of the Locrian scale. Could that repeating sequence have somehow been an anagram for Chernoff? Probably not, yet there it was! So my mind started wandering afresh. The opening theme of the first movement, which returned again at the end, flowed somewhat awkwardly through a series of three measure units that consisted of two measures of triple time followed by a two-beat measure. Each of those units added up to eight beats which corresponds to the number of letters in Chernoff—another cipher. I would not have been able to follow through on the implications of that back then, but I certainly could do so now. So I slightly reworked those eight-beat units, plotting out precisely eight of them accompanied by the harmonic progression of C – B (H) – E – D (Re) – then two measures of melody unaccompanied for "NO" – and finally two measures of F. The original melody consisted exclusively of three-note phrases across each eight-beat unit. With only some tiny adjustments, I was able to make them all conform to possible tri-chord subsets of the full pentachord 01356 (BCDEF). In the past 20 years, I've developed a compositional language that reconciles serial and minimal procedures (both of which I first originally learned about from Chernoff), but the seeds for my eventual musical vocabulary seem to have already been planted in this very first piece. In the original, the climactic sequence I described above was just solo guitar. I added a melody on top of it that announces the full "CBED rest rest FF" and then permutes it (which hopefully makes it sound slightly less indebted to French film music). I got rid of everything else. It's definitely a flight of fancy of an extremely active imagination so I called the movement "Quixotically," which is a word I first learned about and was obsessed with when I was in high school.

The second movement's alterations were not as drastic. I basically only reworked the guitar part to make it sound less like a poor cousin of an Alberti bass. Here, too, the centerpiece of the movement is a sequenced melody which this time goes from an F major seventh to an Eb major seventh then to a Db major seventh and then cycles back again and again, getting faster and faster. It is clearly a chromatic reimagining of that earlier FEDC(B) sequence. I left it alone. Another word I overused back in high school to show off how smart I was was "jejune," which means naïve or simplistic. To me the word sounded beautiful even though it's pejorative. Since this music is undeniably naïve and simplistic, even though I think it is heartfelt and I'm unrepentant, I call it "Jejunely."

I couldn't be so laissez-faire about the third movement. The original was just a melody line, with no guitar part, consisting of several sequences of five ascending diatonic notes that slightly changed but not by much and with no clear intent. It seems not completely thought out and unfinished. So it needed to be completely rewritten, but how? I began contemplating what would happen if all those ascending five note sequences were replaced with descending sequences, to mirror the sequenced melodies in the first two movements, and that they contained only the pitches that appear in the "Chernoff motive" (F E D C and B) I had discovered when revising the first movement. When I tried to find Chernoff through online queries, one of the only things I was able to come up with was information about his Ph. D. thesis which was called "The determination of all possible hexachord-generated, twelve-tone rows characterized by bisymmetric configurations of all the simple intervals" (for Catholic University of America in 1968). Since this is a piece honoring Chernoff, "Dr. Lionel Chernoff" needed to be acknowledged here in a formal way, so I decided to take the process of manipulating sequences derived from FEDCB to its logical, or perhaps illogical, conclusion: I made it a compendium of all possible pentachords

containing FEDCB, a total of 120 combinations, which progress from the closest stepwise motion (that original descending F E D C B), to the greatest distance (a descending B C D E F which requires a nearly three-octave span). Admittedly the resulting music is light years away from the rest of the piece. It's not something I would have been able to play on any instrument back in 1979 and there's no way I could even have conceived of such a thing. To pawn it off as music I wrote in my teens would be a complete fabrication. To give it more musical interest than it would have had if it were just a continuous sequence of phrases parsed predictably in duple or triple time, I put the whole thing in the more unstable meter of 7/8, but that only further adds to the anachronism. (While I had already started using quintuple time in the musical I completed that summer, septuple rhythms didn't enter my music until much later.) Then again, it was Chernoff who pointed out to me that music history is something we must reinterpret for ourselves in each generation. There's an additional musical metaphor contained in this that confirms it is music I only could have written after December 2016. The piece begins as a call and response between the two instruments but then they are in strict unison and later an octave apart as the sequences grow incrementally wider and wider. A quality of such a collection of possible combinations is that half of them will replicate the pitches of the other half in reverse order. However, since each sequence continues to descend, it is not a proper palindrome and it doesn't sound like one. Still, to mark that exact halfway point where sequences begin occurring in reverse, the wind instrument disappears and never returns as the remaining iterations keep growing wider and more unwieldy for the musician left plucking strings alone. I imagined the last time I ever saw Chernoff, hearing my solo guitar piece and breathing parallel with the phrases as he heard them. But now, sadly, he will never hear anything else I've ever written including this music, the first piece I had written which was because of him which has now become a piece for and about him. I realize that this something most people won't hear when they listen to this music since the whole concept is somewhat esoteric, so I call it "Esoterically"—yet another favorite word of mine as a teenager since it contains my name.

Finally, a rondo. When I composed the original version of this music back in 1979 it was the very first time I had ever imposed a formal structure on any of my music. Doing so forever transformed the way I compose and since then I have never given up being obsessed with patterns, particularly ones that are audible even if super-fast, hence "Relentlessly." The music here is not exactly the same as what I wrote back in 10th grade. I elongated the middle section to make it correspond to the descending sequences of the other movements which gives the entire piece an overarching architecture. I also made each successive return of the recurring theme slightly different and spiced up some of the rhythmic counterpoint. (The 2s against 3s were in the original—my first polyrhythm—but the 3s against 5s and the 5s against 8s you can blame on the person I am now.) My hope is that whatever revisions I've done remain true to the spirit of the original material but make it more exciting for would be interpreters as well as for listeners. Although none of the melodies, harmonies, or rhythms herein contain any references to Lionel Chernoff, at least as far as I have been able to analyze, it is musically the most indebted to him of all of the movements since, after all, he's the person who told me what a rondo is and that rondos typically concluded sonatas.

However, as I'm sure Lionel Chernoff would have pointed out, it's *still* not a sonata! So now the piece is called *Dually – an Anti-Sonata in Memory of Lionel Chernoff* and it is under that title that it has received its world premiere performance by the Duo Montagnard in the rotunda of Bronx Community College's Gould Memorial Library on April 26, 2017. But, to honor Chernoff's open-mindedness to instrumental malleability, this music can be performed by any feasible duo consisting of a wind and a plucked string instrument. In addition to the alto saxophone and guitar version I created expressly for Duo Montagnard, it could also work well for a flute/harp duo and, in honor of Chernoff's Medieval and Renaissance class, I would love to hear it played on recorder and lute one day. I rechristened it an "anti-sonata" out of respect for Chernoff's specific use of the word sonata, but I named it *Dually* for a variety of reasons. On the most basic level it is music for two people. But it is also music that was composed by two people: 14-year-old me and the 52-year-old me of 2017. I also use the word to acknowledge that although the classical music canon is built upon the notion that the great composers of the past were solely responsible for their timeless masterpieces, nothing has ever been created in a vacuum and it also cannot exist in our present world without the contributions of many other people—interpreters, presenters and other advocates, and, perhaps most importantly, listeners. All of my own humble attempts at contributing to the repertoire have been the by-product of lots of things I have learned from lots of other people. Many of the most important things I learned in my formative years I learned from Lionel Chernoff, and whenever I listen to or write music, I am not doing so alone; he is with me. The word dually, like the words for each of the movements, is an adverb ending in "ly" for Lee, Lionel Chernoff's nickname which I rarely called him by but which I will always remember.

—Frank J. Oteri (April 2017)