

Bruce Wolosoff: American Eclectic

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For musicians of the 21st century the world is full of possibilities, something Bruce Wolosoff was happily aware of long before he officially declared himself a composer. Jazz, rock, boogie-woogie, electronics, all fascinated him as much as classical music. It took him a while to integrate all the sides of his musical nature, but he hasn't looked back since. That's not to say that any given composition incorporates all aspects of his musical personality, merely that to him they're of equal importance. I hadn't heard any of his music before being asked to interview him, but various coincidences, people we knew, music we admired, led me to suspect that he'd be a sympathetic, enthusiastic conversationalist. I'm pleased to say that my intuition was sound.

Q: When did you and the piano first meet?

A: Sitting at the piano is among my earliest memories. I was very little. I sat there a lot. It was so fascinating to me to make sounds and listen to them, to observe how the quality of the room changed depending on which notes I played and how I played them.

Q: Your parents must have noticed your talent: Did anyone in the family play an instrument and did they get you started, or did they find a teacher for you right away?

A: My older sister, Joy, took lessons and played pretty well. My parents asked her teacher (Charles Caserta, a pupil of Moritz Rosenthal) to start teaching me when I was two, but he said my hands were too small and I had to wait! They let me start at three. Besides my sister, my grandmother, a Russian émigré who

lived in France and spoke no English at all, was a very good classical pianist. I remember reading the Egmont Overture with her in a four-hand arrangement and thinking what a funny name it had.

Q: What sort of music was “in the air” at home?

A: Well, my father died when I was five. My mother remarried when I was six, and my step dad was a terrific swing pianist, you know, with a stride left hand. He played the Tin Pan Alley hits from the '20s and '30s, all by ear. We'd go to a show and he would come home and play all the songs from it, having only heard the show once. It was a happy sound, his playing. Often he'd stay up late and play into the night. When I got older, we'd stay up together and play for each other. Those were good times.

My mom loved the Big Bands, and Sinatra. She was always listening to Sinatra, and that radio show, The Make Believe Ballroom , hosted by William B. Williams. Her mom was the niece of a very famous cantor named Yossele Rosenblatt, and sometimes she played his records too. They were haunting and sad.

Q: What drew you to jazz, rock, and fusion?

A: Once I heard the Beatles as a little boy, rock music became my music; the drive, the pulse, the energy. Then when Hendrix came along . . . forget about it! He had this demonic quality, the quality that Lorca described as duende . It hit me really hard.

There was something so important about music to my generation, maybe every generation feels this way, but it seemed like rock music was a galvanizing force for the collective spiritual quest that my generation was going through in the '60s and '70s.

Q: Did the bands you played with perform original compositions and did you write for them, or were they primarily “cover” bands?

A: As kids we played mostly covers, but we really just treated them as points of

departure and would jam out on them like crazy! I've always loved a good jam session! In college I had a band with Elliot Sharp [composer/multi-instrumentalist/performer]. We wrote a lot of our own stuff for that.

Q: Did any of your "serious" teachers ever try to discourage that sideline?

A: Yes, there was one guy in particular at the New England Conservatory who said I had to choose. He thought the rhythm came from a completely different place in the body. I thought he was an idiot. He had never even heard Bill Evans!

Most of my teachers were very open-minded about it. It was about becoming "a complete musician." Really, pretty much all the composers being taught in the conservatories could read scores and were conversant with the literature, but they would also improvise and compose. Don't you ever fantasize about what it would be like to hear Beethoven improvise? Or Bach? Chopin? I do!

Q: When did you start to study with German Diez? How did you meet and were you contemplating a career as a pianist, or was composition always your first love?

A: I met German Diez the summer after my freshman year at college. Joan Tower suggested that I study with him. He was her teacher too. I was fully committed to being a classical pianist at that point in my life (though after hours I played my "other music").

Q: Where did you study with him?

A: At his apartment on Amsterdam and 76th on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Then he came to Bard to teach in the fall, so I'd see him both places. Sometimes we'd have lessons at the Greenwich House [in New York City], where he's been chairman of the piano faculty for, I don't know, 50 years? He's still teaching there now! I can't emphasize how important this man was to my musical development. He became my spiritual father, not only teaching me piano technique (he teaches the technique of Claudio Arrau) but showing me what it meant to be a dedicated and devoted musician.

Q: Why did you decide to go to Bard for your college years?

A: I went to Bard because the high school guidance counselor recommended it. At the time it was known as a place where you could do your own thing. I liked the idea that everyone was self-motivated and you got to hang out with people who were serious working practitioners in your field.

Q: I know that you studied with Evelyne Crochet: Where was she teaching at the time? I recently heard some of her excellent Bach and Fauré performances on YouTube and I'm tempted to say she doesn't get the recognition she deserves. Of course, there are so many fine pianists of whom I could say the same...

A: Very true. I met Evelyne Crochet at the New England Conservatory. She was a fantastic pianist and a very demanding teacher. She was a student of both Rudolf Serkin and Edwin Fischer. She brought their high standards into the practice room with her. Evelyne was at NEC for just one year, though I continued working with her on and off for much of the next decade. We lived around the corner from each other in New York and spent a lot of time together. Evelyne Crochet and I covered a very wide range of repertoire: Tons and tons of Bach, Scarlatti, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Chopin, Liszt, Busoni, Debussy, Messiaen, Crumb. She was a strong advocate for my improvisation and composition. One night she brought the great jazz pianist Randy Weston to a party at my loft because she wanted me to meet him! He played into the night. What a fantastic night that was.

Q: I understand that Richard Goode was another of your teachers. What was it like to study with him?

A: Richard Goode was a force of nature! He was just relentless in his pursuit of musical truth. I'd alternate between feeling inspired and feeling crushed. The first thing I ever played for him was the complete set of Busoni's Elegies. We worked mostly on Beethoven and Schumann, as I recall. I would go to his apartment on Friday afternoons, and stay there for hours. Longest lessons ever! I remember one time we spent like two hours on the opening of a Beethoven piece and at

one point towards the end of that he said “Okay, that was almost beautiful.”
Ouch. Check your ego at the door, kids!

Q: Was the fact that Joan Tower taught at Bard a factor in your choice of college?

A: No, it was just serendipitous that Joan was at Bard at that time. I had no idea who she was when I first met her. Back in those days she was also the pianist of the Da Capo Chamber Players. She could really play the piano too!

Q: Joan Tower, I would assume, teaches composition from a classical perspective, but you’ve also studied with some famous jazz musicians, Charlie Banacos, for example.

A: I met Charlie Banacos pretty much the same way everybody else did, I waited for two years on his waiting list for lessons! He was something of a hermit. When I got to Boston to do my graduate work at the Conservatory, everybody was telling me “get on Charlie Banacos’s waiting list.” I didn’t even know what he taught!

I remember how surprised I was when I first met him. He was so young! At the time, Charlie wasn’t affiliated with any academic institutions, he taught out of this cool little studio in the Coolidge Corner arcade building in Boston. Charlie was a masterful pianist, and had a greater insight into harmony than anyone else I’ve ever known. He was a truly extraordinary musician, as anyone who ever heard him play can attest to. A pity he didn’t record. What a musician! After a few years, Charlie and I grew very close and became like brothers. He was so funny and silly. When I first started dating the woman who was to become my wife, Margaret Garrett, I brought her up to Gloucester to visit him. I wanted him to check her out for me. He turned to her at dinner and said, “So, exactly what are your intentions with regard to my friend?” When we got back to New York at the end of that weekend, she moved in with me!

Charlie influenced me in so many ways. More than I can possibly begin to

recount here. He loved my playing and was always telling me to write and perform my own piano works. It was around that time that I was composing more and playing less, certainly performing less, and by about the age of 30 I had pretty much stopped performing. It wasn't until Charlie's untimely death in December 2009 that I decided to start performing again, beginning with a tribute concert to him that became the CD *Many Worlds*.

Incidentally, I wasn't planning to record the *Many Worlds* CD, but my close friend Cynthia Daniels, a multiple Grammy winner, insisted on recording the concert that night, free of charge, for posterity. I'm really glad she did. It's done a lot to revitalize my interest in performing again, but this time around playing my own music instead of other people's music. Sometimes our good friends can see us more clearly than we can see ourselves.

Q: Tell me about Jaki Byard, another of your jazz mentors.

A: I was walking through the hallway at the New England Conservatory my first couple of days there as a graduate student. I saw this man standing there, the energy coming off of him was so intense, he was unlike any person I had ever seen. I knew, even before hearing his name, that whatever this guy was teaching, I wanted some of it! It was no big surprise when someone told me that was Jaki Byard. I had heard of Jaki back when I was at Bard. Joan Tower was a big fan of his. Of course I heard him on those fantastic records with Charles Mingus and Eric Dolphy. I studied with Jaki that first year in Boston. Then after I finished school and moved to New York and was working as a freelance pianist, he and I hung out a lot and I'd go out to his house for lessons in Hollis, Queens. We had a lot of fun together. What a genius!

Q: When did you start to compose (not counting your first experiments at the piano)?

A: I did some composition at school. Twelve-tone music was in vogue then, and I did it just like everyone else. I guess I always gravitated towards a more lyrical use of the idiom, closer to Dallapiccola, say, than Babbitt. An early Sonata for

Alto Sax and Piano tried to incorporate some jazz elements. Still, the system was dictating things too much and the music I wrote using that method always felt a little formal and stiff.

Through Jaki's influence I started writing more jazz inspired things. However, it wasn't until I met Lawrence Widdoes that I really began to compose. Larry taught me to hear music in my mind and then write that. "What are you hearing?" he asked me constantly. After months of this, one day after I responded to the question he said "Okay, now where's it going?" That became the question for the next several months. A wonderful teacher, a wonderful guy: I miss him. He was so funny. We used to laugh uncontrollably sometimes at the lessons.

Q: Do you still have any pieces that you notated in childhood?

A: Probably. I'm a pack rat when it comes to music! I recently came across something kooky from my teen years, an electronic Munchkin Funeral that I did using some early analog synthesizers and tape: Really fun stuff.

Q: How did your interest in improvisation mesh with your attraction to the classical repertoire?

A: For many years there was a real split between them, especially as the tonal languages were so separate. In recent years, through the intermediary of my composition work, they have grown closer. I don't play much classical music anymore, mostly just my own music (though I do play some Bach pretty much every day, and of course Chopin's Etudes). Lately I've been jamming off of works by Purcell, Monteverdi, Dowland. That's been an interesting hybridization. It feels right, musically right, and like it's healing something. It will be interesting to see how that process evolves.

Q: Coming forward in time from the composers you've just mentioned, you once recorded a Busoni CD for Music & Arts.

A: Busoni was such a towering figure for me, the range and scope of his interests and passions: piano virtuoso, composer, improviser, transcriber, arranger,

conductor, theorist, musical thinker. It is no accident that his Magnum Opus was Doktor Faust, for he was truly the Dr. Faust of music. I loved that he could accept and embrace conflicting tendencies within his own musical personality, performing Bach AND Liszt, for example, or the way he had such a deep relationship with the music of the past and was also so involved with the music of his own time (and the music of the future!).

I was very inspired by Busoni's book *The Essence of Music* and his thoughts on the inherent freedom of music, how it is most itself in improvisations, preludes, and transitional passages. And of course, above and beyond "The idea of Busoni" I loved his compositions. The *Elegies* came into my life at a time when I really needed them, spiritually. They were with me during the darkest period of my life, after the death of my parents. I felt like the music in these *Elegies* expressed so accurately the psychic conditions I was experiencing, and they brought me much consolation.

It meant a great deal to me when Hannah Busoni [Busoni's daughter-in-law] met me and loved my interpretations of Busoni's music so much. The day we first met, she gave me a portrait of Busoni, and wrote on the back of it "To Bruce Wolosoff, on the first day of a lifelong friendship." I would go to her apartment on West 56th street every few weeks or so to chat, about music, about life. She was a lovely lady.

Q: Let's talk about your recent CDs. Of the two, *Many Worlds* strikes me as a more diverse sample of your work, although hearing the entire recital reveals a common thread. I thought the Jaki Byard homage very effective, as it strongly evoked his musical personality and mannerisms—the strong attack (not that he couldn't play lyrically), the "bluesy" feel, the far-reaching imagination, and in the last piece, echoes of his stride left hand and his frequent use of off-kilter rhythmic accents, which made his playing so vivacious. Have I got it right?

A: Yes. The *Many Worlds* suite was conceived as a personal requiem for Jaki, my way of expressing my appreciation of him, communing with his spirit, and grieving his loss. Our teachers are always with us. "There are many worlds," Jaki

said to me when my mom died. Jaki is always with me. German Diez is always with me. Charlie Banacos is always with me. I talk to him every day.

Q: The CD includes a series of variations on Shenandoah , the beloved American folk song, in which you understandably concentrate on and develop the peaceful side of the song, although there are a few more forceful moments.

A: I love that melody. It has haunted me for years. Several of the variations are more “forceful,” but yes, the feeling throughout much of the work is consoling.

Q: Are American folk songs important to you? Do you identify with Copland, Ives, or other composers for whom “Americana” is an important component of their work?

A: Actually, I’m not all that interested in American folk song, unless we are going to expand that definition to include the Great American Songbook! Yes, I do hear a commonality that I share with other American composers who have “an American sound.” That is, when I’m not sounding French! Or Russian! Or Bruce-ian!

Q: The Celestial Ruby is the first piece on the program, and the exotic title piqued my curiosity. As to its form and content, I thought it surprising that you follow the calm, meditative opening with a sudden blues outburst. Then, having startled the listener with this unexpected juxtaposition, you cleverly unite the two seemingly disparate elements in a convincing synthesis.

A: That sums it up pretty well. As to the title, this work came out of a preoccupation I had for many years with alchemy and Hermeticism. The phrase “the celestial ruby” figures in some of those writings. Just looking for the Philosopher’s Stone, man! They talk a lot about different operations and procedures performed on a substance, the Prima Materia, or first matter, but they never tell you what that Prima Materia is. What if it was music? Sound?

Q: Moving on to the Four Blues for Piano, I’m guessing that these must owe something to your days as a rock or boogie-woogie pianist. The strong, bass-

heavy piano playing reminded me somewhat of Frederic Rzewski's Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues. However, in these pieces, at least, you don't employ the more "avant-garde" style of writing that one can hear in his The People United Will Never Be Defeated.

A: Yeah, I like Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues and those terrific Variations of Rzewski's very much. I'm not trying to be him. I'm just trying to be me.

I wrote those pieces after going through a period in which I was feeling stuck as a composer. I wasn't sure which direction to go in with my work. As fate would have it, I was on a ferryboat in a terrible lightning storm and who should be on the boat there with me but the great composer William Bolcom! Give me a sign, God! I got to talking with Bill and we became friends. In addition to being one of the great composers of our time, he's also a really terrific guy. I talked about what I was going through with him and he told me that John Cage had once said to him "Instead of thinking about what you're supposed to be doing, maybe just listen to what your organism feels like doing." "The only thing that matters is the fire," Bill added. "Just come from the fire." These were very potent words.

I went home and lived with that thought. A few days later I started collecting boogie-woogie recordings by some of the masters of the '30s, Meade Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson. I listened and I listened. After a while I started improvising and writing, finding my enthusiasm again, and my next batch of compositions were totally energized by that style. I'm talking about these Four Blues, the ballet score The Passions, and even Blues for the New Millennium.

Q: Your ballet A Light in the Dark was commissioned by actress/choreographer Ann Reinking, but it wasn't the first time you'd worked together.

A: I think you're talking about my earlier ballet with Annie, right? The story was something that Ann Reinking and her friend and collaborator Melissa Thodos came up with based on a book called The Devil in the White City . It's an amazing story and a totally amazing ballet. It's about a serial killer on the loose at the big Chicago Exposition in 1893.

Q: How did you and Ann Reinking meet?

A: I met Ann Reinking at a memorial service for our mutual friend, the actor Roy Scheider. She is a very special person, and I felt like we understood each other right away. I played something at that ceremony, and she really responded to my playing. Some time later, Roy's widow Brenda came over to my house for dinner and brought Annie with her. It happened to be on the same day that I received the first edits of the Songs without Words recording in the mail [Carpe Diem String Quartet: Naxos]. I mentioned that at dinner, and Annie said, "Can we hear some of them?" I put them on, and she was just totally transported by them. She kept wanting to hear more of them, and between them cried out: "I SEE DANCES! I AM SEEING DANCES TO THIS MUSIC!"

Q: Who suggested a ballet based on the life of Helen Keller?

A: They did. Definitely them! Annie, Melissa, and Gary Chryst: Completely their idea. I thought they were punking me when they first called me up to talk about it!

Q: Has the ballet been filmed?

A: I don't think so, but I understand someone was there with a camera. I think there will be a DVD at some point, but I haven't seen one yet.

Q: Your music for the ballet is often lyrical, "American pastoral," perhaps. Were you trying to evoke the earlier America in which Helen Keller came of age?

A: Yes, though I didn't realize it until a critic praised me for it!

Q: You've used a smallish chamber group for your piece. I'm reminded of Stravinsky, who deliberately wrote *Le Histoire du Soldat* for reduced forces so that it could be played more easily on tour: Any similar considerations on your part?

A: Yes. I also needed to be able to bring the recording in on budget! I get a real charge out of trying to make smaller groups seem like larger groups. There's been some discussion about possibly making a reduced version of the score for

two or three players for touring purposes.

Q: What was it like working with Ann Reinking?

A: Annie was just a dream to work with! She'd call me on the phone and the moment I heard her voice I'd grab a pen and paper because I knew I'd need to be taking notes. She told me what she was envisioning, what the mood was, the action, the development of the narrative, and she just had this incredible knack for putting me in the mood to compose! The moment I put down the phone I'd go over to the piano and start improvising and making a few sketches. I'd record things into the voice memo of my iPhone just to be able to recall the exact feeling. When the sketches were more fully developed I'd record a solo piano demo of the music and send it to Annie and Melissa. Sometimes there was a comment or two about some changes they wanted me to make, a section needing to be longer, or more buoyant. I'd revise and send them another scratch demo. We didn't get together to work in person until the piece was mostly written.

Q: I thought the music for the ballet was immediately attractive. No doubt it's enthusiastically received wherever it's performed.

A: Thank you! I'm very proud to have been a part of another great production with this creative team, and am very proud of this score.

Q: Your music is largely tonal, although not unadventurous at times and you don't seem compelled to pursue convoluted harmony or jagged "Expressionist" lines (or other forms of abstraction), let alone electronics or all the other "modern" trappings. I'm guessing you don't see the need to...

A: Oh, when the music calls for it, I'll go there! I'm trying to be honest, true to what my inner voice is guiding me to write. I've never been particularly interested in the latest trends, fads, or "isms."

I do a lot of experimentation at home with electronic sounds. They haven't really found their way into the public arena yet, but don't rule that out! It's an interesting expansion of the color palette, but I'm not giving up my Steinway anytime soon!

My very first works were electronic. In my apprentice years, my work flowed in two fairly distinct streams of thought (though you could often hear elements of one in the other). One was jazz inspired, and the other was “highly dissonant.” I underwent a lot of changes, a stripping away of “false selves” both spiritually and musically, to arrive at the musical language I am working in today.

Really, there is such resonance in octaves and fifths, and there is an elemental power to triads. We haven’t used them up yet, have we? I think there is magic in the modes. I’ve also come to believe in the primacy of lyricism and melody, and have lived long enough now that I am not ashamed and don’t feel too vulnerable or exposed if I open my heart and unleash a beautiful and simply stated tune.

As for the composers working in other styles that you allude to, I’m glad someone is doing that so I can just write what I write without having to worry about writing what they write too!

Q: Recent years have seen a flourishing of what’s become known as a neoromantic sensibility. Do you feel any affinity with that approach?

A: Zero. I just want to hear honest music and write honest music. Now, that said, having grown up playing romantic piano music a zillion hours a day, it is no huge surprise that a lot of romanticism comes out in my writing and people call it “romantic.” I’m just trying to come from my musical truth.

Q: Perhaps it’s your popular interests that persuade you not to stray too far from your “roots?”

A: I’m reminded of what Stravinsky wrote in *Poetics of Music* about music not straying too far from the song or from the dance. I’m also reminded of a story told by a contemporary of mine, an American, who went to Europe to study with Ligeti. Ligeti exhorted him to return to America and find his inspiration in American sources, which he thought were so incredibly rich.

Q: You once made a comment about your 18 Songs without Words that I find quite amusing, something along the lines of, “Imagine my joy to learn I’ve written

music that my friends can enjoy.” There’s a lot hidden “behind the scenes” in such a remark—Would you like to elaborate? What does this say about contemporary music, its reception, and its place in our culture?

A: I’m glad you got the joke! Some reviewers at the time didn’t realize that was a tongue-in-cheek remark. Yes, modern composers for many years were writing for highly specialized audiences (or no audiences at all!). I think times have changed significantly though, both for the audiences and for composers too. We are living in a very eclectic musical age. Hybridization is everywhere, man!

Q: I’ve heard that you’re writing a cello concerto for Sara Sant’Ambrogio, the Eroica Trio’s cellist.

A: The pianist of the Eroica Trio, Erika Nickrenz, is a very old friend of mine (though I am much older). She was a student of German Diez and was a child prodigy. I remember going with German to hear Erika play a Mozart Concerto at Town Hall when she was 11. Erika’s mother, Joanna Nickrenz, was, as you probably know, a great recording engineer, and I worked with her and Marc Aubort on several projects, including my Busoni recording. We became really good friends. I ran into Erika a few years ago after not having seen her in a while and it just felt natural for me to write something for the Trio. I wrote a piece, Tantric Scherzo, and they played it so beautifully. While working on this with them I developed a great rapport with Sara Sant’Ambrogio, who is just a phenomenal cellist. There are plans in the works now for more music for the Eroica Trio, and, as you’ve said, a concerto for Sara. It’s all very exciting.