CHAPTER I

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Arnold Rosner developed the foundations of his own musical style prior to receiving any formal instruction in composition. Born 8 November 1945 in New York City, he was a prodigious youth with a remarkable gift for music and mathematics, graduating from Bronx High School of Science at the age of fifteen. Although neither of his parents had any formal training in music, they enjoyed a casual appreciation of it, and encouraged him to undertake piano studies. He took private instruction in piano from the age of nine until he was thirteen.

His early musical experiences proved to be formative. Even before private study began, he was frequently experimenting with sound combinations on the piano in his home, finding himself drawn mostly to the familiar elements of vertical construction, and exploring the possible connections between various chords. In a 1991 interview he recalled, “During the second week of piano lessons, I discovered the fantastic sound of major/minor effects [e.g., E–C–E♭–C]. I showed my piano teacher and she reacted as if

they were something illicit or immoral. Of course that gave me all the more reason to fool around with them, and I'm still using them in my pieces."[1] Many of Rosner's earliest formal compositions are small keyboard works, of which he composed eight between the years 1956 and 1961. By the time he enrolled at New York University in 1961, he had also composed two symphonies, an orchestral tone poem, and an oratorio.

At the age of nineteen, Rosner graduated *cum laude* from New York University with the B.A. in Mathematics, where he also majored and earned highest honors in music. This pursuit of a dual major did not reflect indecision on the composer's part: He refers to the mathematics degree as "a lark right from the beginning. By the time I got to college…I knew [composition was] what I really wanted to do. But I was doubtful that academic musical training was going to do anything for me."[2] He received a National Science Foundation Fellowship in 1966/67, enrolling at the prestigious Belfer Graduate School of Science of Yeshiva University, where he undertook studies in Set Theory and Mathematical Logic. By the time he formally undertook music composition study at the age of twenty, in the graduate program at the State University of New York at Buffalo,

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[1] Walter Simmons, "An Interview with Arnold Rosner," *Fanfare* 14:5 (May/June 1991), 416. Bracketed text appears in the source.

[2] Ibid.

his output included four symphonies, two concertos, and two dozen chamber, choral and keyboard works.

It was at SUNY where Rosner first underwent a major stylistic change. In the composer's own words:

> My earliest compositions were most strongly influenced by the Romantics. In my 'teens I had already written four symphonies clearly in the Dvorak–Mahler–Shostakovich lineage. By 1967, two distinct forces brought about at least a temporary change. The first was the simple fact that virtually none of my works had been performed and that my full orchestral scores seemed relegated to permanent obscurity. The second was the study, at the graduate level, of Renaissance music in general and the works of Josquin des Pres in particular.[3]

While frustration over unperformed symphonies is universal to almost all young composers who have written them, certainly the New York scene in the 1960's was not an encouraging environment for a composer who had little inclination toward serialism, minimalism, or electronic music.[4] As Nicholas Tawa relates, "The novice was admitted to probationary membership in the avant-garde so long as he was willing to study 'the secret code of an exclusive fraternity,' as one outside observer expressed it. 'To gain acceptance

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[3] Arnold Rosner, liner notes to *Music by Arnold Rosner* (Laurel Records LR-849CD, 1989).

[4] In a correspondence to the author dated 4/29/97, Rosner remarked about awaiting feedback on scores he had sent to a conductor: "Do you realize how many man-hours of waiting time I have spent—and that any composer would have spent—just waiting for people to respond to things?" The statistics suggest that much of the waiting has not been in vain; eighty percent of Rosner's works have received public performances, and fifteen percent are currently available on CD.

in the rarified circles of the musical elite, he must claim to see the Emperor's new clothes.'"[5] That Rosner was more influenced by his own studies in music history than his private tutelage in composition is of no surprise to those who know his music. Liner and program notes often repeat Rosner's statement regarding his study with Leo Smit, Henri Pousseur, Allan Sapp, and Lejaren Hiller, calling them a group from whom "I learned practically nothing."[6]

Rosner's path through graduate music education remained rocky. His principal advisor in the doctoral program in composition, Lejaren Hiller, was a chemist and composer who had studied composition at Princeton University with Roger Sessions and Milton Babbitt. Hiller is best known for his *Illiac Suite*,[7] a computer-generated work for string quartet written during his graduate study at University of Illinois. For Rosner, the compositional philosophies of teacher and student clearly were on entirely different planes, and he found that his own work was frequently met with deliberate indifference. In 1970, after suffering his graduate committee's rejection of a substantial work for orchestra and chorus which he had composed as a doctoral thesis,[8] Rosner made the

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[5] Nicholas Tawa, *A Most Wondrous Babble* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Inc. 1987), 39. Tawa quotes Christine A. Murrow, "The 'New Music': A Reply," *American Music Teacher* (January 1983): 49.

[6] Arnold Rosner, liner notes to *Chamber Music of Arnold Rosner, Vol. II* (Albany Records Troy210, 1996).

[7] The peculiar spelling is correct. The word "Illiac" is a combined abbreviation of "Illinois

decision to switch to the doctoral theory program, retroactively collecting his M.A. in Composition. His doctoral dissertation was *An Analytical Survey of the Music of Alan Hovhaness,* and in 1972 Arnold Rosner received the first Ph.D. in Music awarded by SUNY Buffalo.[9]

Rosner's resistance against the forces of serial and avant-garde composition in the 1960's is even more curious in view of his remarkable mathematical and theoretical skills. A formidable duplicate bridge player, he is a former director and teacher at the Bridge Center of Brooklyn, a winner of several regional tournaments, and has received mention in *The New York Times* bridge column.[10] He also dabbles in the somewhat esoteric investment practice of selling covered stock options, and had a letter published in *Barron's Financial*. His unpublished article proposing a system of analysis for non-tonal and non-atonal music, based on measuring intervallic distances from a prescribed pitch center, is compelling.[11] Yet despite these skills, Rosner has never chosen to compose

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Accumulator," the name of the computer on which the piece was generated.

[8] Op. 45, *Perchance to Dream*.

[9] Rosner subsequently contributed the article on Hovhaness in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* 6th ed.

[10] Alan Truscott, "Bridge," *The New York Times,* 16 September 1980.

[11] Arnold Rosner, "Valence Theory: A Methodology for Neo-Tonal Music" (paper submitted to Society for Music Theory, 1991), in the possession of the author. The approach assigns integer values, called "valences," according to the distance in perfect fifths from a central pitch. Chords are identified by the average of these valences, and observations of progressions are viewed according to the degree of "remoteness" between the chords. The Society has invited Rosner to submit an enlarged, in-depth discussion of this methodology.

music for non-traditional instruments, nor to work out a dodecaphonic matrix before setting pen to staff paper.[12]

Schwartz and Godfrey observe that "there was a growing feeling [in the 1960s] that the outer trappings of originality (dissonance, complexity, experimental instrumentation, etc.) had ironically become predictable."[13] The resurgence of musical conservativism which has taken place in the past few decades seems paradoxically to place composers such as Rosner in a vanguard of American musical style. Nonetheless, his devotion to his own style, coupled with a distinct aversion to playing the games of academic politics, has kept a prestigious university appointment beyond Rosner's grasp.

Rosner exemplifies the composite career of a diversely talented musician. He has taught at several colleges in the Northeast and Canada. He was Music Director of WNYU-FM radio during his entire four years at New York University, and from 1970 to 1972 he was an assistant Music Director of WNYC-FM, one of New York's top radio stations. A capable conductor and pianist, he has participated in both roles in performances of his own compositions. His miscellaneous credits also include arranging and conducting music for a 1989 documentary film, *Łodz Ghetto*; composing and

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[12] There are a few works in which Rosner uses a 12-note "row" (including op. 94, discussed below), but none of these employ serial procedures to generate further material beyond the melodic statement.

[13] Elliott Schwartz and Daniel Godfrey, *Music Since 1945: Materials, Issues, and Literature* (New York: Schirmer books, 1993), 263.

programming for educational multimedia materials; and articles published in *Music Educator's Journal* and the *Journal of the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society*.

He currently resides in Brooklyn, New York, where he is an assistant professor of music at Kingsborough Community College, which is part of the City University of New York. He teaches courses in opera, world music, music appreciation, and theory, which allows him to share with students his outstanding musicological intellect, but neither school offers formal courses in the study of composition.

Despite receiving seven awards from the American Society of Composers And Publishers, and being a five-time recipient of Meet the Composer grants, Rosner readily admits frustration over his struggle to achieve higher visibility with the musical public. When he discusses the composer's experience or the state of art music in society today, Rosner's words betrays a certain weariness typical of the unjustly neglected composer of today. In a 1993 radio interview, when asked "Tell me the joys and sorrows of being a composer as we head out of the twentieth century," Rosner replied, "Well, I think that the sorrows outnumber the joys, probably."[14] When asked what advice he would give to an aspiring composition student, his response has been that he would discourage them from pursuing composition as a career path. Although such a realistic and pragmatic viewpoint

[14] Arnold Rosner, interview by Bruce Duffie, WNIB–FM, Chicago, 5 November 1995.

is understandable, it is fortunate that whatever negativity may exist in Rosner's outlook does not come across in his music.

During the height of Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone style, he wrote, "I believe that a real composer writes music for no other reason than that it pleases him. Those who compose because they want to please others, and have audiences in mind, are not real artists…They are merely more or less skilful entertainers who would renounce composing if they could not find listeners."[15] The notion of writing from the heart or from the brain has been one of the central issues dividing composers and consumers of music alike for most of the present century. Although his music reveals a commanding knowledge of musical history, theory, and compositional practice, Arnold Rosner stands nonetheless as a figure who has remained firmly committed to writing from his heart.

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[15] Arnold Schoenberg, "Heart and Brain in Music (1946)," in *Style and Idea: Selected writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1975; revised paperback edition, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 54.