

Andrew Shapiro – Future Classical

by Mark Prendergast

Mark Prendergast is the author of *The Ambient Century: From Mahler to Moby, The Evolution of Sound in the Electronic Age*. Copyright © 2013-2017 by Mark Prendergast, London.

THE MUSIC OF ANDREW SHAPIRO draws a fine line from the pellucid piano forms of Erik Satie through the electronic compositions of Jean-Michel Jarre to the thought-provoking sculptures of Richard Serra. His love of the Cocteau Twins and their unique musical style informs a sensibility that goes way beyond cliché. Ostensibly a Minimalist and directly influenced by the work of such New York downtown giants as Philip Glass and producer Michael Riesman, Shapiro has nevertheless carved a unique place in 21st-Century Ambient music. He has achieved this not only through his unique recordings on his own Airbox label. His piano piece *Mint Green* (now an Ambient classic with over 6.9 million plays on Pandora) shows that his position also derives from his devotion to his soft-pedaled piano playing style. Performances of these exquisitely cloudy piano miniatures have been heard from Brooklyn and as far away as the European continent. With his 2016 album *Pink Jean Mint Green*, Shapiro also demonstrated a mastery of contemporary synthpop with a plaintive vocal style and a unique collaboration with English writer Neil Gaiman.

Andrew Shapiro (b. 1975, New York City) grew up in Larchmont, New York, a village twenty miles northeast of midtown Manhattan. Shapiro's parents were not remotely musical—his father an attorney and his mother a schoolteacher. An early childhood memory puts him on a beach on the Long Island Sound with his mother who bumped into a friend who suggested a recorder class in the neighbouring town of Scarsdale. A natural, he soon graduated to the clarinet. So talented was he that on leaving high school he passed several band auditions and performed in an honor group with students drawn from 13 different states. After that he attended Emory University in Atlanta for two years where he combined the clarinet with courses in Economics and Maths. According to Shapiro, "I was just feeling my way in music. Then a new teacher—a composer named John Anthony Lennon—arrived and things really started to develop." By the autumn of 1995, Shapiro had primed for a full-time musical career and enrolled at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio. "I spent three years studying composition at Oberlin, which, on one hand, was inspiring because, for instance, there was a teacher there who had studied and worked for Arnold Schoenberg. So that was a cool energy to be around. But, on the other hand, and I know I'm not alone when I say this, the composition teachers seemed to have a phenomenal ability to crush the spirits of the students. It seemed like nothing anyone ever wrote was good enough or academic enough or advanced enough or sophisticated enough or "interesting" enough. And that messed my brain up for a pretty long time. But on balance, Oberlin was an incredible place because the

students were amazing and the opportunity to forge interdisciplinary artistic collaborations was unparalleled."

Though aware of the music of such American composers as John Cage, Morton Subotnick and Morton Feldman, Shapiro's real inspiration is American Minimal music, a truly American art form that revolutionized compositional technique in the 1960s and 1970s. At Shapiro's Conservatory, the old mainstay of 12-Tone or Serial or some other sort of strict system-based composition was still the standard. But one thing he remembers learning was about when John Cage went to Darmstadt. "He blew everybody away by saying, in effect, 'What you can do with your complexity and rigidity, I can do with my simplicity.'"

Of course, it would be simplistic to suggest that Shapiro had an easy entry into the world of Minimalism and Ambience. "The reasons why I liked Terry Riley's *A Rainbow In Curved Air*, for example, were basically twofold. First, there was a way into this music for a non-musician—people I knew I wanted to reach. And secondly, it was a musical language that was totally new to me. Growing up as a clarinetist, I played in orchestras and wind ensembles and chamber groups, and, in private studies, I experienced the major genres of classical music—Stravinsky's Primitivism, Brahms's Romanticism and of course Mozart's Clarinet Concerto. And I played saxophone too, which led to session work, jazz combos, big bands, pit orchestras, and pop/rock and funk bands. So by the time I got to music school I was pretty well-versed in a variety of different styles. But Minimalism, this was a completely fresh and new and exciting thing for me."

Before Shapiro graduated from the Oberlin Conservatory he was beginning to embrace the multifaceted music and career of Philip Glass. "There was an Oberlin alum, a composer who had worked at Philip's Looking Glass Studios in downtown Manhattan. And he gave me the idea to get myself in the door there. So in January 1998 I started what ended up being a rather brief internship. But it didn't take long for my life to change. It changed the minute I walked in the door. The buzz of success was flying all over the place. Philip's score for Martin Scorsese's film *Kundun* was up for an Academy Award, he was writing and recording music for the Jim Carrey film *The Truman Show*, he was on the cover of the *Village Voice*, and so on."

Shapiro's pivotal meeting with Philip Glass would occur during rehearsals for *Monsters of Grace*, the multimedia opera by Glass and Robert Wilson. "Michael Riesman, Philip's music director, and I became friends, and he invited me to hang out and see what was going on. And when I met Philip I asked if he ever gave lessons! So over the next year or so I went over to his house a few times and showed him some stuff I had written. But what was more

valuable was when we sat at the piano together and he explained his way of discovering astonishingly fresh and wonderful chord changes. He said, 'If you've got interesting harmonies you can do your figurations any way you want.' And that had a great effect on me. His chord changes are full of breathtaking flexibility and complexity where he's so fluent at toggling chord changes around and making it seem so accessible."

"Philip paved the way for someone to get out of that sort of music school composer mentality. Brian Eno too showed you could achieve high art with popular music underpinnings. You could have that simultaneity that certainly didn't exist in conservatory. I thought about making a push to work myself into a music assistant job at the Looking Glass, but then I thought if I was ever going to develop as a composer the way I wanted to I'd have to start from scratch and build my own thing piece by piece. So I moved out to San Francisco for a couple of years and started writing and recording my early songs."

Upon returning to New York, Shapiro began releasing recordings on his own Airbox label in 2003. Initially EPs of songs and instrumentals, these precise compositions were of short duration and bridged the gap between Classical structure and Minimalist Ambience. And in 2004, Shapiro decided to follow in Erik Satie's footsteps. The famous Arcueil, Paris resident and inventor of Ambient music had regularly played piano in Parisian bars and restaurants for the populace. Likewise, after reading in a magazine that there was a McDonald's fast-food restaurant in downtown Manhattan with a grand piano, Shapiro would end up playing his compositions there publicly every Sunday. By 2005 he was the toast of the town with features in the *New York Times* and *The Village Voice* and, in 2010, he gave a TED Talk entitled "Casual Compositions" about his fusion of art music and fast-food culture.

American Minimalism as a visual art form would also play a role as a major influence, particularly the photorealism of Chuck Close and the giant steel sculptures of Richard Serra. In 1979, Serra was commissioned by the American government to make a large-scale work for the courtyard outside of the Federal Plaza building in downtown Manhattan. What he came up with, *Tilted Arc* (1981), (a 120-foot-long steel plate bisecting the courtyard diagonally, dwarfing humans, and, like all Serra's work, sitting in a space between fragile danger and tensile strength) seemed the last straw for a public fed up with high conceptual art. Against Serra's wishes, the piece was dismantled and destroyed in 1989. For Shapiro's first EP *Invisible Days*, (2003) Shapiro wrote the song *Richard Serra* as a tribute to Serra's ordeal and also as an homage to Shapiro's heroes, New York visual and musical artists of Serra's generation, Close, Riesman and Glass among them.

Another influence on Shapiro's trajectory was the French electronic composer Jean-Michel Jarre. "In the summer of 1990 I was 14 and in Paris studying French. On Bastille Day, Jarre performed a concert at La Défense in front of something like two million people. I remember thinking, 'What the hell is this music?' I had never heard anything like it, yet it's ridiculously popular here. The only parallel I could think of was something like Simon and Garfunkel in Central Park. Michel Geiss, Jarre's sound designer, instrument builder and synth player played in the group too. I never thought I'd actually meet someone who

played in that concert, but when I played a piano recital in Paris, Michel came to the concert via a mutual friend. And afterwards over dinner he gave me the idea to make a piano album."

The long road to realization would finally reach perfection on the piano album *Numbers, Colors & People* (2009). It captured perfectly a new take on American Minimal music. A strain of melancholia could be heard between the notes in a post-9/11 world, but the sheer optimism and beauty, underpinned by a marvelous clarity of conception and simplicity of execution, meant Shapiro had arrived at a new American aesthetic, one that looked backwards with fondness and respect but was ever present and moving forward. Shapiro maintains that what informed the album most was the combination of Geiss and Riesman. "Michel really encouraged me, so when I got back to New York I called Michael and he agreed to produce it. I could not have imagined anyone better to work with. The moment when we started the session –between Michael saying 'Take One' and me starting to play– was a moment where a huge dream had come true."

The album's standout track *Mint Green* would go on to define Shapiro's early career. This six-minute jewel in its nature is furtive, an arcing, pacey piano solo which rises and falls delicately, its melody slowly emerging from a Debussy-like haze of almost-hesitancy. No matter how many times it's heard you have to return to its cascading style. *Mint Green* would go on to garner nearly seven million plays on Pandora Internet Radio and become a regular soundtrack on American television. "Writing *Mint Green* was very Cocteau Twins-inspired. There's a sharp 11th (G#) over a sort of D major and A major polytonality that gives it its liftoff. If there's a sharp 11th it can sometimes become a very Cocteau Twins-esque type of thing. I love it."

Listening guide to Andrew Shapiro

Not surprisingly, Andrew Shapiro began his recording career with music having its antecedents in the works of Philip Glass, namely the vocal song albums *Songs From Liquid Days* (1986) and *Hydrogen Jukebox* (1990). While living in a San Francisco art gallery in 2000, Shapiro began working on his first album, the EP *Invisible Days* (2003), on a Yamaha EX5 Synthesizer. *Invisible Days* introduced Shapiro to the world as a very cool sound designer of vocal music. Aided by the airy vocals of Keisha Hutchins and Peter Hess's flute, the results are four pieces of sonic precision effortlessly marrying American Minimalism with a neo-'80s New Wave synth sensibility. Even Richard Serra gets a tribute in song and sound. Further experiments with synthesis, MIDI and sequencers produced *Quiet Kissing* (2006), another EP, recorded in Los Angeles and Brooklyn. Divided equally between instrumental and vocal tracks the EP begins where *Invisible Days* left off with a gently percussive song which then moves into Ambient territory with two instrumentals, the shimmering *Quick* and the real meat of the project *Quiet Kissing*, a solo piano piece which seems to hang in space, its beautiful logic unfolding like a water lily gliding on water.

In 2008 during a European tour Shapiro met

Michel Geiss in Paris, who suggested a piano album. The 2009 album *Numbers, Colors And People* (recorded in one day at Philip Glass's studio) was all instrumental piano with a soft-pedal style that would become his trademark. A truly Ambient work, it showed how far American Ambient had come since the days of La Monte Young or Windham Hill's George Winston. While neither avant-garde or soporific, the music has all the richness of Debussy and Satie coupled with the crystal clear production of Michael Riesman and mastering of Michel Geiss. Not only is it the place to start with Shapiro's oeuvre, it also contains the classic tracks *Quiet Kissing* and *Mint Green*. The latter's astonishing success on the Internet and as theme music belies its origins. In fact, *Mint Green* was directly inspired by the Cocteau Twins's track *My Truth* from their 1993 album *Four-Calendar Café*.

Soundesign (Expanded Edition) (2011) is a collection of early synthesizer pieces from his San Francisco days coupled with four new pieces including vocal compositions. Inspired by playing the Exit Festival in Serbia, Shapiro stayed on for two weeks and immersed himself in the Balkan culture, resulting in the album's standout track *Sarajevo*, a new version of *Mint Green* put in a sequencer and reimaged.

Possibly Shapiro's most idiosyncratic recording is *100 Houses: Gatsby Meets Caulfield* (2012), a full vocal album of songs based upon the literary masterpieces *The Great Gatsby* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. After leaving conservatory, Shapiro reread both novels consecutively once a year for several years and, taking a leaf from both William Burroughs and David Bowie, highlighted words and phrases, put them in a word processor and jumbled them up to form lyrics. According to Shapiro, "The idea was to imagine if Jay Gatsby met Holden Caulfield and had a talk about how they'd do things differently if they had a chance to do them all over again." An interesting experiment recorded in San Francisco, Shapiro's vocal style is too limited to hold an entire album, especially a concept album of such ambition. Interesting though for its beautiful instrumental piano coda *Rejected Film Theme* which pays homage to the still music of Arvo Pärt.

Far superior is his second 2012 release *Intimate Casual*, an album of hazy piano instrumentals that took two years to write. Eschewing fancy studios with fancy pianos, Shapiro opted to record at his Brooklyn home using his Suzuki upright piano. It incorporates a mute damping pedal that enhances the gossamer feel of its ten beautiful tracks. Possibly one of the finest Ambient piano albums ever recorded, the album also includes Shapiro's cover of *Energy Flow*, the famous solo piano piece by fellow New York resident Ryuichi Sakamoto. Response to this beautiful album was universally positive and demonstrated that Impressionistic Ambience, far from being something from the 19th century, continued to thrive in the 21st.

A six-track collection *Singles* EP (2013) contained three new vocal tracks. *Andrew Andrew* (a tribute to Shapiro's friends, the New York-based performance artists) is memorable for its soft percussive keyboards and soulful horns. *The Giveaway*, with lyrics by John Mayer glistens, and *Kim Dreaming* evokes a soundscape redolent of Manchester's Durutti Column.

The High Line & Other Places (2015) is one of Shapiro's most outstanding achievements. Its main arc is

the tri-part *High Line* violin sonata where renowned violinist Gregory Fulkerson gives the music an almost American folk feel. The title comes from an elevated park (formerly train tracks) on the West Side of Manhattan where Shapiro once worked as a park ranger. This exquisite chamber music gives way to *Three Piano Pieces*, written in a more cascading Minimalist style and performed by Australian pianist Andrew Chubb. The album ends with *Orange*, a tri-part electronic/synthesizer piece oozing the character of Indonesian percussive Gamelan music.

Pink Jean Mint Green (2016), is a proper synthpop album in the classic mold of Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark fused with the more contemporary electronic sounds of Air and Daft Punk. Produced by Grammy-winner Mario McNulty (of David Bowie fame), the album also features drummer Sterling Campbell, another Bowie alumnus who also played with Duran Duran and Cyndi Lauper. A lovely plaintiveness is found, particularly in the opening track, *Lauren Hynde*, which tells the story of Shapiro's imagined relationship with a character in novels by Bret Easton Ellis. The final track *Bash Street Worlds*, co-written with English fantasy author Neil Gaiman, is a real belter. Beginning like OMD's classic 1980 song *Enola Gay*, the song floats along before ending with a surprising coda— a clarinet trio written in homage to the one Philip Glass wrote for the end of Paul Simon's song *The Late Great Johnny Ace*.

Though his famous McDonald's residency drew to a close in 2013 —following a renovation the piano was removed— Shapiro returned to his solo piano style with *Piano 3* (2016). The opening track, the Cocteau Twins-inspired *Royal Purple*, conveys a rich serenity and an almost stillness in Ambient calm which pervades the album. The 14 pieces include new compositions alongside some of Shapiro's favorites from his catalog of music written for theater and film. Another jewel in Shapiro's rich chest of music, Shapiro's varied output confirms Pete Namlook's wonderful late-20th-century prophecy that "Ambient will be the Classical music of the future."