

Looking Back: Joseph Schwantner's Chicago Connection And a Look at His Recent Flute Works

by
Cynthia Folio

In the last issue of *Pipeline* (Summer, 2009, Vol. XII, Issue 4) Laura Barron contributed an enlightening article about the process of commissioning a composition in memory of the great flutist and teacher, Samuel Baron. She described how a consortium of Baron's former students chose Joseph Schwantner as the composer. The result of this process, a new piece called *Looking Back*, was premiered at the National Flute Association convention in New York City on August 15th. Flutist Alexa Still and pianist Stephen Gosling presented a brilliant performance to a large and enthusiastic audience.

Months before this premiere, Sherry Kujala asked me if I would write a sequel to Laura's article because of my close association with the composer. Just as Laura was a student of Baron, I was a student of Schwantner, and I have admired and written about his music for a long time. This article is in two parts, both of which involve "looking back." The first part will highlight Schwantner's early years growing up in Chicago, and it is based primarily on my interview with the composer.¹ The second part will discuss the newly-commissioned work in the context of Schwantner's other flute music.

Part I: Looking Back at Schwantner's Chicago Experience

One of the overarching themes in our interview was that the support systems that Schwantner had as a child, growing up in Chicago—family, teachers, schools, music professionals—were of vital importance in his development as a musician. He was born in Chicago, but when he was young, his family moved to the south suburbs, where he studied the guitar with "this incredible teacher named Robert Stein." One can only get a glimpse of how amazing this teacher was from Schwantner's anecdotes:

...I would come to my lesson ... and I'd have these assignments that he would give me and I would never play the damn things the way they were written. I would add a filigree, and add some other parts to it, so every time he wanted me to play, it had this kind of elaboration to it [he laughs].

I was a young kid and he was very accommodating for a while, and finally he said, "Look, I really want you to play exactly what's on the page, OK? If you want to do this other thing that you seem to want to do all the time, that's fine ... we'll try to adjust that." And so the next week I didn't practice any of the studies that he had given me, but I came with ... I had written three pieces for him.

And he was great. We started to talk about harmony and melody and all that. Then the other thing that was a part of the equation was that my parents had a very extensive

78 rpm record collection, of all kinds of music—of classical symphonies, of ... I don't know where my father got a whole collection of Django Rinehart, Hot Club of France. Django Rinehart was this fantastic French guitarist—gypsy guitarist from the 30's and 40's. And I listened to those ... I wore out the records listening to that music. So it was an incredibly eclectic body of music that I would listen to. So one day at my lesson I said to my teacher, "I've been listening to the Dvorak: New World Symphony [he laughs], and I would really love to be able to play that on the guitar." So the next week—it was unbelievable—he came and he had arranged all the major themes from the [New World Symphony].

He was extraordinary. When I think about it now, many years later, what he did to kind of encourage this young goofy kid ... at the end of the day, as soon as my lesson was over, all I could think about is my next lesson the next week. That's how exciting it was. And I absolutely am convinced that that's why I'm a professional musician—because of that early, unabashed support, unencumbered with—no matter how difficult I could be sometimes, and even opinionated in what I wanted to do—he was always very supportive. And I never forgot that, actually, and it's always been a part of my thinking, as a teacher.

These anecdotes also give us a glimpse into Schwantner as a composer, in that he always wanted to be creative and to push himself beyond the limits of what was expected. He is clearly eternally grateful for the support he received from his parents. Again, here are some of his recollections:

When I think about support systems, I had that all my life. Before I could drive, when I was like 15 years old, I used to play in a band that played in bars, OK? And my mother used to drive me to the job and would sit there all night, in the bar, while I played.

I remember one time my mother took me down to see Segovia at Orchestra Hall in Chicago. It's a wonderful concert hall for the Chicago Symphony. We were in the cheap seats, absolutely all the way in the back. ... and I was kind of a little kid, and he came out on stage—I'll never forget this—he was already an old man ... and he came out, and he sat down. [pause] And you know how audiences are at the beginning of a concert, they're fidgeting around, reading their program notes, eating candy, and all the rest of that. And he just sat there, and he just looked at them, never said a word, and I think that it was probably only maybe three, or maybe four minutes at the most. It seemed like an hour. And I said to my mother, "What's going on? When's he going to start playing?" Well what he was doing, of course, and I only understood later was, he was staring the audience down, understanding with an acoustic instrument, how

could he possibly compete with all the racket? It's a reason the orchestra starts with an overture, right? To settle the audience down. So he just intimidated them. And all of a sudden, there was just this kind of extraordinary moment, where all the oxygen was sucked out of the hall. ... in other words, the audience finally got it, right? They just got it. ... he had a series of 20-minute sets. He would play 20 minutes and then he would run off and, I guess, get a drink or something.

When he would come back on, as soon as he sat down, the audience would "rrrrroop" like that [making a gesture with his hands]. And later I thought, "Wow, what power that he held, without ever uttering a word. And it was pretty extraordinary, right? And you know what? You could hear every articulation, even though we were way the hell back in the hall. It was quite amazing. And that always stuck with me—about the power of music making. And I couldn't articulate it at the time—obviously I was a kid. But it really stuck with me about the issue of, not only making music, which was always what I wanted to do, but the power of performance, and how really spellbinding and engaging that process can be, with an audience.

Schwantner described his high school experience as "the closest thing to a music major that you could get." The following are some stories from his high school years, which also explain his shift in focus from performance to composition.

... well, I got very interested in jazz ... I was interested in a broad spectrum of composers, including George Gershwin and Anton Webern. For some reason my high school had scores of Webern! And I would study them. And I was the first kid on my block to write a 12-tone jazz arrangement. And I was very heavily involved with jazz, and, at the time, it's just the fate of the gods, I guess, I was in the jazz ensemble, and the lead arranger from the WGN Orchestra—back in the 50's, large radio stations like the one in New York and in Chicago, they actually had orchestras—and this fellow, our teacher, was the lead arranger. And so he would come to the school, not with student arrangements, but with professional arrangements. So the bar was very high, and he didn't take any you know what from the students at all. If they couldn't play, they were out of there. So we had an ensemble that really could play and we won all of our—even back then there were state competitions for that. And I won an award to the Stan Kenton National Stage Band Camp as an arranger, because I was very interested in writing for the stage band ... so I was thinking about becoming a jazz musician—jazz guitarist, and composer and arranger. But then I realized that I really want to write music more than I want to play music.

The other thing was, the musicians that I played with, were fairly mainstream. And I was very interested in free jazz—what was known then as free jazz—and people like Ornette Coleman, and Yusef Lateef.

The final stage in his musical and academic training were at the Chicago Conservatory and Northwestern University. Although he did not speak specifically about these

schools in the interview, he discussed some of the events that were turning points in his compositional career around this time:

And then ... professionally what happened was, I won a series of these BMI student composers awards, three of them in every year. And there was a group in New York at the time called The Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, Arthur Weisberg [conductor]. Well, they picked up this piece of mine, for sax and chamber ensemble, and they proceeded to play it everywhere, and record it, and take it all over the world, and that led to a kind of ongoing relationship with them, and meeting a lot of musicians from New York. I was a kid from Chicago. I knew who these guys were, but I didn't know them personally. So, things like that happen that are kind of out of your control, but you're smart enough to take advantage of it when opportunities arise.

Part II: An Analysis of *Looking Back*

The title, *Looking Back*, clearly makes reference to the fond recollections of Baron's students. Schwantner mentions this in his program notes, which are included in the published score. At what I believe to be the dramatic apex of the three-movement piece (the middle movement) the flutist is asked to chant *ricordando* ("remembering") "in a ghostly manner" across the embouchure hole—a haunting illusion to the memory of this monumental musician.

But the title has another, more practical meaning for the composer. In his program notes to *Looking Back* (for flute and piano), he writes, "Often when beginning a new project, I start by 'looking back' at my earlier music, in this instance, my previous flute pieces. They include: (1) *Modus Caelestis* (1972) 12 flutes, 12 strings, keyboards and percussion, (2) *Canticle of the Evening Bells* (1976) flute and chamber ensemble, (3) *Black Anemones* (1980) flute and piano, (4) *Soaring*, (1986) flute and piano,



JOSEPH SCHWANTNER and CYNTHIA FOLIO at the convention of the National Flute Association in New York, August 15, 2009.

(5) *A Play of Shadows* (1990) flute and chamber orchestra and (6) *Silver Halo* (2007) flute quartet. Revisiting these pieces became a fruitful catalyst for new ideas as I reconsidered the sonic worlds they inhabit.” Later in the same program notes, he states that the middle movement engages “a variety of musical elements from my earlier flute pieces.”

So, how might we describe these “sonic worlds”? And what are the musical elements to which he refers? When I asked him about this in the interview, he said that the musical elements are largely motivic; that is, he borrowed melodic fragments from previous flute works and developed them in this piece. But when I asked him about the more gestural aspects of his flute writing, he emphasized the brilliant virtuosity, the agility, and the energy that flutists are able to bring to a performance, including a common desire to show off their technical skill. Most of Schwantner’s music is virtuosic, but, in my opinion, *Looking Back* is one of the most challenging works in his chamber music repertoire. When asked about the difficulty of this work, he responded:

...Here’s what I like—and maybe as a composer and as a performer, you too appreciate it. There is something to be said for just being on the verge of losing it, right? ... and really good players—they kind of embrace that sometimes, and really go for the jugular!

He describes his flute writing even more eloquently in his program notes to *Silver Halo*: “I find the flute’s mercurial voice, its extraordinary dynamic, expressive and technical prowess, endlessly compelling.” I would add that he manages to explore the whole gamut of possible moods with the flute—from explosive and energetic (e.g. the opening of *A Play of Shadows*) to dreamlike (e.g. the end of

the same work, in which the flute literally “floats” over a 5-minute pedal tone in the low instruments. He can be aggressive (e.g. the “spit attacks” in the 2nd movement of *Looking Back*) to haunting (e.g. the beginning and end of the same movement—see Example 2 on p. 9).

The first chord of the first movement (see Example 1) evokes an instant recollection for those who know Schwantner’s music; it is one of several variations of a chord that Schwantner calls a “bell chord.” Examples of earlier appearances of this chord in his music include *and the mountains rising nowhere* (wind ensemble) and *Sparrows* (soprano and chamber ensemble).² This opening chord could be described as an Eb7 with a “split 3rd” (both major and minor third) and #11 (the repeated A-natural). Emphasis is on the tritone interval between Eb bass and the repeated A, an interval that received special emphasis in the second movement.

Example 1 also gives a glimpse of the rhythmic energy and constantly changing meters, especially prevalent in the A sections of this movement’s overall ABA’ form. In m. 3 the piano and flute play in 8ves, which is a common texture in this movement (and which make it rather difficult to play!) Unison and 8ve textures are a common feature of his style; sometimes he uses a technique that he calls “shared monody” in which certain instruments sustain one or more of the pitches while the unison/8ve line continues, creating harmony out of a single melody. Although this is not a feature in *Looking Back*, it is the main texture at the end of the 1st movement of *Silver Halo* (which was also performed at the NFA convention, by the group that commissioned the work—*Flute Force*).

Continued on p.10

Example 1

to the memory of Samuel Baron

Joseph Schwantner

Looking Back

I. "Scurry about..."

♩ = 120 *veloce con brio* ♩ = ♩ *sempre*

The score for Example 1 consists of two staves: Flute and Piano. The Flute staff begins with a rest in 8/8 time, followed by a series of notes in 9/16, 4/8, 14/16, and 9/16. The Piano staff features a complex rhythmic accompaniment with various dynamics including *conforza*, *fff*, *pp*, *ff*, and *marcatiss.*. The score includes performance instructions such as *sempre*, *feroce*, and *marcatiss.* and is marked with a first ending bracket and repeat signs.

Example 2

II. "Remembering..."
(ricordando)

$\text{♩} = 52$ a piacere

Voice: "speak in a ghostly manner" (across the embrochure)

Flute: voice "sing lower octave"

p *pp*

ri - cor - dan - do ah

$\text{♩} = 96$ legato, poco più intenso modo ord.

ppp *pp* *p* *pp* *mp* *>p* *pp*

Detailed description: This musical score is for a piece titled "II. 'Remembering...'" in a "ricordando" style. It features two parts: Voice and Flute. The tempo is marked "♩ = 52 a piacere". The voice part is written in a 5/8 time signature and includes the lyrics "ri - cor - dan - do". The flute part is written in a 5/8 time signature and includes the vocalization "ah". Both parts feature triplet markings. The score is divided into two systems. The second system has a tempo change to "♩ = 96" and includes dynamic markings: *ppp*, *pp*, *p*, *pp*, *mp*, *>p*, and *pp*. There are also performance instructions like "legato, poco più intenso modo ord." and a "tr" (trill) marking.

Example 3

$\text{♩} = 120$ ben animato

III. "Just Follow..."

1 $\text{♩} = 120$ (2+2+1) $\frac{7}{8}$ $\text{♩} = 120$ $\frac{7}{8}$

legato (2+2+1)

p *mp*

6 $\frac{7}{8}$ legato $\text{♩} = 120$ $\frac{7}{8}$ $\text{♩} = 120$ $\frac{7}{8}$ $\text{♩} = 120$ $\frac{7}{8}$

p *p*

Detailed description: This musical score is for a piece titled "III. 'Just Follow...'" in a "ben animato" style. It is a piano piece in 7/8 time, marked "♩ = 120". The score is divided into two systems. The first system starts with a first ending bracket labeled "1" and a tempo marking "♩ = 120 (2+2+1)". The second system starts with a second ending bracket labeled "6". The score features a complex rhythmic pattern with many triplets and slurs. Dynamic markings include *p* and *mp*. The piece is marked "legato" and includes a "(2+2+1)" instruction. There are also performance markings like accents and slurs.

According to Schwantner, the inspiration for creating this very distinctive texture was his background as a guitarist, where notes literally “hang in the air.”

Another feature of the 1st movement (and also the 3rd) is its slow harmonic rhythm. For example, the chord in Example 1 is repeated, with interjecting 8ve passages, a total of five times, covering one page in the score. The irony is that the fast tempo creates rhythmic drive, while the slow harmonic changes create a lessening of tension.

The 2nd movement of *Looking Back* is for flute alone and features some tricky extended techniques. It begins and ends with the flutist speaking “ricordando” (as mentioned above, see Example 2 on p. 9). The second gesture (a five-note motive) requires that the flutist sing and play at the same time. Line 3 (not shown) transposes that motive, but as whistle tones. Later in the movement, the motive is played using “spit attacks.” This motive consists of the following intervals—M2 down, m3 up, tritone down, M2 up. Note the use of the tritone again as a prominent interval. Also note that the first triplet on line 2 (Example 2)—Gb, Ab, D—is a RI (retrograde-inversion) of the last three notes of the motive—Gb, C, D, transposed at the tritone. These are the kinds of details one can discover in Schwantner’s music. Although he writes very intuitively, some of his early works, such as *Elixir* (fl, cl, vln, vla, vcl, pf) are serial and he still sometimes thinks serially.

The opening of the 3rd movement again features changing meters, fast tempo, and slow harmonic rhythm. The Db chord is sustained for 12 measures while the melodies in the piano R.H. and the flute play rising lines from the Db Lydian mode. Note that that in mm. 8–9 (and continuing past Example 3), the scales actually “descend” the scale as pitch-classes—Bb, Ab, G, F, Eb, Db, C, Bb, Ab, G, F, Eb—but the gesture gradually ascends in pitch because of 8ve displacement. The movement ends with a return—or “remembering”—of the A’ section of the 1st movement. The piece ends (as does the 1st movement) with a light-hearted unison/8ve F to Bb in both instruments, or “SOL – DO.”

Schwantner’s *Looking Back* is a great addition to the modern flute repertoire, and is a cornerstone in his own history of pieces that feature the flute. Only advanced

players who are willing to take some risk will decide to perform this piece, but they will be rewarded. Anyone who studies this piece (or his music in general) in some depth, as I have tried to do, will also be rewarded.

¹The quotations in this article are from my interview with Schwantner, on August 15th at the Marriott Marquis Hotel in New York City, shortly before the premiere of *Looking Back*.

²Cynthia Folio, *An Analysis and Comparison of Four Compositions by Joseph Schwantner*, and the mountains rising nowhere; Wild Angels of the Open Hills; Aftertones of Infinity; and Sparrows (PhD Dissertation, University of Rochester, 1985), pp. 25 and 157.

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Cynthia earned an M.A. (1979) and Ph.D. (1985) in music theory and a Performers Certificate in flute (1979) from the Eastman School of Music. She studied theory and composition with Joseph Schwantner, Robert Morris, and Larry Nelson and flute with Bonita Boyd and Emily Swartley Newbold.