

**Joseph Schwantner's *Looking Back*:
An Analysis in Relation to his Other Flute Works and his Chicago Experience¹
by Cynthia Folio**

In a recent issue of *Pipeline*,² a newsletter published by the Chicago Flute Club, 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 she organized a consortium of Baron's former students over a four-year period in order to raise funds for a commission in memory of Samuel Baron. As a democratic consortium, they chose Joseph Schwantner as the composer and Alexis Still (who had studied with Baron as a graduate student) as the flutist. 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 15, 2009. Flutist Alexa Still and pianist Stephen Gosling presented a brilliant performance to a large and enthusiastic audience.

Months before this premiere, Sherry Kujala (who was editor of *Pipeline*) asked me if I would be interested in writing a sequel to Laura's article that would focus on Schwantner and his new composition, because she knew of my close association with the composer.³ Just as Laura was a student of Baron, I was a student of Schwantner, and I have long admired his music and have written about it since 1985. This article is in two parts, both of which involve "looking back." The first part highlights Schwantner's early years growing up in Chicago,⁴ followed by an account of major events in his career. The second part discusses this newly-commissioned work in the context of Schwantner's other flute music, since *Looking Back* is based, in part, on his earlier compositions for flute.

Part I: Looking Back at Schwantner's Chicago Experience and His Career Highlights

One of the overarching themes in my interview with Schwantner (see footnote 4) was that the support systems that he 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 Robert Stein.

Schwantner described Stein as an amazing teacher and told many anecdotes about his lessons. He explained how compassionate his teacher was when he added "filigree" to the assigned music, or when he brought in his own compositions to play instead of what his teacher assigned. Recognizing that Schwantner had a talent for composition, Stein introduced music theory into his lessons. In one lesson Schwantner told his teacher that he would love to play Dvořák's *New World Symphony* on guitar; to his amazement, in the next lesson Stein had arranged all the major themes from the symphony on guitar. Schwantner described how he always looked forward to the next lesson and declared that Stein was the figure that led him on the path toward becoming a professional musician. He also credits Stein's inspirational teaching as an influence on his own teaching style.

Schwantner's family also provided strong support and a nourishing environment. His parents had an extensive and eclectic collection of 78 rpm records—all the way from classical symphonies to Django Rinehart (a gypsy guitarist from the 30's and 40's)—which he absorbed as a young person. Schwantner described a life-changing moment when his mother took him to see Andrés

Segovia at Orchestra Hall in Chicago. Segovia came out on stage, and the audience was restless, so he just stared at the audience and never said a word, for 3–4 minutes. Schwantner only understood later that Segovia was staring the audience down in order to make them quiet. Every time he came on stage subsequently, the audience became instantly quiet, as if “all the oxygen was sucked out of the hall.” One lesson that Schwantner learned from this was the amazing power of performance, and how spellbinding and engaging that process can be.

Another strong support system came from his musical experience in high school. He called it “the closest thing to a music major that you could get.” He had access to numerous contemporary scores and studied such composers as George Gershwin and Anton Webern. He was also interested in free jazz—artists like Ornette Coleman and Yusef Lateef. When he was in the jazz ensemble, the lead arranger from the WGN Radio Orchestra in Chicago would come to the school with professional arrangements and would expect the students to reach a high level of performance. The jazz band won many competitions and Schwantner won an award to participate in the Stan Kenton National Stage Band Camp as an arranger.

The final stages in Schwantner’s early 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. One turning point was when the New York group, *The Contemporary Chamber Ensemble*, conducted by Arthur Weisberg, added his composition, *Diaphonia Intervallum* (for alto saxophone and chamber ensemble) to its repertoire; the ensemble played it all over the world and also recorded it. This started an ongoing relationship with this group and other New York musicians, and helped to launch his distinguished career.

While a complete list of Schwantner’s many awards and accomplishments is beyond the scope of this article, a list of some of the highlights should serve to demonstrate why he is considered one of the most prominent American composers today.⁵ He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1979 for his orchestral work *Aftertones of Infinity*, which was commissioned by the American Composer’s Orchestra.⁶ He served as the first composer-in-residence for the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra (1982–1985), while Leonard Slatkin was the music director. His Percussion Concerto, commissioned for the 150th anniversary of the New York Philharmonic (1995), is a staple of the percussion repertoire and is one of the most performed concert pieces of the past decade.

His most recent honor is his selection for America’s largest orchestra commissioning consortium—the “Ford Made in America” program—a partnership between the League of American Orchestras and Meet the Composer, funded primarily by the Ford Motor Company Fund. The purpose of the program is to give orchestras with small budgets the opportunity to engage their communities with the work of established American composers. The resulting four-movement work, *Chasing Light...*, was performed by 58 orchestras in all 50 states.⁷

Despite Schwantner’s busy creative career and steady stream of commissions, he remained active as a teacher for many years. He was on the faculty of the Eastman School of Music for 30 years before accepting an appointment as professor of composition at Yale University in 1999. He also held distinguished residencies at many colleges. He currently devotes himself full-time to his creative work and resides in the bucolic village of Spofford, New Hampshire with his wife Janet.

Part II: An Analysis of *Looking Back* in the context of his other flute works

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.⁸ 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 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, (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. When I asked him about the more gestural aspects of his flute writing in general, 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 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 (the opening of *A Play of Shadows*) to dreamlike (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 (the "spit attacks" in the second movement of *Looking Back*) to haunting (the beginning and end of the same movement).

The first movement of *Looking Back* (see Example 1) features a driving 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 octaves, which is a common texture in this

movement (and which has the potential to create ensemble problems!) Unison and octave textures are a common feature of his style; sometimes he creates a texture that he calls “shared monody” through the use of unisons and octaves (discussed below).

Example 1: *Looking Back*, opening of first movement

to the memory of Samuel Baron Joseph Schwantner

Looking Back

I. "Scurry about..."

$\text{♩} = 120$ *veloce con brio* $\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ *sempre*

feroce

Flute

Piano

Another feature of this movement is its slow harmonic rhythm. For example, the opening chord is repeated, with interjecting octave 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 rhythm creates a kind of suspension of time. This opening chord (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.” This opening chord could be described as an Eb7 with a “split third” (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 receives special emphasis in the second movement.

Variations of the bell chord occur in some of his other flute works. For example, the opening of *Canticle of the Evening Bells* has a repeated bell sound (this time a D major seventh chord with #11), reflecting the title of the piece and the poem that inspired the work, “A ringing bell” by Ch’ang Yu. The opening lines of the poem are: “I lie in my bed, / listening to the monastery bell.” The bell effect is enhanced by imaginative orchestration and unusual timbres (such as sustained glass crystals and whistling) to create resonance. The percussion and piano play a major role, with the latter using various pedaling techniques (damper pedal, sostenuto pedal) and a clusterboard (allowing all the keys to be depressed).

Soaring also opens with what might be called a “super bell chord” (my words, not Schwantner’s) consisting of eight notes, or seven different pitch-classes, since C# is duplicated. It consists of a stack of thirds (with a few enharmonic spellings) from the bass note D: D-F#-Bb-C#-F-A-C#-E. It can be heard as a combination of two seventh chords: D-augmented, with major seventh (D-F#-Bb-C#); and a transposition of the same chord on F (F-A-C#-E). The fact that this “super bell

chord” is split into these two seventh chords later in the piece encourages this reading. This polychord serves as the source for most of the harmonic and melodic material in this brief and ephemeral piece. This same chord also makes many appearances in *A Play of Shadows*—again both melodically and harmonically.

Example 2 demonstrates Schwantner’s concept of “shared monody,” in which certain instruments sustain one or more of the pitches of a continuous unison line, creating harmony out of a single melody. The example comes from a passage at the end of the first movement of *Silver Halo* (which was also performed at the NFA convention in New York City, by the group that commissioned the work—*Flute Force*). The basic unison line occurs in flute 4 in m. 155, and is passed back and forth between flutes 3 and 4 in m. 156. In the meantime, flutes 1 and 2 take certain notes from that line and sustain them, creating harmony and also creating two new melodies. According to Schwantner, the inspiration for creating this very distinctive texture came from his background as a guitarist, where notes literally “hang in the air.”

Example 2: *Silver Halo*, mm. 155–156

The image shows a musical score for four flutes (Fl. 1, Fl. 2, Fl. 3, and Fl. 4) in measures 155 and 156. The score is in 3/4 time and features a 'shared monody' texture. Flute 4 plays a continuous unison line in measure 155, which is then passed between flutes 3 and 4 in measure 156. Flutes 1 and 2 sustain notes from the unison line, creating harmony. The dynamic marking is mezzo-piano (mp).

The second movement of *Looking Back* is for flute alone and features some tricky extended techniques (see Example 3). It begins and ends with the flutist speaking “ricordando” (as mentioned above). 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 3)—Gb, Ab, D—is a retrograde-inversion (RI) 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 and with great emotional impact, he is still influenced by the serial approach that he used in his earlier writing.

Example 3: *Looking Back*, opening of second movement

II. "Remembering..."
(ricordando)

$\text{♩} = 52$ a piacere

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

Flute: voice "sing lower octave"

ri - cor - dan - do

ah

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

pp < > p pp mp > p pp

One of Schwantner's earlier flute works that uses serial techniques is *Canticle of the Evening Bells*. Table 1 lists the pitch names for two transpositions of an eighteen-tone row that appears in the two lines of Examples 4 and 5, which occur simultaneously in mm. 9–10.⁹ Note that the strings share one continuous line, thus illustrating the concept of "shared monody" that was defined above. The eighteen-note row is divided into three hexachords (six-note groupings), labeled here as H₁ and H₂. H₁ (shaded grey in the table) contains six of the twelve tones, while H₂ contains the other six. Each statement of H₁ or H₂ contains the same notes in a different order, but maintaining the 1/2-step pairs. The beauty of this particular combination of T₀ with T₂ is that H₁ and H₂ combine vertically to produce all twelve tones, and H₁ and H₂ alternate melodically, also producing all twelve tones.¹⁰ While some passages in *Canticle* are based on this row and this technique, most others are free.

Table 1: 18-tone row from *Canticle of the Evening Bells*, mm. 9–10

		H ₁						H ₂						H ₁					
str.	T ₀	C	B	G#	G	Eb	E	C#	D	F	Gb	Bb	A	Eb	E	C	B	G#	G
fl.	T ₂	(D)	C#	Bb	A	F	Gb	Eb	E	G	Ab	C	B	F	Gb	D	C#	Bb	A
		H ₂ (The D occurs in the oboe)						H ₁						H ₂					

Example 4: flute melody from *Canticle of the Evening Bells*, mm. 9–10

fl. 3 [♩=112] [solo]

vib. molto espr.

mf sf mf

3:2 5:4 6:4 5:4 3:2

10

Example 5: string melody from *Canticle of the Evening Bells*, mm. 9–10

3 [♩: 112] 10

violin I: * pz. legato (all strings: legato, resonant & sonorous)

violin II: * pz. legato

viola: * pz. legato

cello: * pz. legato

* square notes indicate pizzicato

Schwantner's earliest flute work, *Modus Caelestis*, uses serialism, and twelve-tone technique in particular, to an even higher degree, which explains why the instrumentation is for twelve flutes, twelve strings, and percussion. It opens with a twelve-note cluster trill in the flutes. Soon after that a twelve-tone row is introduced as a twelve-part canon in inversion in the flutes and each entrance begins on a different pitch class, thus creating twelve-note formations both horizontally and vertically.¹¹

The opening of the third movement (Example 6) again features changing meters, fast tempo, and slow harmonic rhythm. However, the tempo and mood are more relaxed than the first movement, evoking a pastoral, folk-like flavor. 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 in mm. 8–9 (and continuing past Example 6), the scales actually “descend” as pitch-classes—Bb, Ab, G, F, Eb, Db, C, Bb, Ab, G, F, Eb—but the gesture gradually ascends in pitch because of octave displacement. The third movement ends with a return—or “remembering”—of the A' section of the first movement. It ends (as does the first movement) with a light-hearted unison/octave F to Bb in both instruments, playfully hinting at a V-I cadence (“SOL–DO”).

Example 6: *Looking Back*, opening of the third movement

♩ = 120 ben animato

III. "Just Follow..."

1 $\frac{7}{8}$ (2+2+1) $\frac{7}{8}$ $\frac{5}{8}$ $\frac{7}{8}$

legato (2+2+1) *p* *mp*

6 $\frac{7}{8}$ *legato* *p* $\frac{5}{8}$ $\frac{7}{8}$ $\frac{5}{8}$

$\frac{7}{8}$ *p* $\frac{5}{8}$ $\frac{7}{8}$ $\frac{5}{8}$

Some of his other flute works that use diatonic writing and folk-like themes are: the second movement of *Silver Halo*, the middle section of *Black Anemones*, and the last 18 measures of *A Play of Shadows*.

Schwantner's *Looking Back* is a superb addition to the modern flute repertoire, and is a cornerstone of his compositions that feature the flute. Only advanced players who are willing to take some risks will decide to perform this piece. Anyone who performs or studies this piece (or his music in general) in some depth will be rewarded, as I hope I have illustrated.

¹ I want to thank Sherry Kujala and Joseph Schwantner for providing materials and for their assistance.

² Laura Barron, "Flutists Unite in Sam Baron's Spirit—the commissioning of Joseph Schwantner's *Looking Back*," *Pipeline*, Vol. XII, Issue 4 (Summer, 2009).

³ This resulted in my article, “Looking Back: Joseph Schwantner’s Chicago Connection and a Look at His Recent Flute Works,” *Pipeline*, Vol. XIII, Issue 1 (Fall, 2009).

⁴ This account of his early years, as well as the quotations and paraphrases throughout the article are from my interview with Schwantner, on August 15, 2009 at the Marriott Marquis Hotel in New York City, shortly before the premiere of *Looking Back*.

⁵ For more complete information, visit his official website: <http://www.schwantner.net/>.

⁶ For an analysis of this piece, and three others from the same time period (1977–79), see: Cynthia 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).

⁷ For more details, including a map of all the performances, and video clips of Schwantner discussing the piece, go to <http://www.fordmadeinamerica.org/>.

⁸ *Looking Back*, Schott Music #ED30027 (ISBN 1423483782), 2009.

⁹ The flute and strings are separated into two examples for clarity since the pages of the score are quite large and a reduction would be difficult to read. Other instruments in these two measures are omitted in order to focus on the serial technique in the flute and strings.

¹⁰ This technique of combining hexachords melodically and harmonically to create all twelve tones is called *hexachordal combinatoriality*. Arnold Schönberg used this technique extensively in his late music.

¹¹ A brief analysis of *Modus Caelestis* is included in my dissertation: Op. cit., pp. 11–15.