

## **Interview with Composer Vivian Fine**

by Elizabeth Vercoe

*International League of Women Composers Journal*, June, 1992, pp. 18-23.

Courtesy of the International Alliance for Women in Music.

<http://iawm.org/>

This interview on April 8, 1992 was conducted at the Brockway family home in Bennington, Vermont before the premiere at Bennington College of a new work by Fine called Hymns, the second part of which, "Toward a Distant Shore," was dedicated to the memory of her friend, Jean Brockway. We were there at the invitation of Professor Brockway and his daughter Joan Brockway Esch, a Boston cellist and teacher. It seemed fitting that a beautiful seascape by Carl Ruggles, painter and composer, kept an eye on the proceedings.

Q. Of course, you have been at Bennington College for years so that has been a very stable situation for you.

A. I taught there for twenty-three wonderful years, but I resigned in 1987. I just wanted to have all my time for composing and my own life, but I still have close ties to Bennington, and it is a quite wonderful place, a community.

Q. I have read that you started writing very young and that your first teacher was Ruth Crawford, and it interested me also that you felt she had been an ongoing influence in your life. I wondered if you could say something about what she was like as a teacher and whether you knew her music at the time you were studying with her.

A. How I got to study with Ruth was this way. I had begun to study when I was eleven years old with a very interesting woman called Diane Lavoie-Herz who had worked with Scriabin in Europe. And Ruth had also studied with Madame Herz, as we called her. When I had studied with her for about a year, Mme. Herz thought, quite wisely, that I ought to have some education in theory and harmony although there wasn't any thought of me being a composer because I hadn't manifested any such interest. (I had been playing the piano since I was five.) We were very poor, so Mme. Herz made an arrangement that she would teach Ruth piano and Ruth would teach me harmony and theory, I began with her when I was twelve. When I had studied for about six months, she asked me to write a [piano] piece, and it wasn't a bad little piece. It had something individual about it. I remember Ruth standing in the back of the room, and when I turned around after I played it, there was a very intent look on her face. She had really listened. And I think the only thing she said was, "Write another one." And that was the beginning of my being a composer. Then I began to write, and Ruth became very interested in what I was doing. She would play works that she had just completed. I would say that began when I was no more than fifteen. That continued until I was seventeen. I became totally absorbed in composition, an absolute obsession with me, a happy, happy obsession.

I didn't like the public high school I was going to [in Chicago]. It was a badly run school with fifty students in a class, a terrible school. I told my mother I didn't want to go to school anymore,

I think I was fourteen. My parents were an immigrant Russian Jewish family and [believed] education wasn't tied to an institution, education was tied to books and going to lectures and thinking. (They didn't understand my music at all; early on my music became quite dissonant, more dissonant than it is now. That was the ultra-modern style then, to be very dissonant.) My mother knew that I was busy composing, that I took piano lessons, that I was reading all the time. I wasn't looking to my parents for ways to fill my time or for direction. So it was fine with them.

Q. So you stopped going to school at fourteen?

A. Yes. I was a good student. I was the top member of my class at the age of twelve. But it was a very wise decision because it would have been a waste of my time. And I read very widely. The only thing that I missed was some science education. But how much of that I would have gotten, I don't know. It is not a cause of deep regret. It was certainly the right thing for me to do. So I worked with Ruth all those years. I also went to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra every week. For fifty cents you could go and hear this great orchestra and I, of course, got to know the repertoire very well.

Q. Were your works being performed at all during that time?

A. When I was about fifteen, Ruth or Mme. Herz introduced me to Henry Cowell. And I began a correspondence with a number of composers. I think Cowell was the first one. When I was sixteen, he [had my solo for oboe] performed in a concert in New York of the Pan-American Association of Composers which he founded with Varese and Charles Seeger and some other people. I was really launched on my professional career at that age. Another composer who became interested in my work was Dane Rudhyar [whose works] follow in the path of Scriabin. And then I also met a Hungarian composer, Imre Weiss Haus [known during his work in the French Resistance as Paul Anna], a young colleague of Bartok, and he became interested in my music and had it performed at the Bauhaus and by the International Society for Contemporary Music. So early on I began to have a professional life. I didn't miss high school at all.

Q. So you moved to New York about this time?

A. At eighteen. Ruth had gone to New York when I was seventeen. She had a scholarship with her teacher [in Chicago], Adolf Weidig, who was a good harmony teacher. He didn't succeed in teaching me harmony, though. That's another story. (I was doing fine without conventional harmony.) But I worked with him during that year, and then I went to New York when I was eighteen. And Ruth was there, and she was working with Charles Seeger at that point.

[In conversation following the taped interview Fine told the story of the manuscript of Ruth Crawford's Sonata for Violin and Piano which Crawford herself had purposely destroyed. Sometime after Crawford's death, Fine found herself in a discussion with a conductor who was lamenting the loss of the piece. a loss Fine didn't know about as Crawford had presented her with a hand-copied manuscript in Chicago during her student days, Realizing that she now owned the only extant copy and about to move. Fine hand-carried the manuscript to her new apartment, putting it in what she thought was a safe place. Unfortunately, in the confusion of

moving, she forgot where she had put it and was, as she said “suicidal” at not being able to find it. Years went by, Every time the subject of the Crawford Violin Sonata came up in a conversation, Fine said she just gave a sickly smile and didn’t know what to say. Then one day her husband, sculptor Benjamin Karp, came across some music in a portfolio of his drawings. The music was the long-lost sonata. Charles Seeger wanted to authenticate his wife’s manuscript and did so personally, driving at age 92 to see it and, glancing at the first page. saying, “Yes, that’s Ruth’s hand.” Fine arranged to make a gift of the manuscript to the Library of Congress and gave a performance of it there (the first since the Chicago premiere) in the 1980s.]

Q. I’m also interested in your own performing — as a pianist. You were continuing that at this time?

A. Yes. I was. I didn’t realize it, but I was really perfecting my skills as a modern pianist in Chicago in those years because I would buy everything that I could and learn to play difficult things, new music. And when I came to New York, I wasn’t there for more than a couple of weeks when I applied for a job as a dance accompanist. It was expected in my family that you supported yourself. It wasn’t a moral expectation at all; they simply had no money to support me. So I found this job in the depths of the depression [with] a dance company. And it was unbelievable what I did: I would play the score of Petrouchka on the piano, the whole thing. And also Strauss’ Salome, I would just plough ahead from the piano reduction. It was a lot to play. I began to be known as a performer of contemporary music almost immediately in New York. I was a good sight reader of contemporary music. People were quite amazed. I had been working at this in Chicago; I was really ready.

And also at this time I became a member of a very interesting group formed by Aaron Copland called the Young Composers Group. (This is in Vivian Perlis’ book.) I don’t know if we met every week but certainly every other week at Copland’s apartment. There weren’t tape recorders and very few recordings of contemporary music, so we would read through some new works and everybody brought their new pieces. He wasn’t a teacher; it was a group where we shared our music. It was wonderful, absolutely wonderful. Copland always had this very nurturing aspect to him; he liked to be in contact with young composers and to help them. I was the only woman; there really were no other young women around. I think the most striking difference between that scene through the ’30s was that there were so few composers of contemporary music. Now we have them by the hundreds, by the thousands maybe. There were very, very few; you could name no more than ten over the whole country: Varese, Ruggles, Cowell, we were just beginning to know about Ives, Copland, Virgil Thomson. A dozen, that’s all. And then the younger composers also, not more than a dozen.

Q. So everybody knew each other?

A. Everybody knew each other and we made a community, not necessarily (it’s no pun) harmonious, but we felt we were part of the avant-garde. Even if we were studying, we didn’t feel like students. And we were forging a new kind of music. Maybe not all of it was great, but it was an exciting time then. There were no grants, or almost no grants. The Guggenheim, I think, began in 1929; Ruth was the first woman to get a Guggenheim, one of the few. It was a completely different scene where you realized you were pioneering with what you were doing.

Not with any sense of grandeur but with a sense of independence. I think we all felt this. There was a lot of talk then of "What is American music?" The group was formed shortly after Copland wrote his Variations. I remember I proofread them for him. He had me sit down and he said, "You play it; don't worry about the rhythm." So he was able to see what notes were wrong. And there were at least a couple of occasions where I played some pieces of mine and he played the Variations. At one concert where I was playing the first performance of a work by Chavez, Aaron Copland turned pages for me. He had no vanity; he was pretty sure of what he was doing.

Q. It is interesting to me that you say Copland was so nurturing not only to the other composers but to you as a woman because in his writing he has sometimes said that a woman cannot be a composer, that there have been no great women composers.

A. Well, he wasn't that way with me. He arranged a festival called the First Yaddo Festival; he invited me to perform my works, and he introduced me to Antheil, and I played my works for Antheil. And he knew the works of Ruth Crawford. Certainly there was never any condescension; maybe he forgot about me when he wrote that!

Q. Now during this period you became interested in writing music for dance companies?

A. Yes, I became very well known as a dance accompanist. Again, these were the great days of pioneering with Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman and one or two others: they were forging American dance. In 1933 or '34 I became the accompanist for Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. I played for their classes and I toured with them. I met Martha Graham. When I was about 24, Doris asked me to write a ballet for her, *The Race of Life*. So I wrote that one and I wrote a ballet for Charles Weidman [Opus 51], and two for Hanya Holm [*Tragic Exodus* and *They Too Are Exiles*]. Later on I wrote a ballet for Jose Limon [*My Son, My Enemy*]. And much later, 1960, I wrote a ballet for Martha Graham [*Alcestis*]. It was great to see American dance being made. The aficionados flocked to the concerts, and the dancers operated on a shoestring: there were no grants. Martha would be sewing costumes before the concerts.

After I had done that until about 1937 or '38, I stopped doing so many dance classes because I thought that was taking up my time. I didn't want to devote so much time to it. And I had gotten married at the pitiful young age of 21.

Q. Well, it seems to have lasted.

A. Yes, it did. I'm glad I am married to my husband: we still love each other, but it would have been better for me if I had been a more mature person. My parents came to New York before my father lost his job. (Everybody lost their job in the Depression.) And I came straight from living at home to getting married and I think it is much better to have a period where you forge your own life.

Q. I'm wondering if you look on some of your work such as *The Women in the Garden* and *Meeting for Equal Rights 1866* as feminist works, which certainly the subject matter suggests, and if so how you came to write those particular ones and if there are other ones that are in that same vein.

A. What does feminist mean? I don't mean to put you on the spot but...

Q. Well, in my own work I have done a series of vocal works that are settings of either poetry by women or on an historical woman. I wouldn't necessarily call them feminist works in the sense of having a political agenda, but I think of them as feminist in the sense of wanting to present a woman's point of view that would be different in some way from a man's. But I thought perhaps the Meeting for Equal Rights might be political because certainly that was a political moment.

A. Yes. Well certainly women have been very important in my life. My mother was a nurturing influence. She saw when I was a small child that I had ability. She had no background: she was very intelligent, but she had come from a Russian Jewish family and started to work herself when she was fourteen. But she knew that art and things of the intellect were important. My parents were not religious at all: they were agnostics. But the value of learning and acquiring knowledge is a very important value among the Jewish people and that she had. So my mother was very important in my life. I have two sisters I have been very close to all my life. lifelong friends. Ruth was a very important influence. Mme. Herz was an important influence. I had women teachers. I had some men teachers too [Roger Sessions J, but women were very important. And I myself have found since the '60s that the woman's movement has been a liberating influence for me personally—to realize how men treat women, how women react to being treated by men. Our marriage has had to survive some of these things too, but it's possible to learn. So it came very naturally and seemed perfectly natural to have an all-women opera [Gertrude Stein, Isadora Duncan, Virginia Woolf & Emily Dickinson] with one character called the Tenor. It certainly has to do with women's feelings, the bonding of women and the things they have had to endure. For instance, at one point in *Women in the Garden* there is a quotation from Emily Dickinson of scenes of her own death. She says, "When I died, the clerk recorded it in the town ledger as Emily Dickinson, at home." It means that she was taking care of her father. Not [Emily Dickinson] a poet. And then Isadora Duncan was treated so terribly by Gordon Craig, and that's in there too. He is saying, "My work, my work; why do you have to go on the stage and wave your arms!" He wrote this to her in a letter. "Why do you have to go on the stage and wave your arms" to Isadora Duncan! She suffered a great deal from that. There is a lot of that in there. Gertrude Stein is the philosopher, as she usually is. The tenor at one point is kind of Picasso; he's her friend. And there is a long episode in there from Virginia Woolf from *A Room of One's Own*. I hope I did it with a light hand, but all those concerns were real and they are real.

[At the reception after the performance of her *Hymns* for two pianos, cello and horn, Fine discussed *Women in the Garden* further, concluding with the admission that unlike other pieces which she was glad to complete and eager to finish. *Women in the Garden* was different in that she became so interested and involved with the characters that she was reluctant to leave them.]

Q. I have seen *The Women in the Garden*, but I don't know *Meeting for Equal Rights* 1866.

A. It has to do with women trying to get the vote in that period, and the vile things that were said. I am just now writing a new opera. It's an opera in the form of a newsreel. And there's one part in which the librettist has excerpted remarks by the head of the musicians' union in Chicago, and he says, "Women should not play in orchestras; the only thing that women should play is the

harp; women playing instruments should be seated in a discrete position and a woman cannot be in a discrete position if she plays the cello.” Dirty mind, if you ask me. It’s all being set [to music]!

Q. What do you call this opera?

A. It’s called by the name of the heroine, a Russian woman composer, Uliana Rooney. She has seven husbands, each having a different musical style. She actually takes the name of one, a union organizer by the name of Rooney. So her name is Uliana Rooney, kind of a crazy name, but I like it. So I am engaged with that now. Certainly we are going to deal with some of these issues: what it was like to be a woman.

Q. Do you have a particular performance in mind?

A. I got a Lila Wallace/Meet the Composer grant, and it will be done in New York and then in Houston by a group called Voices of Change.

Q. Is it a chamber opera, just two or three singers?

A. There will be, I think, five people and seven instruments. I found with Women in the Garden that people really come after you if you have a chamber opera because there are groups that do very, very well. But if it’s grand opera, the expense is too great. I started to talk about this because it has this [women’s] element. It is just plain history. Also in Women in the Garden, [and] Meeting for Equal Rights was also about that. There were some terrible things on the U.S. Senate floor alluding to women having periodic problems, that they shouldn’t be allowed to be lawyers because they might not be able to make a very good appearance. Just disgusting! I don’t feel bitter about these things, but they are outrageous.

Q. So you are more outraged on behalf of other women than for yourself.

A. Yes. Sometimes I get outraged for myself.

Q. Do you feel you have suffered to any significant degree from any kind of prejudice against women composers?

A. No. Now women get performances by orchestras but for many years they didn’t. I don’t have any great orchestral works to perform, but I would probably have written them, undoubtedly would have written them. There’s no question: you couldn’t get a performance by a big orchestra. Forget it!

Q. You mean, being a woman.

A. Yes. Nobody took it seriously. I remember once at a performance of the Race of Life which I orchestrated from the early version (this was done by the Juilliard dance company), a very well known colleague of mine who was very friendly said. “I liked the orchestration very much, very much. Did you do it yourself?” I said to the so-and-so, “Don’t you do yours?” That is all I said.

Do I do the orchestration! We are talking about the late '50s. I think a lot of ground has been gained. So who knows if didn't suffer for certain things. But certainly since the '60s or '70s I have been very fortunate.

Q. One other thing I would like to talk about is your approach to writing: whether — since you are a pianist — you work at the piano or whether you work away from it, whether you imagine works in their entirety to some extent or sketch out an overall plan or whether you begin at the beginning and write until you get to the double bar, or whether it differs from piece to piece.

A. Until 1969 I wrote at the piano. At that point I was writing a work for twelve brass instruments and chorus, and I found that the piano was beginning to get in my way as far as my imagining the sounds. So then I began to compose away from the piano. I find that the piano disturbs my inner hearing in the sense that I am imagining instruments and then hear the sound of the piano; it bothers me. For works like-as a matter of fact for all my works, I score them immediately; I don't make a piano [reduction]. I had that experience with the brass piece.

I don't have a conscious idea of how the piece will go. It interests me that when I write, and I'm sure it's true of anybody that writes, they know what belongs in the piece and what doesn't belong in the piece. That's a very mysterious thing if you think about it. You say, "It doesn't go in there." There must be an unconscious sense of the whole work somewhere to do that. Otherwise, you wouldn't have any idea of what fit. My brother-in-law told me about an article on organic unity by Oliver Sachs in New York magazine. And he said it dealt exactly with this. And I'm not a good reviser. The only way I can revise a work is about five years after I've written it. Then I can stand away from it.

Q. Have you done that often?

A. Sometimes. I don't remember when I began doing that. I consider now all the works I've written part of me, and I go back, and I might use revisions from an early work, just because I like it. Is it right to do this plagiarism, self-plagiarism?

Q. It's funny you should say that because last year I was writing one work right after another and I felt that it was almost like one piece in a certain sense, that I was even borrowing from one into another.

A. Exactly. Even if! use something from another piece the fact that it has other material brings out another aspect. A colleague of mine told me that Mozart did a lot of this. So we are in good company.

So I have always been a morning person. I do copying usually in the afternoons. I try now not to work in the evenings. Enough is enough. It just gets my brain overactive. I tend to be not too critical when I write. If I veer off somewhere in the wrong direction, I'll stop and find the point, but when it's going smoothly, it goes pretty well.

Q. So you write fairly quickly?

A. Yes, I do. I find it takes a long time to copy a score; I don't mind copying the parts, but score-copying is very laborious. And friends of mine who make scores on computers say it is equally long.

Q. Do you like the copying process?

A. I like to copy the score; I really enjoy copying the score.

Q. Do you make changes sometimes during that process?

A. Yes. I might make some changes, minor changes. I write 25 or 30 pages, then I start copying so I don't kill myself doing all the copying. So it puts the whole thing back into the memory bank more securely.

Q. But that also means that you cannot change the beginning.

A. That's true. Of course, I could recopy it. No, I must feel sure I like it. I don't feel sure until I've written about 25 or 30 pages because I am still looking for—some people call it the matrix, the defining idea, the defining impulse (I'm not talking about a tune or a harmony) and the defining sense of the form. [For example,] I wasn't quite sure what was happening in this work [Uliana Rooney] until I got the idea, "This is a newsreel." And then I saw it wasn't a question of conflicting [ideas, impulses], it wasn't a drama, and it wasn't so much about people making contacts with each other as I did in *Women in the Garden*, but it was an unfolding through time. And once you get that, that's a lucky day when that happens.

Q. Now you must write almost entirely on commission at this point in your life.

A. Yes, after years of not having that. I got my first significant commission in the seventies. I was already very much of a grown up lady. There weren't many commissions around, and I didn't get a Guggenheim until I was sixty-seven.

Q. Do you think that that was discriminatory.

A. I don't think I knew the right people at that time, Now I didn't know anybody at the Guggenheim either, but in terms of my career I did one very smart thing in my life. In 1973 I decided to give a concert in New York of my own works. I didn't even think of having the critics. I just wanted to give this concert. For one thing I had the assistance of my marvelous colleagues, performers, at Bennington, They are top-notch people. And I had gotten to know Jan DeGaetani when she was a substitute here at Bennington. She was more than happy to sing.

[As the tape ran out and I was flipping the cassette, Fine continued the story of the 1973 concert, saying that a critic from the New York Times did show up after all, gave her a glowing review. and she found herself receiving a lot more attention afterwards. The following excerpts from the review (4/15/73) by Donal Henahan give a sense not only of the music but also of Fine's personality: "The 10-part mass...left an impression of distant times and cool cathedrals. The composer also gave the first performance of her *Concerto for Piano, Strings and Percussion*



(1972) in which she functioned as a one-woman band. Although heavily in debt to Cowell, Ives and Cage, the Concerto was absorbing in its aural sensitivity and its tongue -in-cheek manner... The Neruda songs made a delicious pair... The singer silenced the pianist (Miss Fine) by gently closing the lid, removing the music, and, finally, dropping the key covering. The final chord was played woodenly but expressively by Miss Fine, a marvelous straight-woman.”]

Boston composer Elizabeth Vercoe is an associate editor of this journal.