

# Aaron Siegel Interview

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*Composers: Today talks to contemporary composer Aaron Siegel*

## **Tell us something about your background.**

I grew up in the suburbs of Washington DC. My musical life was centered on an intimate percussion studio in my neighborhood where the teacher there had all of her students play in percussion ensembles together. My friends and I would go into the city and play at jazz jam sessions on the weekends and eventually I went to the University of Michigan to get a degree in jazz studies. I have always wanted to be involved in diverse range experiences as a creative person, so I have always composed for my own ensembles and produced concerts of my music. I have a Masters Degree in composition from Wesleyan University and currently live in Brooklyn, New York.

## **How did you start composing?**

As a teenager, I had a wonderful mentor named Nora Davenport. She was a percussionist in the National Opera but she was a composer as well. She was always bringing new sketches of her music into our percussion ensemble rehearsals and we would finish writing the pieces as an ensemble. Since I didn't know any better at that time, I assumed composing was a daily part of every musical life.

## **What drives your work, what are your passions?**

As a listener, I enjoy work that is puzzling and abstract. Not for its own sake, but because it is clear that the composer had to write the piece that way, that their own idiosyncrasies didn't allow them to do otherwise. My work comes from this same place. I am passionate about sticking to a vision and discovering the new questions generated by my intuitive process.

## **How do you compose? Do you sketch? Do you compose at the instrument or away from it?**

Growing up I remember being told to practice X amount of hours a day. I was terrified by this. It would have been so much better for me if I had been told to grow my relationship to music every day; jot down ideas as they come up, experiment with short pieces that your friends can play, and think critically about the results. I am working on any number of compositions at a given time. Some of them are just ideas, some have instrumentations, some come out at the piano as a sequences of pitches that I orchestrate later, and some come out fully formed, written in pen and are simply copied into a final version later.

## **Which non-musical influences have affected your music most?**

I am inspired by art that is engaged in experimental investigations. For Virginia Wolff the novel was simply the means by which she was able to communicate. Without the need to adhere to novelistic convention, Wolff was left with the possibility of conceptualizing characters and a narrative form to serve her ideas. In the films of Werner Herzog, characters, narrative, images are only the skin on a structure of ideas. Instead of giving us something that we might relate to immediately, Herzog forces us to linger with images in uncomfortable but meaningful ways.

## **What is your musical philosophy?**

With all of the adaptations and post-modern recontextualizing that is prevalent in a lot of art currently being made, it's hard to remember that there is true merit in original ideas. I don't mean to sound all grand about this (I am partial to the idea that there isn't much left to surprise us with), but I think that there are still different perspectives on the way the world works and they should be taken on their own terms, not in reference to something else.