



MUSIC MAN

BY SALLY ABRAHMS | PHOTOS BY STEVEN VOTE



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PICTURE THIS: YOU ARE A SUCCESSFUL RADIOLOGIST who dreams of composing a full-length symphony. The problem is you read and write music at an elementary level. That would undoubtedly be a daunting obstacle for most of us, but not if you are Albert

(“Alby”) Hurwit, ’57, who has had his work performed by a national symphony orchestra, recorded by an international orchestra and distributed by a record label. ■ In 2004, the 85-piece Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra recorded his 59-minute

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Hurwit flunked a music reading test at Harvard, but didn't let that deter him from attempting to write a symphony 50 years later. Previous spread: Hurwit revisits Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts, where the Hartford Symphony Orchestra performs.

Symphony No. 1, just two years after the Hartford (Conn.) Symphony Orchestra put the symphony's third movement on a program that included such music masters as Tchaikovsky and Brahms. Hurwit received a standing ovation at the debut, and one newspaper reviewer wrote that his work "evokes Mahler." A respected classical music magazine pronounced his principal melodies "uplifting."

How did the 74-year-old Hurwit change his tune from a successful radiologist to a successful, albeit untrained, composer? It wasn't a natural or expected course, to say the least. He was hardly considered a music virtuoso. Yes, he did compose a melody when

he was 15 (that has been incorporated into symphony's fourth movement), but Hurwit also took piano lessons for just three years between the ages of eight and eleven and then quit. And then there was that ill-fated music reading test at Harvard College where

he did his undergraduate work. Hurwit had wanted to major in music but, alas, flunked the reading test. That left the sciences, which led to medical school following college.

After he received his degrees, Hurwit would occasionally dabble with made-up melodies on the piano, but he was primarily focused on cultivating his radiology practice and raising his three young children, along with working on a number of social justice causes. Among them were Physicians for Social Responsibility and the Council on Economic Priorities, a public research organization that analyzes the social and environmental records of corporations, whether it is women and minority advancement, family benefits, community outreach or charitable giving. For a while Hurwit also served as president of the Media Project, which placed advertisements in national magazines on the importance of being educated about nuclear arms.

AT A CROSSROADS

Timing was key in Hurwit's decision to pursue music again. It occurred when the last of his three children was grown and they had all become self-sufficient. "I don't have a second home, belong to a country club or own a yacht, so my financial needs were not that great," he says. "I started to compose and felt the music growing inside me."

There was still the problem of reading notes—or not reading them. “As a boy, I was a poor piano student who bluffed my way through,” admits Hurwit. “I had a pretty good ear but never developed very good skills, which I still don’t have.”

What Hurwit does have is state-of-the-art technology, which has allowed him to overcome his musical deficits. He composes and records through a system of keyboard synthesizers, computers, printers and audio equipment he has set up in the second-floor study of his home in Connecticut. He has learned to master complicated software programs that help him convert the sounds he plays into musical scores.

Initially, Hurwit tried to juggle a thriving medical practice with composing music, doing both part-time. But he would wake in the middle of the night worrying about his patients and wasn’t good at delegating responsibilities. He realized that he was too compulsive to practice medicine part-time and that he wasn’t giving either vocation his all. Hurwit had come to a crossroads. He decided he wanted to compose music, but he didn’t know if it would be a temporary or permanent pursuit.

The plan was to try his passion for six months, and if the juices didn’t flow, to consider returning to medicine. It might have sounded reasonable, but it was nonetheless a hard decision, especially since Hurwit enjoyed radiology.

When he graduated from Tufts Medical School, Hurwit never imagined that he would give up medicine for music. It’s true that when he was 10 and worked in his father’s hardware store, he would get paid in classical albums, and he did take piano lessons briefly, but for the most part, his exposure to music was minimal. After Tufts, Hurwit interned for one year in internal medicine and for three years in a radiology residency at Tufts-New England Medical Center. While he was chief radiology resident there, he was awarded a National Institutes of Health fellowship and went on to co-author the lead article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* on the imaging of kidneys.

There were job offers in Boston, but Hurwit decided to return to his hometown of Hartford, Conn. At first he was in a hos-

pital and private practice, but 15 years later, he left to develop the private practice in greater Hartford.

COMPUTERS TO THE RESCUE

A skilled poker player, Hurwit took a gamble when he left radiology completely in 1986 after 29 years in the field. That practice had started slowly, but within a short time it grew to include the latest diagnostic modalities and also branched out to three satellite offices. His subspecialty was mammography. He offered a personal approach to his patients by spending generous time interviewing and examining patients before their studies. When the diagnostic procedure was concluded, he would give them the results on the spot.

“I had total control, and because I could relate to patients directly, I think I practiced better medicine,” he suggests. “I had more time per patient than a radiologist who sits with a stack of films and reads them.” Hurwit continues to think about medicine. “There’s not a day that goes by when something doesn’t trigger a memory and remind me of when I was a physician. I found medicine extremely fulfilling, and I miss it now,” the grandfather of six says wistfully. “But I also find music extremely fulfilling.”

Hurwit is pretty certain that if he had continued being a physician, he “would have gone nuts” in today’s medical environment. In fact, when he was making a list of the pros and cons of leaving medicine, he wrote down his growing disenchantment with the bureaucratic trend in medicine vis-à-vis insurance and the increasingly truncated time allotted for patients.

Even if he doesn’t know exactly how, Hurwit believes that medicine has helped inform and improve his music. Perhaps it has something to do with passion. “I have to believe some of the music I have created has to come from those deep emotional experiences with patients, with life-and-death situations. They’re part of my music because they’re a part of me,” he muses.

Shortly after the full-time transition to music, Hurwit had a conversation with the head of music composition at the University of Hartford’s famed Hartt School of Music. He listened to Hurwit’s casual compositions

and told the fledgling composer that yes, he probably did have talent, but if he were serious about his career change, he needed to do several things. These included taking piano lessons, then enrolling in four years of undergraduate music work and most likely investing two more years in graduate school.

Hurwit decided he had had enough schooling for one lifetime. Instead, he opted to bypass formal, recommended training and turn to the unorthodox method of computers and synthesizers, which—luckily for him—had just come on the market. He invested in an impressive and intricate collection of equipment. It took Hurwit a year to teach himself the complicated software programs that would allow him to write music on his own terms. It entailed using the synthesizer to compose, then playing the music out loud and changing what he didn’t like, sometimes adding new lines or instruments.

He has many musical instrument tracks, so he might start with the cello and the violin, for instance, add percussion and subtract an oboe. “I add and subtract until I have what I want and print it out in a readable form,” Hurwit explains. But that is not a form that a conductor will accept. He still needed professional help for that.

CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN

In 1997, before he began composing *Symphony No. 1*, Hurwit wrote a five-minute piece called “Adagio for Orchestra,” which he submitted to the prestigious Hartford Symphony Orchestra. The odds were against him. He had no track record. He was not even on the music world radar. Yet, astonishingly, his work was accepted, and his piece was performed. It was to form the groundwork of the symphony’s slow movement.

Buoyed by his success, Hurwit went on to write a 15-minute first movement that would evolve into his full-length symphony. (That first segment happens to be nearly identical to the one in the final composition.)

At a party three years later, Hurwit spoke with Michael Lankester, who had been the Hartford Symphony Orchestra conductor for “Adagio” and was the orchestra’s music director for 15 years. Their meeting soon quickened the tempo of Hurwit’s music career. Hurwit asked the globe-trotting con-

ductor, who has led such illustrious groups as the London Symphony Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra and the Boston Pops, for a favor: to come to his home briefly to listen to what he had written and critique it to see if he had promise.

"I told Michael to be brutally honest and level with me," Hurwit recalls. "I didn't want to squander the next few years of my life if I didn't have any talent." Rather than a brief visit, Lankester stayed for three hours and told the retired doctor, "I think you have to write a symphony, and I think it's going to be massive."

Lankester was so impressed that he offered to work with Hurwit on the project for the next few years. "Although there are many untrained musicians in the world, I cannot think of any with the desire, the energy and the staying power to write a symphony," Lankester says today. "After all, the symphony is, with the possible exception of opera, the Mount Everest of musical forms. And along comes Alby, who never had done any mountaineering before, and climbs it!"

Collaborating for a long period of time can be pleasurable or painful, but Lankester found that "Alby is a joy to work with because he knows what he wants and won't give up until he gets it. Maybe it's his med-



Through his music, the composer evokes the imagined songs and

ical training and experience, but I think in the end, it's his honesty, and you can hear this in his music."

Hurwit also has an impish sense of humor, which does not translate into laughs in *Symphony No. 1* because the subject matter is serious. Nevertheless, he still managed to infuse his symphony with unexpected sounds that make listeners smile, whether they are snippets of brass band tunes or Viennese waltzes.

ANCESTRAL THEMES

The physician began the symphony in 2000; it would take just two years and two months to complete. Hurwit used a synthesizer to compose the work, playing it out loud and

then printing out the score in a readable form, which he faxed to Lankester. Then he would call Lankester on his speaker phone and play him the music. Lankester would make suggestions ("louder," "softer," "more instruments") and Hurwit would redo the music and print it out again. The conductor would also go to Hurwit's house, where they would perfect the score on the synthesizer and computer equipment. The deal was that Hurwit would make all the decisions and compose all the music. When they were both satisfied, Lankester would hand write each note into a conductor score.

Hurwit was able to plumb his past for material for *Symphony No. 1*. For example, when he was building the slow movement of

the symphony, Lankester told him he needed to introduce what is called a second subject—something that stands in contrast to everything that has been happening up to that point. "Shakespeare might put a comedy scene in between two tragedies," explains Lankester. "I said, 'Alby, you have to come up with something.' He went to a file and said, 'I wrote this song about 35 years ago for my wife. I have a feeling it might be suitable. What do you think?' It was absolutely perfect for that moment!" In it went.

When the symphony was completed, Hurwit's submission of the third movement was one of around 150 the Hartford Symphony Orchestra receives each year. Again, he beat the odds.

The movement, titled “Remembrance,” is inspired by the story of Hurwit’s great-great-grandfather, who insisted family members leave Russia to escape the pogroms and make a better life in the United States. His symphony is dedicated to “my ancestors who paved the road to freedom as well as to millions of families from many other religious and ethnic groups who have done the same.” In other words, Hurwit may be Jewish and use the Jewish theme of the Diaspora to inspire him, but persecution has taken on a larger, more universal meaning through his music.

The other three movements are called “Origins,” “Separation” and “Arrival.” The first, “Origins,” describes the changing times as Hurwit’s ancestors migrate eastward from Prague to Russia. “Separation,” or Movement II, recalls the persecution of his family and other villagers in the late 19th century by Cossacks on horseback who brandished sabers. The music turns from violence to urgency as Hurwit’s grandparents and mother are told by family elders that they must flee if they want to survive, which will mean being separated from them forever.

Through his music, the composer evokes the imagined songs and dances the family has

“was a public event of a family matter. The ‘Remembrance’ theme was familiar and yet unfamiliar.” That’s because Hurwit used to play that theme on the piano throughout Elizabeth’s childhood. It was a family song that he also played at the request of his son, Jeff, at his wedding. “The symphony,” says Elizabeth, “was a history of our nuclear family and of the greater family. To be expanded on and turned into this luscious symphony was amazing.”

Amazing perhaps, but not totally surprising. Elizabeth notes that “whatever my father applies himself to, he figures out how to do. His music has been part of my whole life. He would sit at the piano doodling or making up tunes. I hadn’t seen his music in a trained form until I heard his symphony, but he’s very musical, and he’s very sentimental, and for those two things to come together isn’t surprising.”

Hurwit’s draw, believes Lankester, is his ability to move listeners. “What appeals most to me about his music,” the conductor says, “is its incredible innocence and freshness. Not having come through the standard mill of a professional musician, he wasn’t frightened to say and write exactly what he felt, so there was absolutely no façade to him or his music. It comes from the heart and therefore goes straight to the heart of the listener.”

The novice-turned-accomplished composer thinks that his music has become more sophisticated over the last few years. “When I now listen to the symphony, I hear musical progress in me from movement to movement,” Hurwit says. If he were to make any changes, he thinks it would be in the first movement of the symphony. His mechanical skills with the computers and synthesizer have also improved enormously. What used to take him four hours to do now takes five minutes.

He is also moving forward in other ways. In 2002, a former lead dancer for the Martha Graham Dance Co. who directed a dance group in Connecticut heard Hurwit’s music and asked that her troupe create a ballet based on the third movement of *Symphony No. 1*. Another sweet surprise.

MORE IN THE PIPELINE

Deciding to have a real symphony orchestra play his music—every composer’s dream, of course—came as no surprise, just hard work again. The Bulgarian National Radio Symphony Orchestra was not the only professional orchestra that agreed to perform Hurwit’s music for a CD. The London Symphony Orchestra and the Czech Symphony Orchestra were also interested. (Most American composers go to Europe to have their work performed.)

But those latter groups were only going to devote a couple of days to the project. On the other hand, the Bulgarian orchestra agreed to give Hurwit eight days to complete the CD. That was important, because he wanted to fine-tune it. The orchestra, with Lankester conducting, would spend eight hours each day playing. Hurwit and Lankester would then study the day’s recording. Hurwit would make changes, which Lankester would inscribe on the score and orchestral parts. There were 37 microphones, 37 tracks for separate instruments, 21 hours of recording and 25 hours of editing and mixing.

Once the CD was made, it had to be accepted by a record label company. Four companies wanted it. Hurwit chose one, and the \$15 CD was released last February, at about the time Hurwit created his website (<http://www.alberthurwit.com>). The CD—hailed by music reviewers as “strikingly beautiful” and “luminous”—can be purchased at <http://www.cdfreedom.com/alberthurwit> as well as on amazon.com, Barnes and Noble and Tower Records, among other venues. “Let’s hope some American orchestras put Mr. Hurwit’s affecting symphony on their concert programs,” wrote a critic for *Audiophile*. “I’m sure it would be well-accepted.”

What does Hurwit’s future look like? He has several projects in the works, including setting the tragic love poem “Annabelle Lee” by Edgar Allan Poe to music using a piano and an Irish tenor (“I’m not sure why an Irish tenor!”). That endeavor is two-thirds finished. And Hurwit has started two short classical pieces for orchestra, not to mention another symphony.

You will want to stay tuned. TM

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dances the family has shared

shared, but then Hurwit’s music gets darker again, as the Cossacks return and his parents are wrenched from their own parents and family. In Movement III (“Remembrance”), the music depicts the family’s sadness at being separated and yet suggests that their love and compassion for one another ultimately will allow them to carry on. The last movement, “Arrival,” chronicles the family’s ocean voyage to America, portrayed as a land of refuge and freedom.

INNOCENT AND FRESH

Hurwit’s three adult children, wife and grandchildren attended the 2003 Hartford Symphony Orchestra debut. The symphony performance, says daughter Elizabeth, 45,