

Seventy Years of Composing: An Interview with Vivian Fine

by Leslie Jones

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Vivian Fine is among the pioneering women of contemporary American music. With a career encompassing seventy years (1925-95) and beyond, Fine has produced a wealth of compositions, for which she has achieved recognition through numerous awards, commissions, and grants. Despite influences from various teachers, including Ruth Crawford and Roger Sessions, and contact with many other high-profile American composers of this century, the essence of Fine's music — her hallmark characteristics of linear writing and harmony defined by dissonance — has remained relatively unchanged. In 1996 Vivian Fine, in her eighty-third year, continues to compose with a vigor usually reserved for youth. This interview explores her thoughts on music, shares reminiscences about past teachers and associates, and traces her growth as a composer and an individual.

“Among the composers in the central part of the United States, the most interesting figure is Vivian Fine. . .” This statement, made by Henry Cowell in 1930, describes an emerging young composer, a Chicagoan, who was at the time a mere seventeen years of age. In 1996 Vivian Fine (b. 1913), at the age of 83, continues to be in the forefront of contemporary American music. She has proven herself to be not only an “interesting figure” but a highly productive, distinguished composer who has contributed greatly, through her music and commitment, to the recognition of women composers as a creative force in the twentieth century.

A scholarship student at the Chicago Musical College at the age of five, Fine later studied piano with Scriabin disciple Djane Lavoie-Herz and theory and composition with Ruth Crawford. Upon moving to New York, Fine studied piano with Abby Whiteside and composition with Roger Sessions, while establishing herself as a performer and promoter of new music in circles that included such figures as Aaron Copland, Henry Cowell, and Virgil Thomson. Fine's musical output envelops many and various genres, including operas, music for chamber, choral, or orchestral ensembles, and works for solo instruments. Some of her most successful compositions over the years have been dance collaborations with dancer-choreographers Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Hanya Holm, Martha Graham, and Jose Limon. Fine has served on the faculties of New York University, the Juilliard School, New York State University at Potsdam, Connecticut College, and Bennington College, from which she retired in 1987. Among her many awards are grants from the Ford, Rockefeller, Ditson, Woolley, and Guggenheim Foundations and the Dollard and Yaddo Awards. She has also been elected to membership in the prestigious American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

Fine's compositional style has developed considerably over the course of seventy years, but the essence of her music — her hallmark characteristics of linear writing and harmony defined by dissonance has remained essentially unchanged. From being described early in her career as “writing in the grimmest of styles,” she has continually refined her craft, experimenting with diverse genres, with tonality and atonality, serialism, homophony, and counterpoint. Fine is not

content to rest on past accomplishments, but exudes an enthusiastic desire to continue to compose. She shared her thoughts on music and life as a composer with me.

Your study with Ruth Crawford began in 1925, when you were 12. Thus your career as a composer was set in motion. Seventy years later we have a wealth and lifetime of your compositions. What have been some of the highlights of your career?

I don't think of my life in terms of having highlights. Life somehow does not feel that way; it simply unfolds. For instance, one of the nicest things that ever happened to me musically was a memorial service at Bennington for George Finckel, a cellist, wonderful teacher and performer. I wrote a piece for sixteen cellos and conducted it. I often think back on that and how marvelous it was to hear music played by sixteen cellos. So you see, it isn't necessarily something famous or something extraordinary. However, I loved having my commissioned work [Drama for Orchestra, 1983] played by the San Francisco Symphony, but I've also had performances by groups of three instruments that have given me enormous pleasure.

Were there any memorably difficult times in your career to work through, or obstacles to overcome?

Life is entirely an obstacle! Wasn't it Shakespeare who said, "Life is a tale told by an idiot?" I don't think of life as a hassle or an obstacle, but it is complex; it's never simple. It isn't as if there were quiet times and then some awful knot would appear. There are problems to solve every day. So I don't tend to think in terms of especially difficult times. Of course, there have been various crises with my children and my husband, and anybody who says they don't have them isn't telling the truth. That's what life is!

Of the many accolades you have received over the years, do any hold particular significance for you?

I love them all!

You have associated with many of the great composers, performers, and music writers/critics of the twentieth century. Are there any particular individuals or noteworthy experiences that come to mind?

Of course, most all of that generation are gone. In fact, the only one who is left is Otto Luening, whom I speak to very occasionally. But I look back with fondness and enjoy thinking at times of my associations with Copland and Virgil Thomson. Those are the two composers I knew best. I think of their personalities — it's that which I like to recall.

*You served as a dance accompanist for choreographers Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and Hanya Holm in the late 1930s, which led to several successful dance compositions — *The Race of Life*, Opus 51, *Tragic Exodus*. What was it about your music that lent itself well to dance?*

At that point I had been playing a lot for dancers and I seem to have the capacity to feel the movement that the dancer was making, and to adjust my playing and composing to that.

However, the choreographers you mention did not use music that I had already written at all. Everything I did for them I composed specially.

After these early dance pieces, you intimated that you did not want to limit yourself to writing for dance. Do you have any inclination to write any new dance pieces?

I don't really feel like writing dance music today, but interestingly enough, there may be a choreographer upstate here [in New York] who is interested in choreographing several of my compositions. So it has come full circle. Instead of my writing for dance, choreographers want to use my existing music. Actually, I have something very wonderful to add. My granddaughter, Keli Noton, is a dancer and she very recently choreographed three small pieces of mine. So I am connected with dance now and with my granddaughter's generation.

What pieces did she choreograph?

I have a set of pieces for guitar, flute, and cello called *Canciones y Danzas*. They are all pieces that have a Spanish flavor. They were commissioned by Joel Brown, who is a guitarist on the faculty of Skidmore College; these will be issued on CD. My granddaughter used three of those.

You studied with Ruth Crawford between 1924 and 1929. How would you describe the role she played in your life?

She influenced me in a very fundamental way. I always thought it was perfectly natural to write music. I never thought of myself as a woman composer, and of course, Ruth was a woman composer, so that was something very fundamental that I got from her. Also, she took a very deep interest in my compositions and my development — in a very feeling way. She wasn't didactic and she didn't think of me as just some young thing. We had a real friendship.

Let's talk about your early compositional style (1925-37). You're described by Henry Cowell as "writing in the grimmest of styles." What characteristics gave your early music its harsh quality?

The amount of dissonance. I thought of avant-garde (although I really didn't know the term avant-garde) or modern music as being dissonant. I would not allow a sense of tonality in my music. With the brashness of youth, I was very brash.

What pieces from this period exemplify this style?

Four Pieces for Two Flutes [1930] and *Four Polyphonic Pieces* [for piano, 1931-32], which I played at the Yaddo Festival in Saratoga Springs, New York.

Between 1937 and 1944 your music changed, moving in a more tonal direction. What caused this shift?

For one thing, I began to study with Roger Sessions. My composer friend, Israel Citkowitz, thought that I should have a thorough grounding in harmony. That was part of it. The other part

was that the world changed. There was the Great Depression and a lot of artists — composers, writers, etc. — moved leftward. It was a very, very different world in the 1920s and part of this leftward shift involved communicating with what we called “the people.”

What works from these years best exhibit your experimentation with tonality?

The ballet *Race of Life*, for Doris Humphrey, and the *Four Elizabethan Songs* were written during this period, and I still like those. Also, the *Suite in E-flat Major* [1940] for solo piano. I still think they show that they are compositions, not just glib exercises in tonality.

After 1944 you seemed to return to atonality, but using a more tempered approach. Can you explain this?

I see this music as a sort of return to my roots, but with added change, further study, and exposure to many composers and new music.

An interesting piece that I've studied is the Chaconne [for piano] from 1947. Twelve-tone technique has never been a part of your musical language, yet this piece is built on a twelve-tone row. Is this an anomaly?

I tried to experiment with twelve-tone technique in this piece. The basic theme or material of the *Chaconne* is twelve-tone, but the rest of it is not. I could never get myself to reach the point where I could stick with it or be locked into it. Many wonderful pieces have been written in the twelve-tone language, but it just was not for me.

You agree that your style may be characterized as linear and contrapuntal. Canons, retrograde, inversion, stretto, fugal writing, and exchanging voice positions surface repeatedly in your works. How did you become steeped in the use of counterpoint?

I had a fine sense of linear shape very early on in my composing. By looking at composition in this way, I bypassed the problem of having to deal with any kind of conventional harmony. I let the harmonies happen; the harmonies fall where they may fall. I continue to do that today.

Many of your solo instrumental works use generic titles or have a Baroque derivation: suite, preludes, variations, chaconne. Is there an apparent reason for this?

Yes; it's because I am a pianist.

From 1964 to 1987 you were on the faculty of Bennington College. In the wake of the recent upheaval at Bennington, how do you view your years there?

I view Bennington College with nostalgia because the music department as I knew it is no more. It was a wonderful department and I had wonderful colleagues. I think there were four composers on the music faculty and at least that number of instrumentalists. I enjoyed my teaching there enormously.

1960-73 was a highly productive period for you. You wrote many pieces that featured cello, piano, and percussion ensemble: Fantasy for Cello and Piano, Missa Brevis, Chamber Concerto for Cello and Six Instruments, Concertino for Piano and Percussion Ensemble, among others. Why was this?

There was a wonderful cellist, George Finckel, on the faculty, and also a very good percussionist, Louis Calabro.

You have written in numerous genres. Do you have a favorite?

I particularly enjoyed writing the two chamber operas [*The Women in the Garden* (1978) and *Memoirs of Uliana Rooney* (1994)], but otherwise I have no favorite instrument or genre. The operas were fun because you are dealing with characters.

Do you compose at the piano?

I stopped using the piano to compose about 1967 because I thought it interfered with my hearing of instrumental timbres. Even when I wrote for piano in ensembles, I didn't use it. However, I did use the piano until that point.

You must be an avid reader to have unearthed many of the texts, titles, or subjects that you've chosen for many of your vocal works: Meeting for Equal Rights 1866, The Women in the Garden, Two Neruda Poems, Teisho, etc. What criteria do you use in finding these interesting texts?

Usually I just start reading. *Meeting for Equal Rights*, 1866; [1976] was written for the two hundredth anniversary of the founding of this country. I read about the whole struggle for equal rights, and it was at this time that women became very active in search of the vote and general suffrage. *The Women in the Garden* idea just popped into my head, and *Guide to the Life Expectancy of a Rose* came from the garden section of the Sunday *New York Times*.

I know you've just had a new opera premiered. Can you tell us about it?

The title is *Memoirs of Uliana Rooney*. It's the high-speed biography of a woman composer. It also is a stylistic newsreel, musical newsreel. She [Uliana Rooney] zips through life — from a send-up of Pierrot Lunaire to the turbulence of the 1960s. It isn't strictly autobiographical, though, because I have had one husband for almost sixty years and Uliana has a tendency to change husband when her musical style changes. Also, there are a lot of quotes from my music throughout the opera, and it has film in it. I collaborated with Sonya Friedman, who not only wrote the libretto but also did the film sections. It was a true collaboration. [Memoirs] was premiered at the University of Richmond in Virginia, September 9, 1994. Also, it will be performed in New York on August 1, 1996 by American Opera Projects.

Most of your works are available through Catamount Facsimile Editions, the company that you and your sister created. Do you foresee establishing ties with any other publisher in the future?

Not speaking financially, I think I have done as well there, in terms of having my music available, as I would do anywhere else. However, I'm not opposed to it.

Your compendium of compositions is large and continues to grow in the 1990s, and you continue to compose with unabated zest and vigor. What drives you?

I love to write music; it's as simple as that! My current project is a project with my younger daughter, Nina, who is a singer. She has written a text and I am setting it. It's a solo dramatic work, like Erwartung, a monodrama of about twenty to twenty-five minutes' length.

Is your older daughter musical also?

Peggy is very musical. She plays the piano very well, but doesn't make a living at it. She's a social activist in California, where she resides.

If you could prescribe how you would like to be remembered, what would you wish?

My children and grandchildren are my best contribution.