

In the 1st Person : June 2004

# NewMusicBox

## Worth Fretting Over

Stephen Griesgraber, moderator

James Emery  
Mark Stewart  
David Starobin  
Dominic Frasca  
David Leisner

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4:00-5:00 p.m. at the American Music Center

### Getting an Education

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** We have a diverse representation of aesthetics and interests here. I hadn't thought about beginning this way, but we could briefly talk about how people came to the guitar. I think it's a uniquely American situation we have where guitarists come to contemporary music and want to study music at a very high level, but generally come to it not through the same sort of avenues as a violinist or pianist, etc. We can come to it through rock 'n' roll, in addition to developing an interest in jazz or classical. Also we should talk about the different generations we have represented here today and what that has meant in terms of our individual interests in the guitar.

**DAVID STAROBIN:** Well, I came to it through classical music. My parents were always playing ballet music and classics—[Chopin](#) and stuff. Then when it came time to start playing an instrument, they thought, well there's this [Segovia](#) guy you know, let's find a guitar teacher. At the time, the [New York Classical Guitar Society](#) had a list of the three or four approved teachers that you could study with, so we made calls and I landed with one of them when I was about seven. That's how I started.

**MARK STEWART:** My family was very musical. In fact, we had a family ensemble called the Stewart Family Troubadours. We did mostly vocal repertoire, medieval and renaissance and American folk music—it's how we paid for music lessons. My father was an Episcopal priest and didn't have a lot of bread. We had a place to live, but taking music lessons was a little bit expensive and the way that they paid for it was by us doing these concerts together. Over the years I remember my mother bringing home an instrument from time to time. I did all of my

conservatory studies on the cello, but my great passion was always the guitar. I started when I was nine. I originally played folk music because that was the simplest way to join in a potent fashion with the family ensemble, and played quite well because, of course, you have three chords and you've got a solid folk tune. Then later by a circuitous route, I came the various kinds of guitar playing that I do now.

**JAMES EMERY:** My parents were also musical, but they played all sorts of things in the house. I was hearing [Ray Charles](#), [Louis Armstrong](#), [Duke Ellington](#), [Tchaikovsky](#), all sorts of things. When I started playing music, I just wanted to start playing music, period. It didn't matter what kind it was. I started on organ when I was six and then wanted to switch to a wind instrument, but my parents would not get me a wind instrument. I wanted to play oboe or clarinet or alto saxophone, but they wouldn't have any of it. So finally when I asked for a guitar, they said okay. They also bought me a book so that I could start teaching myself. After about a half an hour with that book in my bedroom I discovered that it would only teach me how to play chords so that I could accompany myself while singing. I was not happy with that because I wanted to pick out the actual notes and play a melody. I think that I'm still that way to a large extent [*everyone laughs*], even though I've learned a few chords. They insisted that I study with a classical guitar teacher and that was one of the best breaks I've ever got. There was a woman who played violin in the [Cleveland Orchestra](#) under [George Szell](#) at that time named Ann Stanley. She was also a really fine classical guitarist and she took me on. Fortunately for me, she not only taught me how to play the guitar and play the repertoire, she also taught me why chords sound the way they do and the theory behind harmony and rhythm, and so forth. So she not only taught me how to play but how to think on the instrument.

**DAVID LEISNER:** I'm curious, James, why you were attracted to the guitar after the other instruments?

**JAMES EMERY:** I'm not sure about that.

**DAVID LEISNER:** I'm not either—that's probably why I asked.

**JAMES EMERY:** It must have been something that I saw or heard at that time. I don't recall what that was, but after striking out so many times on wanting other instruments, maybe I thought I'd just ask for something really common.

**DAVID LEISNER:** It's funny how this is developing because my background is sort of a combination of the three of you. I came from a nonmusical family, although they all appreciated music, and I was listening at age four to the symphonies of [Mozart](#), [Brahms](#), and [Beethoven](#), but at the same time Duke Ellington and [Count Basie](#), jazz stuff, and all those people. And like James I felt like I wanted to make music in some way or another. My mother being the dominant musical force in the family really wanted me to play violin, so when I was nine years old I started on the violin and was a mess at it. I don't know why I gravitated to the guitar next, but I did when I was ten. It was not one of those things where I heard Segovia or some special person and thought, "Oh, I have to play that instrument." I think maybe it was more a practical thing. I began in a folk guitar class in a Jewish community center in Los Angeles and my teacher then took me on privately for lessons and gradually eased me into classical, which I didn't really begin until I was thirteen. Then for many years I played folk and popular music and my own compositions and classical music side by side. It wasn't until I was seventeen that I decided to go all-classical. Although along the way I had some teachers-like [David Starobin](#), in fact—through much of this time and really for the rest of my life I was basically self-taught amidst the confusion of all these different musics and different instruments and different styles.

**DOMINIC FRASCA:** I did it for the chicks and the money [*everyone laughs*], which is why...

**MARK STEWART:** ...you're so miserable.

**DOMINIC FRASCA:** ...and then I realized I wasn't going to get the chicks and the money. So I thought, well, I'm going classical so I can mock the guitar players who do get the chicks and the money [*everybody laughs*]. I started through rock basically, actually through [Van Halen](#) and hearing "[Spanish Fly](#)." I said that's classical guitar, that's what I want to learn. Then it slowly morphed into this.

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** I wonder at what point you realized that it was something that you wanted to continue with and to focus on professionally, particularly the serious contemporary classical music and collaborations with composers...

**DAVID STAROBIN:** For me, I was a junior varsity catcher and I had to make a decision because foul tips were absolutely murder on right hand nails, you know [*everybody laughs*]. My father said, "Listen, it's time for you to think about what you're going to do. Are you going to have a professional baseball career?" I thought, well... [*laughs*] I wish! If you're fifteen years old and you're giving up baseball, it's a commitment, and that was it. I also went through rock 'n' roll, had a band for many years, and played trumpet for a lot of years, but guitar was the only one that I was really any good at. So that was it.

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** And you were fairly certain that you were going to be conservatory/university bound...

**DAVID STAROBIN:** I started actually going to the conservatory that year. At fifteen I would take the train down to Baltimore every week to study with [Aaron Shearer](#). From Long Island it was more than ten hours on the train every week. He was a pretty good teacher for me at that point, so it was worth it at the time, but it was a little nuts. My parents were crazy, but they sent me on this journey.

**DAVID LEISNER:** That's interesting because I think really at this time that we're talking about—what was that, thirty years ago, or more—in that era there were very few guitar teachers around. For me in LA there was nobody really. When I came to the East Coast, I didn't go to a conservatory. I went to [Wesleyan University](#) for liberal arts. I knew I was going to be a musician, but I also knew that it was going to be hard to find a teacher. I was at Wesleyan in Middletown and I didn't have any money, no car, so I hitchhiked every other week to Robert Carroll, a violist from the [Boston Symphony](#). He was a violist but he was an amateur guitarist. So just thinking about the dedication—your ten-hour trip to Baltimore...

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** And you literally hitchhiked?

**DAVID LEISNER:** Yeah, with my guitar.

**MARK STEWART:** I used to juggle to get picked up, but a guitar is almost as good.

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** And your path to the decision to be a professional musician.

**JAMES EMERY:** Well, I don't know how I knew this but I remember clearly after playing the organ for a few days when I was six years old, I said, "Yeah, I'm going to be a musician." I just

brought me so much joy and happiness. So I continued on and began playing in rock bands when I was a teenager in high school. We played a lot and were successful with that. So things just started rolling and I worked quite a bit in Cleveland. Fortunately the teacher that I referred to earlier that was the violinist in the Cleveland Orchestra had enabled me to teach myself a lot of things that I encountered later on, such as the music of [Charlie Parker](#) which was a big milestone for me. I heard that and said, "Whew."

**DAVID STAROBIN:** That's really a coincidence, I also had a teacher in the Cleveland Orchestra—the principal second violinist Bernard Goldschmidt used to give me lessons one summer when I was thirteen at the Allegany Music Festival. I remember him because I played the [Villa Lobos](#) Third Prelude. In the middle section there is a very sort of typical [rubato](#) that guitarists have always adopted. It's very dumb rubato that basically feels good on the instrument. He couldn't understand this. He said, "What are you doing that for?" And I said, "Well, you know, my hands just do it." [*everyone laughs*] So he really nailed me. It was great for a thirteen-year-old kid to learn a really great lesson in phrasing because, you know, I have to think about why this note goes to the other note. It was one of the first times that I really found a musician who said think about what you're doing, don't just play it because you heard it that way. That was my Cleveland Orchestra story.

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** It's interesting to hear these profound little epiphanies coming from non-guitarists.

**MARK STEWART:** And I did a whole other route. I did all of my education on the cello. I use everything I've learned on the cello on guitar. The kind of gigs I do now, the kind of life I have would be an entirely different life if I hadn't learned the repertoire that happens to be on the cello. And I fell in love with the repertoire. I went to college to be both a guitarist and a cellist, but the repertoire just killed me. Then I ran off to [Eastman](#), but I was a fox in a hen house. I thought I was going to be a cellist in a string quartet at a nice liberal arts school in the Midwest, but there was no guitar program, so I got every single call to play every guitar gig, faculty and student alike. Whether it was the mandolin in [Don Giovanni](#) or a [tenor banjo](#) in [Gershwin](#) or accompanying Annita Boyd on her faculty recital. It was unbelievable, it was like a cosmic mitzvah [*everybody laughs*]. And now I live a fretted life, and I fret less because of it. I enjoy my life as a guitarist. Life as a cellist was frankly a little stressful.

**DOMINIC FRASCA:** See, it was a lot easier for me. I was the generation when you guys were all starting to form the programs.

**DAVID LEISNER:** So you had more of a guitar-oriented education?

**DOMINIC FRASCA:** Yeah, but I never listened to guitar, I listened to ensemble music. So I always wanted to take ensemble music and stick it on guitar. I was never happy with the sound of classical guitar. I liked the concept, but it just wasn't the palette for me.

## Good Time to be a Guitarist

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** It's interesting that once these guitar programs grew in size there was a premium and athleticism that focused on solo guitar playing. Students have tended to

focus on their solo careers and solo repertoire, possibly to their own detriment, whereas the people in this room clearly have a background in ensemble playing.

**DOMINIC FRASCA:** I know when I did the *Bang on a Can* stuff, it was frightening because I hadn't done a lot of ensemble playing. I have immense respect for the fact that you [Mark] can do that and I think it comes from having done it your whole life.

**MARK STEWART:** It is very important and when I get a call from a youngin asking for advice, I always ask, "How much ensemble playing have you done?" And if they haven't, I say, "Well, say yes to every single ensemble thing you can and take it very, very seriously and learn the skills. Learn how to give and receive cues comfortably and learn how to stoke a group whether you're playing *Baroque music* or if you're playing *serial music*, to play wonderfully and be a wonderful colleague. It's essential for any kind of chamber environment. Perhaps that is something that I've noticed from time to time because of the nature of the beast that sometimes guitarists come with fewer of these skills. If I were writing the curriculum I'd say *Boccherini* for every freshman, and you get your own string quartet. I think it would be a wonderful way to start.

**DOMINIC FRASCA:** Most times you work on one piece the whole semester and you kind of jerk around for the first two months, then you try to put it together at the end. I mean, ensemble concerts are always terrible. They're always in some backroom somewhere that nobody goes to. You don't even care if you mess them up. That's kind of how it was when I was going through my programs.

**DAVID STAROBIN:** I like to think it's changed [*laughs*]. Not enough, but it's certainly on its way.

**MARK STEWART:** And the repertoire has grown in the last ten or twenty years, [*to David Starobin*] and of course you're one of the reasons.

**DAVID STAROBIN:** Well, there are lots of people who are the reason, and that's great. It makes all the difference when someone says to you, "Well, what can I do for this combination?" and you can actually list a bunch of pieces instead of saying, "Well, there isn't anything for that combination, try again."

**MARK STEWART:** It's a good time to be a new music guitarist. I don't think there has been a better time.

**DAVID LEISNER:** And not just new music, but the old music, too. A lot of the old music repertoire that has never been played or played so little can be played now because there are guitarists that are more experienced with chamber music and groups of non-guitarists who are willing to play with them and try that repertoire.

**DAVID STAROBIN:** Although I have to say there is still an incredible prejudice out there. You go to an orchestra and you say, "Listen, I've got this great guitar concerto, terrific composer, played him three years ago, it got great reviews, everyone in your orchestra thinks he's a great composer..."

**MARK STEWART:** Subscribers dug it...

**DAVID STAROBIN:** Right! "How about it? Guitar concerto?" And they say, "Well, the last time we did a guitar concerto twenty years ago the guitarist got lost..." [*everyone laughs*]. Forget it. And

there are these stories that persist to this day of guitarists that fell apart so there has been an incredible amount of prejudice built up in certain spheres about bringing guitarists in as soloists. That's a problem.

**MARK STEWART:** That's an unfortunate inheritance.

**DAVID LEISNER:** Which is really why it's up to the educators to bring more and more chamber music into the education of guitarists. I think it's absolutely essential. It also happens to help the solo playing tremendously. You improve your rhythm, you improve your awareness, all kinds of things. We don't play with orchestras, we certainly haven't played much chamber music until recent times, so guitarists are stuck in a little corner with their terrible habits and if they play any chamber music at all it tends to be guitar ensemble—you know, where they put together other guitarists with equally horrid habits, and they're not forced out in to the big world of music with the fiddle players, and the cello players, and the wind players, and the singers, and that's what really expands a guitarist's horizon. The more that that's done the less that this sort of thing that we're talking about will happen.

**DOMINIC FRASCA:** In connection with the resistance from programmers and artistic directors to undertake works with guitarists as soloists, do you feel the same sort of resistance from composers saying, "I'd love to write a piece for ensemble X, but I'm not so hot on the guitar. I'd love to write for them without guitar."?

**DAVID STAROBIN:** When you talk about composers now with the kind of longevity that some of our composers have—talking about guys who are in their nineties—in that case it might be a little bit problematic, but any composer who is under sixty-five at this point has probably written for the guitar in one situation or another, either as a part in a piece, a solo piece, or something. It's really rare that you find a composer that hasn't used the instrument. That's my experience.

**DAVID LEISNER:** There are those composers who have that experience, but are still so shy with the guitar. Because they tend to be pianists...

**DAVID STAROBIN:** They tend to be shy of the harp, too, and all the instruments that have peculiar techniques that are not easy to write for, but I don't sense that there is any kind of prejudice against the instrument itself.

**MARK STEWART:** In fact it's the opposite. Often times a composer will say I want to write for the guitar but I'm scared, help me. The composers, they're up to date, and if they write a good guitar piece they know that it's going to get played. It's pragmatic—it's a great idea to write a good guitar piece. They're just scared sometimes. So you just try to hold their hand a bit. It's worth it, too.

## Acoustic vs. Electric

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** The other interesting thing I think with the guitar in contemporary chamber music is that you have two instruments. You have an electric guitar and a nylon string classical guitar. And you have other guitars, resophonic guitars. Do you have feelings about that? Do you find composers preferring one over the other? Do they consider them completely different instruments? How do you offer guidance in terms of how to write for one over the other?

**MARK STEWART:** Well, they're very different instruments. For me with [Bang on a Can](#), it's almost always electric guitar. The kind of rules or pep talk or whatever information that I want to give to them is certainly going to be different than something David would give.

**DAVID STAROBIN:** Well, my guitar has pickups and most of the stuff I play that's not 19th century is almost always amplified. Then you begin to get into differences of what you can do on steel strings that you can't do on nylon strings...

**MARK STEWART:** I'm not going to make a whole lot out of the differences because of course there's so much that is in common as well. The biggest difference that I'd say right away is the attack—with a [solid body electric guitar](#) there can be no attack: you can do the clarinet-thing with a volume pedal or a sneaky thing with a [Strat](#). Just those kind of qualities. I'd say if you want to find ways in, then think of me as joining with different instruments, as being very chameleon-like, that's what I do with this band a lot anyway. Extending the sound of the piano, making it into a supra-piano, or extending the sound of the clarinet. Think about it in those kinds of ways and you don't really have to be an idiomatic master of the instrument. Get the guitar—and you should have a guitar in your lap when you're messing around because that's a great way to find out what's possible. Call up your best friend who is a guitarist regularly, like you call your Mac guy when you're having a problem. It's the same kind of thing.

**DAVID STAROBIN:** I've got a loner. If a composer calls me up, I say, "Have a guitar!"

**MARK STEWART:** No hurry getting it back...I think there are still some that have some of my instruments, actually. *[laughs]* I'm sure of it. I'll have to make some phone calls.

**DOMINIC FRASCA:** But don't you think that the younger composers more want to write for electric guitar? Are you seeing that? More as a status thing—a lot of the new ensembles, they're all featuring electric guitar, much more of a rock slant. It seems to be the in vogue thing.

**MARK STEWART:** I can't speak about the motivation of it, but certainly people are excited about doing it. I know that to be true.

**DOMINIC FRASCA:** The thing about nylon string guitar is that it's not a crossover instrument in the way that electric guitar is, you know, it doesn't have that kind of pop appeal that people hear and say, "Oh, that's a very familiar sound to me." Or the hip look of an electric guitarist as opposed to a classical guitarist, so I find that the composer, especially when they're writing for ensemble, they want electric. They're like, "Yeah, that's the sound I want, a little bit of distortion and that kind of rock feel."

**DAVID STAROBIN:** I think if they want an electric guitar part they write an electric guitar part, when they want a nylon part they write a nylon part. The instruments really are so different and the contexts are so different that I think they're used for what each one can do. And I don't necessarily see them as displacing one another.

**MARK STEWART:** Well, when I'm on an airplane and someone says, "Oh, you're a musician?" And I say yes they say, "Well, what kind of music do you play?" I usually say I play a little bit of popular music, quite a bit of semi-popular music, and an enormous amount of unpopular music. *[everyone laughs]* And then they say, "Well, what's unpopular music?" That's the first question and so I begin to describe what it is I do.

I say some of the unpopular music that I play is "contemporary classical music," and they say, "Why are you playing electric guitar if you're playing classical music?" and I say, "Well, composers writing music today didn't just grow up listening to [Mozart](#) and [Monteverdi](#) and [Beethoven](#) and [Stravinsky](#) and [Boulez](#), they grew up also listening to [Frank Zappa](#), [Jimmy Page](#) and the [Bee Gees](#), and so that's a sound they're unwilling to relinquish when they come to the table to write 'serious' music" or 'concert' music." That's how I explain it and that's essentially what I believe to be true and what I've experienced to be true. And that's why people write for the electric guitar if that is a timbre that is important to them. I'm sure for some of them—the hipness or the showbiz aspect—I'm sure that's part of decisions that are made. Now, I'm not an electric guitarist first. If I'm stuck on a desert island, it's my nylon string guitar that my mom brought home when I was nine years old that I'm more comfortable on than anything. Big wide neck, nylon strings doing everything a string should...

**DAVID STAROBIN:** Oh, man, you've got to get a new guitar! They make these great guitars now with real thin electric guitar-type necks and nylon strings. You've got to check it out.

## Performer-Composer

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** David, you primarily play without amplification on a traditional Spanish guitar, yes?

**DAVID LEISNER:** I play with amplification when I play chamber music or in a concerto situation. Once in a while I'll play a solo concert with amplification, but mostly, yeah, I'm playing a more traditional instrument. Certainly I only play the guitar. I don't play the electric guitar, I don't play the lute, I don't even play the 19th century guitar, so I suppose I've limited myself, but then I do so many other things to. Being a composer at the same time—almost by necessity I have to limit myself.

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** You seem to present yourself as both a guitarist and a composer on an equal level...

**DAVID LEISNER:** It's just who I am. I've always felt that I'm split down the middle 50/50, part performer, part composer. And no matter how much time I spend actually doing one or the other, I feel that my way of looking at the world and my way of thinking about things and my way of thinking about music is really split between the two. And it's very weird what I'm doing, though I supposed less and less weird as time goes on. Certainly for most of my life I was kind of an outcast in that way because you were either one or the other in the 1900s, except for in popular and jazz music where of course all along it's been the norm. But in classical music, it has not at all been. [Rachmaninoff](#) was basically the last of the great performer composers...

**JAMES EMERY:** [Bartók](#) was an incredible pianist.

**DAVID LEISNER:** He was a great pianist and so was [Benjamin Britten](#). Britten is maybe even closer to the model that I'm thinking of. Bartók didn't play a lot of other people's music as far as I know. Britten did, in fact played incredible [Schubert](#) and [Brahms](#), really I think one of the great pianists of the 20th century, but in terms of someone who plays other people's music as a large

chunk of their repertoire and someone who writes music that's not all for their own instrument, but for orchestra and so forth, there are very few people doing that.

**MARK STEWART:** That's true.

**DAVID LEISNER:** Part of the reason why it's not easy is that in this age of specialization that we've been in for a hell of a long time, each of those careers requires, practically speaking, a great deal of time and effort just to promote yourself. So just to hustle for the next concert or hustle for the next commission or performance or whatever, you have to put a tremendous amount of time into it, so to do that in both streams has been remarkably difficult.

**MARK STEWART:** But you look great. [*everyone laughs*] He's a survivor. He walked in, I thought, "Man he looks great." Maybe this is the answer?

**DAVID LEISNER:** It is, it is. Stop practicing and start writing.

**MARK STEWART:** I mean that!

**DAVID LEISNER:** I appreciate that, thank you. Well, I guess in terms of spirit maybe it's done me a lot of good, but in terms of more practical things it's been really difficult.

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** Now you've added a publishing division to your record company with a composition of yours...

**DAVID STAROBIN:** Yeah, last night I was playing this piece with my daughter. I am not a composer. I have composed a few pieces, but I am a player and a businessman, pretty much, and a teacher. But I would like to think that there are some pieces out there that I would like to write. When I can see clear to getting time, which as David said is a real problem. I felt encouraged by my last effort and I'll hopefully do some more of it, but I'm a performer not a composer.

**MARK STEWART:** I think when you talk about the age of specialization...in classical music improvisation has been abandoned almost completely except for the French organists who have kept it wonderfully alive in their very small world, and that's starting to change in certain areas of unpopular music. Like for James the thing is completely blurred because you're making it fresh every night, you're composing every night.

**JAMES EMERY:** That's required. That's the tightrope too, because sometimes it's not happening...

**MARK STEWART:** And that's why when it's happening...I remember [René Lussier](#), wonderful Quebecois composer and guitarist, and his tough nights were the most thrilling, nights that were really hard where he was having to work it out. And James, you're the same ilk, and it's an opportunity to really do some finding. We heard a thing the other night and you know the moment of the making is such an exciting moment, and of course the idea when we're playing wonderfully written music is to give people a sense of the moment of the making, but [*points to James*] you're really there. I mean, you're *there*.

**DAVID LEISNER:** And we can watch him in that moment and listen to him in that moment.

**JAMES EMERY:** Well, I guess it takes some nerve [*everyone laughs*] but there's an awful lot of training and practice behind that, and it's like speaking a language. You build up a vocabulary over time and you learn other dialects perhaps so that you can say the same thing in different ways, and just piling on, things build up over time. You learn to live with it.

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** Going back to the idea of guitarist-composers, bringing those traditions together and integrating them in a way that maybe they haven't been in the past couple of generations, what's your philosophy behind that and how did you come to decide that you would have both?

**DOMINIC FRASCA:** You know, the music that I wanted to play, there was just nothing for solo guitar, so I kind of got into writing just through wanting to play that stuff on the instrument. When I started, I found out there weren't that many guitarist composers in college at all—none of the students were doing it. Now there's a much bigger wave of it happening and it's really great. Just over the last few years I've realized that you can work on other people's music and then on your own, but eventually you have to decide how much you want to give to other people's music, because you can dedicate your life to doing that and in the end it's their music.

Recently I've been realizing that I want to spend more time writing music. I have a friend [Marc Mellits](#) whose stuff I'll always play. We kind of think as one, so working with his music is great because he lets me do what I want with it, he lets me kind of half-compose it. I think when you're working on other people's music and it's strict—I'm not the type of guy who just wants to do what's on the page, I find that really confining, and sometimes that feels like you're just serving somebody else's ideas. You only have so much time in the day and so there does get to be a point where I think you have to say, "Well, I want to perform and I want to perform my music." It's nice that you can go out there, play your stuff when you want to play it and control your own world. I like that aspect of creating everything from the bottom up.

**DAVID LEISNER:** It's important, I think, to be true to yourself. You have to find out who you are and then follow that path.

**MARK STEWART:** I've been involved very seriously in instrument construction these last five years, in fact it's probably the most important thing in my musical life right now. My current definition of instrumental music is find out what an instrument does, do it, and music tends to emerge. And I would say what you [*gestures to David*] just described was to find out what you do, do it, and the music tends to emerge. And you just described [*gestures to Dominic*] your version of it—you know, how much time do I have in the day.

## Working with Other Composers

**MARK STEWART:** I used to play a lot of very thorny [serialist](#) music on the cello, in fact most of my New York gigs in the late '80s and early '90s was playing [Charles Wuorinen](#) and [Milton Babbitt](#) and everybody...[Rolv Yttrehus](#) wrote a terrifying piece that I spent, you know, eight months doing nothing but. A reviewer came and said lovely things, but of course the polyrhythms in the clapping of the audience were almost as interesting as the polyrhythms in the music. I didn't regret a single moment, but it got to a certain point and I had to make a call like that too. I say youth is not wasted on the young when I see scores like that now, and I salute everyone who

is not young who is still spending that kind of time and energy, but I can't play that kind of music any more. And I get choked up just like I get choked up about how little Brahms I play. When I hear a great performance of a new work of Charles Wuorinen, who I loved—he was one of my absolute favorites. I remember doing his [String Sextet](#): two cellos, two violas, two violins up at [June in Buffalo](#) with him conducting on [NPR](#). It was just...I was the bottom, and [Josh Gordon](#) was the other cellist and we were ripping it, and that was...wow, talk about being alive, but man...it's a tough road.

**DAVID STAROBIN:** For me it was always the composer god, and if I found someone who I thought was saying something that I really felt was important and great, for me there's no greater thing than to be able to serve that person through an interpretation. I've got my handful of guys that I'd go to the end of the earth to play their music and to convince them to write yet another piece. I think it's just very much what your personality is like.

**DOMINIC FRASCA:** Have you gotten yourself into the situation where you asked somebody to write something and you get it and you just go, "I have to learn this?" You've committed to it and then just as you're working on it you're thinking, "I'm going to play this and this is not really what I want to play."

**DAVID STAROBIN:** I have, absolutely. It happens. But each time it happens, it's a lesson for me in being a little more careful, a little more selective, and making sure the person you're hooking up with is someone who is going to produce something that has a good probability of being something that you're going to want to play. And that I guess is just getting older and finding the right person and going with that. But sure, it's happened to everyone in this business who gets a new piece.

**MARK STEWART:** Well, I remember when I was playing trios for [Gil Kalish](#) and he was describing when he and [Joel Krosnick](#) would get a new piece you know from...it was the [Ralph Shapey](#), actually. He'd just gotten another one and he was tuning the low C down to low A all the time now, got the new piece and went through the score [saying] "What was he thinking!" and it was so heartwarming because, of course, that's what I was doing when I got a new piece, you know, throwing it across the room. Then you put it back on the stand and you start fighting the good fight and if you stay in there then you find out what they're thinking.

**DAVID STAROBIN:** There is still music that I won't touch because [it will take] three years to prepare and then it's over. I think we all know who the composers are who have big reputations for being that way and, you know, if it's something you can't handle then you just steer clear and there's always someone 20 years younger who will do it, so...*[laughs]*.

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** You spoke earlier about this composer as god perception, and does that also imply that you have a very hands off approach when they're composing, that you wait until you have the product and you look at and only change what's absolutely necessary or is it a product more of a collaboration?

**DAVID STAROBIN:** Well, that's a couple of questions with different streams and answers. I would say composers that I've tended to work with have been really crafty composers who don't make too many mistakes, so the kinds of adjustments you're talking about are generally minimal. As far as hands off in the creative process, I'm pushy, and so if I'm talking to a composer pre-compositionally and I think I have an idea, I try to get that across in terms of length of piece I'm talking about or, in the case of my closest friends, occasionally stylistically maybe pushing them in a certain direction. But that said, once they start the piece, it's their piece and I'm out of the

picture until I get the score. I can be a yenta and kind of pre-compositionally say what I want and bug 'em, but once they're writing the piece, it's all theirs and that's it.

**DAVID LEISNER:** I think the better composers that I've worked with tend to be more open in general to what they deliver as a finished project. I think they consider it kind of a first draft in a sense and sometimes, you know, there's little or nothing to be done and sometimes you do have to work things. So far in my experience the better composers tend to be very flexible. It may be something technical or it may be a structural thing. You might say, "Well, this is going on for too long, what do you think about that?" And they may say, "Yes, you're right," or they may say, "Well, I'm not sure that's really true. Why don't you live with it a little bit longer?" and then they're absolutely right in the end, you know. But at least there's a discussion that can happen, but I'm different than David in that I don't like to meddle too much in pre-composition. I'd rather that the composers take it where they want to take it, but if they ask me, I'll give them something.

**DAVID STAROBIN:** I'm talking about just a couple of people that I can do that with who I know very well, people who are more like family than anything else. Mostly someone like a Ruders who tends actually to have several different styles that he writes in and so if you can sort of hype him on a particular type of piece beforehand, you're likely to get something in that direction. But that generally does not apply—it's more like what David described.

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** When you talk about stylistic differences within a particular composer's output with someone like Ruders, is it something about the way he approaches the instrument as a guitar or as a timbre? Some of his music seems to be guitar music to me and some of it seems to be a sort of absolute music using a particular timbre and instrument, but not referencing certain idiomatic characteristics of the guitar.

**DAVID STAROBIN:** I would say he's first and foremost a contrapuntalist, and so those are his concerns, those are the things that interest him. The flamenco-based music, strumming and chords and stuff, it's not his cup of tea, so the pieces are not going to go that direction. I think every composer really has strong preferences as far as extra-musical things, and so the kinds of effects-based composers, guys who really rely on a lot of effects and sound quality and things like that are in a completely different boat than guys who think about the instrument in a more traditional note against note way. And Poul Ruders specifically, he's trained as an organist so I think he thinks contrapuntally first. We don't have so many composers who are based in that aesthetic, so it's nice to find one.

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** What is your experience of working with other composers who have written for you? What are the parameters that they give you? In jazz, I imagine, it is much more open...

**JAMES EMERY:** In particular the kind of jazz that I'm associated with it's really open, people like Anthony Braxton, Leo Smith, Muhal Richard Abrams—really forward looking people who are concerned equally with textures and colors and effects-oriented things. It's refreshing to hear what you have to say because it's kind of new to me. Most of what I'm doing concerns my own music, so I'm not really dealing with those issues. I'm basically doing my own thing and trying to bring out in what I do the kinds of things that appeal to me. And I was thinking about something that you [David Leisner] said earlier. You said you feel like you're divided as a guitarist and a composer. To me, it's all one thing.

**DAVID LEISNER:** I know that's true! But that's because you're an improviser. I'm a terrible improviser.

**JAMES EMERY:** But I write a substantial amount of through-notated material.

**DAVID LEISNER:** I'm sure you do, but at the root you're an improviser and that's why for you it's the same impulse.

**JAMES EMERY:** It really is. It's really about what part of the process I'm working on: organizing the material and getting ready to perform and record, then I'll be thinking about how I'm going to bring this out when I've already gone through the process of organizing it. So it's really about how am I going to get my music out there in the most accurate and stimulating way possible.

**DAVID LEISNER:** It's really an organic process for you.

**JAMES EMERY:** And then generally when something's over—when it's been performed and recorded—unless we're going to keep performing it, which we do from time to time, I'm done with it. I don't want to hear it again. It's such an immersion kind of thing that it's like: "Enough... Let's move on to the next thing!"

**STEPHEN GRIESGRABER:** What's it like working with the composers that write for [Bang on a Can](#)? Are all of your parts through-composed or do they require a fair amount of input throughout the process?

**MARK STEWART:** It's different from person to person. It's the other side of the spectrum in a certain way. With a lot of the composers we work with, it might be the first time they're ever working with an ensemble that wasn't their own and the kind of notation they use with their ensembles isn't standard at all. It's their own personal vernacular. Our job often times is to be translators and to find a way that they can present not only a piece that we can play but that many other ensembles would be able to play. I remember once crawling in a crawlspace getting very dirty and going and finding [Glenn Branca's microtonal](#) harpsichords that had been in storage for fifteen years—finding the right key, getting the covers open and then a flashlight and writing down what was on each key so that then we could play his score. Of course the harpsichordist was looking at C-sharps and Ds and G-flats and all that stuff, but of course that's not what's coming out. That's just how he could make the translation. That's just one description.

I have played James's pieces and shared a stage playing them, so I actually took directions from the composer. The piece, *Standing on a Whale Fishing*, that was a good one, too.

**JAMES EMERY:** I have put a lot of effort into studying composers and how to write for other people so that they won't have to decipher what I mean. The first time we ran through that piece...

**MARK STEWART:** It played! He was not someone we had to translate. All we had to do was listen to his excitement to even do more and to put a little more oomph in this spot. That was an example where we hardly had to do anything. So we do a lot of work like that. It's these folks that are between the cracks that are not getting the [Guggenheims](#), the [MacArthurs](#)—well, there's some pretty wild folks getting MacArthurs—but a lot of times they don't know about standard notation and so it's a whole other thing.

**JAMES EMERY:** What you're saying reminds me of something what [Duke Ellington](#) said. He didn't write for instruments, he wrote for individuals. So what you're talking about then is someone brings in a piece and they may not be so notationally astute. You're talking about how to play their personal music.

**MARK STEWART:** Yeah, precisely.

**JAMES EMERY:** Something that's really individual to them. Yet you play it with your ensemble and the challenge I would imagine is to retain this personal aspect.

**MARK STEWART:** It doesn't always succeed. People say to me, "You play new music because it's all wonderful and great!" Well, no. It's not all wonderful and it's not all great. "Well, then you play it because most of the music is fantastic!" Well, no. Most of the music isn't fantastic. "Well, then what are you doing?" Well, it's like [homemade beer](#). It's fresh. It's now. It doesn't have to be the great [Belgian beer](#). I know where to get that. It's not my choice to say this is great, this is bad. It's really more me doing the best I can to make it speak. You know there's going to be plenty of time to figure out whether it is great, or good, or lousy. Plenty of time, if that's what you want to do.

**JAMES EMERY:** That the thing that you experience when you're dealing with a living music, stuff that is coming out just right now, it's really a lot like life itself. There are good days and bad days. I think to get to the good days you have to go through the bad days sometimes.