

## John Psathas – Interview Questions

### Introductory questions:

1. *Tell us a little bit about yourself (include where you are from and your cultural background)*

All 4 of my grandparents were part of the population exchange between Greece and Turkey following the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. The villages my ancestors came from are now in Turkey, but my roots are in Greek culture. My parents immigrated to New Zealand in the early 1960s. Their other choices of destination were South Africa, Australia, and Canada.

I grew up in small town New Zealand, a place called Taumaranui. Our family ran food businesses and I grew up working late hours in restaurants. Eventually we moved to the beautiful small city of Napier, an area of New Zealand where the climate, at times, comes close to resembling that of Greece.

My experience has always been that of the outsider. New Zealand was extremely parochial when my parents arrived. It has changed a great deal since then and is steadily transforming into a multicultural society.

The effect on me personally of this life has been to feel that I am not bound by tradition to any particular country. I am neither New Zealand nor Greek, I am partly both, but mostly as a person - and especially as a composer – I have been free to invent myself with few guidelines. This used to be a great burden and made every step that much harder, but I now appreciate just how free from cultural obligation I've been.

2. *Have you ever been to Canada?*

No.

3. *What do you know about Canada?*

Only that a great many artists I admire, and have been led to believe were American, are actually Canadians. There's something familiar about this, something to do with Australia and New Zealand.....

4. *How long have you been composing?*

Since I was 11.

5. *What made you decide to become a composer?*

Around the time of my 11<sup>th</sup> year, I used to work quite late in the family business, often until early morning hours. Later, at home, when everyone was asleep I would listen to music with headphones. I was indiscriminating and listened to whatever records I would find in the house. I started having very intense experiences with certain pieces of music: a powerful emotional reaction, and an experience of being transported to some other place in the human spirit.

I remember an old LP of Daniel Barenboim playing Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata – but I skipped the first movement altogether, it was the fire of the last movement that I wanted. Also, a piece of music called 'Lap of the Gods' on Alan Parson's *Pyramid* album. This was exotic and strange, but heavy with purpose and had an intense trajectory. I listened to these pieces constantly, feeling the music more strongly each time, and being transported further into this mysterious and disturbing realm.

There was nothing else in my life compared to these experiences. I couldn't explain them and I couldn't share them. I began improvising a lot at the piano, trying to find that *thing* that I was experiencing through music. It was then, when I was 11-12 years old that I decided *the best thing I could do with my life was to crossover into this concealed world where I could be the person creating the music that gave other people this incredible experience.*

This has been my aim ever since, and my belief in the value of this ambition hasn't wavered. I became a music theory junkie and lived at the piano, often playing all through the night and going bleary eyed to school the next day.

6. *What instruments do you play?*

I studied piano and played jazz as a student. My best experience as a performer was the decade I spent in a local Greek band, playing at weddings, taverna evenings, and other social gatherings. I learnt a lot about the immediacy of music and the beautiful role of music as a social cohesive. Now I have a performance shyness that keeps me off stage. Of all things, I mostly miss the joy of making music with others.

7. *What were your favorite composers when you started composing (of any musical genre)? And now?*

**Then** (1970s/80s) - Keith Jarrett, Beethoven, Alan Parsons, Peter Gabriel, Toto, Billy Joel, Joe Jackson, Chick Corea, Split Enz, Bach, Prince, and all of the Greek music saturating our house and restaurant.

**Now** - Kevyn Chemirani, Yasmin Levy, Bijan Chemirani, Pat Metheny, Keith Jarrett, Mamak Khadem, Nitin Sawhney, Brian Blade, Beethoven, Jeff Buckley, Paul Avgerinos, Manos Achalinotopoulos, George Carlin, Christos Hatzis, Ross

Daly, Mercedes Sosa, Haig Yazdjian, Atahualpa Yupanqi, Morton Feldman, Bill Hicks, Mesomedes of (ancient) Crete, Stravinsky, Zakir Hussain, Bela Bartok, Chick Corea.

8. *What are some of your upcoming projects?*

As part of my 2010 residency for the Auckland Philharmonia I'm writing a concerto for the multi-talented New Zealand musician Warren Maxwell. A singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist, this concerto will also be a song. Warren plays guitar, piano, saxophone, harmonica, and has a beautiful, compelling, singing voice. Warren currently fronts the group 'Little Bushman'.

Also as part of the residency I'm constructing a concert length orchestral program of Greek music. The music will be drawn from 2500 years of Greek history, from ancient Greece to living Greek composers. This will also involve a percussion quartet and two phenomenal folk musicians from Greece; clarino master Manos Achalinotopoulos, and percussion virtuoso Vagelis Karypis.

I hope to be working again with Serj Tankian (from System of a Down), on his new symphony.

I'm currently writing a work for solo piano and tape, as well as a solo violin work. Also, I have several CD projects coming to fruition, one a collaboration between Greek folk musicians and NZ electronica artists, the others recordings of my recent works.

Interview questions:

9. *One of things we like to discuss is the relationship that exists between a composer and the audience. Fifty years ago, many composers were writing music that pushed experimentalism to new extremes. It was a time when artists were creating art for art's sake, where concepts overruled expression and the audience was of secondary importance. Now, things have changed. More and more composers are writing music that communicates directly to the audience, making it an integral goal to their creations. Why do you think that is so? In other words, in your years of being a composer and of witnessing this transition, what do you think were the factors that led to this change of attitude in today's composers?*

The key factor in this shift has to be the loss of dominance and control over thinking by a particular generation of composers. Also, new art music became the (almost fatal) casualty of composition entering the universities and being taught by composers who no longer needed to justify their existence in terms of social interest in their music.

The emergence of composers who developed an audience base outside of this environment (e.g. Steve Reich), gave pause for thought to a great many others.

Realizing it was possible to be a composer society was interested in, without deviating from your artistic journey, gave many a new courage; a courage to be free from the freedom of the ivory tower. In my student days there was definitely a particular message filtering through, (and it was hypocritical):

“ You are studying to be a composer in an environment that is free from the pressures of having to conform to traditional practice. You are free! Do whatever you please, you are even free from having to worry whether *anyone* will *ever* be interested in your music. You are utterly and totally free! Oh, by the way, the following things are forbidden.....”

The way out, for some, became clear. Look *outward* not inward. Be *inclusive* not exclusive. I feel lucky (to an extent I can't describe) that I was born at a time that allowed me to witness this transition, and appreciate the value in both approaches (and there are advantages in both, and brilliant music has been written by composers who couldn't care less about who ever heard it). What I think was different for my generation was that we were the first – in a long time – that didn't feel totally beholden to the establishment, that each one of us might write our own unique set of rules.

Now, things are so much easier with technology and the wider dissemination and consumption of music. I don't see many composers getting any richer, but they can certainly share their music in a way that was never possible before.

10. *Is the audience an important factor to consider when composing?*

The better question is - What do you mean by audience?

Do you mean a room full of people hearing the piece together, once?

Or do you mean one person, alone, listening to the piece many times during their lifetime?

Personally, I don't think of a room full of people when writing. I think of an individual. I have always thought of music as one-to-one sharing. Even when we are part of an audience we can only share our response to the music, not our experience of hearing it. That is very private. And I have always aimed for works that will stand up to, and inspire, repeated listening.

I do consider the overall density of information in music. I have been to many music concerts (and not necessarily contemporary music) in which every piece is so dense with musical information that I eventually lose my ability to process what I'm hearing. I'm conscious of this when composing, and listen to my own works-in-progress from this perspective.

Conversely, I think the modern media world has also influenced me in that I do consider the idea of attention span. I try to make my works as concise as possible and to achieve the most impact I can in that time.

Another vital consideration is the *line* through a piece. I want to grab the listener in a tight embrace, and take them through the work, on a compelling journey. I try to keep the listener intensely focused on the work from start to finish.

11. *What do you think the composer's role and responsibilities are to today's society and/or audience and musicians?*

Given the state of things in our world today this will sound naive. To me the crucial role of all art, whether it is reflective, challenging, or just emotionally gratifying, is to introduce a positive energy into the world. I see our created works of art as millions of positively energized counterweights to the *other* kind of weight which is constantly bearing down on us. The inevitability of death, our inability to share equally and look after each other, the ease in which we are easily distracted from most important things. Ultimately I see art as an energizer, a catalyst. And I wish it to be positively charged. In music, this is hardest because music works in a unique way. Its abstract nature makes it hard to control, and yet it also allows music to be more limitless in its possibility than any other art.

12. *What are some of the things you try to achieve when you compose a piece of music?*

As teenagers we are highly susceptible to being influenced profoundly by music. When we mature into adults, many of us lose this powerful connection we have with music. I think we lose this strong relationship with music because in order to survive in adult society we need emotional filters. But these necessary social tools can eventually inhibit our ability to feel music and other arts strongly.

When composing I am trying my hardest to break through or reach around these filters. My first and most important aim is to find a way to make the mystical connection between one human being and another, a connection that is uniquely possible with music.

I realized recently I am listening almost entirely to improvised music. This is because when improvising, people are trying hardest to communicate without filters. There is immediacy between the impulse and the articulation. What we often hear in improvised music is the *sound of the improviser's sense of wonder at moments of discovery*. Some note-on-paper composers have managed this also. In much of his work Beethoven has managed to embed *in the music itself* his own amazement at the discovery of new ideas and modes of expression. And being Beethoven, he wanted desperately to share this otherworldly experience with humanity. The climactic chords in the 1<sup>st</sup> movement of the Eroica symphony are a great example. I'm convinced that great music from all genres have this revelatory aspect in common, and this is one of the main reasons we go back to certain music over and over again; to relive with the composer or performer moments of transcendental and sublime discovery. First albums by pop and rock artists are often saturated with this sense of discovery.

This is what I am trying to achieve when writing a new work. I try to create from a place where I myself experience thrilling moments of illumination and magical, intuitive connections. And I try to capture this ephemeral energy and embed it in the work so that it can be shared. When this works, there is a positive sharing, and a listening experience that is memorable and repeatable.

*13. What inspires you?*

The world around me. Mostly people. I am fascinated with human beings.

*14. If a young student comes to you and expresses a desire to become a composer, what advice would you give them?*

Inside, part of me sighs deeply. Knowing the struggle and the emotional fortitude needed, the fact that it is impossible to be dishonest with oneself about the quality and worth (or lack of) in one's work, and the truth about how long it will take to arrive at an understanding of whether the sacrifice and self-doubt have been worth it, my initial instinct is advise them to run away, run away, and never look back.

But passion produces strong results, it turns work into play – and, given the opportunity, we will play for many more hours than we will work. My way of responding to students who approach me about being composers, is to try and determine how passionate they really are about this life they want to choose. I often say, “If you can be happy doing something else, then do that instead”. The emotional cost of living a life in art is great, even success can be its own form of creative trauma. The best justification for pursuing this kind of career is that you can't *not* do it. If not pursuing this path makes you unwell and unhappy, then you don't actually have much choice.

How inspiring is that!