

June in Buffalo

Making June in Buffalo Tick—A Talk with David Felder

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David Felder

Randy Nordschow: For the benefit of the uninitiated, could you give us a little bit of history and explain what exactly June in Buffalo is?

David Felder: June in Buffalo is a festival of contemporary music, and it's a festival that focuses on emerging composers. And it also presents them in concert with our senior composers who have been selected primarily because of an expertise and interest in working with young composers. The young composers are selected from an international call that we put out for scores, proposals to have pieces done here and also for some background information including letters and so forth. Generally speaking, we get between 70 and 100 applications each year for about 20 spots. We try to cast the party of the 20 composers so that we have a diversity of positions all represented in a certain sense—not that we're thinking about one from column A and one from column B—but we're certainly thinking about having people who have very different kinds of experiences.



One unique feature of the Festival for the younger composers is that they are working not only in masterclasses with five composers and then working with very dedicated—and in many cases superstar—performers. But they're also presumably bumping into each other quite often in masterclasses and then socializing. It's very important, I think, that they make contacts with one another and they begin to explore different cultural positions, different points of view, including making future contacts for generational development of a kind of composer community. And that's one of the things that I've been very pleased about, because now I think there are over 500 people who have been through the program in the 20 years that I've done it. I hear often from people that it's been a very important week for them. That it's changed their minds and their way of doing things in many, many ways and they continue to really take sustenance from it, including the people that they've met here, not just the faculty and the performers, but the colleagues who they went through the week with.

I came here about 21 years ago and June in Buffalo, which had been run by Morty Feldman was defunct. He tired fairly quickly of doing the festival. It's a lot of work. He had a slightly different perspective on things than I do. His idea was that the younger composers could come and sit as disciples receiving pearls of wisdom from the senior faculty who would dispense them. And that certainly is a valuable point of view, and an interesting point of view. But I really felt in the mid-80s when I came here, that aside from the five or six people who went to Tanglewood, and the six or eight people who went to Aspen in the summers, there were no opportunities for younger composers who were doing serious work in the country to hear their pieces well played, and to find out what other people were doing. So I felt like there was a huge void. And so what I did when I restarted June in Buffalo when I came here was to shift the focus so that young composers would not simply be receiving pearls of wisdom, but they'd also get smoking hot performances of their pieces, which gave them a really fair chance to evaluate how they were doing.

One of the things, as you know, that is so problematic for a young composer is, it's hard to know how well you did if a conservatory third-year viola student doesn't really want to play your piece, but is being forced to. You get, at best, a lukewarm performance. And it's very difficult to tell how you're doing when you compare what you're doing to some performances you might hear of really seasoned, great, new music virtuosi, let's say, who are playing other work. It's hard to know how you're doing. So this was a very important component of really wanting to fulfill a strong need that the field had, which is why we brought this back and put it on the air. And that's what we've continued to do. Each year I change the focus a little bit. As you saw this year was different kinds of quartets: percussion quartet, the Arditti String Quartet, and then the SATB model for vocal writing. This was an overtly musical year. Next year, for example, will be computers and music technology. So we'll be doing pieces which will be more involved with live interactive computer music, installations—we'll obviously also have concerts on the stage. And we'll have video and possibly even some dance and other kinds of things where we're going to explore different uses of technology. So that's what I do to keep it alive for me. It's not the same thing every year. I try to change the focus and change the cast of the party and make it, I think, relevant to the field more. There are a lot of other things I'd like to do. Maybe at some point it would be interesting to get some cross-disciplinary work going where you had people who were working in different fields—and I don't mean just artistic fields, but putting scientists together or writers together with composers and so forth and see what happens. We've started some of those discussions along the way. So that's the broad sweep in terms of the history of the festival.

RN: I want to pick up on that "party" that you cast each year, in particular the senior composers that you cast. You consistently manage to attract such a diverse cross-section, much more so than any student might encounter at Aspen or Tanglewood. And June in Buffalo has been doing this for a very long time.

DF: I used to have hair when I was first started this so that's how long it's been.

RN: In my opinion, as well as some of the students that I've been talking to, June in Buffalo is an amazing experience because composers get to see how the other aesthetic half thinks. Do you want to speak to that?

DF: I would just say to that that I really am thankful that not only you picked that up, but also the students pick it up because it's caused some consternation in the past. Even consternation among faculties that I might bring together for a year where maybe there's a little more rubbing and friction than there could be. I'm paraphrasing, but I think it was Schoenberg who said "without heat, basically there's no transformation." Right. And what I'm interested in, not only in my own music but everything in my life, basically is how you turn one kind of energy into another kind of energy. And if June in Buffalo is essentially a self-congratulatory week and aren't we all wonderful, then what's gained? I feel my most profound learning experiences—and they continue to be this way—are when I mess up. When I've tried something that didn't work because I continually try to do that within whatever my limits are in a certain sense and I just find personally as an artist that that's how you keep growing. You keep trying to do things that you don't know how to do—quite—if you understand what I mean. It'd be a dilettantish to try to do things that you don't know anything about, but there needs to be something, to paraphrase again, to reach for that exceeds your grasp.

So this week, in putting together people who you wouldn't normally associate with one another, the students get five different perspectives in lectures and masterclasses, unlike many academic environments where people are basically patting each other on the back because they all study with composer X and they hear the same thing in the lessons. One of my students said to me the other day, "You said this to me and this guy said completely the opposite," and I said "Good." I know that sounds perverse, but that's what I want to happen. And that's why, three or four months from now, I'll get mail in my inbox saying that, "The week threw me for a totally loop, but I feel now it's been the most important week that I've ever had. I learned more this week than I have from my teachers in the last year and so forth." I think if I had a way to make a school for composers, and I don't mean to be overly critical of either universities or schools of music or conservatories, but this is what it ought to be. It ought to be composers working in some sort of studio setting with musicians around and guidance from people who are a little bit more senior and really having a chance to—touch is not the right word—grab hold of their material and try things out and see what happens. And it's difficult now because the university environments aren't that, and in the conservatories, everybody's in a practice room shedding Strauss excerpts 12 hours a day. So you can understand why the kids in the conservatories are not very interested in doing new music. So the attitude that I came up, which is the one I just told you, is to just keep reaching, keep trying. I think that's died down a little bit now because of the sort of practicalities of the world in a lot of ways. But this is not a practical field, so let's not pretend it is.

RN: The model of actually having a program and a university that was June in Buffalo all year round, could you imagine? That would be amazing.

DF: Well that's what I would be interested in. I mean your colleagues and your university administration probably won't allow that to happen because it sounds kind of anti-academic. But we're talking about making artists. We're not talking about making people who can teach sophomore theory, right? This is a different kettle of fish. Maybe you can teach sophomore theory, but that shouldn't be the reason that you're trying to pursue an advanced degree in composition.

RN: Being in the dorms along with all of the students, everybody is getting to know each other really quickly. One of the things I've noticed that is different from when I was a student here nine years ago is that sort of frictional rub that may still exist among the senior composers isn't trickling down to the students as much. This is really cool to see. Do you feel that after years of doing the festival, that students these days are a lot less likely to align themselves into opposing stylistic camps?

DF: Yeah, the word I would use—and it doesn't just have to do with teachers, but it has to do with everything in life—is identification. If you identify with something, then in a way you can't see clearly, or you can't hear clearly, or you can't behave clearly. So one thing that I generally like, and I think this has now become more of a change in the younger composers now is they're less identified at the moment. They don't feel as much like they have to carry their teacher's flag. I think that's a healthy thing. I don't feel like there's as much codependence as there might have been before. I'm sure there are frictions, but I don't necessarily feel the frictions, and I haven't heard anything this time at all about there being any particular problems. Even if there are, my attitude is this too shall pass, as they say.

RN: Let's talk about a little bit about your piece that going to be performed on tonight's concert. Can you tell us something about it?

DF: Yeah, it's been a really tremendously fun project for me. I have a really good friend who is this wonderful bass singer, Nicholas Isherwood. The way that I've always enjoyed writing music the most is to work with individual performers, for instance, to be able to write a quartet for the Ardittis that they commissioned the other night. These are joyful experiences for me. It's not that writing music for orchestras isn't joyful, it's just very different. There's less a process of trial and error and experimentation than there is in working with your friends. Isherwood got together a project that he made called *Project Isherwood* and he proposed it to some European festivals. He got three or four festivals to kick in a little bit of funding each, and I was one of the five composers that he commissioned. Through my own personal interest, there have always been long extended slow sections in my music which are very meditative. So I said to myself, since it was the voice, why not actually write a meditation. The process was really a lot of fun. Isherwood was sent a whole bunch of materials which he recorded in IRCAM and then the session was posted on their site and we downloaded it and chopped up the materials. And I worked with the incredible J.T. Rinker who does everything, including his duties as managing director of June in Buffalo, and two people from IRCAM—Ben Thigpen and Olivier Pasquet. We made this eight-channel, I think, very beautiful piece entirely out of Isherwood's voice materials. We're already at 14 minutes even though the piece was originally commissioned for ten. I had all these materials, and it turns out that I've only gotten through some unvoiced plosives, some breath sounds, and some very beginnings of harmonic singing. I haven't even gotten through all of the categories of speech sounds that are mentioned in the *Book of Formation*, and I'll get back to that in a minutes. So now the project will be probably 50 minutes to an hour when it's all done.

The other person we're collaborating with is a really wonderful film and video maker who's also a dear friend of mine named Elliot Kaplan. He's in New York [City], but he teaches here; he was the documentary filmmaker for Cage-Cunningham. He's a beautiful filmmaker in a kind of more traditional way; he makes beautiful images. And we decided to make this piece which is called *Hashmal*. Hashmal is one of 32 potential states of consciousness that's mentioned in a medieval Jewish mystical book called the *Book of Formation*. This book was an amazing revelation when I read it because it opened up a whole Hebrew Jewish meditative tradition that was linked in some ways to something they would call prophesy. It was tremendously interesting to me because this was all done about a year before they were planning a visit by the Dalai Lama and we were having some of the Tibetan monks here who were going to do chanting and so forth. So, we finished the piece up so that it would be ready as a kind of introduction to the Dalai Lama's visit. The same night that Philip Glass was here,

we started that whole event with that piece in this space. So part one is done now and it's 14 minutes long. And we have two more parts to go, and we hope to premier that in June of '08, and hopefully we'll get it down to New York at some point and, and maybe you can see it there.

RN: I'd love to. You talked about how it is an amazing gift to the students to have these performers. But I was talking to one of the students last night, and he said, "I get this amazing performance, but I'm not necessarily getting a long-lasting relationship." It made me think maybe there can be some way to figure out how one composer could get a commission to write for the group. Are you thinking of ways to build longer lasting relationships with some of the students and the performers if they click?

DF: I have never really liked beauty contests and what I mean by that is the field is littered with competitions. You can enter a competition, and win a competition, and then sometimes something happens from that. I've been at Darmstadt a few times and they had something called the Kranichsteiner Prize there. When there was this prize, there was this competitive atmosphere and all these composers really behaved a little bit like pigs at the trough who hadn't eaten in several months. I think that that's a problem the field has already. Composers do not behave collegially with one another. They often undercut one another. It's a very competitive field. So the answer would be I can understand that somebody might be disappointed that he doesn't get a long-lasting relationship in a sense, but that would be up to that person to build for example. If you were read and recorded and rehearsed by the Ardittis, for example, they certainly are going to remember who you were. They're certainly going to remember your piece because they have your score; it's all marked and it's going to go into their archives. If they really liked it and felt that they wanted to do something by a younger American composer, let's say, then they certainly would be free to do that.

Last year we had Ensemble SurPlus here. Ensemble SurPlus is a German group which is led by an American pianist named James Avery and they're a great group. Last fall they played a concert called music from June in Buffalo. They played a piece of mine, and then they played three student pieces that they liked from here. So it does happen on occasion. I think it's less likely to happen with the Ardittis, but I don't think that it's impossible. There's one person who's here who's already had two different string quartets performed by the Ardittis at two different festivals. In other words, he sent us those pieces and we said he's already had two shots with the Ardittis, he doesn't need another one. So we ended up having a choral piece of his done.

My attitude is that there are relationships to be made and you can make those relationships on your own, perhaps. But for us to name a winner at the end of the week would change the dynamics of the whole week. I think it would change even the way the students relate to each other. They would be very happy that somebody got X, Y or Z, but then they might go home and be grumbling because they deserved it: "I'm better than he or she is." I'd rather leave that out of the week.

RN: That's a good point. Anything else you want to add?

DF: No, just thanks for being here. It's great to have you guys here. I guess one last thing to add is that Buffalo is linked in a lot of ways with the Rust Belt, bad climate, and snow and so forth. We haven't gotten nearly the attention that the festival deserves. I think it's widely regarded as probably the best American contemporary music festival in the rest of the world. But it's been very hard for us to become noticed by our own culture. And with your help too, the fact that AMC is here and so forth, I hope that will change. I think it was John Harbison who called it a national treasure in a letter he wrote last year to some foundation. Not to seem self-serving, but I think it is.

RN: I think everybody here right now feels that way, too. June in Buffalo isn't really an underdog, yet it seems to have that perception.

DF: It's weird. It's because of Buffalo. I mean it's because Buffalo comes with a lot of baggage attached. How can anything good happen *there*? I joked about it for a lot of years, but now having been here for a lot of years it's puzzling. It's quite puzzling because in fact, the facilities are great. The performers are great. There's nothing really about the week that one can moan about. You could find things to moan about I suppose, but it is something that ought to be taken note. A few years ago we had somebody here who was a federal judge in Washington D.C. She came to the festival because she was interested in contemporary music. And she wrote to *The New York Times* and said "How can you not have some reporter at this festival for the whole week? You go to Tanglewood, and you go to Aspen, but here's the most important American contemporary festival and you don't go there." So *that* is what I'd like to say.