“Appetite Comes with Eating” –

A Conversation with Stephen Dankner

Every so often, a composer comes along who enriches the body of repertoire for an instrument with several works of distinction. Composers such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin have all written masterpieces for various solo instruments, and this tradition has continued until the present day. For the saxophone, masterpieces have come from Jacques Ibert, Alexandre Glazunov, Frank Martin, Bernhard Heiden, Paul Creston, and many others. Such works have unquestionably withstood the test of time, are regularly studied, and performed internationally.

Among those friends who continue to add rich musical gifts is Stephen Dankner (www.stephendankner.com). His music embraces the romanticism, tonal language, and rhythmic energy reminiscent of his celebrated teachers Henry Brant, Paul Creston, Vincent Persichetti, and others. Each of his saxophone compositions fits the instrument like a glove, bringing to the forefront Dankner’s appreciation for its inherent lyricism, power, and tonal versatility. His journey with energetic saxophonists began only twenty years ago, and his enthusiasm for it is unceasing. The following interview throws back the sash and tells a story about how Stephen Dankner has become a close friend of the saxophone in such a short time. On April 13, 2017, I interviewed the composer at his home in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Q: What initially drew you to music in the first place?

A: Well, I remember I was seven years old, and my parents asked me what I wanted for my birthday, and I said, “a piano.” But they didn’t want to get a piano for me because they thought I would be infatuated with it and then lose interest and then they would have this expensive white

elephant in the room. So, I didn't get a piano. Instead, they bought me a little toy piano. For my eighth birthday, they asked me the same thing, and I said "a piano." I didn't get it. Finally, by my tenth birthday I got a piano. My father drove me down to a warehouse and he bought an old, decrepit upright for $75, had it delivered to the basement in our house in Queens, and there it sat until I was about 22 years old. My father painted it red – it looked like a whorehouse piano; I don't know what he was thinking. It had fragile, yellowing ivories that would fall off if I played too loud. And, it was always out of tune.

I always loved the sound of music. When I got the piano, I couldn't read music, but I was fascinated by music notation. I went to a neighbor's house; she had a piano, and had a collection of printed music. I remember seeing and asking to borrow a big, green book of printed music containing piano pieces of various kinds. The music looked it as if it was written in a secret language. Finally, I asked for a piano teacher, and my parents found a neighborhood piano teacher who charged $7.00 for a half-hour lesson; and I learned how to read music.

Later on, after I'd been playing for about four or five years, I met a friend in junior high school; he was a clarinet and saxophone player. His teacher was a friend of the second bassoonist in the New York Philharmonic, Frank Ruggieri, who he enlisted to get us free tickets to hear the New York Philharmonic perform at Carnegie Hall. At that time, during my early, musically formative years, it was very interesting because I was not familiar with classical music at all, and I quickly became enthralled and addicted to it. The first piece that won me over was Schumann's Second symphony, conducted by Paul Paray, a very well regarded and famous French conductor at that time. So I got really interested in classical music. As high school progressed, my love for classical music got stronger and stronger, and we attended New York Philharmonic concerts all

the time. My friend's teacher was Vincent J. ("Jimmy") Abato[1], who was the source of the tickets. I never met Abato, but I heard of him later because of his connection to Paul Creston. So there was an early Creston-Abato connection when I was in high school, around 1962, so everything that followed was incentivized by the clarinet and the alto saxophone, even before I began to write music, I became interested in music via, indirectly, the saxophone.

I first started composing when I was fifteen, and again, it was my friend, the clarinet/sax player, who once made a casual remark that he had another friend who wrote his own music, and that idea stuck with me. I was playing Chopin and Bach (by this time I had acquired a better piano teacher) in high school, so I decided, "why don't I try and do that?" So I bought some music paper and started improvising, and by that point I could read music well. I remember the first thing I wrote was a Jewish dance - a waltz in D minor. Many years later, in 2012, I used the theme from it in my Twelfth String Quartet. So, fairly soon, I came to think of myself as a composer.

Q: Which composers had the biggest influence on you growing up?

A: I would say Edvard Grieg and George Gershwin. I fell in love with the Grieg Piano Concerto—as a pianist, I loved their piano music. My first, neighborhood piano teacher had this book of easy-to-play arrangements of the classics, and it included a boiled-down, two-page version of the Grieg Piano Concerto with all of the first movement's themes in it (!) Bad as it was musically, it helped me connect with something that I had no hopes of ever learning how to play, because it was more difficult than I could ever hope to perform.

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[1] Vincent J. Abato (1919-2008) had a long and successful performing/teaching career as a clarinetist and saxophonist, including stints with the New York Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the Glenn Miller Band, and the Juilliard School of Music. He is also known for his early performances and recordings, notably the Sonata and Concerto of Paul Creston, as well as the concerti by Jacques Ibert and Alexandre Glazounov. "Vincent J. Abato: In Memoriam", www.michlinmusic.com/abato/tributes.php. Accessed July 6, 2017.

By the time I was 15 or 16, composition became more addictive than spending endless hours practicing and learning other composers' music. I didn't like to practice; it was more fun to make my own music. By the time I was in high school, when I finally had a really good piano teacher, and every time I was assigned a Bach prelude and fugue, or an invention, or a Chopin nocturne, or a Mozart sonata, I would instead spend most of my week writing a piece in the style of the pieces that I was assigned instead of practicing. That was my idea, not my teacher's. But the real metaphorical leap was when I became familiar with Gershwin's music.

My friend who played clarinet and saxophone was a fanatic about Gershwin. So I listened to every Gershwin concert piece, and learned to play many of the Gershwins' great popular and musical theatre songs. I also devoured all of the Gershwin biographies that were available at the time, reading them over and over. I asked my piano teacher if he would assign me the three Gershwin piano Preludes, and I did a good job with them. That's about as far as I got technically as a serious pianist, because those pieces are not easy to play.

Grieg's Piano Concerto was indoctrination, as was going to symphony concerts and hearing Schumann, Brahms, and Beethoven, and everything else, *and* Gershwin. That, plus summertime gigs playing in New York's Catskill Mountains, was my popular music education. There was always a bifurcation in terms of my classical training, which was gradual, and my popular music background, which was always there from the beginning. I wasn't interested in rock and roll. I was only interested in my parents' generation of popular music: Gershwin, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers and Jerome Kern. I was a Romantic from the beginning – age 15.

That's how my musical training began. It was piano-centric, but also expanded gradually into orchestral classical music. I saw Gershwin as a bridge to both musical worlds, and as what he called himself, which was a "modern Romantic." To me, that was the ideal that I set for

myself. Since the music I was playing on the piano was heavily Romantic, I felt that Gershwin was a perfect metaphor because he melded not only Romantic music, but popular music and jazz.

Q: I know that you studied with Paul Creston. When you studied with him, were you aware of the music he had written for saxophone, such as the *Sonata* and the *Concerto*?

A: It's an interesting story how Creston came to be my teacher. I was not a good student in high school, and my low academic grades were an obstacle to my being admitted into the top colleges with good music curricula. But there was a small college in uptown Manhattan – the New York College of Music -, which merged, with New York University in 1968 – but in the early 1960s, was the oldest school of music in the city—it was founded in 1878. I was accepted because my New York Regents Scholarship test scores were surprisingly good.

My first composition teacher was Vittorio Rieti[2]. He was a Neo-classical composer and a colleague of Stravinsky, whose heyday was in the 1920s. The New York College of Music was a wonderful school for me to because it was in New York City—where the action was. The college was tiny, but the students, and especially the faculty – many of them émigrés from Europe after World War II – were very approachable; they were all outstanding musicians – little known today – who truly loved music. They were extraordinarily nurturing, and taught in the *gymnasium*/conservatory tradition. There were only 250 students enrolled; the College accepted you on the basis of your talent, not on your high school grades.

Rieti was a great teacher. He asked me, as a beginner, to write in the style of early Beethoven, to learn the traditional classical forms – minuet and trio; rondo, and sonata-form.

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[2] Italian-American composer Vittorio Rieti (1898-1994) was notable for his neoclassical works, even though he experimented with atonality early in his career. Though not a household name, Rieti did maintain relationships with composers such as Berg, Schoenberg, Hindemith, Prokofiev, and Stravinsky. He emigrated to the United States in 1940, becoming an American citizen in 1944. He held teaching posts at the Peabody Conservatory (1948-1949), the Chicago Musical College (1950-1953), Queens College (1955-1960), and the New York College of Music (1961-1964). "Rieti, Vittorio" in *Oxford Music Online*. Accessed July 5, 2017.

(Does anyone do this today? I'd be surprised if that method of teaching composition is still taught). So I learned the classical way of composing—it was "writing in the style of." But even then, I was starting to write my own music, which was Gershwin-esque. In my first lesson with Rieti, I played my piano ragtime pieces and things that sounded like the Gershwin *Preludes* for him. I was already beginning to incorporate some of the "jazzier" aspects of my popular music playing—and to answer your question in a long-winded way, the saxophone to me was a window into that world, because when I finally did hear the Creston *Sonata* for alto saxophone and piano, I heard a lot of Ravel and Poulenc, which contained what I perceived were jazz elements. So I thought that the saxophone was an instrument that is capable of giving voice to that type of expression, which is something that I wanted to do, as well.

After I studied with Rieti for a year, in 1964, New York College of Music hired Paul Creston to teach composition. Creston was a successful, well-known composer in the early '60s, even though that was the heyday of 12-tone, or serial composition. But in a conservative environment like the New York College of Music, Creston was the right choice – to have a conservative composer on the faculty; to have a "twelve-toner" come in at that time would have been revolutionary, and against the grain of what the New York College of Music stood for, which was, in all aspects, Tradition. Luckily for me, I didn't know any better. I was very happy with Creston (his real name, by the way, was Giuseppe Guttoveggio), who was a nice man with a good sense of humor.

Of course, the first thing I did was to listen to Creston's music, and the first piece of his I discovered was his alto saxophone *Sonata*. I had a recording of him playing it with Jimmy Abato. [recounts how Abato was indirectly the source of tickets to hear the New York Philharmonic] And of course, I wanted to write like Creston. Creston was a very interesting

teacher—he was not liberal in terms of his teaching; he never said, "write whatever you feel like writing." He had this penchant about rhythm. He wrote a book called *Principles of Rhythm*[3], and he insisted that his students had to follow his book, step by step. His mantra was "never have changing meters." [describes how Creston re-barred portions of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*] He had this conception that if you didn't have changing meters, it would make performance a lot easier for performers. Well, I never subscribed to that theory. However, the last movement of my saxophone *Sonata* is entirely in 5/8 meter, so at times I did subscribe to it. He would have liked that, I think. But I did that not because of Creston, but because the last movement of the Ravel String Quartet, which I loved, is in 5/8. What better model than Ravel?

Creston was a good teacher and he was very supportive. Under him I wrote a piano sonata and a clarinet sonata—I didn't write any saxophone music, because the idea of the classical saxophone was not yet in my mind. I was trying to "feel my oats" as a composer and try different things. My graduation piece was an orchestral tone poem, which never got played. A lot of the first year of my two years with Creston was spent on writing esoteric exercises in rhythm according to Creston's theories of rhythmic subdivision. [pulls out a book of manuscript paper containing his rhythmic exercises written under Creston] All of these pieces subsequent to that [indicates manuscript] are exercises derived from his rhythm book. That's how Creston insinuated himself into my compositional training; for me, he was the right composition teacher at the right time.

Q: I think people will be very interested in the Creston connection.

A: He didn't emphasize the saxophone to me when he was teaching. It wasn't his job. He was looking at my music, not talking about his. But I do remember him being very open-minded. His

[3] The book is currently out of print.

favorite composers were Bach and Ravel. He told me to get an orchestral score of Ravel's opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges* and to listen to Bach's organ music. Those composers were his two guiding lights.

Q: What attracts you to the saxophone and writing for it? What do you like about writing for the saxophone?

A: Well, there are so many ways to answer that question. First of all, I didn't write anything for the saxophone until I met Dr. Lawrence Gwozdz, who is Professor of Saxophone at the University of Southern Mississippi, in Hattiesburg. I met him indirectly—it was at a concert in New Orleans. They presented a yearly festival of new music. In 1991 I had written a *Trio* for clarinet, cello, and piano, like the Brahms op. 114, and it was played at their festival. After the concert, I received a phone call from Dr. Gwozdz: "I liked your Trio. Would you consider writing a piece for alto saxophone for me to perform?" I said, "I've never written anything for saxophone, but sure, why not?" So the first thing I did was get an orchestration book and looked up the range and instrumental characteristics of the alto saxophone, and I thought "This reminds me of the Creston *Sonata*," with which I was familiar, and which I loved. And I had heard the saxophone in other contexts: Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* and in the Ninth Symphony of Ralph Vaughn Williams, which uses a whole family of saxophones. So I wrote the first movement of what the *Sonata* became, and I called it a *Rhapsody*, and sent it to Dr. Gwozdz. That was the first piece I wrote for the alto saxophone. Then I said to myself, "This is in sonata form; why don't I just fill it out?" Dr. Gwozdz didn't ask me to fill it out—I later decided to write the second and third movements. The second movement came from another piece, not in its totality, but thematically. It was a piece I'd written called *Voices* for solo harp. That harp piece was never played. Composers like to steal from themselves, or refabricate things, so I took the

opening theme from *Voices* and re-wrote it. The last movement of the *Sonata* came from a piece that was originally conceived as a violin and piano encore. Again, I totally reconfigured it and transposed it to a key that was more compatible for the alto saxophone. So I took two older pieces and re-fashioned them into the second and third movements of my *Sonata*.

By then, I very consciously saw that my *Sonata* was, in my mind, a postmodern sequel to the Creston *Sonata*, for personal reasons as well, since there was a connection between us, inspired by Creston's music and his teaching. I would love to see a performance, and a recording, if anyone cares to do it, of both our sonatas, because I think they would go together very well. I think Creston would have liked and understood my *Sonata*.

Q: Is there anything about the saxophone that doesn't interest you, in terms of writing for it?

A: I've become a little more judicious of late than in some of my earlier music for saxophone(s). For example, when I wrote the *Symphony for Saxophone Chamber Orchestra* in 1998, I included a good number of "top tones." Dr. Gwozdz demonstrated them for me. There are even more in the *Quartet* that I wrote for the Mana Quartet, especially in the fourth movement. However, I heard them play those notes, and I knew they could be done. They wanted a virtuoso piece that would contain the "whole nine yards" of what saxophones can do. I wasn't going to ask them to do anything *avant garde* or radical, like taking the mouthpiece off and blowing into it, but anything that was traditionally-based, yet at the same time virtuosic in terms of expanding the expressive capabilities, like slap-tonguing was, to me, fair game.

These days, if I don't know the players or if I'm writing for the saxophone in a general way, or as an encore piece, like my new *Second Saxophone Quartet* that was commissioned by Project Fusion—I'm very careful. They wanted a piece that was five to seven minutes long; I think my piece came out to last eleven minutes. I guess the so-called "top tones" to me are kind

of a cautionary device—I feel that I've got to be careful because, to me, unless you're writing for people who are really expert, those notes can tend to sound squeaky and uncertain in accuracy. Now, if I'm writing for the best players who are always going to do that kind of thing [play top tones,] I might be a little more liberal. I think the saxophones are at their best when they're in their traditional, standard ranges. I know, for example, that the low notes tend to be loud and are not very flexible in fast passages, and the high notes tend to be thin or shrill, so the heart of the range (the *tessitura*, to use a vocal term) is usually where you want to "live." On the other hand, the baritone has a beautiful upper register, if you can find a great performer who has experience with it, like Dannel Espinoza or Thomas Giles. So, there's little I won't allow myself to do, and I love it all, except that I still feel that the music should dominate, not the technique. Vincent Persichetti, my last composition teacher, used to say: "You can write difficult music, but just make sure it's worth it."

Q: One of your pieces that always stuck out to me is this monumental piece, the *Symphony for Saxophone Chamber Orchestra*. At the time that you wrote it in 1998, there weren't that many large-scale pieces for saxophone orchestra. I'm curious as to why you chose to write something that was so large and ambitious.

A: It was, as Stravinsky said, that when he started writing a new composition, he had a feeling of terror because of the infinite possibilities that lay before him; in other words, *too* much freedom. His key phrase, and the analogy I'm going to make here is "appetite comes with eating." If you don't feel hungry, but then you start eating something, hunger sometimes manifests itself. That's what happened with the *Symphony*.

I had already written the *Sonata*, and I had also written an alto saxophone *Concerto* for Dr. Gwozdz, so I felt that I knew what the instrument could do. I had not written for the other

saxophones, but I felt that since saxophone players, in general, are multi-instrumentalists—they often own and play all the saxophones - that it didn't seem that I'd be taking many risks by writing for all of them, combined.

The reason the piece turned out to be so big was because Dr. Gwozdz asked me to write a piece for his Saxophone Chamber Orchestra at USM in Hattiesburg. I guess he was thinking about a short etude or something. This was at the time when I had hired a career manager to seek out performances of my music, and I was just starting to think about writing orchestral music. I was then living in New Orleans and I had already written several orchestral pieces "on spec," but with no available options for performance.

Around 1997, I started conceiving the idea that I'd like to write orchestral music that had a chance of getting performed. The manager that I hired to promote my music said to me, in passing, "Your music is eventually going to be known by your orchestral music, not your chamber music." Whether that's right or wrong, I don't know, but the idea stuck with me. I said to myself, "maybe he's right; maybe I need to break out." I wasn't getting performances of anything except my first six string quartets and some other chamber pieces. I told myself, "I'm going to plan to continue to write music that's fairly elaborate for orchestra, but, to be practical, I should write a study piece first—something not orchestral, but as elaborate – like a chamber symphony for winds." That idea became the genesis of the *Symphony for Saxophone Chamber Orchestra*. It came when I was trying to break out of the 20-minute, small chamber ensemble conception. Dr. Gwozdz didn't know about my idea; I didn't tell him what I was planning. Then, I handed him this thirty-minute piece. But, to my surprise, when he received the score, he didn't acknowledge any challenges; in fact, he welcomed it!

I knew how difficult it would be to learn and perform – and to conduct - especially when I began writing the last movement, but composing the music took precedence over caution. I just felt that in this case, it was important to "break out." I was thinking of, and was inspired by, the last movement of Brahms' Fourth Symphony. However, a chaconne is really not identical to a passacaglia, although most musicians will say that it is. A chaconne, the form I had chosen for the last movement, is strictly a harmonic succession of chords, not necessarily a bass line pattern (either ascending or descending). Instead, there's the harmonic emphasis on a repeated eight-measure chord progression. And, in my *Symphony*, I maintain the same rather dissonant repeated chord progression in all 32 variations. I was doing my Brahms "thing," but in a modern way. By this point in my creative journey, like Gershwin, I eventually became a "modern Romantic," which was my goal from the beginning of my musical odyssey as a composer.

Q: How did you start working with the Mana Quartet?

A: They contacted me. I got a phone call as I was driving from Thomas Giles, and he said: "We're playing at USM and Dr. Gwozdz recommended that we give you a call to write a piece for us." I remember that I erratically pulled over to the side of the road, and that I was then looking for a new composition project. Honestly, I thought that I had already written enough saxophone music, and I was afraid of becoming "overspecialized." It's not that I didn't like the saxophone anymore, but I was asking myself "What more could I do with it that I hadn't already done?" But it had been about ten years since I had written anything for saxophone(s), so I was ready to be tempted to do it again. We had several subsequent phone calls, and I decided to agree to compose a work for the Mana Quartet.

The Mana players told me the kind of piece they wanted was in a neo-Romantic idiom. Of course, my style had gotten more contemporary over the last fifteen or twenty years, so the

Mana's *Quartet* is not as conservative throughout, as it would have been had I written it in 1997 when I composed the *Sonata* for alto saxophone and piano. As it turned out, I'm very satisfied with the *Quartet*, and the recording the Mana Quartet eventually made is fantastic. They've played the piece over forty times, and I'm thrilled that it was a success and that they found it to be a work with which they were happy.

Q: With all the discussion that's gone on amongst saxophone players about saxophone tone quality, is there any specific saxophone tone quality that interests you? I know that some composers that I've spoken to over the years just hear a saxophone, and when it comes to the nuances of the sound, some of them didn't give it that much thought. For most of your saxophone music, the players you're writing for all come from the same lineage, so does that factor into how you conceive the piece?

A: I can't help but say "yes," because Dr. Gwozdz was a mentor to me in demonstrating how to conceive melodic lines for the saxophone, in the way that Paul Creston was a composition master, and Henry Brant was an orchestration maestro. When, as a student, you find people who are experts, it's your responsibility to listen and learn from them; the payoff is that you'll get inspired by their legacy – that's your reward; you become an acolyte of theirs, whether knowingly or not, following in the tradition they've set before you.

So, I guess enough of the Romantic aesthetic still lives in me to want to be able to write a piece that makes the saxophones, especially in the *Quartet*, sound like an incarnation, but of course on their own terms, of what a string quartet can do. I have to confess that I'm a composer who loves the string quartet medium first and foremost. It's a *genre* that I aspire to in terms of chamber music, which, for me is a universal conception: if you're writing for multi-

instrumentalists you want them to *sound like one instrument*; you want them to blend in such a way that conversationally they talk *to* each other; they talk *with* each other.

The sound of the saxophone comes from the aesthetic that Dr. Gwozdz instilled within me, and yet, at the same time, the strings are my guideposts for the blend and the conversational aesthetic. I have written 20 string quartets since 1991. The saxophone quartet that I wrote for the Mana Quartet, though based upon my conception of how the string quartet as a medium blends, is however, unique; it's *sui generis*; I'm not going to transcribe it for strings.

When Dannel [Espinoza] approached me to write a second quartet, though on a smaller scale, I said, "I can't duplicate what I did with the first *Quartet*." So, I approached it in a different way; I treated it more conservatively; there are no top tones, for example. I conceived it in the most lyrical manner I could imagine. When the saxophone is played expressively, as I know it to be capable of sounding, it is truly magnificent—it's beautiful.

Q: Do think that there's any ideal musical setting for the saxophone, or do you feel that it's versatile enough to be included in anything?

A: It's very versatile. The saxophone, though, is unfortunately still fighting the battle for recognition. I remember when I wrote the alto saxophone *Concerto* for Dr. Gwozdz: the first performance was with the Monroe, Louisiana Symphony—not a great performance because the orchestra was an amateur ensemble. The conductor of the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra at that time, Klauspeter Seibel, who was a sort of mentor/patron for me—he premiered seven of my eight symphonies with the LPO—was not a big fan of the saxophone. I'll never forget that after a performance of one of my orchestral pieces, Dr. Gwozdz and I went backstage to see maestro Seibel in the green room. Dr. Gwozdz didn't know Seibel, but he fearlessly approached him and said "Steve Dankner's a great composer! You have to commission him to write a concerto for

saxophone that I will play with the Louisiana Philharmonic!" And so, it happened. That was the closest I came to something I would never have done, because I never imagined it would be possible to write a large-scale piece for saxophone and orchestra for a Music Director/Conductor who wasn't enamored of the saxophone!

There are still people that you have to convince that the saxophone can be an accepted classical instrument. They think of it solely in terms of jazz, because they've never heard it in any other musical context.

It's admirable and necessary to write for the saxophones because even at this late date there's an evangelistic spirit required of performers and composers who devote their time, energy and talent to push the envelope to seek acceptance for the instruments. For example, if you were to ever hear a saxophone quartet perform at Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood, which I believe has never taken place, listeners would be amazed. Classical music lovers don't understand what the saxophone has evolved into, with groups like PRISM and the Mana Quartet—they don't know because it's not visible and audible in front of them; because programmers are "gun shy" about taking risks before conservative, often reactionary audiences. Even today, I don't think you can study the saxophone at Juilliard.

Q: You can't.

A: You can't? Why isn't there a saxophone major? There should be—I mean, not at the premiere music school in the country? Can you study saxophone at the Curtis Institute?

Q: I don't think you can study it there either[4].

A: Well, something's wrong. You know, it's a legitimate instrument. Juilliard recently sanctioned jazz as a major study; early music and Baroque performance on original instruments

[4] As of this writing, there is currently no applied saxophone instruction at the Curtis Institute of Music and only jazz saxophone instruction at Juilliard.

have also been added as major area specializations, so why not the saxophone as well? It's clear - there are still battles to be fought and won, and mountains to be climbed and conquered.

Q: Did you ever think that your friendship and collaboration with Dr. Gwozdz would have spread out into all of these different avenues?

A: Well, I at first thought that it would be a calculated risk, but a good one. First of all, as soon as I wrote my alto saxophone *Sonata*, Dr. Gwozdz got on the phone; he photocopied the score, and he sent it to several pianists. He booked a slew of concerts in Eastern Europe and elsewhere to showcase the piece. He was an evangelist in his own way. He also had a connection with Ries & Erler, the Berlin-based German publisher that, through his influence, would soon publish my *Sonata, Concerto,* and *Symphony*. Dr. Gwozdz was a man on the move; a man with a plan.

Q: You've contributed so much to the saxophone in so many different ways, including a sonata, a concerto, a symphony, smaller chamber pieces, and a saxophone quartet. Are there any other potential works you'd be interested in writing?

A: Someday, if someone asked me to, I'd be happy to write a concerto for saxophone quartet and orchestra. I even proposed the idea to the Mana Quartet. But, they'd have to have a connection with an orchestra, or a commission to get it performed. I guess you could say that a saxophone quartet concerto would be a novelty piece, but I don't think so. One thing is certain: the quartet would be heard over the orchestra!

I just finished two recent pieces: a lyrical duo (*Perseus and Andromeda)* commissioned by Dannel Espinoza and his wife, Kristina, for soprano saxophone and harp. The second new work is a *Trio* for the Mana Chamber Players—the Mana Quartet minus the baritone saxophone. Both of these pieces are different—they don't do what I've before. If I can find a way to do something for saxophone(s) that I haven't previously done—in a different way, a different

conception, a different expression—I will consider doing it because I don't like repeating myself. That's always been an ethical thing for me. I have a need to be creative, to say new things in each piece, especially if it's in a *genre* in which I've composed several – or many works, like the string quartet, symphony and for saxophone(s). Even when I composed the alto saxophone *Sonata*, when I transcribed the themes of early works, to create the second and third movements, I re-wrote them from the very beginning, so they were new.

These days as I get older, what's important to me is getting really good performances. After I wrote the Saxophone *Symphony*, it took a number of years to get it performed well. Dr. Gwozdz was wise; he didn't make a recording right away. It took several years to get players that he could train to a very high level so that they were able to perform the work confidently – with outstanding musicianship and incomparable technical prowess.

I love the saxophones. I love writing for players that are wonderfully talented and expressive, and I love the energy that the instrument has inspired in players like you, who bring such verve and enthusiasm to it. The repertoire for saxophones is still a work in progress, and doesn't seem to have been codified yet. You can't build a repertoire solely on transcriptions; you've got to have original works. That's what's eventually going to make the saxophone a universally accepted classical instrument. In my own, individual way, I like to think that I've had the opportunity and good fortune to contribute to that noble effort.

Appendix of Saxophone Works by Stephen Dankner

- Sonata for alto saxophone and piano [1997]. Composed for Dr. Lawrence Gwozdz. Published by Ries & Erler, Berlin. CD recording: *Simply Gifts* (Lawrence Gwozdz, alto

saxophone; Lois Leventhal, piano; Stephen Redfield, violin), Albany Records Troy 378, 2000.

- Concerto for alto saxophone and orchestra [1998]. Composed for Dr. Lawrence Gwozdz. Published by Ries & Erler, Berlin. CD recording: *Hurricane!* (Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra; Klauspeter Seibel, conductor; Lawrence Gwozdz, alto saxophone), Albany Records Troy 429, 2001.
- Symphony for saxophone chamber orchestra [1998]. Composed for Dr. Lawrence Gwozdz. Published by Ries & Erler, Berlin. CD recording: *America Remembers* (The Sax-Chamber Orchestra; Lawrence Gwozdz, conductor), Roméo Records 7216, 2002.
- Romance for solo saxophone (soprano or alto or tenor) [2000]. Recording by Alan Theisen is expected.
- Meditation for alto saxophone and string orchestra (or piano) [2000]. Composed for Dr. Lawrence Gwozdz.
- Quartet for violin, alto saxophone (or viola), cello, and piano [2000]. Composed for Dr. Lawrence Gwozdz.
- Saxophone Quartet [2014]. Commissioned by the Mana Quartet. CD recording: *Vide Supra* (The Mana Quartet), Mark Records 52288, 2016.
- Quintet for saxophone quartet and piano [2015]. Commissioned by the Mana Quartet and Holly Roadfeldt.
- Trio for flute, alto saxophone, and piano [2015]. Commissioned by Duo Fujin and Leslie Downs. Recording by Duo Fujin and Leslie Downs is expected.
- Fantasy for two alto saxophones [2016]. Commissioned to celebrate the retirement of Patrick Meighan.

- *Perseus and Andromeda* for soprano saxophone and harp [2016]. Commissioned by the Kontra Duo (Dannel Espinoza and Kristina Finch).
- Trio for soprano, alto, and tenor saxophones [2017]. Commissioned by the Mana Chamber Players (Michael Hernandez, Michael Mortarotti, and Eric Barreto-Maymi).
- Saxophone Quartet No. 2 [2017]. Commissioned by Project Fusion.