



*David Shifrin's  
words of wisdom.*

BY Keith Powers

# The Master Collaborator

Some musicians land a spot in an orchestra. Some musicians (not many) become famous, well-traveled soloists. Some carve out a freelance life full of various affiliations.

Some become presenters, building a festival or a series for themselves and their fellow musicians. Some become teachers. Some are true innovators, creating musical opportunities that did not previously exist.

Almost no one does it all. David Shifrin is among the few.

What you know about David Shifrin probably depends on where you've intersected with him. For many, especially in New York, it would be his twelve-year tenure as artistic director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. For some, he may have been a colleague, years ago, in one of many orchestras: when he was principal clarinetist with the Cleveland Orchestra, or the American Symphony Orchestra, or in Dallas or Honolulu.

Maybe you were lucky enough to share a chamber music stage with him, like the Guarneri, Emerson, Tokyo and other quartets have, or like Emanuel Ax, or Wynton Marsalis. Or maybe you sat in his classrooms at Yale, where he has taught and directed the chamber music society since 1987. Or at Juilliard, at the Cleveland Institute of Music, or Southern Cal or Michigan.

Maybe you made a recording with him, on one of half-a-dozen labels—perhaps one of the many recordings that have received Grammy nominations. Perhaps you are one of the more than a dozen composers who have written new works for him. Or maybe you are one of the many to have collaborated with Shifrin at Chamber Music Northwest in Portland, where he has been artistic director for almost four decades. Or maybe you were an audience member, at CMNW, or CMSLC, or on one of his many tours.



## CMA HONORS DAVID SHIFRIN AT NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Chamber Music America will present the 2018 *Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award* to David Shifrin on Sunday, January 7 at the Westin New York at Times Square. Shifrin will be interviewed by Fred Child, host of *Performance Today*, preceding the award presentation. More information is available at [conference.chamber-music.org](http://conference.chamber-music.org)

Shifrin performs with Wu Han and David Finckel.



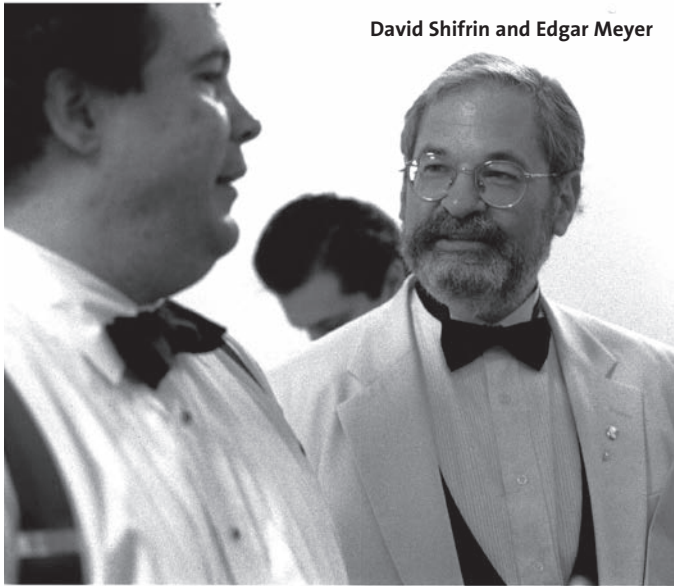
“The music world is full of people who are self-serving and ambitious, driving forward and leaving everyone in their wake,” says the composer and pianist Bruce Adolphe, one of David Shifrin’s long-time colleagues. “David has never been like that.”

Adolphe and Shifrin have their own intersections. They’ve worked together for years in Portland and in New York as chamber music collaborators—mainly with Shifrin as chief administrator, and Adolphe as composer-in-residence, performer, or guest lecturer. Shifrin has performed multiple works written by Adolphe, some of them world premieres. He even played at Adolphe’s wedding.

“Honestly, his leadership style is kind of like playing chamber music,” Adolphe says. “Everything emerges in a collaborative way. It’s not like he feels that he has to do everything. He is a facilitator. Just like in a string quartet, everyone collaborates. They chip in their own ideas, they discuss interpretations. And in the end, it’s not a consensus, it’s more like a common vision. Not a compromise at all, it evolves into a personality, like a family. Really good leadership is like that.”

Shifrin started in orchestras—a couple of the best, especially for a musician at the beginning of his career. He was concertmaster in the American Symphony Orchestra, under Stokowski, and then performed with the Cleveland Orchestra, under Lorin Maazel. Those experiences were rewarding, and offered security—not the least of any musician’s concern—but his notion of success was broader.

“My ideal of what a career is, and what a life in music is, goes back another century,” Shifrin says. “I look at someone like Richard



David Shifrin and Edgar Meyer

Mühlfeld. Brahms wrote great clarinet works for him. He was a concerto soloist. He was a soloist in Bayreuth, for Wagner. He toured with Joseph Joachim. Why would a musician have to be one thing, or another? I've tried to live that way.

"My early experience, the first five years or so of my career—well, I look back on that with some mixed satisfaction at the results," he says, thinking about his time with the American Symphony, and with Cleveland. "I loved that repertory, and I've always tried to keep that connection.

"But then I went to Michigan"—Shifrin taught there from 1976–82—"which gave me all kinds of opportunities. I was still doing international competitions, and playing a lot, but it put me in a new mindset. I realized that it took a certain amount of entrepreneurial skill, and motivation, if you were really interested in creating your own career, the one you wanted for yourself.

"It's really wonderful to have a paycheck every week, and the pension that comes from being in an orchestra," he says. "But I had the security of teaching. And besides, taking control is nothing new; it's not something that has just happened in the last 40 years.

"Think of Mozart, and Beethoven, even Bach, trying to sell their scores. Trying to build subscription audiences. There are many elements to what some folks do to take charge of their careers."

Taking charge is what he did. Chamber music can be rewarding in many ways—the repertory, the collaborations, the intimacy. But Shifrin also dove into the behind-the-scenes activities—and has continued to do so for almost five decades.

"It's a great joy just to pick up the phone, answer a call, and

get invited somewhere to play the clarinet, where other individuals are responsible for the organizing, and the audience.

"But being aware of how the sausage gets made—it never changes, for one thing," Shifrin says, "and it's not rocket science. It is labor intensive, and it's about partnerships. Between musicians, and music lovers.

"I came to Chamber Music Northwest in the earliest stages—I think it was the seventh year," he says, referring to the Portland festival that he has led since 1981. "Now it's approaching 50. It was just two or three concerts in that city, a city that did not have that much music going on in the summer.

"Fast forward 48 seasons, and we have tens of thousands of people coming every year. A budget that was about ten thousand dollars now is probably something like a couple million, and creeping up.

"You realize that you can do it, but it also speaks to the wonderful adaptability of chamber music, and how you can build on that."

Along the way, many musicians have benefited. His directorship at CMNW, and at the CSMC (1992–2004), created opportunities that allow younger performers to follow his model—the let's-have-it-all type of career.

"That kind of musical life is still possible, and I know it because I've seen what's happened with the players in CSMC Two," Adolphe says, "which, of course, Shifrin started."

Shifrin began CSMC Two in 1995 as a three-year residency program for young artists. Fellows who have benefited from the experience include the Brentano, Borromeo, Escher, Pacifica, Jupiter, and Danish string quartets; individuals like cellist Alisa Weilerstein; violinists Hilary Hahn, Jennifer Frautschi, Nick Eanet, Frank Huang, and Colin Jacobsen; and pianists like Lang Lang, Gilles Vonsattel, Shai Wosner, and Jonathan Biss. It's an entire generation of performers, familiar to audiences as recitalists, soloists, and innovators on their own.

"Young musicians who can get into Two have opportunities," Adolphe says. "They meet great players like David, and perform with them. They meet composers from different backgrounds. David made that possible.

"I guess now it's this feeling of being a parental figure," Adolphe says. "Over the years, we've had a build-up, a circle of friends, both together and with these players. David is very loyal. It's just this endless feeling of growing together."

For Adolphe, the quality of the performing is also part of the leadership. "David's playing is enchanting, and at the highest level," he says. "It's not simply something admirable, to be enjoyed. It's very important from a leadership point of view as well, when you're providing your own viewpoint of how to do something."

Because of the opportunities Shifrin has helped create, Adolphe feels the classical music industry is in a better place than



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David Shifrin performs with the Dover Quartet.

it was a generation ago. Avenues for composers, performers and presenters have opened up, fueled by the diversity of input.

“I think it is more likely for musicians to have a rich career,” Adolphe says. “I know for young composers there are more opportunities, there are more chances for voices from different backgrounds. And look at institutions: Marlboro has always been there, but now many other music schools are expanding that notion, giving young players a chance to study and perform with professionals?”

“David believed that, from the first time I met him, in 1986. He was a warm guy, and he wanted to surround himself with others. It became a family. And he made it real, when he started CMSLC Two. I know a lot of young players who have gone through that, and now think and act the same way David does. Not in competition with everyone else, or just ambitious. Making music first, and connecting with one another.”

Despite his own varied experiences, and his success on so many levels, Shifrin is slow to offer advice to younger players. When he thinks about a career in music, it’s on philosophical terms, and the advice he gives sounds a lot like empowerment, rather than specifics.

“The more resilient and adaptable you are, the better,” he says. “You get the most bang for your buck in chamber music—you can do more things at the highest level.

“It’s a competitive environment: who is going to get played, get recorded, and who is going to endure. Gifted people are getting better training. The performance level is very high—I see players coming along that can do things without thinking now, things

that were difficult tasks just a generation ago. The competition level is high, and entrepreneurial programs in conservatories are helping too. In some ways there is more of everything.

“You’re a professional from the first time you charge for a concert, or request donations,” he says as a reminder. “Don’t forget that. The trajectory of your career depends on what you choose from then on.”

The Dover Quartet is one ensemble to have benefited from Shifrin’s advice. Hardly newcomers at this point in their career, Dover was invited out to CMNW when its members were young students, and that experience helped galvanize their thinking and solidify their ideas.

“His guidance in the first years was really meaningful to us,” says the group’s cellist, Camden Shaw. “He first had us out to Portland about nine years ago, and now we’ve been performing with him as well.”

“He’s wise, he’s patient,” Shaw says. “He’s a great player. He’s a very kind man, and it’s amazing to see what he accomplishes. And his way with the audience—he presents commissions that will last, and educates the audience so that they are not only prepared, but they get excited about a piece.”

If anyone can offer encouragement and direction to composers, it’s a performer like Shifrin, who has sought out new works by a range of voices—John Adams, Joan Tower, Stephen Albert, Adolphe, Ezra Laderman, Lalo Schifrin, David Schiff, John Corigliano, Bright Sheng, and Ellen Zwilich among them—and tackled difficult new works.

*continued on page 56*



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David Shifrin, *continued from page 45*

"I think that in the same way there are many more really fine performers today, there are many more gifted composers as well," Shifrin says.

"For composers, I'm fascinated by many things," Shifrin says. "You look back at the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, to see what works are part of the canon, and what aren't performed anymore. Fascinating. I've read some books about the 1940s, and 50s and 60s, and so much was written about composers that I've never even heard of. Works that were all the rage back then, and now you never hear them. I love looking at the past for that perspective."

There are some practical notions about composition that Shifrin thinks will help get performances, and get pieces to remain in the canon.

"Without squelching anyone's ambitions, I think it's wise to think about the practicality of performing a work," he says. "The length. The clarity. There are incredible geniuses, but they write music that is so daunting it doesn't see the light of day.

"Write works that will be heard, that can be performed," Shifrin suggests. "Think about who you are writing for. Maybe you don't need to write for 175 musicians.

"And don't forget that the world premiere of a piece is not always the definitive performance. With consortiums commissioning works, there is a better chance that there will be more performances. The more performers play it, the more it has a chance to grow."

Shifrin has some of his most ardent advice for audiences—audiences that he has helped build in many ways over the course of more than four decades of performing, presenting, and proselytizing for his art-form.

"I don't think audiences have shrunk at all," he says firmly. "I do think the ratio of music purveyors to audience has shifted, and I've had many thoughts over the years about how to tackle that.

"We have the highest number of influences ever in music, and the greatest depth of them as well," he says. "I say to audiences: keep an open mind. What you've heard to date, that's just your experience of a particular period—simply what you've experienced to this point. This is the most eclectic period in music history."

*Keith Powers covers music and the arts in the Boston area for the GateHouse newspapers and WBUR's ARTery.*