

10 (or so) questions with...

By: **STEVE LANGE**

Photos courtesy of Lauren Bernofsky

Lauren Bernofsky,

the former Rochesterite who has been called “a master composer,” and whose works have been performed all over the world.

Rochester Magazine: Is composing your full-time job?

Lauren Bernofsky: It's not full-time in that I don't do 9-to-5 work, and I stay at home. But it's my main career goal. I do have a 5-year-old and a 10-year-old, and they are both in school during the day.

RM: *Top Gun* was on TV last night. Did you watch it?

LB: No, I was helping a friend pack until about three this morning.

RM: True or false: I could watch Tom Cruise play sand volleyball wearing nothing but his jeans all day. And by 'I' I mean you.

LB: Most definitely false. I barely watch movies. Why? Because at night is when I do my work. My Saturday night is writing my music, networking by keeping up with musicians through email and Internet, corresponding with publishers, developing new pieces. Those are the kinds of things I'm working on, and that's why I'm not watching Tom Cruise movies.

RM: Your composer headshot is very serious. Your Facebook photo is very laughy. Which is it?

LB: The headshot was taken at a time when I was frustrated that people don't take a woman composer seriously.

RM: Really?

LB: Absolutely. This is a huge chip on my shoulder. If you look at any concert program for a year of what an orchestra is performing, and there are ten new pieces, maybe one will be by a woman. If someone says to you 'Picture a grand piano with a bust of a composer on it,' it's not going to be the bust of a female composer. It's going to be the bust of a male composer: Bach, Beethoven, Brahms. But there are a lot of fantastic woman composers: Fanny Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann. Their pieces are just as good as their male counterparts but they don't get played today because of tradition.

RM: But that didn't dissuade you?

LB: No, this may sound corny, but I've always followed my passion.

RM: Were your parents behind that?

LB: Completely. They were behind anything I wanted to do.



Bernofsky and her cat Jeremy.

I started out as a violinist. Then one summer I went off to a music camp as a violinist, and I saw there that the coolest kids on a ladder of who's cool were the composers. They were all walking around with their spiral notebooks of music paper and you'd see them and think 'What could be on those pages?' I thought that was really cool.

RM: I read that when you were a kid, your parents held weekly folk dances in your basement.

LB: That's right. I would supposedly be in bed, but I could hear the music filtering upstairs, and what I would hear was a lot of international folk music—Eastern European, Israeli and Greek, and that has flavored the music that I like today.

RM: And that was in Rochester, where you grew up at 525 13th St. NE?

LB: Yes, in fact the name of their group was the Zumbro Valley Folk Dancers.

RM: What are your parents' names?

LB: My dad, Carl Bernofsky, was a biochemist at Mayo. My mom, Shirley, was a school teacher of special education. And I have a sister, Susan.



RM: OK. I'm going to play a song on the phone buttons. Tell me what it is. [I dial 654-566-555-6000].

LB: Mary Had A Little Lamb.

RM: Yes. OK, now I'm just going to tell you the notes and see if you know the tune: D flat, G flat, D flat, A flat.

LB [singing it perfectly]: Bong bong bong bong.

RM: That's exactly right.

LB: I don't know. It sounds like it could be the beginning to a John Williams piece.

RM: It's actually the four notes for the Intel Inside commercial.

LB: I don't watch TV.

RM: But you sang it perfectly.

LB: That's because I have perfect pitch. If you tell me notes I can hear them.

RM: You've said before that you like composing pieces for schools and kids. But I've got to imagine some people don't, that some composers get pained listening to kids play their work.

LB: Yes, I would be lying to say I love the sound of a piece being maybe played out of tune. But if you just think about it differently, of course they're not going to play it like the MIDI sound, which is the electronic playback on your computer. But it's certainly going to have some spirit, and just seeing the look on their faces and knowing they're having fun is better than hearing any computer playback.

RM: Here are some composer jokes. Why couldn't Beethoven find his composition teacher?

LB: He was decomposing.

RM: That's good, but no. He was Haydn.

LB: That's cute.

RM: How many composers does it take to change a light bulb?

LB: Well, there are a lot of answers, I guess. One would be 100, one to do it and 99 to say they could have done it better.

RM: That's exactly it. Knock knock.

LB: Who's there?

RM: Philip Glass.

LB: Philip Glass who?

RM: Knock knock.

LB: Who's there?

RM: Philip Glass.

LB: Philip Glass who?

RM: Knock knock.

LB: Oh, I get it. It's minimalist.

RM: Ha ha ha ha! I don't get it.

LB: Philip Glass' music takes maybe a measure, or maybe a four-note beat, and it will be a long time before it changes just a little bit.

RM: Oh, OK. I still don't really get it.