

## **Pianist, Visual Artist Frank Levin**

As a youngster, in Ottawa, I recall listening to, and singing along with the popular songs on the radio. No doubt encouraged by this interest, my parents purchased a piano and enrolled my twin brother, Harold and me in after-school piano classes. Our interest and progress however was undistinguished. We soon gave up the lessons and the piano remained untouched for several years.

When I was about twelve, two things happened that re-awakened my interest in studying music. First, my oldest cousin married a woman who was a concert pianist. When I heard her play, I was mesmerized by the expressive and emotional possibilities I had never suspected lay in the instrument. Second, my parents bought a few inexpensive classical records offered as a special feature at the grocery store, and I discovered the piano music of Rachmaninoff. I played the Second Piano Concerto over and over again and began to dream of becoming a composer myself.

I asked my parents if I might resume piano lessons and they willingly obliged. My brother, Harold, about the same time became interested in the guitar and popular music, which would later take him into a career as a major Ottawa popular music concert promoter. And my younger brother, Lewis, took up the guitar and became quite an accomplished folk singer in his teenage years.

Shortly after I began piano lessons again, I completed my first tentative manuscript and proudly signed it "F. Rachlevinoff". It used only the three primary triads of C Minor but I thought it was wonderful, and was ecstatic for days.

I began listening to classical music voraciously. The Romantic Concerto particularly captured my imagination, and I began purchasing records and taping off the radio every concerto I could find. I couldn't wait until 9 o'clock Sunday morning to see what new treasures the "Concerto Hour" might reveal. I became familiar with all the standard warhorses for piano, violin and cello, and many obscure ones for unusual concerto instruments like voice, tuba and double bass.

By the time I was sixteen, I had a new classical music icon, Brahms, whose music I was just beginning to play. I also loved much of the popular music of the time and enjoyed singing along with the great songs of Simon and Garfunkel, the Beatles, Joni Mitchell and others. And I discovered the wonderful harmonies of George Gershwin and melodies of Rodgers and

Hammerstein and the Broadway composers. I was not blessed with a good singing voice, however, as my friends were quick to point out. So in time my fingers became my primary means of making music and my compositions became my songs. To this day, a singing melody features prominently in virtually everything I compose, and my "Classical Crossover" writing style is a unique hybrid of both the classical and popular music I loved in my formative years.

At the same time I was very interested in art, especially the work of the Canadian Group of Seven, and Lawren Harris in particular, whose clean lines and architectural style informed my own early oil paintings and sculptures and continue to do so.

## Oil Paintings (1965-1970)



Copy of Sleeping Gypsy by H. Rousseau



Tropical Fantasy



Magic Mountain



City at Night



Sunset on the Desert



Teddy Bear



Land and Sea Fantasy



## Copy of Picasso's Three Musicians



Abstract

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Initially, I did not consider making a career in the arts. I got a B.A. in Sociology from Carleton University and took a position in the Canadian Federal Government working as a Job Placement Counselor in a Toronto Canada Manpower Centre. This led to a number of positions in occupational research, first on a Canadian Dictionary of Occupations and later in the collection and interpretation of occupational data for Statistics Canada.

Meanwhile, I continued to compose and take music courses in my spare time.

However by the mid 1970s, I realized I would be happier devoting myself to music full time and left my Government employment to follow that career. The San Francisco Conservatory of Music offered me the best combination of music theory, history and composition courses I was seeking and I chose to study there. This began a life of commuting back and forth from my home in Ottawa to San Francisco that would continue for many years.

My experience at the Conservatory was profoundly eye-and-ear opening. I experimented with serial and electronic music, though never found either especially emotionally engaging and took classes

with the now famous John Adams whose minimalist style of writing I found intriguing but not enough so to explore personally. He did teach me to take chances in my writing by going beyond what I could physically perform or hear clearly in my head. This was liberating artistically and helped me grow professionally. However it was Dr. Sol Joseph's classes in harmony, counterpoint and form and analysis, that gave me the skills to study and learn from the scores of the great masters that I found most invaluable.

After leaving the Conservatory, by a serendipitous referral of a friend, I began working with Jim Heisterkamp, an amazing poet, humorist, craftsman, street artist, founder of his own religion for people who drank beer religiously, political activist and small time publisher. He was convinced that fame and fortune awaited the writers of the next great Christmas song, and together we embarked on a path to make that happen. We wrote several Christmas songs together which later became the basis for my musical revue, "Never a White Christmas," a satirical and warmhearted salute to the holiday in snow-less San Francisco. Though fame and fortune eluded us, the now well-known cabaret singer, Wesla Whitfield, recorded four songs from that review and the title song won first prize in a San Francisco Christmas song contest.

At the same time, I began studying contemporary song writing and arranging with Gary Remal, a fine studio musician and film composer, and took jazz theory classes with Jim Grantham, another excellent musician and teacher. I also joined Songwriters Resources and Services (SRS), a songwriters support group and learned a lot about the art of crafting a good lyric, and the ins and outs of the music business.

In the 1980s, I took on a few piano students and began writing teaching music for them. This led me to compose a number of pieces designed for students, many of which were later published by Schaum, Willis and The Boston Music Companies. My students often assisted me by supplying titles, suggestions, and in proofreading my manuscripts for typographical errors. Some even inspired compositions, or took delight in being the first ever to play a new

piece.

My focus on teaching music also led me to compile a classical music, and later holiday season fake book, both published by Mel Bay. ( The term "fake book" refers to a shorthand form of writing music, featuring only the melody line with accompanying chord symbols from which a knowledgeable jazz or pop performer may "fake" or improvise his or her own arrangement. ) I was particularly proud of the latter publication. It contained two hundred traditional Christmas, Chanukah and New Year's selections, covering eight centuries and over forty countries; lyrics in close to two dozen languages, including many original English singing translations; and arrangements re-harmonized to suit contemporary sensibilities and piano technique.

Also in the 1980s, I started my own tiny non-profit musical theater group, the "West Coast Broadway Players" We focused on performing small productions for the elderly and disabled, for a nominal fee and frequently for no more than refreshments and the contented smiles of our audience. We performed standards as well as original songs I composed with various lyric writers. I acted as accompanist, publicist, booking agent and everything related. Although it was emotionally satisfying, it was also extremely time consuming and often difficult to get singers essentially to work for free. Therefore, we disbanded the group at the decade's end. Highlights of our company's career were two shows, "Never a White Christmas" previously noted with a cast of four singers and a mini-musical with only two players appropriately entitled, "It Only Takes Two." Dennis Goza, who now has his own children's theater company, "Activated Storytellers," performed in it, and wrote the book and most lyrics. We also later co-wrote many songs for Goza's theater company.

Also during this very productive time, I co-wrote a children's musical play with Jack Boaz, a friend and author who grew up in The Netherlands. He introduced me to a collection of delightful Dutch Saint Nicholas songs which we translated together into English, and I arranged for voice and piano. He then wrote a musical play incorporating them into the story. Entitled "Saint



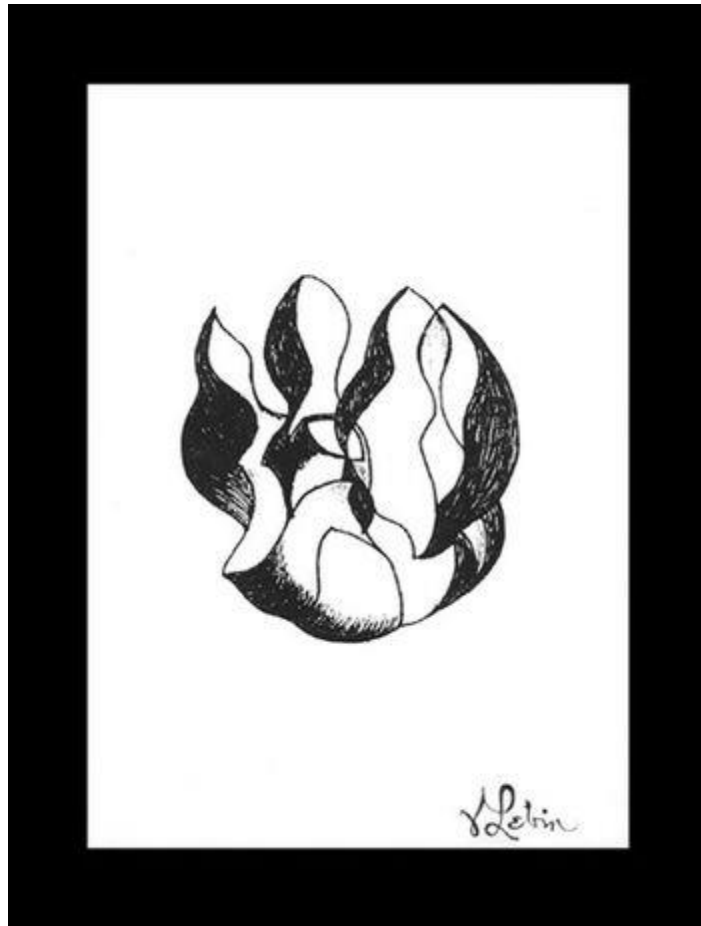
Nicholas Bag", it was performed by a Vallejo children's theater company.

In the early 1980s, when the photocopier machine was novel, I would make and photocopy whimsical drawings for friends and colleagues. These were to be appreciated briefly and discarded like so much in our disposable culture.

## **Disposable Photocopy Art**



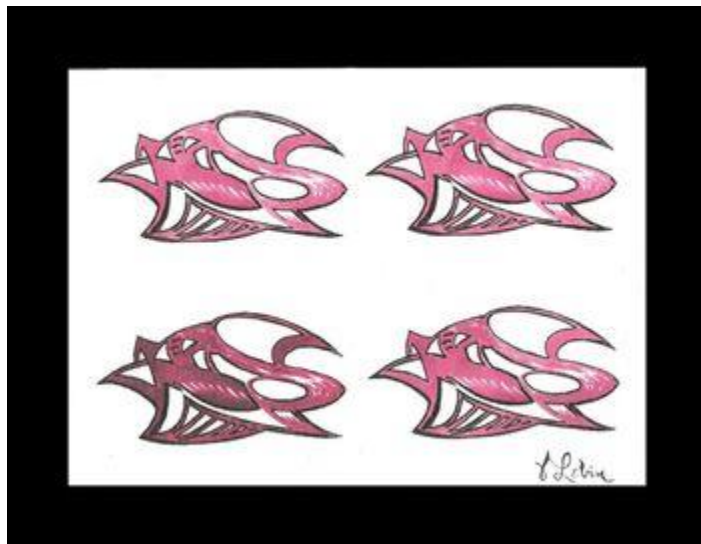
Beetle and Butterfly



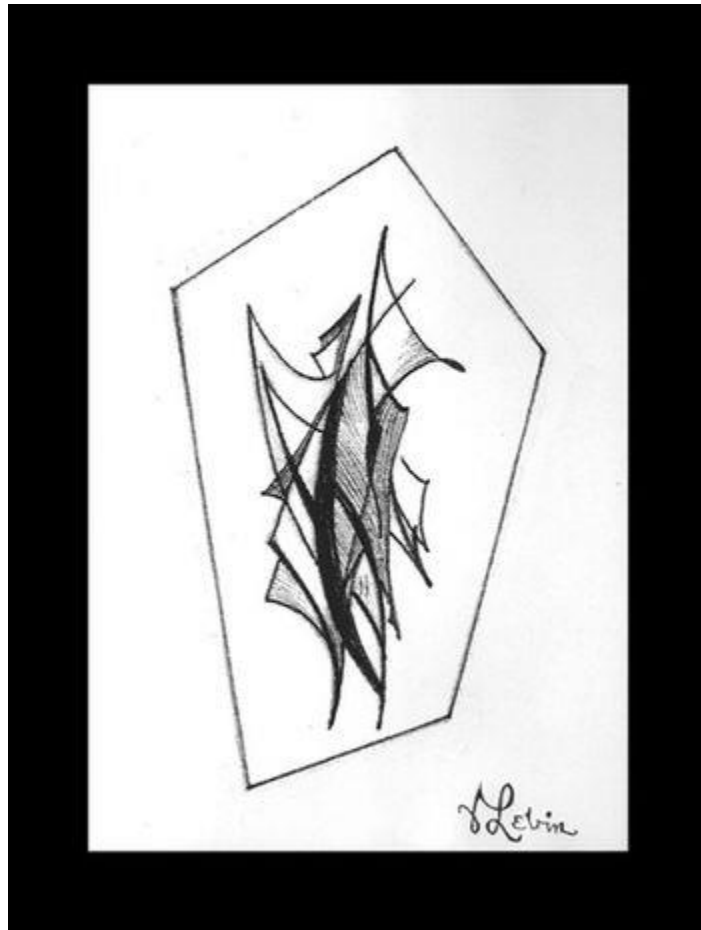
Artichoke



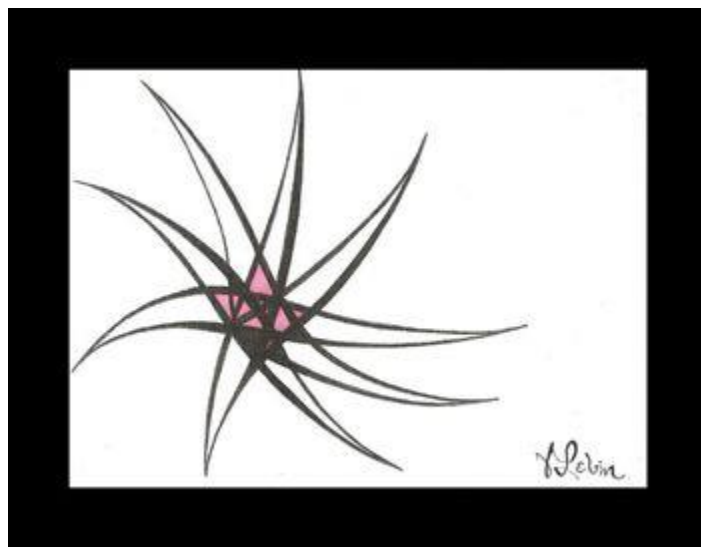
Clown



Fish Clones



Crystal



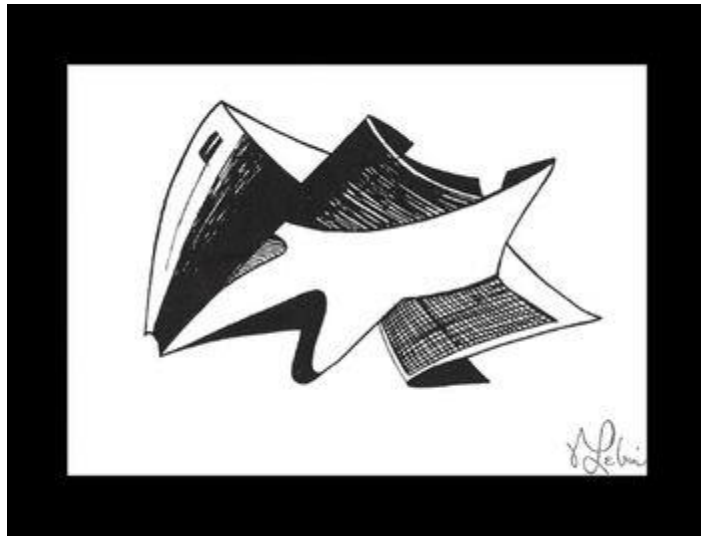
Pinwheel



Intersections



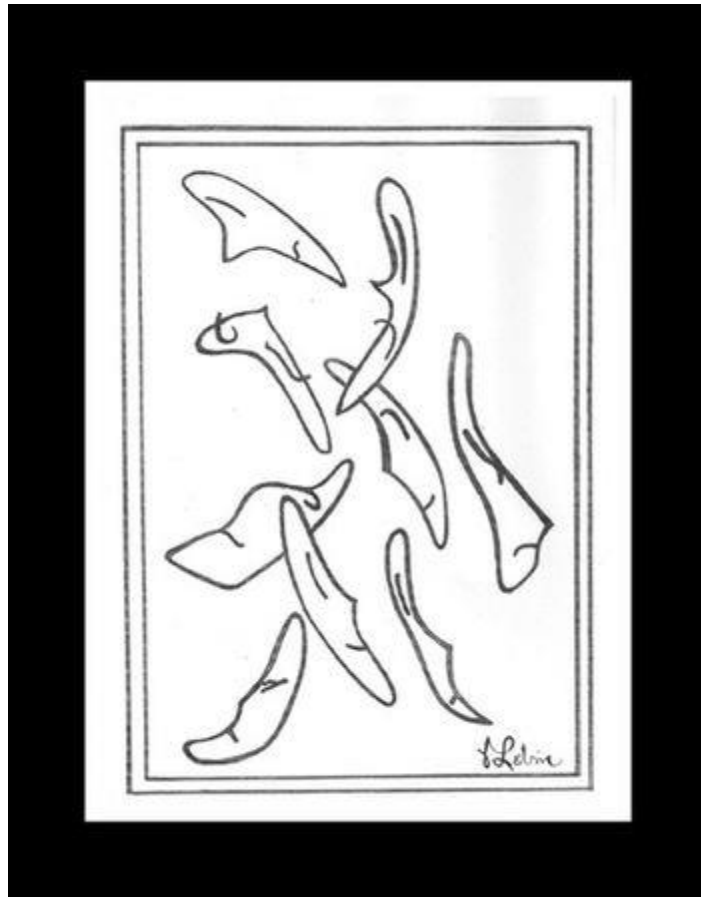
Villain



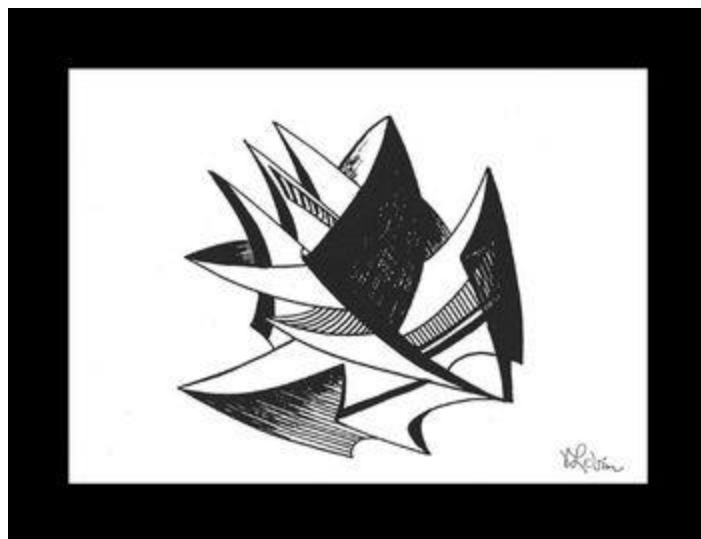
Structure 1



Woman Staring



Faces of Humanity



Structure 2

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In the 1990s, I turned my attention almost exclusively to the piano, bringing the dramatic and lyrical qualities of my song writing experience to the creation of intermediate to difficult works with strong visual and/or emotional content. In 1997, Scott Pratt, a fine concert pianist, became acquainted with my "Morning to Midnight Suite." and performed it first at a Music Teachers Association fundraiser and subsequently in recital in Southern California. Spurred on by its positive reception, he learned and performed more of my work. Later, in 2000, we embarked on a project to record the best of my piano music to date. The project was completed in July 2002 with the release of my first CD, entitled *Morning to Midnight*. Response was overwhelmingly positive and a second CD of piano music, *San Francisco Souvenirs*, was released in July of 2005.

Composing for me is not easy, and yet there is nothing I enjoy more. When it goes well, it is the greatest "high" I know. I liken it to solving a difficult crossword puzzle or trying to view a picture in an extremely foggy room, gaining a glimpse here and there of a portion, until eventually I can put the whole together. Sometimes I must abandon a piece for months or years when solutions to various problems elude me, but that happens much less now than it used to, as my analytical and technical skills have become increasingly more keen. I work mostly at the piano, polishing details in my head. I don't use computers. I sketch out my ideas first in pencil and later in ink, in fine calligraphy. The final score itself for me is a work of art. I also use the tape recorder to help me evaluate various alternatives more objectively without the distraction of having to physically play them. I like to vary the style and emotional content markedly from piece to piece. It keeps the work interesting and prevents me from falling into mindless, predictable patterns. While the intellectual aspect is always present, I never write a note I can't feel. Ultimately for me, composition is the art of refining the notes until the feeling is perfect

Since November 2004, I have taken up residence in Vancouver BC and become semi-retired. I continue to teach a little and to compose, primarily for the piano. The Canadian National Conservatory of Music published some recent, intermediate level piano works for students, and Hal Leonard published my Three New



Gymnopedies, a work that many consider to be my finest. In addition to being performed as a solo piano piece, it has also been performed in piano four-hands, and piano and cello arrangements. Several can be found on Youtube.

The Vancouver duo-piano team, Scott Meek and Clare Yuan have championed the piano, four-hand version of my Gymnopedies and have plans to record many of my unrecorded works during the summer of 2018.

Since 2010, I have been the volunteer pianist for the Barclay Manor "Heritage Harmonies" sing-a-long group, which focuses mainly on singing the popular music of the last century.

My interest in art has also continued, both in drawing and ceramic sculpture. This work has been exhibited in several exhibitions in British Columbia where its clean lines and organic semi-abstract shapes are especially appealing to viewers.











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The Canadian Music Centre has undertaken a project to archive all my music and biographical memorabilia. Some is already available to the general public and more will be added in time.

In the end, my artistic goal regardless of the medium is to produce work exhibiting both classical purity of form and honesty in emotional content, and always with the intent to provide pleasure and uplift the spirit.

Frank Levin