

# Hangin' With MARIA SCHNEIDER

By Rob Enslin



**I**n 2005, **Maria Schneider** became the first artist to win a Grammy Award for an album distributed exclusively over the Internet. The album, “Concert in the Garden,” featured her 17-piece jazz orchestra and was released through her company, **ArtistShare**, which helps artists fund projects outside normal industry circles. Such innovation is typical of Schneider, who is also one of today’s leading composers, conductors, and arrangers.

**TCP: Maria, you’re a successful composer, pianist, and music entrepreneur. What’s your secret for keeping it all together?**

**MS:** You might get different answers on different days. One day, I might say my secret is loving it [music] so much. Other days, I might say it’s because there’s no choice — sink or swim.

My main motivation for doing what I do is that this is who I am, and I can’t really step away from it. This is my life. I work very hard to please myself, musically, and to survive financially, for my sake and for the sake of the musicians I hire. I work constantly. I’ve never been a professional pianist. Piano [playing] is just for my own pleasure and for my writing. Composing, conducting, and recording are what I do.

I’m not sure I do “keep it all together.” That would imply a balanced life. I don’t claim to have achieved that. Balancing between the introverted nature of composing and the extroverted nature of band-leading, touring, and business is really complex. It’s an endless struggle. I just came off of months of touring, and now I’m trying to re-establish my own schedule. Life has many obligations. I’m left wondering how I’ve done it all until this point. I eat a lot, and I’m still thin. Maybe that says it.

**TCP: Bob Brookmeyer and Gil Evans almost simultaneously helped launch your compositional career. What did you learn from them?**

**MS:** The main thing was what they showed me of themselves. Each was 100 percent committed to his own art and his own voice. Gil illuminated the magic of being open-minded. There was a sort of airiness in his

attitude that could partly be what infused his music with so much space and lightness.

Bob was more opinionated and verbal about things. His music — its power and bold lines — reflects that. Bob was my teacher, and he taught me to question every aspect of the music; not to take anything as given. In doing that, he helped me find my own voice. He’s not really aware of that, but he did.

**TCP: Why are organizations like The Commission Project important to the future of American music?**

**MS:** There’s something very valuable in having students feel like they’re a part of the creative process — to have the experience of bringing a composer’s work to life for the first time. They start to see art as a process, as a living thing. I would imagine that it would inspire their own creativity. It also connects them to the value and the excitement of art — art of all kinds.

Creativity is the most basic and important thing we have. It’s what gives us the power to shape our own lives in positive and even artful ways. Our creativity shapes every moment of our lives. When people go through life, seeing it as black and white, they miss something, and the world misses receiving something unique from them. When people feel their potential to create, to contribute to making something of beauty, it lifts their lives. It can change their lives and other people’s lives in positive ways.

**TCP: What are the challenges, if any, of being a successful woman in a traditionally male profession?**

**MS:** This, thankfully, has never been an issue for me. As a child, my first piano

teacher was a woman. Every teacher I had until age 12 was a woman. There was an artist in my hometown who mentored my sister — she was a woman. I had a strong and creative mother.

I also was around men a lot. My father took me hunting at the age of nine. I spent much of my childhood with his hunting buddies, shooting a 20-gauge shotgun, and then running home to ballet class.

I’ve pretty much experienced the gamut of what could be considered masculine or feminine. That was my life, and I felt it as normal. I don’t know how being a woman has affected others’ view of me, but when I look out of my eyes and express myself through conducting and composing, or when I listen to musicians play my music, I can promise that I’m only concerned with one thing: creating beauty. The last thing I’m concerned with is my gender. I couldn’t possibly have created the music and life that I have if I thought about it even half as much as people seem to think I do.

**TCP: What can we do to encourage more women to pursue music — not only in the traditional roles of educators, but also as performers, composers, and businesspeople like yourself?**

**MS:** I think many women are pursuing music. Music is something that people should choose when they feel it’s the only choice for them. It requires so much. It’s not a small thing.

In the case of jazz, I think that, in decades past, this lifestyle didn’t appeal to most women. The nightlife and life on the road were hardly conducive to the kind of lifestyle

most women had. But a woman's role in society is much more open now, with many possibilities, and the nature of being a jazz musician has greatly changed, too. The changes on both sides are why we're seeing more and more women coming up. As more young women see others having a life they find attractive and aspire to, it will blossom on its own.

I will say this about my life: I'm presently alone, and I don't have children. I don't have almost any empty space in my life. I honestly don't know many women who would want the life that I have. What I do is very difficult. It is very rewarding, but it's not for everyone. I cannot imagine having a child and doing what I do to the degree that I do it. If someone needs encouragement to do what I do, they'll be very unhappy. I've wanted this without even knowing what it is that I've wanted. Does that make sense? Exposing all kids to art, music, artists, and the pleasures that beauty and creativity bring to one's life is what's most important. The rest comes, once the spark is there.

**TCP: How are new trends like ArtistShare, which gives the consumer online access to different parts of an artist's work, changing the way we experience music?**

**MS:** It allows artists to shape their projects as they choose. That's good for the music. It allows the income that comes from the fans to actually fund the art. In the case of ArtistShare, it allows me to share my creative process. It allows me to offer things to players, writers, listeners, educators — including music, scores, music minus-one recordings — all with interviews and materials that hopefully illuminate the music, the performance, and the creation of it. It makes [the experience] much more multidimensional. It opens up my world to be more translucent to those who wish to be more inside of the music.

I recently saw a documentary on [architect] **Frank Gehry**. Last February, I was inspired by playing a concert in his spectacular **Walt Disney Concert Hall** in L.A. In this movie, he spoke about process, and it resonated deeply with me. His comments made me

comfortable with myself, with the insecurities and cycles that come with creating — the baffling mystery of it all and the feeling that, in the end, I don't even know where the music came from, even if I know I worked hard. I was thinking how I toiled over the commission I'd premiered in that great hall, how I wondered if it was living up to the building. But now I see that in making that magnificent hall, he suffered the same things! It makes it all almost humorous and illuminates what a mysterious process creativity is. It's fascinating.

And that's exactly what I'm doing through ArtistShare. It's like a real-time documentary. It's easy to go back after the success and say, "Oh, I suffered so!" But how about when you feel like you're hanging off a cliff with not an idea in the world? It's of great value for me to go back then and read the statements I made in those times and say, "Wow, look at that! I remember feeling that way!" I hope that, through ArtistShare, I can help others be more comfortable with themselves and their own lives through exposing my process. Ah, I guess it's true: misery loves company.