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Those who think that hard work and determination don't pay off in the music industry have yet to...

Meet Robin Spielberg

Article by Kathy Parsons

Frequently referred to as "the hardest-working person in the music industry," composer/pianist Robin Spielberg is also one of the industry's brightest rising stars. Her first album, *Heal of the Hand* (1994) was produced with the financial backing of one of her fans, and Robin has gone on to record five more albums since then. Her latest, *In the Arms of the Wind*, was released in May, and features solo piano and piano ensemble selections. It is a real beauty, and is reviewed herein!

I discovered Robin Spielberg on the Internet late last year, and was told that if I liked the music of Suzanne Ciani and David Lanz, I would like Robin's, too. I was a little skeptical since I wasn't familiar with her, but decided to give it a try. I love it! Unlike many of the other recordings I have bought in recent years, I find that the more I listen to Robin's music, the more it grows on me and seems to etch itself onto my own heart. "Compelling" is a word I would use to describe many of her pieces, and I now include her music in the curriculum I share with my piano students. The grace and gentleness of Robin's music made me feel that I would really like the person behind the music, and I found that along with being hard-working, she is also one of the nicest people around. If you haven't had the pleasure, I'd like to introduce you to Robin Spielberg!

Now in her early thirties, Robin Spielberg is a native of New Jersey. Also an accomplished actress, Robin devoted much of her youth to the theater as well as to her music. She was a drama major in college, but kept coming back to the piano. She started her career playing in piano rooms in New York City. Over time, she started incorporating some of her original music into her repertoire, and found those pieces to be extremely well-received. This led to her ingenious

marketing strategy, and to a career and audience that is growing by leaps and bounds.

Robin Spielberg began picking out melodies on the piano at an early age, and began formal training at age seven. Violin, organ, and ballet lessons followed shortly, as well as a developing interest in the theater. It was the latter that drew Robin to New York University, where she studied acting with Pulitzer-Prize winning playwright David Mamet and actor William H. Macy (Oscar-nominated for his role in "Fargo"). Robin became a founding



member of The Atlantic Theater Company along with several of her classmates, and acted in dozens of their productions off-Broadway and during summer seasons in Vermont. Robin also composed music for many of the productions, including Mamet's adaptation of "Three Sisters" and a children's musical entitled "Balloonland," which enjoyed a successful run off-

Broadway in 1993.

Ironically, it was her passion for the theater that led to Robin's return to music. To support her fledgling acting career, Spielberg played piano in New York City's finest hotel lobbies and piano bars, including The Plaza Hotel, The Grand Hyatt, and the Marriott Marquis. "My ongoing piano engagement at the Grand Hyatt in New York City became an integral part of my life. I would improvise a great deal at this engagement, and to my pleasant surprise, people began to really respond to my creations. Those improvisations eventually became songs in their own right. I played this engagement 3-6 hours a day, five days a week for six years. Then in the evenings, I would act in plays. In 1993, at the urging of my avid listeners, I recorded a CD containing listeners' favorites." That CD, *Heal of the*

Hand, was recorded in one afternoon by engineer Steven Miller, who had engineered landmark recordings for many Windham Hill artists including George Winston, Liz Story, and Scott Cossu.

(Miller has engineered all of Robin's subsequent albums as well.)

Robin started out with two thousand copies of *Heal of the Hand*. She literally packed them into the trunk of her car and took them to stores herself. She'd drive around looking for places she liked, usually gift shops and boutiques. She would offer the owner or manager a free copy of the album to play in the store and would leave ten copies to sell by the cash register. If they sold, she would bring more; if not, she would pick them up at the end of the month.

This strategy was very successful. Robin also started a mailing list from the 800 or so business cards she had collected from fans while playing in hotels, and sent out fliers advertising *Heal of the Hand*. She had about a 70% response, and quickly sold all 2000 copies of the album! Seven months later, Robin signed a recording contract with North Star Music in Rhode Island, and *Heal of the Hand* became the label's best-selling album for 1994 and 1995. Last year's follow-up of original piano solos, *Songs of the Spirit*, was the label's #1 selling recording for '96! It is interesting to note that *Songs of the Spirit* sold more than 200,000 copies

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last year, and was actually approximately the 12th best selling album in the New Age category. It didn't show up on any of the Billboard charts because of where the albums were sold. Scanners keep track of the titles sold in music stores, but the music sold in gift shops or other alternative markets isn't counted in the "official" statistics.

Robin has recorded six albums since 1994. Her second album, *Spirit of the Holidays* (1994), features piano, cello, and acoustic guitar; *Unchained Melodies* (1995), is a collection of her arrangements of standards and show tunes; *In the Heart of Winter* (1995), is a second holiday collection that includes four original pieces; *Songs of the Spirit* (1996), is an outstanding collection of original piano solos; and her latest release, *In the Arms of the Wind*, features piano solo and ensemble work. Spielberg will be included on a compilation album of women pianists (Suzanne Ciani and Lorie Line are also featured) due out later this year. I feel that with each new release, there is obvious artistic growth, and Robin just keeps getting better! Her caring and optimistic nature comes through on all of her recordings, and the tremendous amount of feeling she puts into her playing should appeal to all but the most jaded of spirits.

Appearing live before an audience is an important part of any recording artist's career, and since Robin does not yet have a manager or tour promoter, she created her own corporation to facilitate performances, publishing, promotion, and production. She works full-time in her home production office, putting together concerts, finding other artists to perform with, answering mail, sending out albums and promotional videos, etc. Her company is called "Spobs Music" which came from someone taking roll in school, and stumbling over her name. "I had never intended to run a company like Spobs, but I must admit I do love the business of music as well as the creative aspects of the work. I realized shortly after making the first album that not many 'New Age' artists tour. There are 'jazz festivals' everywhere for jazz artists, and 'classical series' for classical artists, 'folk houses' and 'coffee houses' for singer/songwriters, but nothing for what I do, which is tell stories and play new acoustic music. So I invented Spobs, which also serves as a 'presenting organi-

zation', in order to facilitate touring." Robin is a Steinway artist, so Steinway promotes her in exchange for her endorsement of their pianos.

Spielberg played about 200 gigs in 1996, which included more than thirty performances for Nature Company Stores, Borders Books and Music, and Barnes and Noble stores all over the country. She expects to do more than 200 dates this year, including her Carnegie Hall debut on March 15 which sold out! She also spent time in Germany this spring producing the second album by her friend, pianist Robin Meloy Goldsby.

Robin co-produced *In the Arms of the Wind* with Gerry Putnam. The album features many talented guest artists, including world-renowned Celtic fiddler Johnny Cunningham (of Nightnoise); flutist Alison Hale, cellist Barry Phillips, and guitarists Dave Surette and Chris Theriault. The album is currently being featured on listening stations at Borders Books and Music nationwide.

For the piano players, Robin's second folio of piano solos is available, and is published by Cherry Lane. A collection of pieces from *Heal of the Hand* is available from Spobs.

Robin loves to hear from her fans and welcomes email at the following userid: spobs@access.digex.net. You can also visit her home page, which contains reviews, her concert schedule, sound samples, photos, liner notes, fun facts and more. It is located at:

<http://www.access.digex.net/~spobs> ■