Described as “a brilliant musical vagabond,” [Sequenza/21], Derek Bermel is known both for his virtuosity as a clarinetist and for his work as a composer, drawing from a widely eclectic range of genres and cultures. He was written for chamber ensembles, symphonies, dance, and theatre in the idiom of classical, jazz, blues, gospel, and pop, drawing from cultures as disparate as Bulgarian, Ghanaian, American, Brazilian, and Irish.

A native New Yorker, Bermel grew up in New Rochelle, but hardly to the standard-issue suburban family. His British-born father Albert Bermel is a theatre scholar, critic, and translator of French drama. His mother Joyce, an editor who worked for two years for film director Stanley Kubrick, sang show tunes and jazz around the house. His older brother Neil played the trumpet before going on to a career as a linguist.

Derek, it seems, was programmed to take in all the music he heard from the earliest age. He started clarinet at the age of seven and by ten had written his first composition, in honor of a recently demised guinea pig.

In school, Bermel played clarinet in the orchestra and band. “I wrote for my high school band and orchestra,” he says. “The directors were kind enough, open enough, to play my compositions. I didn’t know how to put together a score—I wrote everything in the wrong place—so just the act of preparing a piece to be performed taught me so much.”

Outside school, he was singing and playing keyboards in rock bands and listening to pop, rap, hip-hop, punk. When he discovered Monk and Coltrane, he learned saxophone so he could play jazz. “I just tried to take it all in,” he says. “It was all music and it was all interesting.”

“I think most good musicians don’t cut an entire genre off their radar. They’re still listening, because they know there’s going to be something good in any genre. As composers, it’s part of our job not to cut ourselves off.”

Lightning struck, however, in a big way, in the form of Olivier Messiaen at a summer music camp when Derek was in his early teens. “Somebody played two of the movements from Vingt regards sur l’enfant-Jésus,” he says. “I remember thinking ‘That’s what I want to do.’”

Derek went on to earn a bachelor’s at Yale, studying music, physics, French. After graduation, he spent a year in Jerusalem studying ethnomusicology and orchestration. “You should study with William Bolcom,” his teacher advised him. “He’s the right teacher for you.”
Young Composers. He also performs with his Brooklyn-based band Peace by Piece, where he functions as bandleader, singer, and songwriter.

While in Ann Arbor, Bermel conducted the University Symphony Orchestra in a performance of Dust Dances, a work that arose out of his time in Ghana. "Transforming what I learned on a percussion instrument that was not in the same scale as western orchestration was a challenge," he says. "But that's what a lot of composition is about: taking an idea, transforming it, taking it out of one context and putting it into another. It's transformed through your own filter, the filter of who you are and what has influenced you."

"I get a lot of musical ideas. Many of them are mediocre and don't need to go anywhere. But if it's a good idea and it's something I can't get out of my head, writing it down becomes a necessity. It's telling you to pay attention. Being a composer, in a way, is ego driven; but in another way it's about dropping ego completely and allowing the music to tell you where it wants to go."

"Sometimes you need to shut up a little bit and let the music speak."

Since 2006, Bermel has been the Music Alive Composer-in-Residence for the American Composers Orchestra (ACO), a three-year post. Wynton Marsalis recruited Bermel to compose The Migration Series for Jazz at Lincoln Center, a new concerto for jazz ensemble, inspired by a series of paintings by artist Jacob Lawrence.

"Composing for jazz band and orchestra is interesting because you have to combine the strength and weakness of both ensembles," Bermel says. "Every tradition of performance has its own system of notation, its own way of thinking about music. This adds a layer of complexity to writing, in this instance integrating improvisation with sections that are written out."

In New York, Derek works with young musicians, most recently the ACO's 'Orchestra Underground: Composers Out Front' and with the New York Youth Symphony's 'Making Score for Young Composers.' He also performs with his Brooklyn-based band Peace by Piece, where he functions as bandleader, singer, and songwriter.

"I didn't really know who Bolcom was," Bermel says, "so I listened to his music and went to meet him when he performed in New York. He encouraged me to apply to Michigan, so I bought a MIDI piano and recorded all my compositions." Bolcom and William Albright, who were on the screening committee that year, heard something unique in Bermel's work.

"Michigan, for me, was incredible," he recalls. "I worked with everyone. If you showed me a roster of the faculty at that time, I probably worked with at least half of them. There are many schools that have great teachers, but few where you can work with them intensively. I was not shy about approaching them, but there was something about Michigan that made me feel that I could. They're all busy people, but they will stop and engage with you."

Like Messiaen, who traveled widely drawing inspiration from sources as far ranging as Japanese theatre, Indonesian gamelan, and bird song, Bermel has been compelled to go where the music is. He traveled Ghana to learn the Lobi xylophone, to Bulgaria to study the Thracian folk style, to Ireland to learn Uilleann pipes.

"If there's a type of music I'm drawn to, I need to go where it's played," he says, "to get my fingers on the instruments, to understand how it manifests in the culture, to know how people dance to it; to experience it in context."