

**“I imagine myself**



# composing a space.”

Jonas Salk, August Komendant, and the Woman populate a new chamber opera inspired by the life and work of Louis Kahn.

## LEWIS SPRATLAN speaks with FREDERICK PETERS

### OPPOSITE

Louis I. Kahn, *Tower of Villa Rufolo, Ravello, Italy*, 1929, watercolor on paper, 14 ¼ x 10". From the collection of Sue Ann Kahn. © Sue Ann Kahn. Courtesy of Lori Bookstein Fine Art.

In 2005, composers Lewis Spratlan and Jenny Kallick began work on an opera inspired by Louis Kahn. Kahn, who excelled in music and once considered becoming a composer, was especially cognizant of how sound works in a physical space. “Space has tonality,” he often said.

Kallick, a professor of music at Amherst College, made recordings of the “acoustic envelope” at several Kahn buildings, which were employed in composing the work’s prelude and interludes. Key elements from Spratlan’s music were integrated into this electro-acoustic music, creating a seamless connection between the narrative world of the characters and the sounding spaces that filled their dreams.

Opening in the ruins of Rome and ending with the healing waters at Kahn’s Salk Institute, *ARCHITECT: A Chamber Opera* narrates the dramatic arc of Kahn’s journey from dreamer to master builder.

*ARCHITECT* has not yet been performed live, but a video will be screened as part of the Architecture and Design Film Festival in New York City, October 17–21.

In this interview, Spratlan discusses the project with Frederick Peters, board chairman of New Music USA, which supports composers, performers, and audiences of new American music.

**Frederick Peters:** How did you decide to create *ARCHITECT*? Did it arise from a personal interest in architecture?

**Lewis Spratlan:** Jenny Kallick was really the creator of

this piece. While a student in New Haven, she became very interested in Kahn’s two important buildings there, the Yale Art Gallery and the Yale Center for British Art, particularly after seeing Nathaniel Kahn’s film *My Architect*. She decided that she wanted to immerse herself in what these buildings stood for, and was particularly interested in their sonic value. Kahn spoke often of his interest in the sonic qualities of his buildings. He had a strong interest in music; in fact, he had even considered a career as a composer. He frequently spoke of music and architecture and sound in one breath, so to speak.

Jenny began this project by doing recordings, together with John Downey, a student of hers, at the Salk Institute; at the Yale Center for British Art; and at the Exeter, New Hampshire, Library. They went to various locations in these buildings and would first of all record just the room tone. I can’t technically describe what room tone is, but when you’re in any given room, you’re never in total silence; the environment is producing almost imperceptible sound. That’s room tone.

Then she would have various sounds made in that room—a hand clap, a drum smash, a squawk on an instrument, usually a quite short burst of sound—to determine what the so-called sonic envelope in that space would do to those sounds.

**Frederick Peters:** Was she thinking opera at this point, or was she just thinking it was interesting to collect the sounds?

**Lewis Spratlan:** At that point, we weren't talking about it as an opera. At that time, the Yale Art Gallery was really the only Kahn building I knew. I didn't have a very elaborate idea of Kahn—who he was in the world of architecture or what he stood for, particularly. But I knew I liked that building.

Jenny presented me with four or five sets of lyrics, and I was very taken by them, right away. A lot of them include Kahn's own words: There are volumes of Kahn's writings and remarks that were taken down by people as he talked with them.

Very early on, she said, "You've got to go see *My Architect*." It was a revelatory film to me. I think the main theme in the life of Kahn and at the heart of this work is—and it's something I've been aware of for years as an artist myself—the cost to one's private life of an artistic career, which is exaggerated in Kahn's case, but it's something that all artists are aware of.

**Frederick Peters:** It's overwhelmingly strong in the film, how everybody around him paid for what he did.

I've often thought about the commanding forces at work in both architecture and music, and they are remarkably similar.

—Lewis Spratlan

**Lewis Spratlan:** Absolutely. Frank Lloyd Wright is an interestingly parallel case—the same sort of cavalier obliviousness toward people who were extremely close to him. But we observe it all the time. Art has a kind of commanding quality if you're its servant. My wife might disagree, but I think I've mended my ways a little after seeing that film.

**Frederick Peters:** Early on in the opera, Kahn says that space has tonality: "I imagine myself composing a space." One could flip that and say music has architecture. Working on an opera about an architect, were you unusually conscious of structure? Were there particular ways in which you tried to build architecture, or a sensitivity to architecture, into the work?

**Lewis Spratlan:** There are two conspicuous places where I was quite self-conscious about trying to evoke architecture in the music itself. I've been acutely aware for a long time what architecture is and what it has to be. I've often thought about the commanding forces

that are at work in both architecture and music, and they are remarkably similar. Common to both is the fact that there's a surface: the tune, or the façade. But behind that surface, in both cases, there are elaborate mechanisms that allow that surface to be understood and appreciated: the harmonic contrapuntal structure of music, or the whole collection of structural elements that are involved in architecture.

One of the most conspicuous moments when I am invoking architecture in a frank way is the opening of the soliloquy we hear Kahn deliver about what a building is and what a building needs to be. It's called "The Flame." He had this rather elaborately articulated notion that was consistently at the center of any structure that he was working on. It was his metaphor for the sort of irreducible purpose of that building: why it existed, what its mission on earth was. And then he had this rather concentric idea of subsidiary functions that were paid attention to in the design of a building. So there's this sense of centeredness and then structure surrounding layers of concentric function.

**Frederick Peters:** And in the opera, that's described in a quasi-religious way, as if you had the people within the temple, then the people who want to be in the courtyard of the temple, and then the people who want to be even further away but nonetheless in proximity to the temple.

**Lewis Spratlan:** And those who want to just wink at it. So there is an attempt to communicate that sense of concentric qualities in this aria. And the introduction to it is my best shot at setting up some architectural elements. What I had in mind was two walls intersecting with one another, but on a single grounding, lying on a common platform. The platform in this case is the lowest sound that was made by this orchestra, which was the E of the double bass. In my imagination they were great, towering walls, so the whole tonal span is laid out in them. But they're distinctly different: One might think of one being in shade and the other in bright sunlight, or one rough and the other smooth. I wanted a sense of two independent elements, which were at the same time linked by their being on this ground of low E.

In fact, when we first hear the voice of Kahn, it appears during the sounding of one of these walls in the form of an oboe. The oboe is the surrogate for Kahn in this piece. The other moment is in the introduction to the first number in the piece, a duet—

**Frederick Peters:** When they're in Rome.

**Lewis Spratlan:** Yes, there's an invocation constantly of stone work. I was trying to get at the whole sense

of these interlocking blocks of material. The music actually is like brick work, or interlocking elements. Again, not in a way that it's going to make you pop up and say, "Ah! Well, that's a picture of a stone," but this is my response to trying to make that invocation.

**Frederick Peters:** The music during the first part of the opera, up until the entry of the Woman, has in many ways a lapidary quality—an impression of being polished and intellectually driven. Then the Woman enters, and suddenly you're in more of a sense world. Can you talk a little about the Woman? She's such an interesting apparition in this highly intellectualized, male environment.

**Lewis Spratlan:** Anybody who has any kind of familiarity with Kahn is aware that his private life was turbulent, to say the least. Complex. He was married and had a daughter by his wife, and he had at least two mistresses, each of whom bore a child by him. We felt that if we were going to be telling any kind of serious tale about Kahn, the issue of women in his life had to come up. So we made the decision to create an amalgam of these three women and call the character "Woman." What she stands for in the opera is an exemplar of the difficulty that he has with personal relationships. She feels neglected, not incorporated fully into his existence, on the outside all of the time.

We see the Woman twice. The first time, as you say, she interrupts this train of intellectual considerations and male dominance that had been occurring, and it's a very abrupt shift. We see her just after she has received a letter from Kahn that includes a poem by E. E. Cummings, which we hear her read. It's a complex reading: She doesn't simply sing it straight through; each of the lines is sung twice, and on its second reading, more of her reflection and the spice of her understanding are injected into it.

**Frederick Peters:** Which then is followed by one of my favorite moments in the opera, the concrete duet, in which Kahn and the Engineer sing like workmen with Italian accents about how to temper concrete. Suddenly, for the first time, there are people—guys with wheelbarrows and bags of cement; it's actually a job site. And there, in the background, you see a building being put together while they are singing about how it has to be tempered with the right vibrations. Very funny.

**Lewis Spratlan:** I think this duet is one of the strangest operatic moments in captivity. Jenny imagined it as a moment between Kahn and [August] Komendant, showing their complicated relationship, as was the case with all the important relationships in Kahn's life. Komendant, by many reports, was largely responsible

for a lot of Kahn's buildings even being built. Kahn was a tremendous dreamer and would come up with schemes about which most engineers would have said, "Why do you even show me this? It can't be done." Komendant was an imaginative, large-brained thinker who could find a way to make these buildings happen. So they were symbiotically very heavily involved with one another. At the same time, Kahn was abusive to him and felt that he was too strict about things, too orderly. [Komendant] wouldn't allow himself to be engaged in Kahn's pipe dreams. And Kahn was annoyed by that.

**Frederick Peters:** These visionary architects desperately need good structural engineers; otherwise, they end up with buildings that leak or barely stand up. They may



**ABOVE**  
Louis I. Kahn, *Canal Houses, Venice, Italy, 1928*, watercolor on paper, 10 x 8". From the collection of Sue Ann Kahn. © Sue Ann Kahn. Courtesy of Lori Bookstein Fine Art.

be conceptually brilliant, but for architecture to work, the building actually has to stand up. The doors have to open and close. That clearly is where Komendant was indispensable.

**Lewis Spratlan:** Both Kahn and Komendant were of Estonian heritage, so this duet starts with an imagined reminiscing about Estonia—the flounder, the little red potatoes. And then the other thing they share is their love of concrete. As I understand it, concrete is a tremendously important structural element in many of Kahn’s buildings. And Komendant was apparently an absolute master of concrete. The concrete in most of their buildings has this incredible integrity to it: it simply doesn’t crack. It also, and this is very noticeable in the Salk Institute, develops a patina, a burnished quality that you don’t think of with concrete. When you look at it, it doesn’t appear rough; it seems to have a finish to it. In any case, he was obsessive about getting concrete right. So they did share this love and respect for concrete. That’s not an incidental thing. We imagined that when this is staged, they’ll be having a beer somewhere, just a couple of guys who finally find a moment to sit and relax, then they fall into this riffing about concrete.

**Frederick Peters:** It’s very funny.

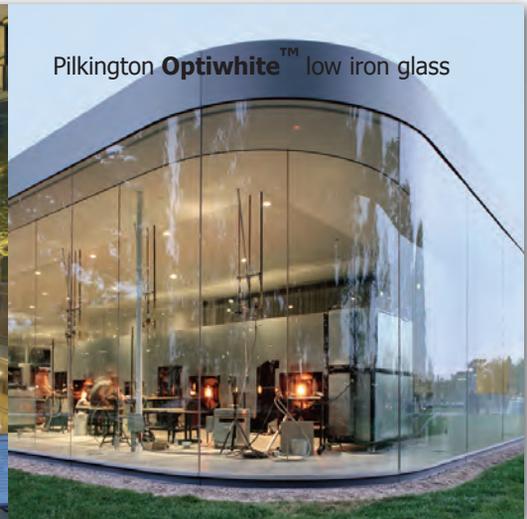
**Lewis Spratlan:** It is funny, with this constant refrain: “Mix it right and cure it with the right vibrations.” It’s borderline nonsense, a deliberately heel-kicking moment in the piece. Like many of the great heavy-duty operas, there are wonderful moments of levity in it.

**Frederick Peters:** Then you move into an extended mad scene, very intense and just about 180 degrees from the lightness of the concrete duet.

**Lewis Spratlan:** This takes all the frustration and disappointment that we see from the Woman in her first number and sends it to its furthest extreme. Talk about a woman at the end of her rope—she’s just losing it.

**Frederick Peters:** And not even articulate through much of it.

**Lewis Spratlan:** I’ve invented this kind of private language that she has, grunts and moans and squawks and squeals, and sometimes things that actually sound like language but don’t mean anything to us semantically. There are a few English words in it, but



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they're all chosen from that E. E. Cummings poem that she sings earlier. It's mainly just agony, which then turns into rage; then there is a moment of retrospective reflection on sexual joy that she had with him; then it lapses again into real fury at the end.

**Frederick Peters:** If you think about the opera in terms of movements, that scene is followed by what I see as the reconciliation section. You get the third embodiment of the baritone as the Healer, and Salk and Kahn have this lovely interaction on the grass in which Salk soothes him into sleep with a wonderful little lullaby. Then there's a dream sequence, which ends up with a reference to the Salk Institute, which seems to be where all the different themes come together. So you have all three of the characters at the end singing very lyrically about the water flowing through the structure and out to the sea, with obviously all the things that the sea represents.

**Lewis Spratlan:** Jonas Salk was very aware of Kahn's work and actually commissioned him to design the Salk Institute. Salk had this vision of a marriage of science and art—and not only the art of the building, but he wanted art to be in the air at this building. In fact, to this day there is an ample line item in the budget of the

Salk Institute for artistic productions, and they have a little theater there.

**Frederick Peters:** *ARCHITECT* hasn't yet been performed live on stage; how do you imagine that performance when it occurs?

**Lewis Spratlan:** Right from the beginning, we had this idea of its being very portable. It has a total cast of only three singers, just nine players, a very small orchestra. As I like to say, sort of a two-station-wagon opera. And why? We wanted the piece to be able to be put on in various [Kahn] buildings. This was an important thing for us, requiring an absolute minimum—in fact, requiring no traditional theatrical space at all. No drops, no orchestra pit. A flat space that can hold an audience, that's really all we were thinking about. We would be delighted to have it put on in theatrical venues, although it would just be lost at the Met or virtually any traditional opera house.

Two of the Kahn buildings have already shown great interest in having performances, so we just have to raise some money and do the planning. It won't just happen overnight, but those will be the next stages. I hope this piece has a long and varied life. ■

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**  
For a longer version of this interview, and to hear an excerpt from the opera, go to: [www.architectureboston.com](http://www.architectureboston.com)



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