New Yorker Annie Gosfield’s compositions explore the inherent beauty of non-musical sounds and are inspired by diverse sources such as machines, destroyed pianos, warped 78-r.p.m. records, and detuned radios. One of her recent compositions was commissioned as a piece for “violin and something,” and the resulting Lost Signals and Drifting Satellites combined recordings of old satellite sounds from the 1950s and live violin. Currently she’s composing an opera based on the encrypted radio transmissions of the Danish Resistance in World War II.

Growing into composing
When I was a kid, I knew that I wanted to be a musician of some sort, but wasn’t sure about being a classical pianist. Playing and writing music were always intertwined, and I was often more interested in writing and playing my own music than in performing another composer’s work. Until a few years ago I composed, but also performed with my own band in venues from small clubs to large concert halls. Over the years I’ve shifted to spending most of my time at home, composing music, and am able to make a living doing it. It’s not an extravagant living, but I get to be my own boss. One commission keeps me working for a few months. As much as I love to perform, it’s great to really focus and sink my teeth into writing one piece of music instead of spending time booking concerts in several different places.

My formal education
I took piano lessons throughout my childhood, then studied composition and other facets of music in college. Before college, I went to progressive schools that stressed creativity, which helped me to maintain my own musical identity later. Then, during my formal musical education, I learned traditional approaches to theory, playing piano, and composition. At moments it was frustrating, but my musical education taught me to work hard and stay focused, and provided skills and knowledge that allowed me to pursue my own ideas.

My informal education
Absorbing everything musical I was studying in college was a challenge, but I always made sure to keep some time or space for my own ideas, whether or not I was getting supervision or approval from my teachers.

Outside of my education, it was very important for me to listen to all kinds of sounds, and not to divide the world into music and noise. I try to keep an open mind in order to learn from all types of music and sound, and to listen with interest, whether I hate or love what I’m hearing. Playing music with other people in all kinds of situations was very important too: it added up to a lifetime of varied experiences in music, which has expanded my outlook and understanding of my art.

Music = Noise: Noise = Music
I’ve heard sounds in factories that I found far more beautiful than some of the music I’ve heard in concert halls. Traditional Western concert music (classical music) is based on
a scale of 12 notes to the octave, but in our environment, sounds are not naturally divided up into a scale, and that’s often reflected in my music. I try to find the “notes between the notes.” Everyday sounds can have a profound effect on our lives if we stop and listen.

Tracking the music of everyday life
A few years ago, I spent six weeks in Nuremberg, Germany, in a residency designed to combine art and industry. It was an incredible opportunity: I was brought there to experience all kinds of factory environments and to listen, record, and then compose music that used factory and machine sounds. It opened my ears to all kinds of sounds and influences.

Shortly after I returned to New York, I heard a beautiful, sweeping, symphonic sound. I ran downstairs and onto the street to try to pinpoint where the beautiful noise was coming from—and found it emanating from a machine that was repaving the street. The tar smell was awful! But it demonstrated the power of sound and the beauty you can discover in your own environment if you just keep your mind open.

Being a composer
When I compose, I have to be comfortable working by myself. When I feel isolated or alienated, often I pick up the phone and call the musician I’m writing for, or think of the performers who will play the finished composition. That reconnects me.

The work style of a composer is unique because you have to be able to work well independently, but also work well with other people. Musicians can be nervous when they’re playing your piece for the very first time, and you have to be sensitive, articulate, and firm in order to communicate what you want while maintaining a creative, positive atmosphere. There’s a lot of subtle psychology involved, and leadership abilities are very important.

The Annie Gosfield Ensemble
My group consists of me on sampling keyboards, Roger Kleier on electric guitar, and an unusual combination of others (mainly drummers and percussionists from varied backgrounds) who are brought in for each concert. I like to let musicians bring their own personal history and unique ideas to a project, and I’ve been lucky enough to work with a great variety of men and women from the classical, jazz, rock, and improvisation worlds.

My equipment
My workhorse is a Macintosh PowerBook laptop. I originally started incorporating unusual sounds using a hardware sampler, which was a great technological innovation in its time, but is now a bit of a dinosaur. A sampler is basically a digital recorder that takes any audio signal [sound] and distributes it along the length of a piano-style keyboard so one can access the sounds just by playing a note. It’s a familiar and comfortable way for a pianist to access unfamiliar sounds. I replaced my old hardware sampler with a software sampler called Kontakt2, and now I connect a MIDI [musical instrument digital interface] keyboard to my laptop, which is a more flexible system and much easier to carry! I normally do field recordings with my computer using an application called ProTools, but occasionally I have to use something more portable, such as a small digital recorder.

My advice to future composers
Although my music is by no means traditional, I never regretted having a traditional music education. Learn an instrument and acquire basic skills. Then listen to everything with an open mind: something that sounds terrible to you today might be totally captivating tomorrow. Computer skills are important for technologically based music, but there is no substitute for developing musical ideas and tapping into your own creative instincts. Play around, improvise, and don’t be afraid to go out on a limb. So many exciting ideas wouldn’t have come to fruition if composers were worried about seeming foolish. Most of all, have fun! A composer’s life entails a lot of hard work, so now is the time to really enjoy music and discover new things. It’s important to develop good work habits early, but never forget that the best reason to pursue music is because you love it.