

# Peter Schaffter

## CURRICULUM VITAE

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## PREAMBLE

**T**wenty years ago, I took an extraordinary step. Single, with no family commitments, I rid myself of most of my possessions and removed myself entirely from the employment grid. I had worked in several fields after university, had even learned a new trade. The jobs were satisfying in their way, but none allowed me to contribute fully of the gifts I had received, both from my education and my upbringing. The politics of income prevented me from following a path whose value lay outside the pay cheque.

Living as an unpaid cook and domestic in two households in Québec, in one case for eight years, I assured myself of food and shelter. During that time, I wrote and published one novel, completed a second (now in the submission phase), and contributed over 18,000 lines of code and 1.5MB of documentation to the GNU free software project. I am justifiably proud of those accomplishments, but they take second place to the more important acts of nourishing and teaching—children and adults alike—which gainful unemployment has allowed me to do, and which are my most valuable assets.

The purpose of this document is to let you know who I am and what I've done in life. In the truest sense of the term, it is a *curriculum vitae*. If you're looking for employers' addresses, dates worked, official job descriptions, paper qualifications or references, read no further.

But if you're intrigued to find out who I am, what I've accomplished and how I might be useful, carry on.



# OVERVIEW

## Education and work

I was born in Costa Rica to an Anglican minister father and a librarian mother. Three months after my birth, they returned to southwestern Ontario, where I grew up and received most of my education.

I've lived half my adult life in Ontario, and half in Québec. I speak English and French fluently. *Québécois* French, I'd like to add—a crunchier version of the language than the gilded cadences of Paris. I also have enough command of German and Latin to translate from either language into English or French with the aid of a dictionary. The Latin's not much use these days, but the German comes in handy from time to time.

The only set of letters I have a right to after my name is Mus. Bac. I started piano lessons at age four and barrelled on until I graduated from the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto with a degree in composition and a minor in choral conducting. I made the Dean's honour roll and got some fancy awards along the way (the BMI in composition; the Percy Faith for best undergrad in any major), but lost my taste for ivy and haven't darkened the halls of academe again.

If a job is what you do to earn money, then I did a lot of them after university, from cocktail pianist to frat-house cook to landscaping grunt. The easiest to quantify in terms of employment was typographer. I apprenticed to the trade of typesetting shortly after university, segued into desktop publishing, and eventually wound up at the internationally-renowned Montréal studio, Les Maîtres Typographes Zibra.

Sadly, Zibra closed its doors in the '90s, a victim of the trend toward inferior but less expensive in-house publishing.

A character in the '80s movie, *Birdie*, makes the observation: "It's hard being good at something nobody wants anymore." A decade and a half ago, the statement seemed to sum up my abilities and talents. A

classically-trained pianist and composer, proficient in an undervalued trade, rich with skills acquired through sundry jobs, I was facing chronic, and criminally wasteful, underemployment. Furthermore, I had a strong drive to *contribute*—to give rather than to take, to offer rather than to earn.

To deal with the problem, I took what might best be called a personal vow of poverty. I have continued to work since, but not for money, in the same way, for example, a homemaker works without a salary. Rather than monetizing my skills, I have given of them freely, resulting in a richer life than I could ever otherwise have had.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

**T**he French language has a term, *polyvalent*, which can mean versatile, multipurpose, or “one who is capable of doing many jobs”. Reluctantly, honesty requires me to stick the label on myself. The simplest way to demonstrate is by listing some of my accomplishments in differing fields.

### Writing

☞ **Novelist** In 2004, I had my first novel published, *The Schumann Proof* (Toronto: RendezVous Crime, 2004). A work of crime fiction set at Toronto’s Royal Conservatory of Music, the book was very well received in the national press (Margaret Cameron, “Homicide for the Holidays,” *The Globe and Mail* 27 Nov. 2004) and called by one reviewer “...*easily the strongest first novel I have ever had the pleasure of reading.*” (M. Steinberg, *Storyteller Magazine*.) You can read a full review of the novel that appeared in *The Midwest Book Review* on line at

<http://www.amazon.com/review/RLJXCL33V51K3>

## Computing

☞ *Groff macro programmer* If getting my first novel published was a source of pride, the real chest-thumper was being referred to as “...one of the unsung heroes of Free Software” in Georg Greve’s *Brave GNU World* column in the German magazine, *Linux-Magazin*.

With no training in programming whatsoever, I undertook to write a massive front-end to the freely-available PostScript typesetting and document preparation system, groff. Since its release, “mom”, as it is called, has become the most popular new interface to groff in the world. It’s currently being used by companies as diverse as the Sammy’s Submarines restaurant chain in the US (for generating soft proofs of franchise menus via a Web interface) to FLIR, the world’s leading manufacturer of thermal imaging equipment.

The program (more accurately, a macroset) is released under the GNU General Public Licence, and is consequently part of all freely available Unix-based operating systems. One of those systems is Free BSD, the underlying platform for Macintosh computers’ OS X. Look under the hood of any Mac and you’ll find me there.

The document you’re reading is a demonstration of the typesetting and document processing capabilities of the mom macroset. If you’d like to read a translation of Georg Greve’s article, it can be found at:

<http://www.gnu.org/brave-gnu-world/issue-57.en.html>

## Music

☞ *Founding director of The New Voice* Shortly after university I was approached to found and conduct Toronto’s first gay men’s chorus. After some discussion, it was decided that Toronto deserved a mixed lesbian and gay choir, and The New Voice was born, named after an anthem I composed for the inaugural concert.

I stayed at helm of the choir for several years before passing the

wheel to Brainerd Blyden-Taylor, who now conducts Toronto's Nathaniel Dett Chorale.

In addition to rehearsal and conducting responsibilities, I received a grant from the Lesbian and Gay Community Appeal of Toronto (LGCA) to compose a three movement work for the choir based on the feminist poetry of Marge Piercy.

## Media

☞ **CBC documentary subject** Filmmakers John and Rose Kastner's CBC documentary, *Sharing the Secret*, looked at the lives of four gay men in Toronto. I was one of the subjects. The film received a special jury citation at the *Prix Italia* in Sienna, Italy.

Owing to the Kastners' deliberate *épater les bourgeois* style, I can humorously claim the honour of being the first man to appear butt naked on national television.

# HATS I WEAR

## Musician

☞ **Classical composer** Within the Western art-music tradition I've composed chamber music, sonatas for various instruments, piano solos, choral music and art songs. Some of it has been on commission, though not much. Classical performers are perennially poor.

I especially enjoy writing vocal music. It allows me to blend two passions: composing and poetry.

I also maintain an abiding interest in the electro-acoustic music of the '50s, '60s and '70s, which GNU/Linux open-source sound software has made it possible once again to compose—without an investment in costly studio equipment.

☞ **Songwriter** In addition to composing in the dead-white-male musical tradition, I've also written quite a few country-music influenced

songs and ballades, some with my own lyrics, some in collaboration with Toronto playwright, David Fairley.

☞ **Classical pianist** I don't like being alone on stage despite twenty years' training to be a virtuoso pianist. It's lonely. My preferred role is vocal accompanist. I think *Lieder* (German art songs) are one of the greatest achievements of Western musical culture, and am never happier than when I'm one half of a team performing them.

## Writer

☞ **Fiction** I tend not to write short stories because they take too long. My real interest is in longer narratives. *The Schumann Proof*, my first published novel, is a work of crime fiction centred around the discovery of an unknown song cycle purportedly written by 19th-century German composer, Robert Schumann.

My second novel, published online, is a semi-autobiographical psychic thriller.

☞ **Computer documentation** When I gravitated to the GNU/Linux operating system over a decade ago, I realized quickly, as do so many, that the weakest part of most programs, whether open-source or proprietary, is their documentation. The problem isn't the accuracy of information, nor the format used to present it. It's the quality of the writing itself, and the organization of the material.

I wrote the groff macroset, *mom*, for GNU/Linux in part to test my theories about what constitutes truly useful documentation. Amongst other things: that explicit repetition is more useful than cross references; that examples are more helpful than instructions; and that the reader should feel s/he is engaging in a learning dialogue with a real human being—preferably one with a sense of humour.

Users routinely thank me for the care I put into my documentation. Several have confessed to reading it all the way through for pleasure.




## Typesetter/infographiste

There's a word in French, *infographiste*, which describes someone who works on computers to create documents for printing—anything from a poster for a lost dog to a corporate annual report. There is no real equivalent in English. Graphic artist isn't right. Neither is page layout artist. I often say I'm a typographer, which is accurate but, more times than not, isn't understood. Plus, I'm proficient in page layout and computer-assisted graphics, which confuses matters.

My field of expertise is making type look good on the page. It's a complex skill requiring extensive knowledge and practised aesthetic judgment. I learned it at the end of the era where pre-press involved setting type in galleys, which were then assembled into full page layouts by paste-up artists. When the printing industry migrated to desktop publishing, and typesetting and layout merged, I carried my typographic skills with me.

The same in-depth knowledge of typography was brought to bear on my open-source programming work. The “mom” front-end to groff (see [above](#)) is noted not only for its ease of use in automated document processing, but for the fine-grained typographic control it gives as well.

## WORK FOR PAY

 My life is divided into two epochs: one where I worked in the conventional sense, and one where I worked for free. The second allowed me to contribute far more than the first, but a list of income-generating activities gives good insight into my versatility.

In alphabetical order, what follows is a list of work I have at various times been paid to do.

☞ **Cocktail pianist** for private functions, as well as occasional work at The Toronto Women's Club on McGill Street.

- ☞ **Dining room manager** At The Fireplace, a French-Chinese fusion restaurant in Toronto. Held the post for six months after its opening.
- ☞ **Dog sitter** Hey—anything's a job if you get paid for it, right? Actually, I'm good with animals in general.
- ☞ **Fraternity house cook, U of TP** Prepared daily lunches and suppers for four fraternity houses—simultaneously. The most physically exhausting work I've ever done.
- ☞ **Landscape grunt** For Denson Landscaping out of Belfountain, Ontario. Heavy physical labour including dismantling and restoration of fieldstone walls. And, in one case, digging up eight fully-grown cedars by hand and moving them three metres at the whim of a client with more money than brains.
- ☞ **Retail clerk/cashier** Student jobs, mostly in bookstores.
- ☞ **Storyteller** Like politicians, I have been paid for telling stories. My specialty is reciting works by Edgar Allen Poe. At various times, my repertoire has included classics like *The Telltale Heart*, *The Masque of the Red Death* and *The Cask of Amontillado*, as well as lesser known but equally creepy stories such as *Morella* and *The Oval Portrait*.
- ☞ **Typesetter, typographer, page layout artist** Apprenticed in Toronto at the now-defunct 3rd Generation Graphics. Subsequently worked for The Merton Circle and Image Plus, also in Toronto. Freelanced for several years, then moved to Montréal where I typeset for the magazines, *Wine Tidings* and *La Barrique*. Migrated to desktop publishing and worked for Les Maîtres Typographes Zibra.
- ☞ **Vocal accompanist** Art song recitals, primarily at the Heliconian Club in Toronto. Specialist in German *Lieder*. Also provided vocal coaching and exam preparation for advanced Royal Conservatory students.

☞ **Wine critic** While working in Montréal for *Wine Tidings* and *La Barrique*, I was on the panel that evaluated wines for monthly articles. In addition to contributing review, I provided the technical glossary to *For the Love of Wine* (Thomas Bachelder et al., Montréal: Kylix Media, 1990).

## EDUCATION

**I**n addition to regular schooling and university, independent music and language studies formed a supplementary and very important part of my education.

### Musical education

☞ **Royal Conservatory of Toronto** I studied piano and electro-acoustic composition at the Royal Conservatory of Toronto, as well as completing all Conservatory requirements in theory, harmony, counterpoint, history, analysis and ear-training. My primary teacher of piano was Boris Berlin, perhaps the best known piano teacher in Canada owing to his extensive publications. Theoretical subjects were studied with the equally renowned Molly Sclater, author of numerous standard textbooks.

☞ **University of Toronto** After completing high school and my Conservatory studies, I enrolled in the Faculty of Music at U of T and earned a degree in composition with a minor in choral conducting. In addition, I took full advantage of being at U of T to enrol in classes outside the Faculty in English literature, German, aesthetics, and cinema.

☞ **Private studies** I was fortunate to continue my piano studies after university with the world-renowned teacher, Karl Ulrich Schnabel. If you're not a pianist, the name probably doesn't mean much. His father was considered the premier interpreter of Beethoven in the twentieth-century. So it wasn't exactly like studying with God, more like his son.

## Language studies

Though anglophone, I gravitated to the French language in high school, and had the opportunity to take my grade eleven year in French in Switzerland. I also studied *québécois* literature and French translation at l'Université de Laval, in Québec.

As for Latin, I was lucky enough to attend a high school where it was still taught, and studied it from grade ten until I graduated. The final year was taken through correspondence.

German, which I loved from the moment I first encountered Schubert, I studied for three years at the University of Toronto.

## COLLABORATIONS


I have had the honour and the pleasure of collaborating with some interesting and talented Canadian artists in film and theatre. A few of them are worth mentioning.

**Bruce Glawson**, now an executive producer at the Discovery Channel, made a documentary about the coming out process called *Michael: A Gay Son*, for which I wrote the music. The result of that collaboration is that I'm listed in the International Movie Database (IMDb) on the Web, which I think is pretty cool.

**Sky Gilbert**, the founder of the Toronto theatre group, Buddies in Bad Times. I had the opportunity to write the incidental music and one torch song for the first run of his play, *Cavafy, or the Veils of Desire*.

**Louise Johnson**, the Montréal-based National Film Board animator whose short film, *When the Dust Settles/Quand retombe la poussière*, made as part of a UNICEF conflict-resolution multimedia package, won the Best Film award at the International Festival of Animation in 1991. I've performed behind the scenes on several of her projects, doing voice-overs and continuity.

## CONCLUSION

y interests are broad, from wildflowers to country music to Japanese animé and manga. I read widely. My preferred novel genre is science fiction and I love good comic books. In non-fiction, I generally read philosophy, theology, politics and history.

The computer is my über hobby—specifically, the GNU/Linux operating system—since it allows me to work freely in many fields: programming, writing, composing and engraving music, typesetting, image manipulation. I support the principles of free, open-source software as outlined by the GNU foundation, and am committed to the ideals of the Creative Commons.

I'm a really good cook and baker (no, honestly!), and maintain myself physically through daily yoga. While I have no specific religious affiliations, I read Lao Tzu regularly and have studied the I Ching.

I work well alone and have never missed a deadline. I also function well in groups, as either leader or follower, provided that respect is earned and flows both ways.

Finally, if there's one statement that sums up my core beliefs, it is this: individuals are always more important than institutions.

