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Musical Borderlands: Exploring Interdisciplinary Art in Philadelphia  
By Alyssa Timin

Amidst the wide array of music being made in Philadelphia, from jazz to folk to classical, some groups are looking beyond music itself for adventurous programming. Several regional music organizations, among them PMP grantees Mendelssohn Club, Network for New Music, Relâche, and the Prince Music Theater, are planning performances for the 2004-2005 season that cross disciplinary borders, integrating elements from other artistic arenas into their concerts.

Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia will present an event combining song and a feature length film. In collaboration with the Philadelphia Film Festival, Mendelssohn Club will sing Richard Einhorn's cantata *Voices of Light*, written to accompany Carl Dreyer's famous silent film, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. The Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia will provide instrumental accompaniment.

*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, made in 1928, is well-known both for its groundbreaking film techniques, which influenced Bergman, Fellini, Hitchcock, and others, as well as the extraordinary and haunting performance of Renée Falconetti in the title role. Einhorn composed *Voices of Light* after seeing the film and being so moved as to begin serious research into its history, the life of Joan of Arc, and the writings of several other female mystics. The cantata he composed employs texts from Joan's letters, quotes from the Bible, and poetry from mystics including St. Hildegard of Bingen and Beatrice of Nazareth.

Alan Harler, Mendelssohn Club's Music Director, comments, "There is a terrific history of film present in Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and terrific history of oratorio present in Richard Einhorn's contemporary cantata, *Voices of Light*, based on ancient texts from revered female mystics as well as Joan of Arc herself." Together these works engage the musicians and the audience in an unusual experience that attempts to balance seeing and hearing. "This includes understanding the difficulties of successfully projecting film concurrent with live performance," Harler adds. The interdisciplinary project requires a cooperative sensibility in both its practical and creative aspects.

Harler finds this opportunity to involve other media in the work of the Mendelssohn Club an exciting move that addresses both the origins and the future of artistic performance: "From earliest recorded time, people 'mixed' art forms. Drama was

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not done without music and dance; poetry was not read, but sung; instruments accompanied singers and dancers and actors. With the rise of the formal concert as a form of public performance, we now had separate orchestra concerts, chorus concerts, theater, poetry readings...all as independent performance media. This was a good thing.”

He continues, “Integrating the disciplines in new and interesting ways is also a good thing. Today, people, especially young people, are accustomed to layers of media-driven entertainment. This offers exciting possibilities for choral music to go outside the usual format of ‘the choral concert’ to artistic expression of a much more accessible and highly dramatic nature.” However, Harler emphasizes, “Accessible should not, and does not, mean that it is a less meaningful or valuable experience.” The concert will implement audiences’ increasing fluency with multidisciplinary performance to present a challenging oratorio with a challenging film, both of which explore the religious themes traditional to choral music.

The women of Mendelssohn Club will introduce the concert with Francis Poulenc’s *Litanies á la Vierge Noir: Notre Dame de Roc-Amadour*, a supplication to a French feminine icon of the Church, acting as an alternative to a film short, which traditionally opened silent pictures. The entire concert promises to be an unusual and moving opportunity for audiences to witness two masterful, entwined responses to the tragic life of a charismatic mystic. It will take place on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005, at Irvine Auditorium, located at 34<sup>th</sup> and Spruce Streets.

The Network for New Music will present a number of different interdisciplinary performances this season. In their *Doubletake* program, the Phrenic New Ballet will join the NNM ensemble in the performance of several dances, including works by Chen Yi, Lee Hyla, and local composers James Primosch and Robert Maggio. *Doubletake* will be performed on March 8 and 9, 2005 at the Arts Bank, on the Avenue of the Arts.

NNM’s final production of the 2004-2005 season will be *Nightmaze*, a multimedia work for live instrumental ensemble, digitally processed sounds, spoken voice and video projections, with music by Sebastian Currier, text and concept by Thomas Bolt, and projections by Sage Carter. Like the Mendelssohn Club’s project, this work seeks to balance its various elements equally, here between visual imagery,

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narrative, and music. Currier explains how the collaborating artists balance the piece: “It seems to me that visual images more easily engage our attention than sounds do under ordinary circumstances, and so part of our challenge in *Nightmaze* is to be able to neutralize the visual image at some points while letting it take over at others.”

*Nightmaze* enacts the troubled dreams of a student who is exhausted after several straight days of studying for exams. His nightmare knots his studies of philosophy and psychology with the shadows of his own consciousness. As Currier describes it, “In this state of complete exhaustion, he falls into a deep sleep and, his mind still saturated with fragments of Freud, Burke and cosmology, dreams he is driving down an imaginary highway. *Nightmaze* follows his journey through a dark world of sexual desire, fear, and longing as strange road signs loom up in front of him and he must choose the course to take on his nocturnal joyride.”

Bolt illustrates this symbolic journey as along “a nightmare Interstate in which the protagonist is confronted again and again with stark, binary choices...along with foreshortened warnings, instructions, and paired alternatives from the worlds of Physics, Economics, and Psychology. The static world of reading and ideation is continually set against the restless, demanding sensory experience of travel, music, dream.” The visual components of the work, which remain spare, alternate text and sign, and with the music foster a rhythmic attention that, according to Currier, “ceaselessly propels one forward into distance places.”

Currier commented that he appreciates this opportunity to work with Bolt, whose writings he has known and admired for a decade. A pleasant surprise, he said, was finding that “the basic structure of Thomas Bolt’s narrative seems to relate with great ease to the purely musical structures that I use in my music in general.” He wonders whether or not the correlation is coincidental, or whether it perhaps influenced their choice to work together. Their collaboration has encouraged Currier to consider more extensively the relationship “between concrete representations of the world and the abstract language of music,” including parallels that he recognized between the three-dimensional spaces that Bolt and Carter rendered in their text and images, and the “spatialization” of his music.

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*Nightmaze* will be performed at Haverford College on May 4, 2005 and at Rock Hall at Temple University on May 6. An atmospheric take on the dark conflicts of the psyche, audiences may find Currier, Bolt, Carter, and the Network for New Music transporting them into the wilder realms of their own minds.

Relâche, an instrumental octet, has pursued significant amounts of multidisciplinary work since 2000, including *The Bell and the Glass*. This collaboration with the Philadelphia Museum of Art spawned video, installation, and performance elements exploring two of Philadelphia's most famous residents, the Liberty Bell and Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Undone By Her Bachelors, Even*, nicknamed "The Large Glass." Relâche has also created two live silent film programs, *Sonic Cinema I & II*, and two dance collaborations with choreographer Meredith Rainey and the Phrenic New Ballet.

This year, PMP will provide support for the 2004-2005 installment of Relâche's *Future Sounds* series. Each of the three programs will involve innovative collaborations with other media and disciplines. Relâche has organized the *Future Sounds* series through an overarching thematic lens. The first program, *Comedy + Heroism*, will be produced with the Prince Music Theater's "Film at the Prince" and will address how early animation, while intended as entertainment, simultaneously laid the foundation for crucial American tropes. Focusing on the films of Max Fleischer, Relâche will screen early animated shorts with commissioned works by Diane Monroe and Arthur Jarvinen, as well as perform related works by Joseph Koykkar, John Zorn, and Raymond Scott, whose work with Carl Stalling drove Warner Brothers' animation music.

The second program, entitled *Tragedy + Hope*, will include commissioned works by local composer Toby Twining and Gavin Bryars. Twining, who is known for composing microtonal vocal works, will write a piece for the Relâche ensemble and one of the voices in his a cappella quartet. Bryars, a British composer, will create a piece for multiple musicians and will incorporate theatrical elements.

The final program of the *Future Sounds* series will be *Innocence + Joy*. It will center on the concepts of childhood wonder, nostalgia, and fantasy through the work of Maurice Sendak, author of the children's literature classics *Where the Wild Things Are*

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and *In the Night Kitchen*. The project will feature a radio show composed by Relâche's first-ever composer collective, the Minimum Security Composers Collective. The show will be based on the variety radio show that incorporated talk, skits, music, readings and more, and will encompass 75 minutes worth of coordinated pieces by the four Minimum Security composers, Dennis DeSantis, Ken Ueno, Roshanne Etezady, and Adam Silverman.

According to the group, Minimum Security began as a presenting organization and creative collective hybrid, hoping to match talented performers with a concert's worth of newly-composed works. Etezady explains, "Since the early days of MSCC, our methods have changed somewhat, but our goal is still the same: to be 'evangelists' for new music, and to continue to build strong, lasting connections between composers, performers, and audiences." She remarks that she was drawn to this project "because of the evocative work of Maurice Sendak." In his stories, she sees a passionate and candid rendering of children's imaginations: "His work reflects the fact that childhood isn't all teddy bears and lollipops. Kids live in a mysterious world, sometimes wonderful, sometimes terrifying, sometimes both, that adults often forget about. But not Sendak. His work is at once knowing and naive, whimsical and serious."

The program will be recorded live for regional broadcast on WHYY's "Sunday Showcase" and may be syndicated through NPR. The Rosenbach Museum & Library, which houses the largest Sendak collection in the world, will also provide support for the project. Etezady emphasizes her enthusiasm for collaborating with Relâche, commenting, "These performers are tremendous, and I had such a wonderful experience working with them in the past. The instrumentation of Relâche is absolutely unique – their sound is one that cannot be replicated by any other ensemble, and it gives a composer many exciting opportunities."

Relâche consciously seeks to explore connections between popular culture and the avant-garde, evident in its interest in animation and children's books. Executive and Artistic Director Thaddeus Squire argues, "While contemporary art music must maintain its values as a lead art form, dedicated to musical innovation, it must also fully embrace popular culture, the sense of belonging, familiarity and entertainment value that people

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desire.” The playfulness of pop and the freedom in bridging artistic traditions come together in Relâche’s world of contemporary chamber music, capturing the spirit of their 1924 music-theater namesake: “*Relâche* is perpetual movement, life, it is the minute of happiness we all seek...” (Francis Picabia). Look for the Minimum Security Composers Collective with Relâche at the Prince Music Theater on January 28-30, 2005.

In May of 2005, the Prince Music Theater will mount an extensive program of experimental music theater works under the heading *CrossCurrents at the Prince*. Two of the featured productions will come from Paul Dresher, a famously versatile and innovative composer whose own Paul Dresher Ensemble both produces and tours its collaboratively-created opera and experimental music theater works and performs as the Electro-Acoustic Band with a diverse repertory of commissioned works from a range of contemporary composers.

*Slow Fire*, one of the Dresher Ensemble’s defining works, will be brought out of the retirement it entered in 1996 after being performed nearly two-hundred times and exhausting the live analog tape loop system that Dresher built specially for the piece. For this production, Dresher will develop a new digital performance system utilizing a Mac PowerBook and MAX MSP software to replace the analog system, as well as update the show’s topical references. Rinde Eckert, *Slow Fire*’s choreographer, will modify his contributions to the work to reflect “a more modulated, less-consistently ‘over-the-top’ approach,” as Dresher describes it.

*Slow Fire* tells the story of Bob, “a comic but dangerous everyman,” and follows him through a day and night of remembering his father. More than just a character study, however, the piece uses the cartoonish bluster of Bob and his dad to critique the destructive underbelly of certain contemporary attitudes. Dresher cites “the hubris of manifest destiny, the despoiling of the environment, the destruction of indigenous cultures in the name of progress and property, and the obsessive enforcement of power in a climate that poses the threat (and actuality) of violence” all as issues at work in the piece as Dad bellows, “Get yourself some land, Boy, /Anybody’s land!” Ultimately, he hopes that *Slow Fire* “will offer audiences a renewed opportunity to reflect upon the

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connection between our choices and actions as individuals and our current condition and choices as a nation.”

The political convictions rendered in the piece spoke clearly to its original audiences, as the piece quickly drew a cult following and, through several national and international tours, found expanded audiences from the spheres of opera, rock and roll, modern dance, and the visual arts. “There was something about Bob and Dad that resonated with most of our audiences,” Dresher comments, “who could see in these figures a part of themselves, their fathers, or someone close from their past.” Dresher even discovered that the piece appealed to children. He hopes that with this revival of the show, people who loved the first version will now be able to introduce it to their kids.

Dresher’s new piece that will enjoy its East Coast premiere at *CrossCurrents at the Prince* is *The Tyrant*, composed for tenor John Duykers and created in collaboration with him and writer Jim Lewis. *The Tyrant* takes its inspiration from Italo Calvino’s short story, “A King Listens,” though this production will abandon all of the original text in favor of simply appropriating the narrative’s premise. As Dresher tells it, “A king, unable to physically leave his throne for fear of overthrow, is forced to experience his kingdom entirely through the medium of sound.”

The work is being written as a companion piece to Peter Maxwell Davies’ *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1969), and is being scored for the same instrumentation, the classic “Pierrot” chamber quintet plus percussion. Together, the two works constitute an evening’s performance for Duykers, whom Dresher regards as a mentor in opera and music theater composition. *The Tyrant* has provided Dresher an opportunity to realize a long-held goal of his, to create a substantial solo role for the tenor. He comments, “The score is being written to draw out the full range and depth of Duykers’ extraordinary voice...Indeed, at one recent performance, it was described as having attained the richness of fine wine.”

It was Duykers himself who helped influence Dresher to integrate collaboration and interdisciplinary methods into his compositional style more than twenty years ago. They found success with a co-created show called *The Way of How* in 1981, and Dresher found himself hooked on collaborative music theater. He values mixing performance

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media as a means of building contrasts into an audience's focus; in fact, he says, "I find that this approach continually refreshes the audience's palette and actually can result in the music having greater impact." *Slow Fire*, for example, is led by different media in different scenes, though he expects *The Tyrant* will rely more consistently on music for the development of its drama.

Dresher also values interdisciplinary work for the chance to set texts, even "found" texts that were never intended to be sung. "I love...finding music solutions to language that was not created with any conscious music scheme," he enthuses. "I believe that one of my skills is that I can set almost any text."

On another level, working in theatrical contexts lets Dresher comment more directly on social, political and philosophical issues than he might if he routinely stuck to the concert stage. Clearly, this commentary is at work in the formation of *The Tyrant*, and its "irreverent" libretto will surely zing as an operatic exposé on the panic at the heart of power. *Slow Fire* and *The Tyrant* will play at the Prince Music Theater May 18-22, 2005.

Though audiences have come to expect commercial entertainment to interact with multiple senses simultaneously, multi- and interdisciplinary arts performances may induce audiences to engage in a new kind of listening, a new kind of attention. Audience members are asked not only to look and listen at the same time, but to consider how such seeing and hearing work together – or apart – in appreciating the work of art. Music's established formats and genres stabilize these experiments with their authority and nuance, a rich soil for planting new attempts at expression. More and more, musicians take on work with painters, writers, dancers and directors, rejuvenating traditional forms with projects that seek to discover, and perhaps recover, common artistic ground.

*Alyssa Timin joined PMP's staff as Program Associate in January, 2004. A 2003 graduate of Swarthmore College, Alyssa came to PMP with a background in religion and the arts, including a lifelong love of music. At Swarthmore, she co-edited Spike, a bi-annual humor magazine, and is pleased to return to journalism for the premiere issue of PMP.*