

Philadelphia: A Brave New (Old) World

A few months ago, the *New York Times* ran an article which claimed Philadelphia as its de facto sixth borough, citing disco dancing classes for toddlers and artists living in cheap lofts as evidence of Philadelphia's newly minted cultural viability. It was almost as if the Paper of Record (for The Center of the Universe) upturned a rock and found itself surprised at teeming life beneath. But as centers of activity go—particularly musical activity—it is no surprise that Philadelphia *does* in fact have a pulsing, vivid, vital scene, particularly when it comes to the commissioning, promotion, and performance of new works. Since 1912, when a daring, wild-eyed maestro cum musical mountebank named Leopold Stokowski took command of the Philadelphia Orchestra, one of America's most dynamic musical treasures, Philly has been one of the few cities allowing for the safe passage from thought to deed of The New—and this coming season will be no exception. At the center of this groundswell is, as always, the Philadelphia Music Project, an initiative of The Pew Charitable Trusts that enables composers and ensembles to meet, collaborate, produce, and make a little bit of history.

Like previous seasons, this year's forthcoming commissions outline a wide range of artists, ensembles, and, especially, composers. Some composers work within the "classical," deeply rooted in the Western tradition; some improvise in a wide cut of styles from jazz to the Gamelan Orchestra; some make use of electronic media, hip hop, quotation, multimedia, music of the Great Masters, show tunes, propaganda – the sky is not even the limit. However, a survey of some of the composers whose works will be presented can show one thing: as long as there are organizations whose heart and hands work for the greater musical good, then all the pundits flapping about the alleged death of concert music can be put, finally, out to pasture.

This season saw the birth of *Margaret Garner*, the first operatic collaboration between composer Richard Danielpour and librettist Toni Morrison, a setting of one of the narratives in her book *Beloved*. It is one of the most highly anticipated premieres of the last few years. This work was a co-commission from three theatres: The Michigan Opera Theater (in Detroit), the Cincinnati Opera, and the Opera Company of Philadelphia. In light of the economic risk inherent to producing large new operatic works, this collaboration between one of the most successful composers on the scene and a Nobel Prize-winning author takes a bold step forward in supporting contemporary artists.

Many have wondered how a composer of Persian Jewish descent takes on such a blood-and-guts story about African-American slavery. Danielpour chose to refer to his ancestry in the enslaved race of Esther and to approach slavery from a more universal perspective. "There have been a lot of surprises," he admitted, in an interview given to the *Cincinnati Enquirer* around the time of the world premiere, "but the greatest surprise in writing 'Margaret Garner' was, I didn't know how live an issue slavery really would be. I knew it was important, but I didn't know how important it was that we write this opera."

The Philadelphia Orchestra, with its typical zeal for new work, will present six new works in the coming two years, a series called **First Performances**. In the coming 2005-2006 season, the orchestra will play world premieres of Jennifer Higdon's Percussion Concerto, Gerald Levinson's Fanfare for Organ and Orchestra (commissioned for the dedication of Verizon Hall's new organ), Bright Sheng's Concerto for Orchestra and a new work by Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina. Ms. Higdon is also part of Orchestra 2001's **First Hearings** program, which includes world premieres by George Crumb, Gerald Levinson, father and son Larry and Jordan Nelson, and Liviu Marinesco, with Philadelphia premieres of works by Tan Dun and Aaron Kernis.

"This piece," says Higdon, apropos of her Percussion Concerto, "is one of three concertos I am having premiered this year, and I feel a special fondness for it. I love writing works that highlight instruments that do not have as much literature. There's plenty out there for, say, the violin or the piano, but not enough for percussion. And creating a work for musicians like Colin Currie," who is slated to play the solo part, "and the Philadelphia Orchestra is a real inspiration." The piece, according to the composer, "...emphasizes the interaction between the solo percussionist and the percussion section of the orchestra. It does this throughout the entire concerto, which is unusual—I don't know if it has been done before."

Orchestra 2001's six world premieres this season are highlighted by Philadelphia local hero George Crumb, one of the most influential composers of the 20th century. Younger generations have attempted to recreate such ethereal timbres and other-worldly visions, and while many have come close, few have captured the discord of the previous century as succinctly as he. Perhaps the secret of this ingeniously inventive composer is history: "Most of my influences are turn-of-the-century," he told Mic Holwin in a recent interview, "The LAST turn-of-the-century!"

Composer-pianist-curator Andrea Clearfield is slated for a busy season! For starters, she has been commissioned by the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia to write a large work for chorus, orchestra, and baritone—setting poetry of Ellen Frankel—based on the Jewish legend of the Golem. Titled *Golem Psalms*, the work will be coupled in concert with Ernest Bloch's nearly-vanished *Sacred Service (Avodah Hakodesh)*. "I plan to research folk music from 16th century Prague," says Clearfield, "where the most famous Golem story originates, as well as Jewish symbolism and Cabbalistic numerology, which will inform the musical structure. These numbers will reflect the creation of the myth of the Golem, a clay figure who was brought to life by a particular set of mystical ritualistic actions. The work itself will have the form of a cantata, alternating sections for the chorus with arias for the baritone and interludes for the orchestra."

As well as writing her own ambitious composition, Clearfield will put her curatorial skills to use, overseeing a January 2006 concert called **Mozart: Reloaded** at the Kimmel Center's Perelman Theatre. This event includes five world premiere commissions by Philadelphia area composers, inviting them to choose from among their favorite works of Mozart and create new pieces—or improvisations—based upon them. Composer Gloria Justen will perform on her electric violin, and Jan Krzywicki, Robert Maggio, Sebastian

Chang, and Evan Solot will each compose a variation on *The Magic Flute*'s "Bird Catcher's Aria" for pianist Charles Abramovic. Then Clearfield will bend the rules a little further with a performance by Manfred Fischbeck's Group Motion Dance Company and jazz improvisations by the Tony Miceli Trio and pianist-composer Uri Caine.

"I met Andrea Clearfield," says Caine, an accomplished Philadelphia-raised composer of some fifteen albums, "because I wrote a piece for her group Relâche. After this, she asked if I would be interested in writing a solo piano piece to celebrate Mozart's music—one that would have elements of improvisation within it. On some level, it is a question of finding the right piece—or pieces—to use, and from there you try to take the structure of Mozart and try to open up certain sections of it for free play, either using his harmony or his themes, trying to develop in a way Mozart might have done. It is daunting to use Mozart because his music is already perfect—but once you get into it, ideas occur."

Caine is not the only jazz musician being supported this season in Philadelphia to write music responding to extant works of art. The Philadelphia Museum of Art commissioned legendary jazz musicians Stanley Cowell (a pianist) and David Liebman (a saxophonist) to compose pieces directly inspired or influenced by works in their vast and important private collection. The first original compositions commissioned for their **Art After 5** program, the project will extend Museum's commitment to their role as a performing arts venue. "I hope my piece will serve to successfully celebrate the Philadelphia Museum's ongoing commitment to making connections possible between the area's musical artists and the region's people," says Cowell, "while offering a new perspective on the art and artifacts that are on exhibit."

"It has been a new challenge," he elaborates, "to integrate Asian musical articulations, rhythms, scales and textures into a jazz-oriented composition that will feature jazz musicians as soloists while avoiding cliché sounds we often associate with Asian music. The piece will be absolute music that can be heard without references. However, I am selecting historical persons, gods, places, eras, pictures and titles of artworks from the collection as inspiration and anchors for structuring the music."

Several preeminent Chinese-American composers will be featured in Philly this year, among them Bright Sheng, Tan Dun, and Chen Yi. "The Philadelphia Orchestra approached me," says Sheng, "and asked me to write one of several commissions, each of which will couple a world premiere with a Beethoven symphony: mine will be played alongside the sixth. The working title of my piece, for the moment, is *Concerto for Orchestra—Zodiac Tales*. It has five movements, each of which is inspired by a story from the Zodiac Chinese Legends. But that is enough; titles for music can only stimulate a listener's imagination. Everyone will—and should—have their own story when they are listening to the work."

Sheng's musical purview draws on everything from his native Chinese folk music to Bartók to Bernstein, and his importance to our culture was honored, in 2001, with his receiving the prestigious MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. The list of orchestras and soloists for whom he has written includes the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Emmanuel

Ax, the NDR Symphony Orchestra, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, the New York Philharmonic, percussionist Evelyn Glennie, and the Santa Fe Opera. He is also the artistic advisor for Yo-Yo Ma's wildly successful Silk Road Project.

Gateways to Global Music is a project designed by the Philadelphia Classical Symphony, under the direction of Karl Middleman, to bring cultures together, a sort of "East Meets West" imbued with a musical pulse. There will not only be concerts but also symposia, multidisciplinary collaborations and school residency programs, designed not to smash barriers between cultures but to find their points of tension and intersection, all to aid artists' understanding of their separate and collective musical worlds. In each of the concerts in this series, a leading world music ensemble will join the orchestra to play a world premiere: Chen Yi has been commissioned this year in conjunction with her ensemble Music From China; in the subsequent season, composer Evan Ziporyn's work will be featured in collaboration with Gamelan Galak Tika.

"This is the latest in a series of pieces I've composed over the last fifteen years for Balinese gamelan and western instruments," says Ziporyn, an American who has devoted a significant portion of his career to Eastern music. "Each of these has involved a unique cross-cultural combination, from mixed chamber groups to electronics to, most recently, a full symphony orchestra. For this piece I designed a new set of Balinese instruments in a unique tuning that will intersect with the strings in some interesting ways. Normally, a gamelan is tuned in a way that falls completely outside western tuning, but in this case, there are some notes in common. This, combined with string instruments' ability to retune, will lead to some surprising results - at least I hope so!"

When asked what this work was "about," Ziporyn had some bittersweet things to say: "I never really know what my pieces are about until they're finished. But in general, I believe very strongly in finding ways to bring cultures together, because my own life has been so enriched by the personal encounters that my studies in world music have made possible. Today the world is at war, and wars tend to keep people apart. My hope is that in some small way work like this reminds us of the value of reaching outside of our own backyard."

Ziporyn is a virtuoso clarinetist who has written works for such accomplished and diverse groups as the Bang On A Can All-Stars, the Kronos Quartet, Wu Man, cellist Maya Beiser and percussionist Steve Schick, Arden Trio, the California EAR Unit, pianist Sarah Cahill, and Orkest de Volharding, always seeking to cross cultures, to compose music that bleeds through the pores of traditional boundaries.

William Bolcom is one of the composers—along with Nicholas Maw, Stephen Jaffe, the Hungarian madman composer György Kurtág, Lewis Spratlan, Jennifer Higdon, Ezequiel Viñao, David Baker and Jake Heggie—to be included in this season's **First Hearings** program at the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society. Apropos of his work *Serenada Notturna*, Bolcom says: "The piece is not 'about' anything but its own self. It is not a 'profound' piece—i.e. pompously preachy, as I find a number of recent pieces end up being in their search for depth—or an 'exploratory' piece, in that it is mostly tonal, not

full of harmonic thorniness (I've written plenty of thorny music elsewhere, for anyone who misses it here). The *Serenada Notturna* is rather serenade-y, definitely 'night music,' with night's delights and terrors. I meant it to be a pleasure for the players—it is intentionally 'light,' as a serenade should be, with darker patches that are there to remind you of 'real life.'”

Among the most accomplished and respected composers working today, Bolcom has been commissioned by just about all of the important musical institutions in the world, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera and the Vienna Philharmonic, to name a few. In 1988, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his *Twelve New Etudes* for piano, premiered and recorded by Philadelphia's own Marc-André Hamelin.

This is only a partial list of some of the composers whose work will be competing for Philadelphia's audiences this season. It should, however, serve as ample evidence that the city is alive and hopping with significant projects. PMP lovingly fuels the efforts of these variously talented composers, championing a precious commodity that seems all too often in danger of losing its toehold in the larger discussion: concert music. Someday you will be able to say: “I was there when...”

--Daniel Felsenfeld, composer-writer