

21ST  
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# Gifts from Maggio

TOM MOORE

Composer Robert Maggio is in his late 30's, with two CRI discs to his credit (*Seven Mad Gods*, 1996, and *Riddles*, 2001), and an extensive catalog published by Presser. He studied composition at Yale and Penn, and now teaches at West Chester University, southwest of Philadelphia. We talked in June 2002 at his home in the rolling hills of Media, Pennsylvania, where he lives with his partner and daughter.

MOORE: Tell us about the musical environment in your family as you were growing up.

MAGGIO: I am the youngest of four, all born within about five years of each other. All of us began piano lessons at age seven, almost like a rite of passage. My mother played the piano; my father is not a musician – as far as I know we don't have any professional musicians in the family, so for me to go into music was a little unusual. There was a huge interest in the music and the arts in our family – we went to plays and musical a lot in New York, and were all involved in the various drama clubs. I was much more interested in theater than in music when I was growing up. I was one of the kids who was in the seventh grade play and the eighth grade play when it was really not cool for boys to be in the play.

MOORE: What roles did you play?

MAGGIO: We didn't do anything that you would recognize unless you directed seventh and eighth grade plays. One was called *Something's Gotta Go* about a married couple. I was the husband whose wife was hiring an efficiency expert to come into the house and clean things up, and I was not cool with the idea...I actually got out of piano lessons as quickly as possible. I stopped at fourteen, so it's fairly ironic that I got interested in a professional musical career. I got away with it because I was the youngest. At fourteen I stopped practicing because I didn't like doing the same thing over and over again, but I didn't stop playing the piano. What I really enjoyed doing was improvising. For me the real joy in music came in making up music, not from making someone else's music. To this day I have a really difficult time playing or practicing or learning anything other than what I am working on. Call it hugely egocentric if you will...so I learned all of my own stuff, which was mostly songs, influenced by the pop and progressive rock that I was listening to growing up, also by musical theater. I'm leagues away from that now, but that's where it began. By my junior year in high school there was a playwriting competition, and I entered it, but with a musical instead of a play. Maybe they only got one application, I don't know, but anyway they chose my play for a production – the prize was a production. This was probably one of the most galvanizing forces in my becoming a musician – that is, for the first time ever somebody else was going to have to perform what I did, which meant I had to write it down, which I had never done before. I had to make lead sheets, take all those years of piano lessons and turn it around, and figure out what this stuff that I was playing at the keyboard would actually look like on the page. That was one of the biggest lessons I ever learned – that if you can hear it and play it you should also be able to write it down – a sort of lesson in humility, because I didn't realize how hard it was going to be. After torturedly writing out lead sheets and lyrics, the musical was produced, and that's where the love of acting and music and theater came together for me. At that age, I thought I was going to be writing show. I was a huge Bernstein-Sondheim fanatic. I was one of the only people in high school who knew *Pacific Overtures*. My brother made fun of me – he would come into the room and say, "What is that you are listening to?"

I'd have the soundtrack on, and people would be doing this pseudo-Kabuki drama.... I imagine it was fairly unusual for a seventeen-year old in suburban New Jersey to be listening to this music. That's where the musical beginnings were for me.

MOORE: Where was that?

MAGGIO: This was in Somerville, New Jersey, by the dreaded Somerville Circle.

MOORE: Situate us in time. About when was this?

MAGGIO: I was born in '64, so high school for me was 78-82.

MOORE: Post-disco...

MAGGIO: And I'm listening to *A Little Night Music*, *Follies*, thinking these are great musicals, and also listening to Genesis and Yes and Kansas. I have to admit to liking progressive rock a lot. Around this time my cousin told me that he was going to be going into New York to take lessons in jazz improv on the Upper West Side, and he wanted to know if I was interested in composition lessons. He said, "If you are interested in doing musical theater in college, you might want to take some theory lessons", so I started taking one-on-one private lessons with a man named Dennis Anderson.

MOORE: What was his background?

MAGGIO: He was a trumpet player, and a keyboard player and a songwriter.

MOORE: Doing popular music?

MAGGIO: He was trying to figure out how to make a living, so he wasn't writing inventions or sonatas. That was my earliest training – I was learning the craft of writing pop songs when I was seventeen. He had me buy *Great Songs of the Sixties*, *Great Songs of the Seventies*, and every two weeks we would pick out a song that I liked, and I would write a model composition. Strangely enough it was very classical in its method... I didn't know that ten years later I would be at the University of Pennsylvania, and Richard Wernick would be saying "Go home and write a Bach fugue for next week." Ten years before I was trying to write another version of "Killing Me Softly."

MOORE: Picking up on the elements of style...

MAGGIO: Exactly. What is that makes a James Taylor song a James Taylor song, or a Janis Ian song a Janis Ian song. At an early age I learned that composition is understanding style, understanding a composer's habits – just like the way I put things when I am talking to you is different from the way that you would say it. We would look at every detail – harmonic rhythm, vocal ranges, patterns in the accompaniment, much in the same way you would look at a Haydn sonata. Fortunately he didn't present it like study – it felt like a lot of fun. I would go home every week really itching to get to the keyboard. Had he said me at the time "Let's look at some Debussy preludes" I probably would have balked, and in my experience teaching composition now that's been a huge model that I really revere, which is to meet the student where they are and try to work with them from that point. It doesn't make any sense to impose your vision.

MOORE: The change in musical idiom since your high school years has been fairly radical, and twenty years ago it would have been common even for someone wanting to write Broadway musical to know a substantial amount of classical repertoire. Now you can easily have composition students that haven't listened through a Beethoven symphony. Where *is* the point where you are meeting your students?

MAGGIO: I am extremely jealous of my students in that they are able to approach things in a much more down-to-earth way. They can listen to Queen, or Radiohead, or John Williams, or these film score guys – because everybody wants to be a film composer. My envy comes from the fact that when I was entering college it was Ned Rorem, David Del Tredici – hey, there are still people writing tonal music. For me that was the big breath of fresh air, that it was really possible to write pieces that were tonal, or at least tonally or modally oriented – melodies, not atonal super-modernist stuff that I was not interested in as a student. Actually now I find myself more interested in listening to it – I don't think that I have the temperament of personality to write it – but I am enjoying listening to Boulez, for example, whereas I hated it 25 years ago.

MOORE: Because you can appreciate the craft?

MAGGIO: The craft, but also because I can just let go. I feel more confident with myself. At the age of 20 you are trying to find somebody that looks like you so you can feel comfortable with yourself. I am almost 40, so I can listen to a lot of people and not feel like that has to define my world. I am allowing for a much larger planet musically. The students can come in and now and know that Bang on A Can happened. The most profound impact on classical music has been the integration of rock and pop music, so that someone like Michael Torke can become hugely successful, or David Lang, Michael Gordon, and Julia Wolfe can carve out careers without ever having to write fugues, sonatas. Pop and rock have been completely infused into classical music, and in fact some of my students don't know it, and I have to say “hey, check this out, you might want to write music like this”. It's trying to find for a 20-year-old something that sounds and looks like them. My students come in all over the map – they all want to be film composers, they all play in rock bands, they all know Dave Matthews – they know stuff I don't know.

MOORE: Is the film music because they want to be financially successful, or because they want their music to reach a mass audience?

MAGGIO: That's a great question, since it would do all of those things. They all know John Williams's music.

MOORE: It's hard to avoid.

MAGGIO: We sit in our interviews saying “can you name some contemporary composers?”, and quite honestly they cannot name anyone outside of the film world. “Have you heard of Philip Glass?” “Yeah, he was in *South Park*.” Maybe they'll have some knowledge of John Adams or John Corigliano, or Ned Rorem, because they sang some songs. It's interesting to watch these young composers find out about the really vibrant contemporary music scene that's going on right now. With all the aesthetic camps, it's challenging to define yourself musically. You could play identity politics and write music that reflects your ethnicity, or however you choose to define yourself. It's tough.

MOORE: Nothing is forbidden.

MAGGIO: It's all available all the time, it's all OK. Everything's OK. It's really a problem – there's no taboo. It's really hard to tick people off, to think of what will upset everyone and do it. I was talking to the guy who runs Relache, Thaddeus Squire, two days ago, about this, and how much Dada and Surrealism was about this, composers who were trying to thumb their noses at the establishment.

MOORE: Was the music of David Diamond and Ned Rorem ticking off the high modernists?

MAGGIO: Yes. Not intentionally, though, but it seems to me that if you are a believer in a capital-P Progress in music, that one day we will all be singing 12-tone national anthems at baseball stadiums, then if someone is writing a nice tune in F major it could be disconcerting.

MOORE: And perhaps the eclecticism of 2002 and the dogmatism of 1960 both reflect the political climate at the time, so that even though modernism was something that happened in the West, it had a flavor of the “historical inevitability” that was associated with the coming of “world communism”. And now we have no arrow for history anymore.

MAGGIO: I would have to agree. It would be comforting to see the big arrow in the sky, or in the textbook, or on the computer screen, but I don't see it. And actually that may be a healthy thing. Things may sort themselves out, or maybe we'll just make our own music more personally. My musical concerns change from piece to piece; I am not worried about trying to create a single, identifiable voiceprint. Robert Carl's notes for the recent CD talk about that, and I was touched by that. If you look at it from the point of view of the musical theater, where from project to project the language changes, and to some extent the style changes, it's not an attempt to be eclectic, but just trying to find the best possible way to express what I am working through. Steve Reich's music has always been fascinating to me, but I don't seem to be able to make a body of work that is so self-referential. In some ways I wish I could, because I think it's better for your career.

MOORE: A brand name.

MAGGIO: People know what they are going to get. I am in no way saying that Steve Reich is predictable, his work has morphed in phenomenal ways. But it's clear if you listen to two or three pieces of his that they are by the same person, and I am not sure that is always true of my work. Another chef might have made one of my dishes.

MOORE: You mentioned identity politics a little while ago. Could you talk about how being gay affects your aesthetic? There seems to have been a real bifurcation between the expressive tonal music of gay composers such as Rorem, Diamond, Del Tredici and the serial music of the high modernists.

MAGGIO: It's interesting that as you mention that the most famous lyric tonal composers may be gay and the ones who are not may be heterosexual, with a few exceptions. But the CRI disc of gay composers (in which I was featured) was fascinating in that there wasn't a particular unified style. I remember being asked in college if I would participate in a gay composers program, and I think my own homophobia at the time forbade me to say that my sexuality was in any way an influence on my music. Now I see that everything is some kind of influence on my music. I used to think that being a sexual minority made me feel like more of an outsider, and so maybe it was easier for me to identify with certain kinds of emotional states that I might explore in my musical world.

But then I realized that it doesn't have to be one's sexual identity that makes one feel like an outsider, it can be a million things, and I am really just trying to tap into those elements in myself that are most defining. I think my sexuality is a defining aspect of my life because I am not closeted – my partner and I have been together for twelve years. We have a daughter now, which forces you to be much more out. I am open to my students at my job, they baby sit for me. Interestingly what's happened because of that is I have started to feel more and more suburban and mainstream and normal. If I lived in an apartment and was closeted, I might feel even more the outsider. That's just one example. There are other ways that sexuality becomes part of your emotional identity. I'm talking about that because I do write from a place of emotion and intellect – I think that if I didn't feel anything about the music I was writing, or feel anything about trying to write music, or why I was writing music, I wouldn't write it. If there was something completely lacking on the emotional side, I just wouldn't bother writing music. It's too difficult, takes too much time, there's too many other things I would like to do. It's meaningful to me on an emotional, personal level. Becoming a parent has given me a different perspective on writing music. The ways in which we define ourselves – I am a gay man, a parent, I'm married, a college professor, I'm a white-collar Italian-American – I can think of all these things – and depending on the piece I'm writing some of these things can be more important than others. One of the pieces I am doing now is for the Bucks County Choral Society, and the texts are about children and their future in our world. As a new parent that is really meaningful to me. I find myself really moved by the texts and what I am trying to convey through the music. I am also writing a piece for the Tampa Bay Youth Orchestra, and that has a similar theme. I was given a poem by a girl who was homeless when she wrote it, and this was supposed to be the source of inspiration. I am the parent of an adopted child, and so as an adoptive parent I have different feelings, and that becomes important for that commission. I have a piece to write for the Pennsylvania Ballet that is based on the works of Degas, and we are looking at the ballerina paintings, and thinking about the music that Degas might have heard in the 1800s when he was at the Paris Opera. Right now I am struggling to find the entry point for that piece as I am writing it. There has to be a personal connection, it can't just be about factual information. When I find that entry point, it's going to make the writing go faster, make it easier, make more of a connection. So I look for these touchstones in my personal life for the projects I'm writing. I am doing a piece for the Lesbian and Gay Chorus of Washington, and the DC Different Drummers, which is a concert band, a piece which is supposed to represent the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt at its twentieth anniversary, and obviously in that case my sexuality is important. I've been an Action AIDS buddy for people living with HIV for close to fifteen years now, and being a gay man has given me a strong perspective into how AIDS has affected the gay community, though I have been lucky to not have lost any of my close friends. So the whole issue of identity politics for me is about trying to find a point of entry into a piece of music, but not to write music about being gay, which I can't imagine doing. It's too complicated, too general.

MOORE: For a straight American male, due to the way men are socialized in this country, it might be difficult to really be able to have a view into his emotional life, to be able to draw on that, just because men are socialized to turn off their feelings, so that what you were saying about finding the emotional connection might indeed be easier for a gay composer in our society, though not necessarily in other societies which put more of a premium on connection.

MAGGIO: Sure. I come from a family where it's *really* odd to express any emotion other than positive – the whole issue for most men is to be able to express fear, or grief in any kind of outward manner – the difficult emotions. Unless you are throwing a big temper tantrum – that's very American, with all the crazy violence that we witness. It's interesting.

Who knows why people move towards the professions they do? Certainly in music or theater, the arts, it tends to be a safer to explore and express your emotions, and yet there are musicians who don't really want to talk about emotion, about character, personal narrative. I find that for me it's one of the most interesting things about teaching composition. A friend said that he doesn't want to teach composition because it's too much like therapy. I think that if I had another career it would be as a therapist, so I love teaching composition. What are you doing but trying to get someone to be more of themselves and be comfortable with that. You can learn all the technique from studying other pieces of music, and *you* know if you got it right, or wrong, if you have stuff that doesn't yield any harmonic progression. If you are smart enough you know if it's working, you know how to figure it out, and that's how I have learned most of my technique is by listening and studying. It's not like someone ever said, "look here, this is how this is done, go do it". As my therapist used to say, your mind is like a room or a house, and her job was to help me rearrange the furniture. I feel like that's what I am doing as a composition teacher – trying to help people inhabit their rooms more comfortably. For me one of the big realizations was that I didn't have to be able to play at the keyboard everything that I wanted to write. I remember vividly walking back from a composition lesson at Penn, where I was studying with Jay Reise, and for the first time just imagining music -- sounds -- and that at some later point I could write it all down, but that I didn't need to get over to the keyboard, or nowadays, to the computer, to figure out how it all went at that moment. I could just let that sound play as if the music was already in there. I think that's true, that the music is already in there. I read an article that Steve Mackey wrote recently, and one of the things that he said that I relate to is that he doesn't trust any musical thought that he can come up with. I am not saying that what happens is that I sit and listen, and hear all this great music, and try to figure out how to write it down, but that at a certain point I was able to think more abstractly and gesturally about music. I can think of a super-fast ostinato running all over the place without having to sit down at the keyboard and produce it – but then the best part for me is the editing process, and I think that is what Steve Mackey was getting at. You get stuff down on paper, and then you start pushing it around like playdough. You can always chuck it, but it's always more interesting after you subject it to your will, rather than having it appear fully formed.

MOORE: Your compositions are really quite various. *Big Top* it seemed like it was coming from a different place than the chamber music. You seemed more you in the slow rhapsodic middle section. How did the piece come to be? What was the genesis?

MAGGIO: I made a conscious decision in that piece to change something about the way I was writing. I listened through all of my orchestral music and thought "it's all so serious!" Michael Morgan called me and said "I'm guest-conducting the Atlanta Symphony next season - do you have a ten-minute concert opener that's upbeat, and lively, and American?" "And I said no, I have the 31-minute piece I wrote for you that's really long, and a ten-minute piece that's really depressing, and another piece about exorcisms, but I don't have a ten-minute jazzy American opener." But I said I will write you one for free. He set the bar, said he wanted it to be fun, easy to put together, and that he needed a title next week. So over pizza my partner and I were talking and I said "I should do a circus piece". Circuses are fun – that whole scary clown thing. I wanted it to be fun, but I also wanted it to be a little weird. You remember liking it, but when you are there you are a little weirded out by it? I had this scary clown picture on my wall when I was a kid, and I remember having to flip it over a couple of times so I wouldn't have to look at it – that sort of thing. So *Big Top* was my title. And in thinking about circus music *Petrushka* came to mind.

MOORE: [Hums the quote from *Petrushka* in *Big Top*]

MAGGIO: The reason that's there is because the piece was most strongly inspired by *Petrushka*, and that's because Stravinsky didn't write any of the melodies in *Petrushka*. I realized that for the first time I could write a whole piece without writing any melodies. That was a conscious decision to write a piece that was in an Ivesian way all quotations, so the second strongest influence in that piece is Ives, because it deals with American songs and the attempt to have them fight for your attention the way they would at the circus. They appear in different keys.

MOORE: Three rings for your ears.

MAGGIO: Ives and Stravinsky were my gods in that one.

MOORE: Yankee Doodle here...

MAGGIO: And the upper winds are playing this other thing in another key and another time signature almost. In a way it was really retro. The one regret I have is that I didn't write a ten-minute piece that I dreamed up, but in a way – this is what I dreamed up. Because there was a specific place for this piece it had to be a certain thing, and that's what happened with *Skylines* as well, a piece that was written as a Copland tribute, and Keith Lockhart said it had to sound like Copland.

MOORE: And you knew how to do that because you had been sounding like Stravinsky, like Ives...

MAGGIO: What happens is you end up not being able to do it perfectly, and that ends up being the stuff that sounds like you. In the middle of *Big Top* I got to sound like myself and hang out with this old spiritual "Wayfaring Stranger". I wanted to live there for 20 minutes, but of course it was a ten-minute piece. It ended up being a 12-minute piece, because I couldn't get out of the middle section – I was enjoying myself way too much in there. And oddly enough it ends up being the music that most people comment on in the piece. "All of that other stuff is funny and enjoyable, but I really love that the piece has a soul." For a while you get lost. The metaphor for the piece is that there is the "real" circus, which is unwashed, packing up every day and moving on, but then there is also the fantasy of the circus. This is the outsider thing, the gay man thing – I was painfully aware of wanting that fantasy existence – maybe I have that now that I am married, kid, living in the suburbs, have a job ---but that whole idea of being an outsider – the circus freaks are outsiders – as a gay person I can associate with the outsider. I loved working with quotation and have done it a bunch of times since then. I don't have to look at a blank page, and my job as a composer is pushing these notes around. I hate looking at a blank page. It's much more fun to have this music out in front of you. You fill the desk with stuff, you pick the most promising and say "this, I am going to play with this." I don't think that's so uncommon for artists to be reacting to things. Why do you pick the things you pick? You see something that reminds you of who you are and where you are from. *Big Top* was not just about the circus, but ended up being about so much more. Technically in the middle section it's all full of canonic entrances and modal writing, a place I was exploring in *Two Quartets*, the influence of minimalism in my work. I've always been interested in eclecticism and pastiche. I love Bolcom's music, and the outer sections of *Big Top* are Ives and Stravinsky, and in a modern context, Bolcom. I love that stuff. In canonic writing there is this powerful metaphor of the soul searching for itself. I was playing with that in *Barcarole*. Almost all of it is canonic. It's a dance piece about shipwreck, and the dancers were being thrashed about waves in a visual canon.

MOORE: Your CD's have prominent writing for flute, which seems to be something that speaks to you, even though the expression is quite various from the whimsy in *Fluano Pianute* to the mysticism in the *Two Quartets*.

MAGGIO: The first time I wrote for a flute was a set of songs in 1991, when the flute and voice teacher at West Chester asked me to write some songs for soprano, and I thought "What on earth does one write for soprano and flute?" There are beautiful songs by Roussel. I wrote these songs called *Love and Travel*, not recorded, not even published. And a later performance was at the New York Festival of Song with Bart Feller playing flute and Amy Burton singing. Bart really liked the pieces and played my next flute piece, which was a flute sonata (*Fluano Pianute*), commissioned by the flute faculty at West Chester, Emily Newbold. I came up with this five moment whimsical piece influenced by a form that Jeffrey Cotton had come up with. He wrote a series of pieces which were a musical braid, where the ends of movements were the beginnings of movements two movements later. I wanted to play with this. The interesting thing about this structure is that it's like a puzzle; you write and write and you find yourself stuck. You get to the end of the fourth movement, and you find that you are supposed to bring the first movement back, and you are writing music that has nothing to do with the first movement, so that you have to weave the idea in. It's very playful – you have to tie things together that seem unrelated, and the only way to do it is to have a sense of humor about it, sort of composer as craftsman. And the best part about it is infusing each of those sections with a tremendous amount of personality, so that the piece becomes very mercurial and seems to be talking to itself. The instruments are playmates in a way, and talk to each other as well. With the flute I have been encouraged. After Bart played that piece it got around. He played it at the NFA convention, which led to a solo flute piece for James Pappoutsakis Memorial Competition, which was *Elysian Fields*, which Bart recorded on his own CD. I have about six flute works published by Presser. It's a happy accident, finding players who connected with the music that I was writing for flute and kept asking for more.

MOORE: Because of the nature of the flute, it seems to call for a certain kind of expression.

MAGGIO: The flute has a very particular kind of personality. It's always been one of my favorite instruments, because it has different personalities in different registers – the low flute/low piccolo, with its darker sonority – I love the strident bright upper register for big soaring tunes. But as an instrument that can't play double stops, can't play below middle C, and grind and drive and dance in a really earthy way, the flute is a very skyward type of instrument. It's vocal, very singing, and I exploit that in a piece like *Phoenix* (for two flutes). I've played around with a lot of the extended techniques which Robert Dick has explored, which showed up in this huge, almost symphonic piece for two flutes and piano, *The Laurel Tree*, which is twenty minutes long. More than other woodwind instrument the flute is extraordinarily soulful, but it's also the most versatile, the most agile. The flute and the clarinet are for me the easiest ones to write for; double reeds are more challenging. They have stronger, more focused personalities. I can't imagine writing a solo trombone or trumpet piece easily – those pieces would be really challenging, whereas a solo flute piece seems like a natural thing.

MOORE: What about *River Song*? The model that immediately jumps to mind is the *Moldau*, and the wind octet brings that to mind as well.

MOORE: *River Song* was an experimental piece. Another was *Two Quartets*, which is not melodic, but rather 20 minutes of textural blocks – very Stravinskian. It juxtaposed active dissonant music that doesn't go anywhere with static, modal music that, in the true spirit of minimalism, allows the listener to go somewhere as a landscape slowly changes and transform. *River Song* was an attempt to pick up on that three years later. The piece begins, after an initial fanfare, with horns playing a long, extended tune in canon, with the other instruments echoing as if off the walls of a canyon or river banks. The ensemble creates an echo chamber for the horn duo, and then the everyone starts playing the tune, but at different speeds. This takes about three minutes, and you referenced it in *Moldau*: a slow buildup to an arrival point, a sudden shift key. The tonalities in the piece are related to the Beethoven *Pastoral*. The melody itself is just the pitch pattern from the Beatles' *Here Comes the Sun*. As I said, starting with a blank page is terrifying. The opening of *River Song* attempts to create something that you wouldn't think of doing with winds. With eight string players, this kind of heterophony will sound great, but the trick was "Can you do that with eight wind players? Can you make a wall of sound, a flow?" Much more commonly, you hear counterpoint for woodwinds, spiky stuff, but generally the piece is perpetual motion is tough with woodwind. The performers have to breathe. But with two of every instrument, the players can spell each other. *Riddle* is another experiment piece dealing with pentatonic serialism. Transformations of a pentatonic set is something that Michael Torke has been playing with a lot in his music, taking a diatonic set and slowly adding accidentals. In this case, I just added all the sharps in the order in which they would come into the set – F, C, G, D et cetera, and the piece modulates sideways and shifts mode, so if you are working with C, D, F, G, A, you are eventually working with C, D, F#, G, A, and the piece feels like it's modulating, but the tonal center is not moving up, it's just that the mode itself is changing and transforming. There's all kinds of process involved in that piece. I was trying to deal with process music or minimalist music influences in that piece. All these piece deal with music process in some way. While I don't ever write music that is one thing for a whole movement, these are techniques that minimalist and post-minimalists are working with.

MOORE: Is there opera in your future?

MAGGIO: Having grown up thinking that I was destined to write musical theater, I would be surprised if I didn't write an opera someday. I think about ideas for operas all the time, because I think it can be an incredibly powerful art form. It's probably the most difficult art form, because you are trying to marry different disciplines, and there are so many things that can go wrong. I don't know what kind of opera I would do. I have seen some of Meredith Monk's works, like *Atlas*, which I think is an extraordinary opera, but without a libretto. John Corigliano's *Ghost of Versailles* was extraordinarily powerful, John Adams's *Nixon in China* was powerful, the Tom Waits/Robert Wilson *The Black Rider* was extraordinary. As you are noticing, I am mentioning very diverse kinds of operas. My favorite opera is *The Rake's Progress*, because it pretends to be so cool and it's so passionate. On the surface, because of all the set pieces, arias, recitatives, it's full of tradition and at the same time it's heartbreaking. It makes me cry every time I hear or see the final scene in Bedlam with Tom and Anne Truelove – it's just shattering. And yet Stravinsky is saying "music doesn't really express emotion", and you think "you liar! What a liar! You knew what you were doing!" If I could ever write anything nearly as amazing as *The Rake's Progress*, I would be happy. Or Meredith Monk's *Atlas*. My three operas on my desert island are *Atlas*, *Rake's Progress*, *Sweeney Todd*. That's me in a nutshell.

# Concert Reviews

## Amateur Cliburn Competition

DAVID BÜNDLER

*Third International Piano Competition for Outstanding Amateurs.* Van Cliburn Foundation. June 3, Ed Landreth Auditorium, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX. Through June 8.

There was the usual generous smattering of Chopin and Rachmaninoff war-horses you usually hear at piano competitions around the world, but this year's "amateur Cliburn" contest - as they call this biennial stepchild to the better-known Van Cliburn International Piano Competition - had some appealing contemporary currents as well. In many instances, the music was as remarkable and varied as the resumes of the 74 dilettantes who played here. Among the entrants were a blind hotel reservations agent, a convicted felon, the Justice Department appellate counsel who swore John Ashcroft into his present position, a local railroad dispatcher, several doctors, scientists, teachers and homemakers. There were even a few moonlighting professional musicians better known in their home arenas than as casual pianists - violinist Jerome Rosen and multiple Grammy Award-winning producer Thomas Shepard.

Surprisingly, Alberto Ginastera was a big entity this year -- to the point that the pronunciation of his name became a major point of discussion. The Argentine composer was squirrely about his preferences, some time favoring a hard Italian "g," other times a soft Spanish "g." Jury chairman John Giordano recalled that when he asked Ginastera's equally coy widow how she pronounced her name, she very emphatically articulated, "AU-RO-RA." Several players programmed some or all of Ginastera's *Sonata No. 1* for their sets - the "Ruvido ed ostinato" movement was the hot showpiece of this competition. But Fox News Channel anchor and 1985 Miss America runner-up Lauren Green played his "Danza del Gaucho" from *Danzas Argentinas* with a burly technique that sounded nothing like a beauty queen at the keyboard. She didn't get a chance to show off George Walker's *Prelude and Caprice*, scheduled for her tentative final round; she was cut in the prelims.

If there was a pianist who played the contemporary music card to win, it was Groth sheet music salesman Darin Tysdal, who devoted his entire preliminary round to Aaron Copland's flirtatiously serial *Piano Variations* of 1930. A solid technician, he made it to the semis where he also went for Ginastera as well as the Perestroika-era honky tonk of Sergei Kapustin's *Prelude in Jazz Style*; he didn't make it to the finals. One who did was stealth candidate Victoria Bragin, a chemistry professor at Pasadena City College, who shared first place and took just about every other discretionary award including Best Contemporary Work (Bartók's *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs* -- she'd been in e-mail contact with Peter Bartók to get the dope on original sources).

The other first place winner was MIT professor Michael Hawley, a pianist with a cutthroat, take-no-prisoners technique, who was big on Godowsky transcriptions this year and wowed the crowd with his own finger-snapping, brass knuckle transcription of Bernstein's *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*.

The biggest disappointment of the competition was surely caused by psychiatrist Mark Cannon, evidenced by the big collective sigh that shot through the audience when they announced he was cutting the "Guernica; Epilogue" of Seymour Bernstein's *New Pictures at an Exhibition* from his preliminary set. And surely the biggest crowd-pleaser was second place winner Paul Romero, an LA-based composer for CD-ROM games with a buff upper body and flashy white smile; his final round essay of the original one-piano version of *Rhapsody in Blue* was a showstopper.

## The Eyes Have It in "Water Passion" Spectacle at Bach Festival

JANOS GEREBEN

*Oregon Bach Festival.* Tan Dun's *Water Passion*. July 4, Eugene, OR.

Much of what the Oregon Bach Festival promised for the main attraction of its 33rd season came true on July 4 in Silva Hall. The U.S. premiere of Tan Dun's *Water Passion After St. Matthew* was just as exotic, spectacular and fascinating as advertised. The audience responded with a six-minute standing ovation.

The Festival Chorus was all but invisible in black, in turn murmuring, shouting, clicking stones -- sometimes in unison, sometimes in syncopation -- as they sustained much of the 90-minute work.

Tan himself stood on the podium to conduct (or, rather, coordinate) this multi-media performance-art work. Between him and the near-invisible chorus, a straight row of eight large, water-filled Plexiglas bowls. Another set of eight bowls (travelling with the production from Stuttgart) were set up horizontally, so the bowls formed an appropriate Cross. Lighted from below, the water in the bowls was reflected on the stage ceiling; when the percussionists "played" (hit, swished, sloshed, caressed, elbowed, palmed) the water, the surface movements created vibrations in the reflections.

Instead of an orchestra, *Water Passion* uses soloists, all but festival percussionist Charles Dowd travelling with the Stuttgart production. Elizabeth Keusch (Devil, Judas, Evangelist) sang spectacularly in the coloratura stratosphere, most of her music (and shouting) set between high C and E, produced without a hint of shrillness.

Bass Stephen Bryant (Jesus) mixed "normal" music with Mongolian throat-singing sounds; the chorus also had parts requiring overtone singing and they responded admirably.

Two amazing instrumentalists made attendance worthwhile all by themselves: violinist/fiddler Todd Reynolds, playing with brilliance and abandon, and a Paganini-clone cellist, Maya Beiser, who made her instrument sound like a very large pipe organ on steroids.

The theme of water is heard not only in the physical sounds from inside those bowls, but also in the text: "Baptism" is the first section, "Water and Resurrection" is the last. There are burbling brooks ("Bach" in German), a quiet lake at Gethsemane, dripping water and blood, violently turbulent torrents in the "Death and Earthquake" section.

And what of the music? Here, representing what's likely to be a minority report, I say that Emperor Tan has no musical clothes. Appreciating the festival money and effort that have gone into this enterprise, recognizing the applause for the work here and elsewhere, one still must ask when confronted by thin slices of razzle-dazzle, "Where's the beef?"

The true ecumenical spirit of the festival, embracing even (or especially) those whose only religion is music, is built on Helmuth Rilling's integrity and sincerity in all matters, from the interpretation of great music to matters of faith. Newly fashionable as Tan may be, this work of effects (sound-, special-, manipulating-) stands apart from Rilling's advocacy of substance and value in its obvious search for the opportunity to titillate and impress.

It may be a stretch to compare Tan to Andrew Lloyd Webber, but there is a clear parallel between two talented composers taking easy, quick shortcuts to fame and fortune. Tan writes some beautiful passages, especially for the cello, but the vast majority of the work is unison ostinato, disjointed phrases, the story doesn't move forward, nor does the music touch the head or the heart. *Water Passion* is just as entertaining on first viewing as *Cats*; having heard both more times than I cared to, it's clear the rate of return similarly declines.

As to the advertised new, innovative nature of *Water Passion*, using actual sounds instead of musical representation goes back a few centuries. In the matter of using "exotic" instruments, Lou Harrison's gongs, Olivier Messiaen's ondes martenot, John Cage's *4'33"* silence at the piano, all have several decades -- and much more originality -- over Tan. The shrieks and birdcalls Tan wrote for the soprano have all been done by Meredith Monk, 20 years ago, more effectively.

Ironically, it is exactly the automatic standing ovation that belies the claim to something "revolutionary." Have audiences grown so much that they can instantly understand and appreciate bold modern music in 2002?

The fascination and popularity of "Water Passion" is more aligned with the nature and reasons for the success of teenage soprano Charlotte Church, blind tenor Andrea Bocelli, singing warmed-over Puccini in cat costumes, musicals with chandeliers and helicopters. It's entertainment, but not lasting, worthwhile *music* that demands to be heard again, that grows within the listener every time it is repeated. As to playing amplified water in the concert hall, one may hazard a guess that the festival is not giving birth to a new, viable genre.

## The Return of the BBC Proms

### JOHN RODNEY LISTER

*BBC Proms.* August 12, London, UK.

In a time when new music is being marginalized with a speed which far outstrips the rate of global warming, it is both gratifying and reassuring that the BBC Proms maintain a commitment to including a considerable amount of music of the 20th and 21st century on the programs of what is the largest music festival in the world. Even more cheering is that the inclusion of this music turns out not to be invariably box office poison. That the range of styles is wider than in the heyday of William Glock, and less heavily weighted towards the modernistic is both not necessarily a bad thing and probably inevitable, given the temper of the times.

One can be grateful that music by such composers as Iannis Xenakis, Pierre Boulez, György Ligeti, Harrison Birtwistle, and Olivier Messiaen is there at all, along with music of a more easy-listening type.

The Cosmo girl seems to spend a good deal of time trying to determine what men want, just as what women want is supposed to be one of the major mysteries of the life of men. It struck me as I was thinking about Tobias Picker's *Cello Concerto*, which was performed by Paul Watkins and the BBC Symphony, conducted by David Robertson, that it was the result of a good deal of worrying and calculation about what an audience would want, what performers would want, and what a presenter would want. The answer provided by the piece seems to be that an audience wants a piece that doesn't worry or bother them too much; performers want something that isn't too long, isn't too complicated, isn't hard to count, and consequently can be put together quickly and easily. Presenters want all those things, plus a composer of a certain notoriety, so they can put the piece on without too much expense, be pretty sure that it won't be too difficult or offensive for an audience, and be salable to the world as, at the very least, something like a masterpiece. Possibly because of all these calculations and caution about what people would want it to be the Picker also attains a level of inoffensiveness, which is to say blandness, which makes pieces by Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, Walter Piston, and Randall Thompson seem daringly radical. Writing a cello concerto does bring a composer face to face with a major technical problem, that of making sure that the solo instrument can be heard. Picker's answer to that question is to severely limit the activity of the orchestral textures and to accompany the cello, which mostly plays tunes, mostly with blocky chords. This is not the tactic taken by Dvorak, Tchaikovsky, or Elgar.

The Picker concerto shared the program on August 12 with vivid, brilliant, and lively performances of Boulez's vivid and brilliant orchestrations, or more precisely recompositions for orchestra, of his earliest published piano work, *Notations*. Five of the original twelve pieces have appeared so far, and all of these were performed, VII receiving its first U.K. performance. Also included were performances of Leos Janacek's *Sinfonia*, notable for its verve and color, and Charles Ives's *Three Places in New England*, whose beauty, understanding, and clarity were striking and memorable.

Beauty, understanding, and clarity were also the hallmarks of the performance of the Arnold Schoenberg *Violin Concerto* by Ernst Kovacic and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, conducted by Joseph Swensen a little over a week later. That concert also included a novelty, the first British performances of the same composer's *Nottum*, written in 1896. The piece was lovely, and bore practically no fingerprints of Schoenberg's later personality.

Esa-Pekka Salonen appeared twice at the Proms, on August 15 as a composer and two days later as a conductor. His *Foreign Bodies*, performed by The Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, proved to be engaging and skillful, both in its construction and its orchestration. However, the strongest impression from that concert, for this listener anyway, was its second half, the back to back performances of the sixth and seventh symphonies of Sibelius. Direct and immediate comparison made very evident the fact that the treatment and use of tempo in the pieces are diametrically opposed and are achieved by using exactly the same methods. The performances of all three of the pieces, as well as the remaining work, *Seven Songs from "Des Knaben Wunderhorn"* by Mahler, were magisterial and lovely.

Salonen's appearance as a conductor, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, featured a rapt and compelling performance of Ligeti's *Requiem*, which made the brilliant musicality and inescapable individuality and personality manifest.

The concert also included wonderful performances of the Igor Stravinsky *Violin Concerto*, with Thomas Zehetmair, and the Béla Bartók *Concerto for Orchestra*. As a pendant to the orchestral concert, the Proms Chamber Music on August 20 featured performances of five of the astounding études for piano by Ligeti, received very fine performances by Pierre-Laurent Almard, a champion of Ligeti's music.

Yuri Bashmet appeared on August 13 with his Moscow soloists with brilliantly polished performances of works of Benjamin Britten (*Two Portraits* and *Lachrymae*), Paul Hindemith (*Trauermusik*), and Dmitri Shostakovich. The novelty was the Shostakovich, which was an arrangement as a viola concerto of the *String Quartet No. 13*. The expert reworking by Alexander Tchaikovsky was a bit of a disappointment, despite the strongly persuasive performance by performers whose command of their instruments and whose understanding of the music were beyond any possible reproach. The problem was the things which require effort and struggle when played by four players become much less demanding, both physically and intellectually, when distributed among 19 of them. It gave a considerable buffer zone to what is a harrowing work.

A late-night Prom on August 23 by the BBC Orchestra and the BBC Big Band, conducted by Leonard Slatkin, was devoted to American piece in a jazz vein. Duke Ellington's *Harlem* and George Gershwin's *Lullaby* both, despite very appealing moments, seemed less than completely satisfying. Leonard Bernstein's *Prelude, Fugue, and Riffs*, on the other hand, is one of his most successful works. All of them received impeccable performances. The concert ended with Michel Comilo's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, for which the composer joined the assembled forces as soloist. Slatkin, in fairly extensive comments before the performance, and, in the performance, made his admiration and enjoyment of the piece clear. What he saw in it is beyond this reviewer. The work seemed commonplace and tiresome.

August 20 held another late night Prom by Oliver Knussen and the London Sinfonietta and Chorus, which contained much wonderful music, wonderfully played. Continuing a survey of those works on the cusp of Stravinsky's transformation into a 12-tone composer, Knussen led beautiful performances of *Canticum Sacrum* and the *Von Himmel Hoch Variations*. These were followed by a compelling and engaging performance of the very lovely and rigorous and captivating *Polla ta dina* by Xenakis. Kenneth Hesketh's *The Chricling Canopy* was out of its league in this company, despite all the help given by a strong performance. Hans Wener Henze's beguiling *First Symphony*, written when he was 21, was not.

Yet another late-night Prom on August 29 featured the Benjamin Britten *Sinfonia* conducted by Nicholas Cleobury in two works of Constant Lambert, along with a small work by Gerald Finzi and one of Britten's masterpieces, his *Nocturne* for tenor and chamber orchestra. *Prize Fight* by Lambert, written when he was 22, the subject suggested by his teacher Ralph Vaughan Williams, who had not long before than written an opera with a boxing match in it, was the work of a brilliantly talented and promising student. The main impression conveyed by the performance of his *Piano Concerto*, restored by Easterbrook and Shipley, despite a performance which was as good as one could wish for, was that there were very good reasons for Lambert's abandoning the work before its completion.

Gerald Finzi's *Farewell to Arms*, a small recitative and aria, is a strikingly lovely piece, which has persisted strongly in my memory, despite an uninvolved and off hand performance by Ian Bostridge. Perhaps he can be forgiven for not taking much trouble with this small piece, but his same attitude toward the Britten is hard to forgive.

Aside from the coolness of the performance, the application of exactly the same sound (which could be accurately described as "beautiful") indiscriminately to each of the very different emotional situations of the eight songs which comprise the work, became intensely irritating. The performance was completely unworthy of the great piece it pretended to be offering.

Earlier that night there was a concert by Boulez and the BBC Symphony Orchestra, which was undoubtedly the highlight of the summer's listening. Performances of Schoenberg's *Accompaniment to a Film Scene* and Boulez's *Le visage nuptial* which were merely spectacular, were followed by an overwhelmingly magnificent performance of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* by Béla Bartók. The intensely concentrated, dramatic, and beautiful singing of Michelle DeYoung and especially of Laszlo Polgar, were equaled by breathtakingly vivid and eloquent playing by the orchestra, full of wild drama and dazzling instrumental color.

## Scenic and Sometimes Sonic Splendor

### MARK ALBURGER

San Francisco Opera presents Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*. September 10, War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco, CA.

Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*, in the capable hands of David Hockney and the San Francisco Opera, is a scenic and sometimes sonic splendor, as taken in recently at the War Memorial. Hockney's designs, by now very familiar, continue to charm and amaze with their vibrant colors (the emphasis is on red) and stylized chinoiserie. The backdrops are eminently appropriate for this Italianate faux Far-East fairytale of violence, cruelty, and redemption.

Music Director Donald Runnicles and the San Francisco Opera Orchestra are right there setting the tone along with the sets, with lush and strident playing well suited to the tenor of the work. And about those singers -- John Ames powerfully delivers the opening oratory, along with tender and suite outpourings from the excellent Patricia Racette, as the slave girl Liu. Alfred Reiter proves a craggy old Timur, the dethroned Tartar King. Jon Villars finds the gentler side of Calaf, the love-struck son of Timur, and delivers the famous third-act "Nessun dorma" ("No one must sleep") in the softer tones of a commoner. Jane Eaglen makes a regal Turandot, with her big voice and big presence; and Hernan Iturrald, Jonathan Boyd, and Felipe Rojas provide the proper comic relief as the comic foil trio of Ping, Pang, and Pong.

There are problems with story and problems with pacing, all endemic to the work. Puccini's last opera went through multiple revisions and was left incomplete on his deathbed, and it shows. This is the pseudo-eastasian girl with a curl -- when it is good, it is very, very good. The inverse is not quite true, but the scene for the three grand advisors does go on a bit; and it is hard to justify the happy ending, which only transpires after brutal executions carried out by the title character, and a needless suicide that could have been avoided were it not for the Rumpelstiltskin 10th-hour Mick-Jagger "Guess my name" business

Aside from a high note that did not ring true, the other miscalculation in this production seemed to be the placement of the banda so far offstage that they sounded only like a mere radioic echo of their true selves. But, hey, this is a work that almost exists outside of time and place -- sit back and enjoy the beauty.

# St. Olivier of the Opera House

## MARK ALBURGER

American staged premiere of Messiaen's *Saint Francois d'Assise*. War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco, CA. Through October 17.

Most successful music dramas are about boy meets girl, not boy meets God, so it's perhaps no surprise the Olivier Messiaen's *Saint Francois d'Assise* (*St. Francis of Assisi*), given by the San Francisco Opera on September 27 (through October 17) in its American staged premiere, does not come off as a totally engaging night at the opera.

The total running time of about four hours and 10 minutes (five hours, if one includes the two 25-minute intermissions) is a bit of a stumbling block, too. This work makes such works as Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* (actually a bit longer at around four and one-half hours), to say nothing of La Monte Young's 75-minute *Chronos*, *Christalis* and Feldman's three-hour late works, look like cakewalks. Closer parallels are Terry Riley's *All Night Flight* and Young's longer pieces, and closest is Erik Satie's marathon, with its appropriate title: *Vexations*.

Fair warning is given by the circumstances of the commission. The celebrated and seminal composer-organist had never had his heart set on writing an opera. He was prevailed upon in 1975 by Paris Opera director, Rolf Liebermann, in the presence of French President Georges Pompidou, to write one. Messiaen considered himself ill-equipped for the task -- and he got that one right, for sure.

If ever a composer was a man of the church, rather than the stage, it was Messiaen, whose familiarity with opera was mostly from reading scores at the piano. So, despite (or rather, true to) himself, he wound up writing more of a liturgical drama or a Passion play.

The work is a musical revelation. Here are virtually all of Messiaen's tricks and concerns -- ad infinitum. Certainly it is a pleasure to hear Messiaen working in the genre, and offering up solo and mass voices in prayer (think of the anthems this composer would have produced if he, like J.S. Bach or Ralph Vaughan Williams, had been working in a participatory Protestant tradition).

As TV episodes are sometimes pumped up into full-length movies, so is Messiaen's manner here inflated, from the already gargantuan scores such as his *"Turangalila" Symphony*, to something even more over the top (Harry Partch achieved something similar in transferring *On the Seventh Day Petals Fell in Petaluma* to the stage as a deluded *Delusion of the Fury*).

You want birdsong? You got birdsong. One of Messiaen's signature concerns is trumpeted (trumpet-swanned?) right away in the guise of multiple mallet percussionists ritualistically intoning avian delights. In a scene seemingly made for the French composer, St. Francis ministers to the birds in Act II, but this becomes not enough and too much of a good thing. Not enough, because Messiaen maddeningly stops the flow in seemingly countless instances to have his characters prattle on in aimless recitative (Debussy had the same problem in *Pelleas et Melisande* -- what is it about certain Continentals? -- are they just too in love with the language?) alternating (as Benjamin Britten often did) with orchestral outbursts. Enough! After a while it becomes like the little birdie outside your bedroom window who just won't shut up.

One critic during the second of the 25-minute intermissions uttered the phrase "self-indulgent" -- but why not? Here was Messiaen at the

top of his game, musical resources fully at his command. The music is quintessential the composer's own -- no one sounds like this guy (thank goodness!? -- just kidding -- but seriously, the sounds are a wonder and a solid achievement). The plainchant. The "Hindu" (Asian Indian) and non-retrogradable rhythms, the "modes of limited transposition," the sinuous ondes martinots (no less than three of these early electronic instruments are called for in the score), the ecstatic love-theme (sounding like a *"Turangalila"* out-take), the stern "statue"-like motive (also *"Turangalila"*), blocky Stravinskian winds, masses of contrasting instrumental choirs. The triple-forte crescendo endings (how else can one suggest a finality after all of the disconnections and false resolutions?)

Maybe this music isn't intended to entertain. Perhaps the opera house is transformed into a church, and we just worship.

The finale to Act I, where St. Francis kisses a leper (very appropriate in this City of St. Francis), is the stuff of music drama. But then the main character disappears from sight for the whole of Act II, Scene 1, and what fun is that?

The whole edifice somehow shows up the quirks of the composer's whole esthetic mindset. Perhaps the naive Catholicism masks a fundamentally naive art? Perhaps that savant had a bit of the idiot in him? The English eccentric on the wrong side of the Channel. The recorder of birdsong, standing resolutely in the field -- pen and paper in hand -- gazing upward at a flighty treelimb, a birdbrain. Yet Messiaen unquestionably remains a stimulating and vigorous voice.

And the San Francisco Opera should be congratulated for bringing this quixotic work of an important composer here. There was no skimping on their believe in this work -- somber, dark, black-and-white sets not withstanding. Actually, the decor, in its way was beautiful and stunning. A short film clip of a collapsing cathedral (grime small shades of the World Trade Center Towers) was mirrored in masonry and crosses suspended in the air -- moments of collapsed time in freeze-frame. A question-mark, winding walkway reveals niches (almost a porta-potty at a bus stop in one scene) and cruciform navery. The walkway becomes snow-covered, and then cloud-covered, suspended by strings, which an angel performs.

Oh yes, the angel -- female, in blue body suit, with one wing, that somehow had an animus not unlike the Cowardly Lion's tail (in one scene it is concealed in a backpack).

And the singers -- all marvelous. Willard White as the stentorian Saint, baritone profundo, balanced precariously in one scene from a slowly ascending cross-bass (not unlike Glass and Robert Wilson's slow-motion dramatics, particularly the "Bed" scene in "Einstein"), singing supine in another from another cross, apparently suspended flat over the orchestra pit. Laura Aikin, as the winsome, bell-toned Angel, defied musical and dramatic heights from the clouds and suspended from a cellblock. Chris Merritt as the shrill yet soulful Leper, Johannes Martin Kranzle as a supple Brother Leon.

The players, in the expert hands of Donald Runnicles, were part of the semi-merriment, with ondes martinots and mallet percussionists (in black beanie skullcaps) on the wings, respectively audience left and right.

And speaking of "left" and "audience" -- most stayed to the bittersweet end (I found myself heretically thinking "Die, Francis, die!"). His life was an ordeal, and so was the opera, but that was part of the point, and so appropriate as art as ordeal, and I am very glad to have attended.

The Review is Ended. Thanks Be to God

# Book Review

## Living Strayhorn

MICHAEL MCDONAGH

*Something To Live For: The Music Of Billy Strayhorn*, by Walter van de Leur, Oxford University Press.

Billy Strayhorn wrote for Duke Ellington and his orchestra for nearly 30 years, and his gifts were never fully appreciated during his lifetime, but are beginning to be. David Hajdu's 1996 biography has righted many wrongs, and brought Strayhorn's myriad achievements to light. He may have written jazz standards like *Take the "A" Train* (1939), *Lush Life* (1933-36), *Chelsea Bridge* (1941), and *Day Dream* (1939), but his role as both a composer and arranger for Ellington hasn't been fully ascertained till now. Dutch musicologist Walter van de Leur has literally gone into the vault to find out who did what and why. And so his book, which took him a decade to research and write, presents a much fuller picture of Strayhorn's *musical* personality than Hajdu's. The composer certainly was, in African-American playwright Lorraine Hansberry's phrase, young, gifted, black; and gay, and though van de Leur doesn't shy away from that aspect of Strayhorn, he integrates his psycho-sexual side into the portrait.

Strayhorn was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1915, to a working class family, who shortly thereafter moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His father was frequently drunk and vented both verbal and physical abuse on his family, with young Billy an especially vulnerable target. His mother was fortunately protective, and sent him to her in-laws in Hillsborough, North Carolina, where his grandmother, a church organist, encouraged him to express himself at the keyboard. Back home he studied piano with Charlotte Catlin, whom he found through the local music store. Strayhorn worked as a soda jerk and in 1936 enrolled at the Pittsburgh Musical Institute where he studied with Charles Boyd, who died during his term of instruction. "He was so wonderful," Strayhorn told an interviewer in 1962, "that I didn't think there was anyone else there who could teach me so I didn't stay." Still, he continued to write songs including the knowing, world-weary *Lush Life*, which, with its long, recitative-like verse is almost like a French chanson and the book, dialogue and music for the revue, *Fantastic Rhythm*, for his high school alma mater, which was quite successful. And, like just about everyone else at the time, Strayhorn listened to the Ellington orchestra's radio broadcasts, and heard the band in the flesh in his hometown in June 1934. "[Ellington] played *The Rape of a Rhapsody*, that was the name of the number. Oh, it was wonderful. . . . that's what really got me. He had a chord which I have never discovered, I haven't heard it since, I couldn't figure this chord out. I went home after going to see this show at the Penn Theatre. . . , and I couldn't figure out what was in that chord, it was just wonderful," he recalled. Strayhorn finally got to meet Duke backstage when his orchestra was in town again in 1938. "He had an idea for a lyric," Strayhorn remembered. "He said: 'You go home and write a lyric for this,' and I did. I was so thrilled I didn't know what to say."

Ellington invited Strayhorn to visit him in New York, and then he and his band embarked on their second European tour -- March to May 1939. But just before he left he "parked" the younger composer in his Harlem house, and told his sister Ruth, and son Mercer -- "he's going to stay with us."

During his absence, Strayhorn began a thorough study of his scores -- they were often sketches, and in his idiosyncratic musical shorthand -- and almost immediately started arranging for the orchestra. In the fall of the same year, he met his lover, African-American pianist Aaron Bridgers, through Mercer, and they subsequently got their own apartment, and lived together till Bridgers moved to Paris in 1947.

Though van de Leur doesn't soft-pedal Strayhorn's personal life, he's much more interested in the music. He finds, for example, that some of his own work was performed and recorded soon into his tenure with the band. The author also analyzes the similarities and differences between the composers in great detail, and, in the process, clarifies the uniqueness of both. Ellington, of course, wrote for the musical abilities and personalities of his phenomenal soloists -- saxists like Johnny Hodges, Harry Carney, and Ben Webster, to name just a few -- and favored cross-section voicings, in which chord or harmonic changes were assigned to different instruments, uncommon orchestrational blends, and continuity achieved through timbral contrasts. Though van de Leur doesn't go into it here, others have noted that the collaborative give and take in the band resembles the working methods of African music which thrives on communal ideas and improvisation. While Ellington seemed to be searching for new sounds *as* sound, Strayhorn apparently heard everything in his head, and his work, though extremely intuitive, moved more logically and linearly to its necessary conclusion. He was also, in a sense, an old style control freak, whose pieces, were more or less completely set, on paper. But Strayhorn was *indispensable* to the band, and he contributed hundreds of uncredited arrangements to its book, and thereby helped shape its sound in a very big way.

As in any relationship, there were conflicts, and with two complex and sometimes temperamental geniuses this was unavoidable. Though apparently happy to shoulder many arranging assignments for the band -- "even the unscheduled work.. is behind schedule" he once dryly noted -- Strayhorn walked out of a gala party honoring Ellington only, for the work they both did on the troubled 1946 show *Beggar's Holiday*. The 50's were an especially difficult period for both of them -- Ellington struggling to keep his band going, and Strayhorn writing ever more personal works which went largely unperformed. But they were also rewarding -- the 1956 Rosemary Clooney Columbia LP *Blue Rose*, and two Bethlehem LP's were dominated by his arrangements. But van de Leur oddly neglects to emphasize the friendship forged with the singer, or the even more rewarding one he later formed with Lena Horne. The composers worked hand in hand through the even more difficult for jazz sixties, and Strayhorn made significant contributions to Ellington's ambitious and largely unknown suites, especially *The Far East Suite* (1963-66), which contains his now classic Johnny Hodges feature *Isfahan*, which is a model of his melodic grace

Though apparently shy, Strayhorn lived the jazz artist lifestyle -- cocktails and smokes -- to the end, and his untimely death in 1967, when, one could argue, his star was just beginning to rise, robbed the music world of one of its most gifted, and delicate artists. Ellington probably knew and appreciated his gifts better than anyone else. And many believe that his increasingly feverish activity as his own end neared -- he died in 1974 -- was out of grief for irreparable loss. Devotion like this is almost a thing of the past. Van de Leur's book expands our knowledge of both composers and it will, like them, reverberate for many years to come -- a work full of impeccable scholarship, with notes galore, and insights in spades.

# Chronicle

September 12

Michael Tilson Thomas conducts the San Francisco Symphony, with Joshua Bell, in Samuel Barber's *Violin Concerto*, Igor Stravinsky's *Song of the Nightingale*, and Carl Ruggles's *Evocations*. "serious, surprising, somber and sensuous" [Joshua Kosman, San Francisco Chronicle, 9/14/02].

September 18

Aaron Jay Kernis's *Garden of Light* performed by the Minnesota Symphony. Orchestra Hall, Minneapolis, MN.

September 19

John Adams's *On the Transmigration of Souls* premiered by the New York Philharmonic. New York, NY.

September 21

New Juilliard Ensemble in Frederic Rzewski's *Main Drag*. Juilliard Theater, New York, NY.

September 25

96th anniversary of the birth of Dmitri Shostakovich.

September 27

American staged premiere of Messiaen's *Saint Francois d'Assise*. War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco, CA. Through October 17.

September 29

*George Crumb Festival: Black Angels, Ancient Voices of Children, and Dream Sequence*. Orensanz Center for the Arts, New York, NY.

# Writers

MARK ALBURGER began playing the oboe and composing in association with Dorothy and James Freeman, George Crumb, and Richard Wernick. He studied with Karl Kohn at Pomona College; Joan Panetti and Gerald Levinson at Swarthmore College (B.A.); Jules Langert at Dominican University (M.A.); Roland Jackson at Claremont Graduate University (Ph.D.); and Terry Riley. An ASCAP composer, Alburger writes for Commuter Times, teaches at Diablo Valley College, and is published by New Music. He is Editor-Publisher of 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, and has interviewed numerous composers, including Charles Amirkhonian, Henry Brant, Earle Brown, Philip Glass, Lou Harrison, Alan Hovhaness, Meredith Monk, Pauline Oliveros, Steve Reich, and Frederick Rzewski.

DAVID BÜNDLER is the pen name of Byrwec Ellison, a freelance writer and a Texas Correspondent for 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC.

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JOHN RODNEY LISTER is a Boston-based music critic associated with Harvard University.

MICHAEL MCDONAGH is a San Francisco-based poet and writer on the arts who has done two poem/picture books with artist Gary Bukovnik, *Before I Forget* (1991) and *Once* (1997), the former being in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, The Berkeley Art Museum, and the New York Public Library. He has also published poems in journals including *Mirage*, and written two theatre pieces -- *Touch and Go*, for three performers, which was staged at Venue 9 in 1998; and *Sight Unseen*, for solo performer. His critical pieces have appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco Review of Books, 3 Penny Review, California Printmaker, Antiques and Fine Art, The Advocate, High Performance, and In Tune. He writes for The Bay Area Reporter and heads the Bay Area chapter of The Duke Ellington Society, whose Strayhorn-themed program on June 9, at Fort Mason Center (San Francisco), was hosted by composer-bandleader Marcus Shelby. He co-hosted nine radio shows on KUSF with Tony Gualtieri with whom he now shares a classical-music review website -- [www.msu.edu/user/gualtie3](http://www.msu.edu/user/gualtie3) -- which has also been translated into Russian and appears in Intellectual Forum.