

# 21ST CENTURY MUSIC

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# Rob Kapilow: The Golden Gate Project

MARK ALBURGER

Upon learning about the Marin Symphony's Golden Gate Opus project, a question leapt to mind: "Why not a northern California composer?", given the wealth of top composers in this area, including John Adams, Paul Dresher, Terry Riley, Erling Wold, and Pamela Z -- to name a few. But, virtually from the moment of meeting New-York-based Rob Kapilow, at San Rafael's Embassy Suites, amid a brouhaha of cameras and lights (the first part of our interview was filmed), the sense was that this energetic and youthful composer, who belies his 1952 birth date, is a fine choice to write a large-scale work soliciting community input, celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge. Almost immediately he spoke enthusiastically of Steve Reich's use of found sounds in *City Life* (1995).

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KAPILOW: Real-world sounds are definitely a part of the project. The sound-effects guy from *Prairie Home Companion*, named Fred Newman, is a collaborator with me. Chorus is part of the project, and orchestra is part of the project, and we're still figuring out how it all fits together. Everybody knows what the Golden Gate Bridge looks like, but what does it sound like? We've been asking pretty much every group we go to -- "What are the sounds you associate with the Bridge?" And we've had some pretty amazing conversations with people. Phenomenal.

ALBURGER: And you're filming these conversations.

KAPILOW: The same film group followed around a symphony that I did for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial. And that became a PBS documentary that aired nation-wide last year.

ALBURGER: Did you write the piece recently?

KAPILOW: 2007.

ALBURGER: Recent enough.

KAPILOW: The idea is similar in the sense of following around the piece from its first beginnings. I call these City Pieces -- pieces where I pick a topic that engages a city.

ALBURGER: Despite the fact that this is a semi-natural, semi-manmade setting. Well, obviously, the Bridge itself...

KAPILOW: One of the questions is "Who's Bridge is it?" I mean, it's not Marin's, it's not San Francisco's. But it's also the world's. The idea is to engage the community as I'm writing it, from beginning all the way through the final stages.

ALBURGER: Another question you raise is "What is the community?"

KAPILOW: That's the thing. One of the things we've discovered, is, what every you think it is, it's bigger. One of the kids' suggestions that kept coming up over and over again about sounds associated with the Bridge is all the foreign languages spoken on the Bridge. And it's very clear that it's the world's Bridge.

ALBURGER: Have you walked the Bridge?

KAPILOW: Oh, yes. And we're doing many version of the Bridge.

ALBURGER: The sounds...

KAPILOW: Yes, Claudia Nakagi is a sound archivist who's been out here. She has archival sounds of the Bridge recorded over two generations. So she is feeding us all the raw sounds -- giving them to Fred and me, and we're going to work them into this piece.

ALBURGER: Beautiful! What's the conceived duration?

KAPILOW: Somewhere between 20 and 30 minutes.



ALBURGER: Would the musique-concrete portion of this be thorough-going?

KAPILOW: We'll see.

ALBURGER: That's an open question.

KAPILOW: That's part of the fun of this project, is to go out to people in the city. One of the other goals of the project, of course, is to demystify composition, and to remove whatever barriers people might think there are, and to get people to understand that writing a piece is no different than writing anything else. So, I want people in at the very first stage when I'm asking them, "What does a piece of music about the Golden Gate Bridge sound like?" Then I will keep coming back. Also we have a Facebook site called Golden Gate Opus, and we're asking people to talk to us, offer thoughts. As I write the piece, I will put up bits of it as it gets written.

ALBURGER: Cool. Anyone whistling melodies for you?

KAPILOW: Absolutely. In fact, I met with the Youth Symphony and also the Marin School of the Arts. We had them doing some samples, and playing some ideas, doing some improvisation of fog horns and fog and wind. I wanted them to get a sense of what it's like to engage in the question of "What does a piece about the Golden Gate Bridge sound like?"

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A Google search of Rob Kapilow reveals a similarly brilliantly engaging speaker in national television forums, but paradoxically very little composition -- so we shall just have to wait in greatest expectation for the conclusion of this project: a new work premiered on each side of the Gate, commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Bridge in May, 2012



# Chronicle

February 1

Boston Lyric Opera presents Viktor Ullmann's *Emperor of Atlantis*, or *Death Quits* and Richard Beaudoin *After-Image*. Calderwood Pavilion, Boston, MA. "Ullmann, an accomplished Czech composer who had studied with Schoenberg and worked with Zemlinsky, wrote this searing, scarcely veiled satire of Hitler with Petr Kien, an artist and poet, in 1943, when both were interned at the Terezin concentration camp, the so-called 'model camp' with a busy cultural life, set up by the Nazis to persuade representatives of the Red Cross that life in the camps was not so bad. Though it has had many performances since it was reconstructed from Ullmann's manuscript in the mid-1970s, most have been in the context of programs or series devoted to the music of composers lost in the Holocaust, rather than as part of an opera season. . . . One reason opera houses have resisted *Emperor* is its brevity. At less than an hour it makes up only part of an evening, but finding the right piece to pair it with is a challenge. The Boston Lyric Opera's solution was to commission Richard Beaudoin, a composer on the Harvard faculty, to write a short, independent work that could be used as a prologue. His *After-Image*, a 20-minute reflection on how photographs shape our memories of war (and those who live through them), uses texts by Rilke, Friedrich Rückert and William Henry Fox Talbot, the 19th-century British pioneer of photography. Mr. Beaudoin's gently wistful piece, scored for the same instrumentation as Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* -- another work composed in a Nazi camp -- makes no allusions to *Emperor*, or to World War II specifically. Instead it traces the emotional arc of a young woman musing over a photograph of her father as a young soldier and lets us hear the father's reminiscences, sung from the grave, of that distant time. The Daughter was largely a spoken part, but the mezzo-soprano Jamie Van Eyck sang the role's few arias affectingly, and the bass-baritone Kevin Burdette put across the Father's music with a sharply focused clarity and power.

Mr. Burdette was also the star of *Emperor*, in which he played the combined role of Death and the Loudspeaker with an idiosyncratic, darkly comic incisiveness that underpinned a magnificent vocal performance. "Emperor," performed here in English, tells of Emperor Overall, a maniacal ruler who, regarding himself as nearly divine, declares war on all of humanity and claims that Death will be his standard-bearer. Death, who in this work represents peaceful release (and has a moving, poetic aria to that effect), is offended by Overall's presumptuousness and disgusted by the grim mechanization of modern warfare. When he resigns in protest, the sick and mortally wounded are unable to die, and Overall's realm soon begins to collapse in chaos and desperation. He begs Death to return, and Death agrees, so long as Overall is the first to die. The score, for a small cast and a chamber ensemble, is beautifully wrought, with richly expressive vocal writing, colorful instrumental interludes (including one staged as a zombie dance) and affecting allusions to Bach chorales and Mahler's *Lied von der Erde*, and less direct evocations of Brahms songs and the pre-war German theater style most closely associated with Weill. It also makes specific political points: Overall, or Überall, in the original German, is a reference to the Nazi anthem, *Deutschland, Deutschland, Über Alles*, quoted parodistically when Overall's declaration of total war is read in the opera's first scene. Listening to this opera you have to wonder: What were Ullmann and Kien thinking? Could they have believed that the show-camp nature of Terezin, or their prominence in its artistic life, would shield them? If so, they miscalculated. After attending a rehearsal in the fall of 1944, the authorities canceled the production and sent Ullmann and Kien to Auschwitz, where both died -- Ullmann in a gas chamber two days after his arrival" [Allan Kozinn, 2/2/11].

February 2

John Adams's *Nixon in China* (libretto by Alice Goodman) is finally performed at the Metropolitan Opera, New York, NY. Through February 19.

"During a panel discussion about Nixon in China on . . . [February 1] Peter Gelb turned to the team of onetime artistic rebels who created this work for its Houston Grand Opera premiere in 1987 and suggested that back then, surely, no one involved had had any ambitions for the Met. Other than 'for its dismantlement,' Mr. Gelb added. All the panelists onstage -- the composer John Adams, the director Peter Sellars, the choreographer Mark Morris, the designer Adrienne Lobel and the baritone James Maddalena, who created the title role -- laughed. No one disagreed. But . . . [the next] night that same team, joined by the librettist Alice Goodman, seemed elated to have arrived at the Met with their path-breaking opera. When Mr. Adams, who conducted the performance, first appeared in the pit, he received a cheering ovation from a full house. And practically the first person on her feet during the standing ovation at the end, nearly four hours later, was Tricia Nixon Cox (who during the first intermission had posed for a photo backstage with her operatic 'parents'). This is the second John Adams opera to reach the Met. But the company that presented his *Doctor Atomic* in 2008 is a different place from the Met of 24 years ago. Under Mr. Gelb the house now actively courts contemporary works and modern productions. In 1987 *Nixon in China* went directly from Houston, where critical reactions were all over the place, to the Brooklyn Academy of Music, with no thoughts of breaking into Lincoln Center. The standard thing to say would be that the Met's embrace of *Nixon in China* is way overdue. The opera and the production may have come to the Met at just the right time to comprehend the continuing resonances of this audacious and moving opera. Far from being trendy, the idea of an opera about President Richard M. Nixon's trip to China in 1972, which came from Mr. Sellars, was inspired. In essential ways nothing really happened during that diplomatic journey. Yet in the larger scheme the trip was momentous. For America, as Mr. Sellars said during the panel, it represented the collapse of a 'mental wall,' and the recognition of 'one-fifth of the planet.' Here was Nixon, an 'old cold warrior/Piloting towards an unknown shore,' as he refers to himself in Ms. Goodman's poetic libretto. The meeting of Mao and Nixon was fabulous diplomatic theater.

And no art form is better suited to momentous spectacle than opera. With the exception of Henry Kissinger, all the historic players in the drama are treated seriously and given a dignity that allows for plenty of humor and absurdity. Since its premiere Mr. Sellars and his team have essentially been adapting the original production to subsequent stages. This specific production, which played at the English National Opera in 2006, was rebuilt for the larger dimensions of the Met's stage. But Mr. Sellars's concept, which presents the story with vivid realism and fanciful style, is unaltered. When you get something right at the start, why change it? The opera opens outside an airfield in Beijing, where a contingent of Chinese Army, Navy and Air Force personnel -- dressed in Dunya Ramicova's costumes, which have a touching workaday look -- solemnly sing a chorus. Immediately . . . the rich inventiveness of Mr. Adams's score . . . come[s] through. In the subdued orchestra, overlapping patterns of ascending minor scales create a hypnotic, quietly intense backdrop, pierced by fractured, brassy chords like some cosmic chorale. The chorus sings Ms. Goodman's elegant couplets ('Soldiers of heaven hold the sky/The morning breaks and shadows fly') in intoned phrases. Mr. Adams has acknowledged his debt here to Philip Glass, especially the opera *Satyagraha*. But it is one thing when Mr. Glass sets Sanskrit in staccato bursts to lend *Satyagraha* a ritualistic allure. . . . The scene in which the presidential plane descends for the arrival of Nixon and his entourage remains musically exhilarating and theatrically dazzling. The orchestra erupts with big band bursts, rockish riffs and shards of fanfares: a heavy din of momentous pomp. Soon after Nixon is greeted by Chou, the president breaks into the *News* aria. Swept up, almost in a seizure, with the significance of greeting Communist China on its own turf, Nixon sputters the words 'News has a kind of mystery.' And here the staccato vocal writing perfectly conveys Nixon's awkward stiffness and self-consuming power. . . . Making your Met debut in your mid-50s must be both gratifying and high-pressured. But it would have been impossible to bring any other Nixon to the Met for this premiere. Mr. Maddalena inhabits the character like no other singer, and as he said during the panel, he loves this outrageous and complex character, an affection that came through here.



Mr. Maddalena was riveting in the long scene in which Nixon meets the frail yet feisty Mao, here the tenor Robert Brubaker in a performance that captures the chairman's authoritarian defiance and rapacious self-indulgence. . . . [A] coup de théâtre . . . takes the Nixons to a performance of the revolutionary ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*, choreographed here, as in the premiere, by Mark Morris. The scene imagines the emotional reactions of the first couple to the story of a poor peasant woman abused by a sadistic tyrant until she saves herself through the virtues of Communism. Pat Nixon, apparently taking the ballet as real, goes rushing to the aid of the young dancer as she is whipped, and the horrified president attends to her. The music is a riot of clashing styles, with evocations of agitprop and Straussian voluptuousness stirred up with jazzy blasts. The coloratura soprano Kathleen Kim delivered the skittish, shrieking vocal lines of the malevolent Madame Mao with maniacal intensity. . . . As a conductor Mr. Adams brought an obvious command of the metric complexities of the score to his performance.

I like that he never pushed the music and tried to tease out its mysticism and hazy harmonic richness. As with all his operas, Mr. Adams insisted that the singers wear body microphones. . . . [T]he . . . orchestration . . . [features] synthesizer, two pianos, four saxophones and brassy aplenty" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 2/3/11].

## February 3

Eugene Drucker's *Sonnets and a Soliloquy*, Alban Berg's *Lulu Suite*, and Samuel Barber's *Dover Beach*, performed by the Escher String Quartet and the bass-baritone Andrew Nolen. Symphony Space, New York, NY. "Drucker said a listener might hear echoes of Bartok, his favorite composer, and the harmonic language of Berg and the Second Viennese School, an aesthetic that resonates strongly with him. That aesthetic could indeed be detected in his setting of seven Shakespeare sonnets and a soliloquy from *Hamlet*. Mr. Drucker, who has a longstanding interest in Shakespeare, wanted to notate the rhythms and pitch fluctuations of an expressive recitation, without lengthening any syllable beyond its speech value.

The result was tentative, with the vocal line a sort of expressionist *sprechstimme* (a cross between speaking and singing) that sounded rather bland, especially in *Hamlet's* tortured soliloquy from Act I, Scene 2. But the quartet writing, which incorporates serial techniques, is richly scored. Mr. Drucker effectively used tone painting to illuminate the texts, as in the pulsating measures that accompany the first line of Sonnet 60: "Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore." Mr. Drucker read that sonnet and Sonnet 27; in the program book he writes that since it was his goal to explore the boundaries between speech and singing, he decided to include two sonnets to be spoken. Sonnet 129 was the most vividly rendered, with its agitated strings and dissonant harmonies reflecting Shakespeare's startling depiction of lust. Mr. Nolen sang with greater conviction in Barber's *Dover Beach*, which concluded the program, expressively rendering the text by Matthew Arnold. Here and earlier in the program the fine musicianship of the Escher members — Adam Barnett-Hart, first violinist; Wu Jie, second violinist; Dane Johansen, cellist; and Pierre Lapointe, viola — resulted in cohesive, spirited ensemble playing. . . . The Escher also offered a committed performance of Berg's "Lyric Suite," which meshes a modernist, 12-tone idiom with lyrical and romantic gestures. The quartet's richly hued playing aptly conveyed the dramatic changes of mood in this sensual score, whose simmering tensions allude to the married composer's illicit affair" [Vivien Schweitzer, *The New York Times*, 2/4/11].

## February 4

A multitude of Egyptian protesters sing their national anthem. Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt. "Cracks in the Egyptian establishment's support for President Hosni Mubarak began to appear . . . as jubilant crowds of hundreds of thousands packed the capital's central Tahrir Square to call for his ouster, this time unmolested by either security police or uniformed Mubarak loyalists. . . . [Protesters] abandoned their makeshift barriers to chant, pray and sing the national anthem around the center of the square, where newcomers carried in bags of bread and water. Tens of thousands of others demonstrated in Alexandria and Suez" [The *New York Times*, 2/4/11].

February 10

Tell the Way, with Nico Muhly, Bishi, the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, and members of the American Contemporary Music Ensemble. St. Ann's Warehouse, New York, NY. "[A] good-naturedly shaggy, loosely travel-theme evening featuring . . . Muhly, who wrote or helped write 8 of the program's 11 pieces and played piano throughout. It was an eclectic program, with other performers: there was a surreal piece about the Eiffel Tower (by Bryce Dessner of the band the National), some banjo, an Anglican prayer of thanksgiving, and Indian rhythms. Mr. Muhly's style combines a talent for complex yet transparent choral writing with Minimalist arpeggios and repetitions. At his best, he subtly resists the considerable surface beauty of his music. In Jerusalem, he and the quietly charismatic folk singer and songwriter Sam Amidon adapted an eerily ecstatic 18th-century hymn. Once or twice Mr. Amidon vocalized on 'da' for a few beats instead of singing words, and the accompaniment was jittery and changeable. It was as if singer and players were improvising, about to go off the rails, and it worked perfectly. . . . Before the performance of Mr. Dessner's Tour Eiffel, Mr. Muhly said that the song was about 'travel, the anxieties and delights thereof.' But the evening, despite its wide range of sources, was nearly free of anxiety, or almost any mood other than blandly elegiac uplift. This was gently melancholy, vaguely hopeful music, the kind best listened to while staring through a window at the rain. . . . [T]he British musician Bishi -- in a white fur coat over a futuristic black-and-white pants-and-bustier combo, her hair twisted like a Swiss roll cake -- had a striking look and a clear voice, [and] her sound was a fairly standard combination of choral chant, French chanson and nods to her South Asian heritage. Her ambitious Look the Other Way, with Bishi playing sitar, had an ominous military feel and an Electric Light Orchestra lushness until a bhangra beat abruptly transformed it . . . Its forced global style gave an unintended spin on the evening's central question. Why does she flee through the world, indeed? [Zachary Woolfe, The New York Times, 2/11/11].

February 16

Jeremy Denk performs Gyorgy Ligeti's *Études*. Zankel Hall, New York, NY.

Maude Maggart. Oak Room, Algonquin Hotel, New York, NY. "I Wish It So [is] a gorgeous, little-known Irish-flavored ballad by Marc Blitzstein from his 1959 show, *Juno*. . . . The title of her show, *Everybody's Doin' It*, comes from the perky Irving Berlin song" [Stephen Holden, The New York Times, 2/20/11].

February 19

Young Concert Artists celebrates its 50th anniversary with a well-attended 12-hour marathon. Symphony Space, New York, NY. "[H]ighlights . . . included the pianist Jeremy Denk's virtuosic, thoughtful account of Book 1 of Ligeti's *Études* . . . . The violinist Juliette Kang . . . joined the cellist Efe Baltacigil for a dynamic rendition of the Presto from Kodaly's Duo (Op. 7); and the clarinetist Daniel McKelway and the pianist Gleb Ivanov offered a colorful interpretation of Debussy's *Rhapsodie*" [Vivien Schweitzer, The New York Times, 2/21/11].

February 22

Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "The orchestra, founded as the Palestine Symphony Orchestra in 1936, is celebrating both its 75th birthday and the 50th anniversary of Zubin Mehta's first conducting engagement with it in 1961. Mr. Mehta, 25 when he first led the orchestra, became its music director in 1969. In 1981 his appointment was extended for life. . . . The program opened with the young Israeli composer Avner Dorman's new orchestral arrangement of his Azerbaijani Dance, originally a piano work. Vivacious and appealing in its initial form, Mr. Dorman's piece was transformed here into an exuberant display of vibrant hues and mottled quarter-tones, its propulsive odd-metered rhythms garnished with brilliant metallic percussion and crafty effects. . . . Ending the concert was a passionate and assured account of Mahler's Symphony No. 5.

That these players could make Mahler's borrowings from Jewish folk and liturgical traditions sound authentic and soulful was no surprise. Mr. Mehta too is a seasoned Mahlerian" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 2/23/11].

February 23

London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Valery Gergiev, performs Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 7. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY. "Mahler's Seventh Symphony, composed during the summers of 1904 and 1905, is generally considered the most problematic and baffling of his works in the form. The piece may be the least programmed and the last that most conductors learn, often simply because they have set out to perform the complete Mahler symphony cycle. I, too, have been confounded, though fascinated, by this lurching, extreme 80-minute work in five movements. So I was all the more impressed by the exhilarating and revelatory performance that Valery Gergiev, conducting the London Symphony Orchestra, gave . . . . This was the first of three concerts with which Mr. Gergiev will conclude his survey of the Mahler symphonies, which began last fall with five programs at Carnegie Hall featuring the Mariinsky Orchestra. . . . Since becoming the London Symphony's principal conductor in 2007, he has formed a palpable bond with the accomplished players, who were with him all the way during this visceral, glittering and organic account of the teeming Seventh. Unlike most other Mahler symphonies, this one has no programmatic backdrop. The sprawling first movement, lasting nearly a half-hour, begins with a strange march, halting and heavy at first, then increasingly animated and finally frenzied. From the start this music is steeped in ambiguity. Is the march funereal? Celebratory? Inexorable? Ironic? Rather than resolve the ambiguity, Mr. Gergiev embraced it, drawing consistently incisive, colorful, richly characterized playing from the inspired orchestra. During the bucolic episodes in the middle of this first movement, the music emerged here hushed, tender yet tense. You never quite trusted your inclination to be soothed by the cowbells and the pastoral horn calls, the lyrical passages for wistful strings.

As the movement returned to its crazed mode, Mr. Gergiev and his players dispatched it like some strangely rousing, out-of-sync fight song, full of disjointed phrases and thematic fragments. Mahler labeled the second and fourth movements each 'Nachtmusik,' usually translated as nocturne, though Bernstein called it music of nightmares in his 1967 essay *Mahler: His Time Has Come*. These two movements frame a central ghostly scherzo. Describing all three movements, run through with hints of fractured folk tunes and curious passages highlighting the mandolin and guitar, Bernstein wrote that 'you can hear some of the loveliest, most tuneful, lilting and campy music ever written.' Mr. Gergiev's performance caught those qualities, especially the campy veneer, which is somehow crucial to preventing the music from slipping into sentimentality and keeping its strangeness on the surface. In a memorable phrase, the critic and program annotator Michael Steinberg wrote that as a young man, when he first heard the finale of the Mahler Seventh, it sounded like 'someone's grotesque and futile attempt to remember how the 'Meistersinger' Overture goes.' That Wagner work, though never quoted, pulses in spirit throughout this finale, 'wild and wonderful' in Steinberg's words. Mahler seized on the Wagner for its heady mix of stately march music, industrious counterpoint, soaring chorale tunes and good-humored busyness. But he processed everything through his Mahlerian blender. The hall was packed for the performance, and the ovation was enormous. This Seventh sets a high standard for the Third and Ninth Symphonies, and the Adagio from the unfinished Tenth, much more familiar Mahler works, which will be performed in the final two programs" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 2/24/11].

February 24

Axiom performs Morton Feldman's Rothko Chapel. Alice Tully Hall, New York, NY. "In 1971, the Rothko Chapel, a meditation space and museum supported by the art patrons and philanthropists Dominique and John de Menil, opened in Houston. Missing from the ceremony was Mark Rothko, the artist who had painted a series of 14 large canvases for the chapel. The year before the opening, Rothko, who had been experiencing severe depression, took his own life.

In attendance was the composer Morton Feldman, Rothko's friend from New York, who considered Rothko's art a major influence on his own work. The de Menils asked Feldman to compose a piece for performance in the chapel. Before the year was out, Feldman had done so: the austere beautiful, daringly static and pervasively quiet Rothko Chapel, scored simply for viola, celesta, percussion, two solo singers and wordless chorus. This is perhaps the most defining work of Feldman's inimitable art. Yet though the piece has had wide impact within the sphere of contemporary music, it is seldom performed. Word must finally be getting out. Alice Tully Hall was nearly full on Thursday night for the second program of the TullyScope festival, when Axiom, an excellent contemporary music ensemble from the Juilliard School, and the Clarion Choir gave a pensive and mystical performance of the 30-minute Rothko Chapel in a fascinating program of works by Feldman and the Romanian-born modernist Gyorgy Kurtag. Feldman was inspired by the New York Abstract Expressionist school of painting, especially by Rothko, whose works seemingly do away with formal design and present images of soft-edged shapes and colors that evoke spiritual and psychological states. Feldman was emboldened by the Abstract Expressionist painters to compose music that similarly eluded formal design and strove for purity of expression, quietude and mysticism. The subdued spirituality of Feldman's music is no longer so unusual. But what many listeners still find challenging is the lack of discernible exposition and development . . . . Rothko Chapel unfolds as a series of fragmentary viola lines, flickers of notes on the celesta, isolated wordless chords intoned by the chorus and subdued rhythmic figures in the percussion. Little shifts of harmony or fleeting pileups of instrumental sounds seem major musical events. But nothing disrupts the overall mood of ethereal beauty and spiritual loneliness. Until late in the piece, that is, when out of nowhere the viola plays a wistful 'quasi-Hebraic' melody, in Feldman's term, a tune he had written as a teenager. Given the memorial nature of the piece, this uncharacteristic Feldman stroke seems spiritually right and musically gratifying. The calm, sensitive performance, conducted by Jeffrey Milarsky, conveyed the simplicity and directness of this wondrously restrained music.

And the audience, which had listened with uncommon contemplativeness, gave the performers a long ovation. A performance of Feldman's 1981 Bass Clarinet and Percussion, comparably soft-spoken and minimalist, was also engrossing. The concert began with Mr. Kurtag's trio *Hommage à R. Sch.* (1990), inspired by Schumann, an intriguing series of short, aphoristic, pungently modern pieces played here compellingly by Christopher Pell, clarinetist; Jocelin Pan, violist; and Conor Hanick, pianist. The concert ended with Mr. Kurtag's expressionist 25-minute song cycle *Messages of the Late R. V. Trousova*, a setting of 21 love poems by Rimma Dalos. Lauren Snouffer, a rich-voiced, agile young soprano, was very impressive in these vocally and dramatically demanding songs" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 2/25/11].

February 27

Valery Gergiev conducts the London Symphony in Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 9* and the *Adagio* from *Symphony No. 10*. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY. "[T]he . . . Orchestra[s] . . . clear, muscular playing was ideally suited to the troublesome hall, and its shining brasses, focused strings and utter clarity enlivened a space that rarely rewards other orchestras. The concert concluded Mr. Gergiev's latest survey of the Mahler symphonies, begun at Carnegie Hall with the Mariinsky Orchestra in October and concluding with three London Symphony concerts last week. He chose to end on Sunday with Mahler's end . . . two profound works that have usually (and conveniently) been interpreted as valedictory and focused on death. Mr. Gergiev's moving but unsentimental interpretations, however, avoided any simplistic or programmatic, and certainly any schmaltzy, narrative. Nothing felt, as it often can in Mahler performances, contrived or done simply for effect. The climaxes were blazing yet never over the top, and textures were carefully layered: in the *Adagio* from the 10th, the horns formed a liquid foundation for the leaps in the strings. It was in certain ways a softening of Mahler, sincere rather than saccharine or sarcastic.

You were less aware than usual of the composer's abrupt shifts -- of style, dynamics, tempo -- not because those shifts weren't present but because they occurred so seamlessly. In the second movement of the Ninth, which begins with a spirited dance and turns stranger and darker, the music seemed to transmute fluidly rather than simply switch. Even in the third-movement Rondo-Burleske, Mahler's trademark dizzying transitions of mood felt organic. There were no exaggerated accents (the cheap way to channel this music's eerily jaunty quality) or artificial spirit, just rhythmic precision in both the brass and the strings, more difficult but ultimately far stranger and more potent than blatant, easy grotesquerie. Despite his emphasis on accuracy, Mr. Gergiev was flexible in the rondo's big lyrical theme, which anticipates the sublime final Adagio, played here with eloquence and dignity. And in the lengthening silences that gradually overcome the music at the end of the symphony, the London players made Avery Fisher Hall sound more alive than most orchestras do at their loudest" [Zachary Woolfe, *The New York Times*, 2/28/11].

February 28

The Minnesota Orchestra, led by Osmo Vanska, with the violinist Lisa Batiashvili, perform Ludwig van Beethoven's Violin Concerto (with Alfred Schnittke's cadenzas) and Jan Sibelius's Symphony No. 6 and 7. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "The exacting and exuberant Finnish conductor Osmo Vanska arrived as the music director of the Minnesota Orchestra in 2003, determined to lift this respected ensemble to world-class status. However such things are measured, there is no denying that Mr. Vanska has had enormous success. The orchestra sounded terrific . . . . In any event, for the larger public Mr. Vanska has been cultivating his orchestra's reputation through its performances of Beethoven and Sibelius. This is the third season in a row that he and his players have presented works by only those composers for their annual Carnegie Hall program. Having recorded the complete Beethoven symphonies for the Bis label, Mr. Vanska and the Minnesota Orchestra have begun a new project to record the complete Sibelius symphonies. . . . The soloist was the immensely gifted and accomplished young violinist Lisa Batiashvili.

All the impressive attributes of her playing were present here: a plush, shimmering, beautifully focused sound; impeccable intonation; rhythmic integrity; a winning combination of elegance and impetuosity. . . . A point of interest was Ms. Batiashvili's decision to play first and final movement cadenzas by the Russian composer Alfred Schnittke, who died at 63 in 1998. Beethoven wrote no cadenzas for this work. Schnittke was an iconoclastic composer whose polystylistic works boldly juxtaposed contemporary and Neo-Classical idioms. In Schnittke's first-movement cadenza, Ms. Batiashvili was joined by timpani playing the repeated four-note rhythmic motif with which the piece begins. But when the cadenza started to evoke other works (the slow movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, Brahms's Violin Concerto, Berg's Violin Concerto), it seemed gimmicky. Mr. Vanska's penchant for laying out music clearly proved a boon to his performances of Sibelius's Sixth and Seventh Symphonies in the second half. It was fascinating to hear these elusive, strange scores performed with such directness and intelligence. The Sixth, in four movements, is like Sibelius's cosmic pastoral symphony. But every time some gracious dancing episode or folkloric melodic line seems to take hold, it merges into a symphonic haze with no discernible themes, transitions or developments. The third movement is like some intergalactic Mendelssohn scherzo. The finale is fitful and episodic. Yet spiritual calm pervaded the music in this engrossing performance, which made every curiosity come across as inevitable and right. Mr. Vanska and the Minnesota players were equally excellent in the single-movement 20-minute Seventh Symphony, in which Sibelius distills everything about the late-Romantic symphonic mystique into something spiraling, mystifying and awesome. The strings will break into a soaring line that hovers between a grand symphonic statement and a rambling outburst. Here, in 1924, Sibelius showed his inimitable way of composing something modern, even radical, qualities that came through in this exhilarating performance. Next season Mr. Vanska and the Minnesota Orchestra return to Carnegie Hall, this time with works by Tchaikovsky and Nielsen, a program that is fresher, though it would be nice to hear some of that American music for which they are being singled out" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 3/1/11].

# Comment

## The Cantilever of Chords

LISA SCOLA PROSEK

I was extremely gratified to see, in February's Princeton Alumni Weekly, an article on the theory of Dmitri Tymoczko, entitled The Geometry of Chords. Tymoczko assembled all of the two-note chord combination, and perceived three-dimensional geometric shape, which enlightens the understanding of the physics of sound. For those of us who are lovers of the application of the Pythagorean two-dimensional models, this is exciting news. A mobius tape of chord patterns that gives composers a natural model of the way modulations occur in mathematics is worthy of study and application.

Reading this, and observing the chord patterns on the mobius tape, I became very excited as it mirrored exactly a chord progression pattern that I had devised for myself 15 years ago when I completed my masters in architecture and structural engineering at UW. Never able to become interested in the modeling of three-dimensional living space, I nonetheless applied all of the statics and physics that I learned for the board exams to music. Wandering lost in a world where the new musical systems were devised by Milton Babbitt to prevent "arbitrariness," but seemed to me in themselves arbitrary, the applied physics of engineering filled the void for me and I began to compose from fundamental principles of physics that have served me well.

An error in architecture, or more specifically, the notion that design is elegant and therefore need not adhere to requirements of gravity and loads, leads to loss of life. If you design a balcony that cannot support the weight of a human being, you commit criminal negligence.

Since no one ever died from bad music, however, composers permit themselves some egregious abuse of the listeners, by ignoring:

1. The physiological ability of human beings to absorb and assimilate sounds,

2. The physical effect of the vibration and frequency of the sounds once they enter the room and decay about the listener.

Using again the balcony model we observe that, in order to support the load of a human being, a cantilevered balcony must not extend further than the strength of the load bearing material, And must be adequate for the limits imposed by the weight of the human being.

Likewise, a musical event, chord, phrase, which is very much like a cantilever, for it extends the listener into a floating space, a musical space, must be adequate in it's harmonic strength to support and be absorbed by the listener, to move him out into the space and not become redundant, and must conform to the limits and requirements of human physiological "tuning."

The cantilever, or harmonic bridge of sound, must move at a velocity determined by the limits of human understanding and tuning. Not less than, or it becomes stale and no longer extends us further into space. Not faster than, or it becomes weak, and drops the listener. Otherwise the listener is "dropped", much like the man standing on a balcony, for the cantilever of his attention span is broken, and the musical event is no longer continuous. This makes the listener distracted, and causes him to lose the flow of the composer's intention.

There are a number of points mentioned above that need further clarification.

By human physiological limits, I mean both the limit of his comprehension, and the limit of his "tuning" which I will elaborate below.



•Human “tuning” is much like human weight, a function of the forces around us. Any object under pressure, which we most certainly are, (thousands of pounds of atmospheric pressure, gravitational pressure, the pressure of all of the water in our bodies as it pushed against our skin and the atmosphere around us), has a specific tuning that will respond to vibrations, oscillations, and wave forms that are sympathetic to this tuning. A perfect example of this mystery of our existential tuning was so clearly exemplified by the collapse of the Tacoma narrows bridge, when an oscillation that reoccurs through the winds of the Tacoma narrows amplified the tuning of the bridge itself until the bridge collapsed. Certain oscillations, between notes and chords, amplify our physiological tuning in a discernible way, creating pleasure or pain, or worse, having little or no effect whatsoever. We can gauge how effective a modulation was, as we glance across an audience, to see everyone in the hall react at the same moment to a specific harmonic event. Or we can play through Tymoczko’s mobius tape of the geometry of chords, and try to discern our own physical reaction to the oscillation between chords.

•The limits of human comprehension in real time, is a variable, yet after years of teaching music to small children, I noticed that the variations occur between a narrow band of real human limits. Obviously if we have a listener with extraordinary auditory sophistication, then two dimensional phrase events like “a twelve-tone row based on a hymn sung by my mother, which occurs as a palindrome in two simultaneous voices”, might be heard on the first listen, the likelihood is however, that no-one in the room, not even the composer, will grasp it, if it is played allegro (It never ceases to amaze me after 10 years of performing new works, how much of their own music composer’s fail to grasp).

The question is, therefore, if it exceeds the listener’s grasp, has it occurred?

For most listeners, much like the tree that fell in the woods, the answer is no.

Now a certain amount of these private composerly references and jokes are a delight in Mozart, since they occur while the stream of comprehensible musical information is uninterrupted. And if we require our musical cantilever “balcony” to support human beings, we might want to consider the real physiological limits of auditory understanding, and try to support our listeners with events that can be grasped in real time.

In conclusion, if I can return to the idea of a cantilever, a balcony, a bridge that music extends for us in space and which must be strong enough to support our thinking and our harmonic tuning, there is a leap that occurs between two cantilevers, or that area in the bridge where the net stress is 0, this is the area that I concluded 15 years ago, that needed to be supported on both sides so it could occur effectively, without dropping the listener. This is the transition between two fundamental chords at any point in the musical piece.

It was my understanding, and my unwillingness to put my listeners “at risk of falling” that to establish this cantilever of chords, the Pythagorean principle of sound decay had to be safely in play. In other words, to make the transition between one chord and the next, the strength of the tonalities from the first chord had to be clearly in the room before we could leap to the next tonality. This made the cantilever “safe.”

It also made it natural, and able to effect a harmonious reaction in the listener, to increase their enjoyment of the suspension, of the feeling of being suspended, of not being dropped.

Certainly if the great music of the world makes us feel as if we are flying above the earth, I had discovered the simple applicable principle of the physics of sound which made it so.

## Recording

Ethan Wickman. *Portals and Passages*. Nicholas Phillips, pianist. Albany. "Wickman [is] a composer based at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. . . . Last year two appealing pieces appeared on disc simultaneously: *Angles of Repose*, recorded by the new-music group Zeitgeist (Innova), and *Namasté*, performed by the Avalon String Quartet (Albany). Now comes the first album entirely devoted to Mr. Wickman's music, featuring piano works composed from 2003 to 2010 as played by Nicholas Phillips, a Wisconsin faculty colleague. The music here, essentially tonal, pledges allegiance to no particularism, save for a personable eclecticism rooted in respect for tradition. Mr. Wickman sometimes puts his forebears to work. From the rolling agitation that opens *Invention for St. Vincent* in the *Mezquita*, inspired by a Spanish cathedral built in the heart of a former mosque, emerges a passage from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 2, that evokes both architecture and piety.

A nostalgic song by Mr. Wickman's great-grandfather, Alfred M. Durham, provides *In Winter: Reverberations on a Theme* with material for melancholy elaboration. And the frisky finale of *Inside the Hubble Toolbox*, a four-part suite by turns epic and dreamy, spins out from a fleck of the Allegretto of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. Elsewhere Mr. Wickman's borrowings are more spiritual than literal. You might sense late Brahms in the measured reverie of *Passages for Piano*, while in *Forbidden Parallels* the influences of gamelan and early Copland intertwine amiably. Mr. Phillips is an able and persuasive advocate throughout. Start here, then proceed to the Zeitgeist and Avalon recordings" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 2/4/11].

