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Quartet for the Beginning of Office

PHILLIP GEORGE

Fools, and even wise folks, sometimes rush in where others fear to tread. John Williams took on the august tradition of setting the pretty much Aaron-Copland- owned Joseph Brackett Simple Gifts, and did a pretty good job of it, for the high-stakes arena of the inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States, on a frigid January 20, 2009, in Washington, D.C.

The work was performed by clarinetist Anthony McGill, pianist Gabriela Montero, violinist Itzhak Perlman, and cellist Yo-Yo Ma -- actually "instrument-syncing" to a recording they had made on January 18. In a nation and world absolutely dominated by vernacular musics, this was the first chamber ensemble (and of the instrumentation of Olivier Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time, no less) to be performed at a U.S. presidential inauguration. As the music elapsed over the stroke of noon, Obama officially became President, as stipulated by the Constitution.

Williams's composition was indeed not only an homage to sturdy American traditions, as exemplified by Shaker composer Brackett, but also to Copland, one of Obama's favorite classical composers [did George Bush have any favored art composers? From any century?].

The ternary composition presents an original spare, descending modal melody -- ultimately ushering in (as in Copland's setting), the clarinet on the cantus firmus, whereupon variations and return wend their due course.

Critical response was mixed, as in Anne Midgette's review in the Washington Post:

"It was functional, representational music, and it actually did serve a function: It allowed everyone some downtime before the main event of the oath and the new president's speech. For although it was only four minutes long, a lot of people stopped paying attention and started talking to each other before the music was over.

Music, at such a ceremony, has a role much like the bunting and flags that adorned the west front of the Capitol yesterday: It provides a symbolic background and adds color. Air and Simple Gifts tried to carry so much symbolic weight that it almost collapsed under the burden. It wasn't just that its four high-powered classical soloists spanned a Benetton range of generational, ethnic and gender bases (Itzhak Perlman, 63, born in Israel; Yo-Yo Ma, 53, of Chinese descent; Gabriela Montero, 38, originally from Venezuela; and the 29-year-old African American clarinetist Anthony McGill). It was also that Williams, in the music, was falling over himself to convey messages about patriotism and solemnity and austerity and profundity.

Bringing the high arts represented by the soloists together with the populist Williams was yet another clause in the message of

inclusion that the Obama team has generally been at pains to convey. Williams is not an unfamiliar figure in the concert hall, but known for film scores and pops concerts rather than so-called art music. Unfortunately, faced with this assignment, he made the mistake so many popular artists do when confronted with classical music: Rather than write what he is good at, he corseted himself in a straitjacket of what he thought he was supposed to be doing.

So we could have had a stirring film-score-type theme proclaiming a new beginning for Barack Obama. Instead, we got a chamber piece, at once sober and frilly, in which -- and this is the ultimate cop-out -- Williams, after opening with an original melody, reached for an existing theme, the familiar Shaker tune "Simple Gifts," to convey the bulk of his message. Referencing history is well and good, but since Aaron Copland already worked "Simple Gifts" very effectively into the classical pantheon, its use here merely evoked a well-worn idea of clean, honest, all-American values, without contributing much new to the discussion beyond various instrumental embellishments.

The sparseness of instrumentation was certainly in keeping with Obama's recurrent message about the country's difficulties, and his desire not to make his inauguration too festive. The solo lines conveyed a message of vulnerability -- the lone violin rising above the crowd is a familiar but effective metaphor -- and the fact that the four voices ultimately intertwined to work together while each retaining its own flavor was also a useful simile. Williams did draw on one strength, that of writing a singing theme for strings (both Ma and Perlman have, of course, been featured on Williams soundtracks in the past, notably *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Schindler's List*). Still, the music seemed awfully austere for an event that calls for at least some measure of celebration. . . .

Since Obama has harked back so deliberately to the model of Abraham Lincoln, it's worth noting that Lincoln, an opera fan, chose to include the arts at his second inauguration, according to the music historian Elise Kirk, by mounting an entire inaugural opera: Flotow's *Martha*, a work without much political relevance. A message that can be drawn from this is: If you want to include the arts, let the arts have their head and go where they will."



Chronicle

January 9

Richard Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* and Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, performed by Ensemble ACJW. Paul Hall, Juilliard School, New York, NY. "Were it not for the harmonic density and fervent myth making of [Richard] Wagner's mature creations, Schoenberg might never have deemed necessary a turn toward expressionism and, eventually, his development of serialism: a revolutionary rebirth for German music . . . But that cause-and-effect logic is hard to fathom in a pairing of Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* and Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, the pieces these excellent young musicians played. More than representing different styles, the works seem to come from different galaxies. . . . Wagner introduced [*Idyll*] with a band not much larger than the 13 players ACJW deployed. Led by Asher Fisch, a conductor with Wagnerian credentials in the opera house, the musicians offered a lithe, transparent and nearly unblemished performance. Sentimentality is the last thing that comes to mind in Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, a 1912 piece seemingly without precedent . . . The tone is brittle and morbid, emphasizing the eerie grotesquerie of Albert Giraud's poems. The work's elegance and beauty are those of a gem-encrusted scalpel, meant to flay all trace of Romantic refulgence. The soprano Lucy Shelton's elegant features and gold-trimmed, bejeweled black gown made it seem as if she had stepped out of a Klimt canvas. Her long acquaintance with "Pierrot" was evident in the variety and intensity of her sung-spoken German declamation. Ms. Shelton's rendering of 'Kratz' ('Scrapes') in the 14th of the 21 songs, *Serenade*, was surely among the eeriest sounds ever to escape a human larynx. Surrounding Ms. Shelton were five outstanding musicians: Erin Lesser, flutist; Sarah Beaty, clarinetist; Owen Dalby, violinist; Caitlin Sullivan, cellist; Angelina Gadeliya, pianist. They played with visceral energy and acute dynamics, all the better for this music to creep its way under your skin" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 1/11/09].

Chang-Music IV by Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky. Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium, New York, NY. "[The piece] uses Western strings to create the sound of the chang, a Central Asian instrument similar to the Persian santur (a hammer dulcimer). It is so effective that had you been led blindfolded into . . . the Metropolitan Museum . . . you probably wouldn't have guessed that a string quartet was performing" [Vivien Schweitzer, *The New York Times*, 1/11/09].

January 11

James Levine conducts the Met Chamber Ensemble and Grazia Doronzio in music of Elliot Carter and Luigi Dallapiccola. Zankel Hall, New York, NY. "My guess is that when Ms. Doronzio as a young student fantasized about singing at the Met she did not imagine Mr. Levine conducting her in Dallapiccola. But Dallapiccola, who died in 1975 and was the first Italian composer to embrace the 12-tone technique, also had roots in the Italian heritage of singing and lyricism. *Tre Poemi for Soprano and Chamber Orchestra* (1949) poses vocal challenges through its leaping melodic lines and restless rhythms. Yet the music also wants a voice with the plush warmth and expressive intensity of Ms. Doronzio's. The first movement, *A Flower Given to My Daughter*, a setting of a James Joyce poem translated into Italian by Eugenio Montale, is lush and gorgeous, with wistful vocal lines and transparent writing for 13 diverse instruments. This is music that should dispel notions among timid listeners that anything 12-tone cannot be beautiful. Dallapiccola's "Commiato" for Soprano and Ensemble (1972), a work at once impassioned and ingenious, depicts an anguished "leave-taking," as the title translates, in five movements. Though the work is mostly a sternly intense setting of a sacred text, it begins and ends with the soprano's wrenching cries of 'Ah!' over the instrumental ferment. Ms. Doronzio was again splendid. Mr. Levine drew assured and vibrant accounts of both works from his excellent musicians. The Met Chamber Ensemble gave the 2006 premiere of Mr. Carter's *In the Distances of Sleep* with the mezzo-soprano Michelle DeYoung. The score is a compact, rhapsodic 15-minute song cycle in six movements, set to poems by Wallace Stevens. The volatile music eerily evokes the poet's images of aging, autumn, night and wind. . . . [Kate] Lindsey brought her rich voice and technical agility to Mr. Carter's wide-ranging vocal lines. Under Mr. Levine, the ensemble's 27 Met players performed this score as if they owned it. Mr. Carter, just turned 100, continues to work hard this season, attending performances of his pieces, looking fit and gratified. Mr. Levine's substantive program also offered a glowing account of . . . two [Johan] Strauss [Jr.] waltzes in elaborate, slightly mischievous

arrangements by Schoenberg" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 1/12/09].

January 14

New York Philharmonic, conducted by Gustavo Dudamel, in Gustav Mahler's *Symphony No. 5*. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY. "[T]he depth and maturity of [Dudamel's] musical insights came through in an impassioned yet cogent performance of a formidably complex score. The audience . . . leapt to its feet and cheered after the final flourish. There are big chunks of the repertory that this fast-rising conductor has yet to explore. But Mahler's Fifth is already a specialty. He conducted here from memory, conveying utter confidence and mastery for the duration of the 73-minute performance. The challenge in this work, which Mahler composed during the summers of 1901 and 1902, comes in bringing coherence and clarity to a teeming, volatile and multilayered score of five movements organized in three parts. But the architectural structure in the music that Mr. Dudamel revealed was the most striking quality of the performance. He drew maximum expressivity from the orchestra during the halting episodes of the opening funeral-march movement. Yet the rigor of the rhythmic execution and the steady tread he maintained never allowed the music to become grounded. He did not fuss over the thicket of contrapuntal lines in the stormy second movement but kept his attention on the large gestures, the sweep and churning energy of the music, trusting that the excellent Philharmonic players could take care of the details just fine, thank you, which they did. When a mass of orchestral harmony slid from its mooring, it was as if a geological plate had shifted underground. The long, fitful third movement seemed here like a crazy yet cagey apotheosis of a symphonic scherzo. Mr. Dudamel drew a tender, elegant account of the slow movement, the famous *Adagietto*, from the Philharmonic's glowing strings. If some of the bustling Bach-like contrapuntal passages in the *Rondo-Finale* were a little shaky, it hardly mattered for the vigor and clear direction Mr. Dudamel conveyed. During the ovation Mr. Dudamel engaged in his trademark hug-fest with the musicians, who played brilliantly for him. It increasingly seems that the Los Angeles Philharmonic's decision to appoint him music director, starting this fall, was a savvy move" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 1/15/09].

January 15

St. Paul Chamber Orchestra's International Chamber Orchestra Festival: The London Sinfonietta. Music Room, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra Center, St. Paul, MN. "The second half of the program offered three of the ensemble's calling cards, as they were referred to in a preconcert discussion: Pierre Boulez's *Dérive 1*, George Benjamin's *Three Inventions for Chamber Orchestra* and Oliver Knussen's *Two Organa*. These challenging works come polished to a fine sheen because, as Paul Silverthorne, the principal violist, said in the discussion, 'we had the composers standing in front of us, giving us hell when we didn't get it right.' But the program was most moving in its first half, which began with Harrison Birtwistle's *Cortege*, a 2007 reworking of his *Ritual Fragment*, a memorial to Michael Vyner, a beloved Sinfonietta music director, hastily written on his death in 1989. Over a recurring drum roll and a fluid, dissonant texture, the players, uncondoned, take turns offering brief, overlapping solo tributes and interact in ways that seem to probe the mystery of how community and individuality are subsumed in a musical entity. With similar heat, Claire Booth, a soprano, sang Luke Bedford's song cycle *Or Voit Tout en Aventure* (Now Everything Is Uncontrolled), an exploration of artistic disorder (with a refrain to warm Beckmesser's cold heart, 'Indeed, this is not well done!') and, finally, glorious order, in a folksily melodic paean to music ('Because every fine deed of love is learned from you!') [James Oestreich, *The New York Times*, 1/16/09].

Minneapolis Orchestra's Bernstein Festival. Orchestra Hall, Minneapolis, MN. "Three singers with Broadway and other credentials — Christiane Noll, Rachel York and Doug LaBrecque — gave generally persuasive readings of *West Side Story* excerpts . . . But sometimes here, and often in numbers from *On the Town*, *Wonderful Town*, and other works, the mix of Broadway belting, symphonic plushness, lively concert-hall acoustics and amplification proved an ungodly one. Natural and amplified sound operated on different planes, and as usual, both suffered. Well, at least there was a great and

unencumbered *Candide* Overture" [James Oestreich, *The New York Times*, 1/18/09].

New York City Opera's concert performance of Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "[T]his *Antony and Cleopatra* is the company's only presentation of a complete opera this season. Exiled from its home at Lincoln Center, the David H. Koch Theater, which is undergoing extensive renovations, the company opted to punt for a season and start fresh in the fall. . . . [T]he performance . . . was a reminder of what City Opera is capable of. It has been hard for Barber's work, which inaugurated the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center in 1966, to escape its reputation as a dismal failure. Later productions of the score, which Barber revised extensively in 1970, have not really shifted the negative consensus. What a difference it makes to hear the piece performed by an opera conductor who palpably believes in it; skilled orchestra players and choristers itching for something to do; and a strong cast headed by two exciting artists: the soprano Lauren Flanigan as *Cleopatra*, and the baritone Teddy Tahu Rhodes as *Antony*. The fervent and sensitive performance that Mr. Manahan presided over made the best case for this opera that I have encountered. When the Met approached Barber with a commission, he must have felt straitjacketed by the circumstances of the august occasion. The Met wanted something grand to show off its new house, a contemporary work, yes, but with spectacle and lyrical sweep in the manner of, say, [Giuseppe Verdi's] *Aida*. While Barber's neoromantic musical language effectively tapped into the psychological undercurrents of his earlier opera, *Vanessa*, a gothic generational drama, that same language seems inflated, too swashbuckling, when applied to the epic and intricate historical tale of *Antony and Cleopatra*, adapted from the Shakespeare play. Barber's score is rich with restless chromatic harmony, arching melodic outpourings, lush orchestration, percussive flourishes to evoke the conquering Romans, and reedy, harmonically astringent writing to conjure up Egyptian exotica. Yet these very qualities sometimes swamp the central love story with film-scorish excess. By the 1960s, Barber was a conservative voice at a time that Berio, Ligeti, Messiaen and other modernists were ascendant. *Antony and Cleopatra* almost obsequiously adheres to the time-tested conventions of opera, with set-piece arias and choral ensembles of assembled voices who explain what is going on. Still, in recent decades plenty of safely conventional, neoromantic new operas have been produced that showed nothing like the intelligence and ingenuity of this Barber work[!]. . . . In the 1970 version used here, with Franco Zeffirelli's original libretto (adapted from Shakespeare) revised extensively by Gian Carlo Menotti, the cut-down opera lasts just over two hours. It is hard to imagine that the original work has almost another hour of music. But in trimming it, Barber left some dangling strands in the plot and the score. With this performance City Opera continues its tradition of championing overlooked works" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 1/16/08].

January 16

Osmo Vanska conducts the Minneapolis Orchestra in a two-week Leonard Bernstein Festival. Orchestra Hall, Minneapolis, MN. "Undaunted by New York's proprietary claim on Leonard Bernstein or by its recent three-month citywide festival celebrating his 90th birthday, Mr. Vanska and the orchestra have. . . . [a] . . . Bernstein festival of their own Mr. Vanska might seem an unlikely champion of this most American of composers, but he cites Bernstein as a formative influence, through his Young People's Concerts, televised even in Finland; his recordings (one of the first LPs Mr. Vanska heard as a child was a Bernstein account of Brahms's Second Symphony); and his performances at the Helsinki Festival. 'I like his way of taking risks and living big, and giving whatever he did his all,' Mr. Vanska has said. . . . Vanska, with a podium manner that is intensely physical but far more economical than Bernstein's, seemed to have internalized the music and, at times, to be creating it on the spot. In the *Divertimento* for Orchestra, in particular, Mr. Vanska had his dancing shoes on for movements like *Samba* and *Turkey Trot*, and the orchestra responded with verve and humor. The *divertimento*, from 1980, ended the first half of the program, which consisted of later and mostly lighter works. *Slava!*, a splash of Ivesian bombast that Bernstein wrote for the ebullient cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich in 1977, kicked things off in a timely way. Subtitled *A Political Overture*, it includes recorded fragments of American political oratory that seem to herald, among other things, a new presidency. *Halil*, a nocturne for flute and orchestra from 1981 dedicated to an Israeli flutist killed in the Sinai eight years before, provided soberer subject matter and grittier backup harmonies and textures, but its main theme, representing the dead musician, is so sweet that it is hard to take the sentiment entirely seriously. Still, Adam Kuenzel, the orchestra's principal flutist, gave the solo part a lovely, agile turn. For the second half of the program, consisting of works from 1942, Burt Hara, the principal clarinetist,

opened in like fashion, giving a gorgeous account of Bernstein's *Clarinet Sonata* in Sid Ramin's orchestration. And real sobriety followed, in the concluding *Symphony No. 1* ("Jeremiah"). Always more a colorist than a symphonist, Bernstein nevertheless created a powerful statement in the symphony's three movements: *Prophecy*, *Profanation* and *Lamentation*. The mezzo-soprano Susanne Mentzer was an affecting keening presence in the finale, and the orchestra played splendidly, as it invariably does for Mr. Vanska" [James Oestreich, *The New York Times*, 1/18/09].

St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. Ordway Center, St. Paul, MN. "The pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard, one of the orchestra's five artistic partners, as it calls them, conducted Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Kontra-Punkte*, a work that begins with points of musical color that gradually develop into contrapuntal lines, which in turn dissipate as one player after another drops out while seemingly remaining at the ready. 'A little theatrical game,' Mr. Aimard called the piece in introductory remarks from the stage, and the musicians played along subtly: the trumpeter and trombonist, for example, quietly busying themselves with mutes and continuing to turn pages long after they had stopped playing" [James Oestreich, *The New York Times*, 1/16/09].

The St. Paul Chamber Orchestra with the London Sinfonietta and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, in Heiner Goebbels's *Songs of Wars I Have Seen*, conducted by Anu Tali. Ordway Center, St. Paul, MN. "When the Spoleto Festival U.S.A. presented Heiner Goebbels's *Surrogate Cities*, a big bear of a spectacle, in 2000, you had to wonder how much of its extraordinary impact stemmed from the setting. A lot, it seemed. This was the first production to be mounted in the Memminger Auditorium in Charleston, S.C., since it had lost its roof to Hurricane Hugo 11 years before. Fitted out with a new roof but otherwise left largely a ruin awaiting further renovations (which have since taken place), it provided an ideally rough and rugged atmosphere for Mr. Goebbels's sonic blast. But with his *Songs of Wars I Have Seen*, given its American premiere at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts . . . on [January 16 and 17] as the centerpiece of the four-week International Chamber Orchestra Festival being presented by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Mr. Goebbels showed that he can also create magic in a more standard concert hall. He is in some ways the most theatrical of composers, but in this work, as in *Surrogate Cities*, the theater lies more in atmosphere than in action. The new work draws its title and texts from Gertrude Stein's 1945 Paris memoir, *Wars I Have Seen*, and the stage set — distant, dimly lighted and self-contained — consisted of two parts: in the foreground, a living room, with comfortable-looking chairs and lamps, populated by female instrumentalists in variegated clothing, evoking the world of Stein; raised behind, a group of male wind players and percussionists in black dress amid bare light fixtures suggesting the starkness and austerity of wartime. The performers were drawn from two of the festival's four guest orchestras, the London Sinfonietta, which was featured last week, and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, a period band that takes over this weekend. . . . The 'songs,' except for one number sung by a percussionist, are in fact spoken by the instrumentalists, with studied artlessness. Mr. Goebbels's typically voracious settings represent, as one performer said in a preconcert discussion, 'the accretions of centuries.' And civilizations, she might have added. Mr. Goebbels's swashbuckling temperament is well exemplified by his deployment of the period strings in swatches of Matthew Locke's music for Shakespeare's *Tempest*, from 1764, perversely swathed in techno electronics. But the culmination came as Paul Archibald, the Sinfonietta's principal trumpeter, squeezed out haunting microtonal phrases over the unearthly ringing of Tibetan prayer bowls played by the rest of the ensemble. I walked away from *Surrogate Cities* stunned, and have since yearned to hear it again. Instead, and better yet, I heard a different Goebbels monument and again walked away stunned. One hopes that these works will find their way to New York soon" [James Oestreich, *The New York Times*, 1/21/09].

January 17

Robert Ashley's *Celestial Excursions*. La MaMa E.T.C., New York, NY. "Music history is filled with candles that burned bright and fast. Some composers lived too short a life: Mozart and Schubert, Berg and Webern. Others stopped creating after a productive prime, like Rossini and Sibelius. But longevity can have its benefits for those who endure. Think of the extraordinary emotional insight and depth in [late] Verdi . . . or the vibrant spirit and relative approachability in any number of recent works by Elliott Carter. Robert Ashley has come into that company with his three latest operas, which are in rotation at La MaMa E.T.C. in the East Village. His idiom of sung-spoken electronic chamber opera remains as idiosyncratic as ever. But like Verdi in his final operas, Mr. Ashley, 78, has become deeply concerned with evoking recognizable human emotions with these latest works, and like

Mr. Carter, he has proved willing to open doors by slightly softening a formidable style. Thinking in terms of longevity is appropriate when considering *Celestial Excursions*, the second opera in Mr. Ashley's current revival, which was restaged at La MaMa E.T.C. on Saturday night. Created in 2003 at the Hebbel-Theater Berlin and presented at the Kitchen in Chelsea that year, the opera deals with old age and its effects. Marginalization, loneliness, senility and the preservation of dignity are accounted for in a barrage of layered narrative strands and fragments, partly based on conversations Mr. Ashley had with elderly people in Arizona. Mr. Ashley treats his unnamed characters — portrayed by Jacqueline Humbert, Joan La Barbara, Thomas Buckner and Sam Ashley, his son — with respect and affection. At times he is among their number; elsewhere he is an interrogator in an assisted-living center, trying to impose order upon their wayward statements and impulses. Mr. Ashley does not disguise the unwitting humor in what his characters say, but the laughter here is born of recognition. In Mr. Ashley's abstract score, supervised by the sound designer Tom Hamilton, guitar twangs, electric-bass burps and jazzy keyboard figures (improvised by the pianist [Blue] Gene Tyranny) float and ricochet over moody electronic strains. The vocals, though more spoken than sung, frequently allude to the nostalgic strains of old pop songs. For the current revival Mr. Ashley and David Moodey, who designed the lighting and sets, have streamlined the staging of "*Celestial Excursions*" to its benefit. Mr. Ashley and his vocalists still deliver their lines like newsmen seated at tables. But (Blue) Gene Tyranny is no longer part of the scenery. And the performance artist Joan Jonas, whose constant motion in the original production was distracting, appears in isolated interludes during the work's final section. Through intentionally awkward actions and a gaze that shifts from commanding to imploring, she poignantly evokes an effortful cling to corporeality" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 1/19/09].

Andy Warhol's silent screen tests accompanied by live music. Allen Room, New York, NY. "When the aging silent screen legend Norma Desmond boasted, 'We had faces, in Sunset Boulevard, her haughty claim for the superior physiognomy of movie stars before the talkies, she had not reckoned on Andy Warhol. His well-known but seldom-seen screen tests, filmed in the Silver Factory in the mid-1960's, rebooted the mystique of Hollywood's silent era and transposed it to the art world. A baker's dozen of those four-minute black-and-white films, made without sound, were shown accompanied by live music at the Allen Room . . . as part of 13 Most Beautiful, a multimedia program in Lincoln Center's American Songbook series. Filmed by a stationary 16-millimeter camera, these portraits, with their stark light and shadow, are, in a word, mesmerizing. Talk about the tyranny of the image: these screen tests, chosen out of 300 and projected on a large screen overhanging the stage, rendered songs, most of them composed by Dean Wareham and Britta Phillips (alumni of the group Luna), almost incidental. Some themes were instrumental. Others, sung by Mr. Wareham (who played guitars) and Ms. Phillips (bass and keyboards) in chilly, affectless voices, obliquely related to the lives of the subjects, some famous and others not. Outside songs included Bob Dylan's 'I'll Keep It With Mine' for the screen test of a peevish, impatient, rapturously beautiful Nico, for whom Mr. Dylan is rumored to have written it; and the Velvet Underground's 'I'm Not a Young Man Anymore,' for Lou Reed, glowering through sunglasses and consuming a bottle of Coca-Cola, which he displays to the camera like a pitchman. Mr. Wareham and Ms. Phillips, joined by Matt Sumrow on guitars and keyboards and Anthony LaMarca on percussion, bass and guitars, presented themselves as acolytes and spiritual progeny of Mr. Reed (who was in the audience) and Nico. The music unabashedly translated the ominous drone of early Velvet Underground songs like 'I'm Waiting for the Man' and 'Venus in Furs' into a more modern electronic mode reminiscent of Giorgio Moroder's chic torture-chamber disco. The most compelling portraits included Ann Buchanan, expressionless and unblinking as a tear falls from one eye; Edie Sedgwick as a hollow-eyed little girl lost, her baby-doll lips parted in wonderment; Paul America, smirking and chewing gum; and a wide-eyed Jane Holzer gazing blankly into at the camera while brushing her teeth. The most memorable of all was the young, handsome Dennis Hopper in a tweed jacket, musing to himself, his brows knit, as he subtly registers a train of thought and emotion, from anxiety to amusement. Youth and beauty frozen in time: these portraits of people so glamorously mysterious and so alive tell us much about the power of film to mythologize and to evoke what Samuel Johnson called 'the vanity of human wishes.' In today's world of mass commodification of the self, it is a concept that translates into a demand: Make me a star" [Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*, 1/19/09].

January 18

Celebrating Marilyn Horne: a birthday tribute concert, including William Bolcom's *A Song of Praise*. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. The mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne was once asked what she would have done had she been forced to choose a career as either an opera singer or a song recitalist. She answered that she would definitely have chosen a recital career. She could always have sneaked favorite arias onto her programs, she said, but could never have been happy without 'my songs.' . . . Horne long practiced what she now preaches: during her illustrious career, she gave more than 1,300 song recitals. The festive program of more than three hours, hosted by [Frederica] von Stade and the bass Samuel Ramey, featured five rising young singers, all winners of Marilyn Horne Foundation grants, along with a lineup of starry vocal artists who were happy to sing just one selection each to join in the party: the countertenor David Daniels, the soprano Karita Mattila, the baritones Thomas Hampson and Dmitri Hvorostovsky, the bass-baritones Thomas Quasthoff and James Morris, and Mr. Ramey. A young tenor Miss Horne is excited about, Piotr Beczala, was a late addition to the program. But the most performing slots were rightly claimed by mezzos, including Dolores Zediker, Susan Graham, Joyce DiDonato and Ms. von Stade. Though the program came on the foundation's 15th anniversary, its main purpose was to celebrate Miss Horne's 75th birthday on Jan. 16. There were video tributes from artists who could not attend, including Harry Belafonte, Carol Burnett and Joan Sutherland. There were video clips of Miss Horne's performances, videotaped interviews with family members and, in a segment titled "Helmets and Breastplates," a series of photographs of Miss Horne costumed as the male warriors she portrayed in heroic operas by Rossini and Handel, neglected works that her spectacular singing brought to the attention of new audiences. Halfway through the tribute, when *A Song of Praise*, a work for vocal quintet and four-hand piano, with jaunty music by William Bolcom and a hagiographic text by the lyricist Sheldon Harnick, was given its premiere, I began to feel that this festive event was no place for a critic. The piece, a musical pastiche of marches and waltzes with snippets of Rossini, was harmless fun, a sort of musical *This Is Your Life* in seven minutes. But from the opening lines, it was pretty clear that this was no roast: 'Let fanfares resound! / Let banners be unfurled / For the one who has been called / The greatest singer in the world: Marilyn Horne!' Still, there was a compelling reason to put restraint aside in celebrating Miss Horne's birthday. A couple of years ago her many friends and countless fans had reason to fear that she would not be around for her 75th: she was found to have pancreatic cancer. Thanks to early detection and aggressive treatment, she has been cured, Miss Horne reports" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 1/19/09].

January 19

Jay-Z and Young Jeezy. Warner Theater, Washington, DC. "Young Jeezy . . . has a song called *My President Is Black*; Jay-Z added verses of his own: 'My president is black/In fact he's half white/So even in the racist mind/he's half right.' It continued, 'My president is black/but his house is all white'" [John Pareles, *The New York Times*, 1/21/09].

January 20

Inauguration of Barack Obama, including Aretha Franklin's rendition of *My Country 'Tis of Thee*, and John Williams's *Airs and Simple Gifts*. Washington, DC. "Franklin, wearing an outsized, glamorized church-lady hat, sang . . . with the flamboyance of a gospel hymn . . . Political differences offered George W. Bush less of a talent pool; Wayne Newton, the country duo Brooks & Dunn and the Latin pop singer Ricky Martin (who would later turn against Mr. Bush over the Iraq war) performed at his pre-inaugural event. Stars who had shunned the politics of the Bush administration happily flocked to Washington for Mr. Obama's inauguration. . . . While the new president's politics and identity were the overwhelming draws for so many musical celebrants — bringing out countless performances electrified by the moment — he also has a musical ace in the hole: his name. The percussive "Barack" followed by the three open-voweled syllables of "Obama" give him the most singable name in presidential history, and from the National Mall to the inaugural balls, amateurs and stars alike kept finding new ways to chant, sing and shout it" [Jon Pareles, *The New York Times*, 1/21/09]. "It was not precisely lip-synching, but pretty close. The somber, elegiac tones before President Obama's oath of office at the inauguration on Tuesday came from the instruments of Yo-Yo Ma, Itzhak Perlman, and two colleagues. But what the millions on the Mall and watching on television heard was in fact a recording, made two days earlier by the quartet and matched tone for tone by the musicians playing along. The players and the inauguration organizing committee said the arrangement was necessary because of the extreme cold and wind during [the] ceremony. The conditions raised the possibility of

broken piano strings, cracked instruments and wacky intonation minutes before the president's swearing in (which had problems of its own). 'Truly, weather just made it impossible,' Carole Florman, a spokeswoman for the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies, said on Thursday. 'No one's trying to fool anybody. This isn't a matter of Milli Vanilli,' Ms. Florman added, referring to the pop band that was stripped of a 1989 Grammy because the duo did not sing on their album and lip-synched in concerts. Ms. Florman said that the use of a recording was not disclosed beforehand but that the NBC producers handling the television pool were told of its likelihood the day before. The network said it sent a note to pool members saying that the use of recordings in the musical numbers was possible. Inaugural musical performances are routinely recorded ahead of time for just such an eventuality, Ms. Florman said. The Marine Band and choruses, which performed throughout the ceremony, did not use a recording, she said. 'It's not something we would announce, but it's not something we would try to hide,' Ms. Florman said. 'Frankly, it would never have occurred to me to announce it. The fact they were forced to perform to tape because of the weather did not seem relevant, nor would we want to draw attention away from what we believed the news is, that we were having a peaceful transition of power from one administration to the next.' Anthony McGill, a principal clarinetist of the Metropolitan Opera, and the pianist Gabriela Montero joined Mr. Ma and Mr. Perlman in *Air* and *Simple Gifts*, a piece written for the occasion by John Williams. While not all music critics agreed about the quality of the piece, some took note of the frigid circumstances for the performers. And the classical music world was heartened by the prominent place given to its field. Mr. Perlman said the recording, which was made [January 18] at the Marine Barracks in Washington, was used as a last resort. 'It would have been a disaster if we had done it any other way,' he said Thursday in a telephone interview. 'This occasion's got to be perfect. You can't have any slip-ups.' The musicians wore earpieces to hear the playback. Performing along to recordings of oneself is a venerable practice, and it is usually accompanied by a whiff of critical disapproval. Famous practitioners since the Milli Vanilli affair include Ashlee Simpson, caught doing it on Saturday Night Live, and Luciano Pavarotti, discovered lip-synching during a concert in Modena, Italy. More recently, Chinese organizers superimposed the voice of a sweeter-singing little girl on that of a 9-year-old performer featured at the opening ceremony of last summer's Olympic Games. In the case of the inauguration, the musicians argued that the magnitude of the occasion and the harsh weather made the dubbing necessary and that there was no shame in it. 'I really wanted to do something that was absolutely physically and emotionally and, timing-wise, genuine,' Mr. Ma said. 'We also knew we couldn't have any technical or instrumental malfunction on that occasion. A broken string was not an option. It was wicked cold.' Along with admiration for the musicians' yeoman work in the cold, questions had swirled in the classical music world about whether Mr. Ma and Mr. Perlman would use their valuable cello and violin in the subfreezing weather. Both used modern instruments. Mr. Ma said he had considered using a hardy carbon-fiber cello, but rejected the idea to avoid distracting viewers with its unorthodox appearance. 'What we were there for,' he said, 'was to really serve the moment' [Daniel J. Wakin, *The New York Times*, 1/22/09]. 'Ma, in an interview with National Public Radio, said he and Mr. Perlman put soap on their bows, reducing friction and making the notes barely audible. The piano's action was altered so it remained silent, he said. In a separate interview, he said Mr. McGill's clarinet could be heard, while he fingered, bowed and vibrated as normal. 'If we had played on the instruments that we had we would have had a really terrible performance,' Mr. Ma said. The other musicians did not return telephone messages' [Daniel J. Wakin, *The New York Times*, 1/23/09].

Inauguration Day Punk Show: Pink Eye's Fucked Up and Matt Korvette's Pissed Jeans. Market Hotel, New York, NY. "Hey, you know who deserves some credit for Obama becoming your president?" asked . . . Pink Eyes. He is about 310 pounds, bald and bearded, manic and strangely reasonable. 'The rest of the world,' he answered, as if naming a particular dude of integrity. 'America finally gave in to international pressure.' His punk band from Toronto, with an unpublishable name, headlined an Inauguration Day concert . . . at Market Hotel, a do-it-yourself concert loft in Bushwick, Brooklyn. The band is still invested in being a mode of punk resistance: by spraying out singles and cassettes that can't easily be found (aside from its real-deal albums, the last being "The Chemistry of Common Life," on Matador); by spreading weird information about its pseudonymous members; by playing at unregulated spaces that don't take out advertisements in local papers. And, strange as it may sound, by being musical: building an ecosystem of gorgeous guitar harmony and ambient texture inside the gray rhythmic world of stomping eighth-note punk. Collectively, these five men and one woman don't seem particularly goal-oriented. You wouldn't want to call them musically progressive. They're just putting pressure on punk rock, seeing whether they can create transformative energy. Whatever the music is, it's intense and

mystical and optimistic and has gotten very, very good. One of the band's newer songs . . . is Black Albino Bones. It might be about sex, but look closer: it's also about love of vinyl records as artifacts. (Pink Eyes has said he's a devoted collector.) There's a line in it about "the purity of obscurity"; another line dares you to "try to capture the name as it spins in your mind/follow it with your eyes, the dizzy epiphany." Maybe the object of longing doesn't matter: the song is about giving in to compulsion but questioning it too, and the music transmits desire and inspiration. The band projected and enacted these qualities with a great rhythm section, the kind with a noticeable, powerful drummer (Mr. Jo) and an excellent bass player (Mustard Gas), whom you don't notice so much, because she makes the music better with small, strong gestures of phrasing or contrary motion against the melody. Then there are the three guitarists, one more than the band had last year. At the top of that heap was 10,000 Marbles, who plays strong single-note lines, chord harmonies high up on the neck, carefully constructed echo patterns and wah-wah phrases. Focused on his instrument, he seemed to be quietly distributing order amid mountains of noise. The band's hourlong set inspired arcs of flying bodies; before it was another excellent performance by a sludgy and curious punk band with another unpublishable name, this one from Allentown, Pa. Its singer is Matt Korvette, another guy with a lot of room for vinyl in his life. (He runs White Denim, a vinyl-only label.) Unlike the honest, bearish Pink Eyes, Mr. Korvette has created a comic persona: someone with no sense of social cues and a good dancer's physical instinct. He went into a droopy walking trance, dawdled behind an amplifier, ripped his shirt down the middle, tenderly blew on the neck of a teenage boy about to dive from the stage, mimed a basketball shot and threw his microphone violently at the ceiling. A minute into the set he walked over to stage left, thoughtfully stroked the wall, rapped it with a knuckle, then plunged his fist right through it. The music was good — especially the guitarist Bradley Fry — but the theater was better" [Ben Ratliff, *The New York Times*, 9/21/09].

Borodin Quartet in music of their namesake, plus Igor Stravinsky's Concertino and Dmitri Shostakovich's Quartet No. 3. 92nd Street Y, New York, NY. "Venerability in chamber groups is a flexible concept. Some ensembles, like the Guarneri String Quartet and the Beaux Arts Trio, have retired the brand name before the last original player has left the roster. Others, like the Juilliard Quartet, have gradually replaced retiring players and soldiered on, even after the last original member has left. The Borodin Quartet has adopted the Juilliard model. It was formed in 1945, and had a close association with Shostakovich. But its oldest current member joined in 1975, the year Shostakovich died. Two more current players joined in 1996, and the last of the founders retired in 2007. The argument for considering today's Borodin Quartet related to the original is that its older players have passed on their performing traditions to their younger colleagues. That isn't entirely persuasive: interpretive styles and sensibilities change with time, after all, and quartets don't generally offer museumlike re-creations of their old readings. A quartet's sound changes too, as its players do. So where, exactly, is the continuity? Maybe there should be a rule requiring ensembles to change their names once all the original players are gone. But if the Borodin Quartet that played at the 92nd Street Y . . . was not the same group that played for Shostakovich, it closed its program with a stunning performance of that composer's Third Quartet (Op. 73). This work, from 1946, begins with a bouncy innocence and darkens with each movement, descending to mournful desolation in the penultimate Adagio and becoming an enveloping elegy in the finale. The quartet's sound reflected this journey, beginning with a relatively light tone and moving through stages of astringency and intensity. The group began with the Quartet No. 1 in A by its namesake, a graceful score without the kind of baggage that Shostakovich brought to his work, but also without the depth. It didn't matter: by giving it a lush sound, occasional touches of portamento and lavishing attention on its dynamics, particularly in the winding lines of its slow finale, the players made the work hard to resist. Between the Borodin and Shostakovich quartets, Stravinsky's brief Concertino made an almost perfect palate cleanser. Its acerbic opening prefigures that quality in Shostakovich's music, although in Stravinsky it seems more a rhetorical stance than deeply felt expressivity. And in no time it melts into a stretch of rich late Romanticism before Stravinsky remembers himself and ends on a slightly sour chord" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 1/22/09].

January 22

Phyllis Chen in Pianos Big and Small. Thalia Theater, Symphony Space, New York, NY. "Phyllis Chen's piano recital . . . raised the bar for delightful quirkiness matched with interpretive sensitivity. "[S]he [included] three works for toy piano. Or, more accurately, three toy pianos, a set of clock chimes, a CD player, a music box, a frying pan and an egg. The [Leos] Janacek [piece],

an emotionally charged series of reminiscences, let her put a more expansive palette on display: here Ms. Chen moved easily between a graceful, sometimes gauzy introspection and a forcefulness that put Janacek's pain and regret (about the death of his daughter, for example) into high relief. The toy piano pieces were less substantial and certainly flightier . . . but their sheer peculiarity commanded attention. The first was *Exposiciones*, a 2005 work by Adrián Pertout for a microtonal toy piano and a CD with recorded bell tones and a steady, hollow percussive sound. It begins slowly, with rhythmic and melodic allusions to gamelan music, but gradually becomes a swirl of thick-textured chromatic scale figures. Nathan Davis's *Mechanics of Escapement*, commissioned for the occasion by Concert Artists Guild, is an involved exploration of the ringing timbres produced by both the toy piano and a set of bell chimes that Ms. Chen operated by pulling, striking or using a violin bow on them. At its climax it is almost nightmarishly mechanistic, yet that quality quickly evaporates, leaving only simple, slow-moving chimes at the end. Ms. Chen's own *Tale from the Memoirist* (2007) was the oddest and most entertaining of these pieces. In one segment Ms. Chen adds a toy piano descant to the repeating tune of a music box. Another involves heating an electric frying pan and scrambling an egg between keyboard passages. Ms. Chen closed her recital at the grand piano, with Alvin Lucier's *Nothing Is Real*, a deconstruction of the Beatles' *Strawberry Fields Forever*, first played live, then repeated via a recording of the live performance, heard from a small speaker inside a teapot" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 1/23/09].

January 23

The 25th Focus! Festival. Juilliard School, New York, NY. "Is there a 'California music,' to quote the festival's artistic director, Joel Sachs, and 'if so, what is it?' In other words, are there characteristics of contemporary music from that state that could be considered Californian? We have probably been too glib throughout centuries of music history in ascribing national and regional traits to music. Still, the free weeklong festival, "California: A Century of New Music," poses the intriguing question anyway, and why not? The kickoff program on Friday night, with Mr. Sachs conducting the New Juilliard Ensemble, offered five works by Californians, spanning Henry Cowell's *Polyphonica* (1930) to John Adams's *Son of Chamber Symphony* (2007). . . . Perhaps because composers there were inventing the scene from scratch, they felt less beholden to tradition, more open to eclecticism and modernism. Living amid Asian immigrant enclaves gave California composers direct exposure to Eastern musical ways. Also, leading figures of European modernism like Schoenberg and Stravinsky who wound up settling in California profoundly altered the musical landscape. Yet it was still hard to say what, if anything, could be called Californian about the works performed on Friday. It was a great idea to begin with Cowell's five-minute *Polyphonica*, scored for a 16-piece chamber ensemble. In this work Cowell, a fiercely experimental composer, explores the concept of dissonant counterpoint, in which the standard roles of consonance and dissonance are reversed. Rhythmically *Polyphonica* is fairly tame, just an ambling procession of intertwining contrapuntal lines. But when the lines settle into passages of tranquil consonance, the music seems to be itching for something to happen; and when pileups of astringent dissonance occur, the music somehow conveys a feeling that all is well. Pablo Ortiz's *Heat Wave*, composed in 2006 for the New Juilliard Ensemble, is meant to evoke the sensation one feels on entering a swimming pool and moving through patches of water of different temperatures. I'll have to take Mr. Ortiz's word on this. The piece moves in alluring spans of swirling figures, jagged lines and pointillistic outbursts, often prodded forward by ostinatos in the perky piano. But swimming pools did not come to mind. The violinist Emilie-Anne Gendron was the brilliant soloist in Roger Reynolds's *Aspiration*, a work of nearly 30 minutes, completed in 2005. While all composers write pieces that fill dimensions of time and space, Mr. Reynolds has been especially creative regarding space. In this score colorings, textures and harmonies seem to have a spatial dimension: brass chorales give context to fidgety flights in the winds; the violin alternately emits plaintive soliloquies and fitful virtuosic blasts over sustained ominous pedal tones. But for me the piece rambled. I wish Mr. Reynolds had thought a little more about time and a little less about space. Robert Erickson's *Sierra*, an impressionistic work for baritone and chamber ensemble, is steeped in California . . . Jonathan Estabrooks, a robust baritone, gave his all to the solo part. Mr. Adams's *Son of Chamber Symphony* is a nifty, three-movement piece, a teeming rush of rhythmic patterns and short thematic phrases that get bounced around among the instruments. The music should be airborne, but the playing was cautious" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 1/25/09].

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, in the live premiere of John Williams's *Airs and Simple Gifts*, plus Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Pittsburgh, PA.

January 24

Composer Portraits: Leon Kirchner. Miller Theater, Columbia University, New York, NY. "Kirchner turned 90 . . . and he spent the evening . . . hearing a handful of his chamber works . . . [H]is works get high-profile performances, but they are less frequent than their beauty and expressivity warrant. Like George Perle, who died at 93 on Friday, Mr. Kirchner is essentially a Romantic who adopted atonality but rejected the more dogmatic side of serialism. And the performances here shrugged off the music's difficulties and emphasized its shapeliness and warmth. The flutist Paula Robison opened the program with *Flutings for Paula*, an attractive work Mr. Kirchner wrote for her in 1973 and revised in 2006. At times its slow-moving flute line has the kind of sensuality of Debussy's *Syrinx*, but the similarities are fleeting, not least because Mr. Kirchner's score sets the flute against an atmospheric, tactile backdrop of pitched percussion, played deftly by Ayano Kataoka. Though composed nearly a half-century apart, the *Sonata Concertante* (1952) and the *Duo No. 1* (2001), both for violin and piano, share an approach to the same common instrumental combination. In each, the violin line is supple and often soaring, and the piano writing is rhythmically and harmonically thornier. Even so, Corey Cerovsek, the violinist, and Jeremy Denk, the pianist, pointed up the distinctions between the scores. The duo is more rhythmically driven and, for all the sweetness of the violin line, more abstract. The *Sonata Concertante*, by contrast, draws on a current of unalloyed passion and builds to a cathartic conclusion that would have made a 19th-century composer proud and was therefore a bravely retrospective move in 1952. The Claremont Trio contributed a vigorous, polished performance of the best-known work on the program, the dark-hued *Trio* (1954). And the concert ended with the *Concerto for Violin, Cello, 10 Winds, and Percussion* (1960), a kaleidoscopic piece in which the flowing violin and cello lines are set against ensemble writing that begins pointillistically but quickly becomes a solid, unified force engaged in a lively give and take with the soloists. Daniel Phillips, the violinist, and Timothy Eddy, the cellist, played the solo lines with a well-judged combination of lushness and power, and Brad Lubman conducted a taut performance" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 1/25/09].

January 25

Time Regained, Charles Wuorinen's fantasy for piano and orchestra (after Proust), premiered by James Levine and the Met Orchestra, with Peter Serkin. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "Like Proust in this epochal work, Mr. Wuorinen embarks on an exploration of memory, more specifically, in his words, 'music's memory of a part of its past.' It is indeed possible to hear this formidable 30-minute score as an immense edifice of memory. . . . [I]t was also possible to experience the piece as a homage of a brainy modernist to medieval and renaissance composers he reveres: Guillaume de Machaut, Matteo de Perugia, Guillaume Dufay and Orlando Gibbons. For those intimidated by some of Mr. Wuorinen's fiercely complex compositions, this piece gave a glimpse of a contemporary musician in awe of pioneering forebears. The danger in composing a work that blends actual bits of old music into an astringent atonal contemporary language is that you might wind up with some glib pastiche . . . But Mr. Wuorinen avoided this pitfall by drawing on 'only the raw musical data,' as he put it, from the early music sources. He disregarded the original purpose and every other element of the quoted pieces except for the notes. And sometimes the notes in Machaut, Dufay and other composers of those eras -- the weird chords, the passages of ruminative modal counterpoint, the jerky contours of the mingling lines -- can sound quite startling to modern ears. In this hybrid fantasy, fragments of restless Renaissance counterpoint in the piano are filtered through an orchestral haze of modernist cluster chords; medieval melodic lines are stated in the orchestra, then toyed with, distorted and challenged by the feisty piano. In crucial passages the music seems to dwell in some spectral state where elemental diatonic and diffuse atonal harmonies come to terms in a tense standoff. A piano concerto in all but name, *Time Regained* has a virtuosic solo part, full of spiraling flights and leaping chords, and Mr. Serkin, a Wuorinen champion, played it brilliantly. But the overall mood of the piece is reflective and quizzical, qualities captured in this compelling performance" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 1/26/08].

January 26

The Manhattan School of Music's Chamber Sinfonia in the premiere of *A Rush of Wings*, by Robert Sirota, the school's president. Zankel Hall, New York, NY. "In an explanatory note, Mr. Sirota described a recent preoccupation with sensations of flying, saying that the new piece was an

effort to evoke 'the wings of the wind' as cited in several passages from Psalms. Even without that, Mr. Sirota's goal would surely have been evident in the energetic swoops and airy plummets of his seven-minute piece, fashioned with the clean, angular melodies, tart harmonies, lively syncopations and punchy accents of American neoclassicism. Fidgeting strings conveyed a nervy energy under sustained woodwind and brass tones, with glockenspiel, vibraphone and cymbals providing a shimmering patina. As if buffeted by a breeze, the music frequently changed course without losing momentum. An excellent curtain raiser, the music also sounded useful in the best sense: you could imagine it being fitted to a wind symphony or marching band equally well. Kenneth Kiesler, the conductor, led a clean, animated account, with fine contributions from Yoonshin Song, the concertmaster, and the brass and percussion sections" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 1/27/09].

January 29

Focus! Festival, celebrating a century of music in California. Juilliard School, New York, NY. The works performed . . . were all composed in California, but not one of the four composers was born there, and of the three still alive, only one (John Adams) still lives and works there. It could be argued that Lou Harrison, represented by his *Varied Trio* (1987), was distinctively Californian in the sense that he drew on both American and Asian styles. But Harrison's melding of an open-spirited American neo-Romanticism with the rhythms and timbres of gamelan music was *sui generis*: you hear his music as his, not as Californian. And this trio accomplishes its culture-crossing appealingly, with a violin line that sings and occasionally soars over the gracefully repeating and expanding gamelanlike melodies in the piano and percussion. Ingram Marshall's *Fog Tropes* (1982) has California within it. Its basis is a tape work built mostly of sounds recorded on San Francisco Bay, as well as faint vocal music and an Asian bamboo flute. Against this hazy backdrop Mr. Marshall added parts for trumpets, trombones and horns, to be played live. The brasses fit snugly into the virtually static frame of ambient sound. And although they furnish brief, constricted motifs (the muted trumpet figures toward the end, for example), their contribution is mainly textural, with the trombone attacks, in particular, changing the sonic landscape whenever they occur. Andrew Norman, a composer from Michigan who is currently studying at Yale, offered *Gran Turismo* (2004), a work he wrote while a student at the University of Southern California. But his program note suggests that his main influences here were Futurist art, what he calls Italian machismo and the video game that gives the work its title. Whatever it takes: the piece, for eight violins, is pulsing with adrenalin and rich in vigorous bowing effects and antiphonal give-and-take between the players on the left and right sides of the ensemble. The real draw was the concert's closing work, John Adams's *String Quartet* (2008) in its premiere performance. This 30-minute work, Mr. Adams's first full-length quartet without an electronic track, is a stylistically fluid extended fantasy, with the players moving seamlessly through a colorful sequence of episodes. It begins with a touch of Minimalist chugging but moves far afield, with scampering chase figures as well as hushed, introspective moments and solo passages for each player. The St. Lawrence String Quartet played the work with the passionate intensity that has long been its hallmark. The other works were played with energy and polish by students at the Juilliard School, with Joel Sachs, the festival's director, conducting the Norman, and Stilian Kirov conducting the Marshall" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 1/30/09].

Jubilee Trio. Bargemusic, New York, NY. "[The concert] was billed as a commemoration of Lincoln's birthday and the 100th anniversary of the N.A.A.C.P. But this rare New York appearance by the group's three noteworthy Boston musicians -- the contralto Marion Dry, the baritone Robert Honeysucker and the pianist Leslie Amper -- was itself cause for celebration. The racially mixed trio, formed in 1995, is named for a biblical celebration in which slaves were freed, as well as for the 19th-century tradition of black American groups like the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who injected traditional slavery-era songs into the concert repertory. Accordingly, the trio mixed spirituals with art songs by composers like Robert Owens, George Rochberg and Lee Hoiby, grouped by themes of struggle, resolution and, naturally, jubilation. The singers seemed overly decorous at first but soon relaxed into a deeply expressive mode. Mr. Honeysucker deployed his robust, penetrating trombone of a voice with a thrilling passion and precision. Ms. Dry, apart from a few early instances of strain in her highest register, performed with clarity and insight. Each approached spirituals with a dignified eloquence, avoiding both portentous solemnity and trivializing mannerisms. Ms. Amper, an alert, sympathetic accompanist throughout, proved an estimable soloist in Ives's *Alcotts* (from the *Concord Sonata*) and William Grant Still's *Radiant Pinnacle*, a potent mix of impressionist harmonies and perky rhythms. She

mashed chords with her forearms during Henry Cowell's rambunctious *Exultation for Piano*, to the audible delight of those positioned to see her best" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 2/2/09].

January 30

Brooklyn Philharmonic Nuevo Latino Festival. New York, NY. "In *Leyendas: An Andean Walkabout*, Gabriela Lena Frank used orchestral strings to evoke traditional Peruvian instruments and rhythms. Paul Desenne, from Venezuela, alluded to European cultural strands entangled with native roots in his violin concerto *The Two Seasons*, a cheeky mash-up of Vivaldi and Astor Piazzolla. *Noctámbulos*, the Mexican composer Enrico Chapela's piece for his rock trio and orchestra, further attested to a radical fusion of styles and temperaments within contemporary Latin American culture" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 2/2/09].

Ravi Shankar's *Sitar Concerto No. 3*, premiered by his daughter Anoushka and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "Ravi Shankar, the esteemed 88-year-old sitar player and a pioneer in cross-cultural collaborations, wrote two concertos for sitar and Western orchestra earlier in his career. He composed his *Concerto No. 3* for his daughter Anoushka, an innovative sitarist According to the booklet notes, this programmatic concerto, commissioned by Orpheus, evokes the journey of a young girl from lonely childhood to passionate love affair. As is customary in the Indian classical tradition, Ms. Shankar learned it by ear, listening to her father, who is also her teacher, sing ragas that she would then repeat on the sitar. The Welsh conductor David Murphy helped Mr. Shankar notate the score. Rhythmically intricate, the work featured evocative melodies played with soulful elegance by Ms. Shankar, including a striking passage with a tune unfolding languorously over a string drone. Difficult solo passages highlighted her admirable technique. In Indian classical music melody and rhythm are more important than harmony and counterpoint, both crucial elements of Western orchestral music" [Vivien Schweitzer, *The New York Times*, 2/2/09].

January 31

John Adams's *The Death of Klinghoffer*. Juilliard School, New York, NY. There was something about hearing John Adams conduct . . . a concert performance . . . that allowed this searing, mystical and ambitious work to come through without the doctrinaire baggage that has attached to it over the years. . . . The performance, by the Juilliard Opera Center, the Juilliard Orchestra and the Concert Chorale of New York, was attended by Peter Sellars, who directed the original production and was involved in the work from its inception. It concluded Juilliard's 2009 Focus! festival, which explored new music from California over the last century. Somehow the performers here, too young to have been aware of the polemics the opera initially incited, brought unjaded involvement and affecting commitment to their work. It must have been inspiring for the orchestra players to perform this multilayered, complex and elusive score under Mr. Adams's direction. And seeing these real-life, hard-bitten characters portrayed by singers so full of talent and promise brought a humanizing poignancy to the drama: the steadfast baritone Brian Leehuber as the ship's beleaguered captain, who struggles to end the siege peacefully; the youthful baritone Nicholas Pallesen as the paralyzed Klinghoffer, who courageously denounces the terrorists from his wheelchair; the earthy mezzo-soprano Jennifer Hines as Marilyn Klinghoffer, afflicted with cancer yet tirelessly devoted to caring for her husband; and especially the charismatic baritone Kelly Markgraf as Mamoud, the most conflicted of the Palestinian hijackers though a young man steeped in ancient hatreds. The creators have long maintained that *The Death of Klinghoffer* is as much a dramatic oratorio, like a *Bach Passion*, as an opera. Much of the action, including the killing of Klinghoffer, takes place offstage and is reported in conversations between the captain and his crew. Presenting the work in concert emphasized the reflective nature of the opera, which begins with a pair of somber, brooding, agitated choruses, giving voice first to exiled Palestinians, then to exiled Jews. As the Palestinians tell of their suffering, the vocal lines in the chorus are set with elegiac lyricism, rich with melismas that extend the phrases exotically. The orchestra churns quietly yet nervously beneath, as a lacy, restless violin line threads through the music until the last phrases, when the Palestinians vent their anger, and the music erupts with jagged, pummeling, harmonically piercing fury. The choral writing for the exiled Jews is thickly textured, enshrouded with luminous yet pointedly astringent harmonies. One scene seemed especially timely in the face of the roiling Gaza war. Mamoud tells the captain of the brutality his

family has faced, his mother driven away during a raid, his brother decapitated. In poignantly earnest music the captain tells Mamoud, "I think if you could talk like this/Sitting among your enemies/Peace would come." With chilly resignation, Mamoud answers that the day that he and his enemies sit together, each "putting his case" and working toward peace, "That day our hope dies/And I shall die too." Mamoud is a man whose identity is bound up with endless struggle and hatred. People will always react to this opera with strong feelings and partisanship. The creators understand this. They claim no special insights into the issues and the history. But Mr. Adams believes in his core that he and his collaborators have approached the subject as humbled artists, trusting in the elusive powers of music and poetry. . . . With these sympathetic young performers Mr. Adams was able to present it the way he envisioned it, or so it seemed as he took bows during the long ovation" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 2/2/09].

Extremely Hungarian Festival. Zankel Hall, New York, NY. "[This] was a program devoted to Gyorgy Kurtag and Gyorgy Ligeti, Hungary's two best-known postwar composers. A third, Peter Eotvos, himself the subject of a concert on [January 29], conducted the Kurtag-Ligeti program. Mr. Eotvos, leading his UMZE (Uj Magyar Zene Egyesulete, or New Hungarian Music Society) Ensemble, began with Mr. Kurtag's *Messages of the Late R. V. Troussova* (1980), a quirky setting of 21 short poems about romantic loss. Mr. Kurtag's vocal lines closely reflect the emotional edges of the Russian texts (mostly by Rimma Dalos), which barely hold bitterness at arm's length. The music is often jagged, but that thorniness is offset by gliding, hauntingly introspective passages. Natalia Zagorinskaya, the soprano, began with a pale sound that filled out as the texts grew more descriptive and despondent. She also gave an eloquent reading of *Four Poems by Anna Akhmatova* (2008), a premiere. Nearly 30 years after *Messages*, Mr. Kurtag's vocal writing has softened, but his instrumental writing is feistier than ever. Each vocal work included a cimbalom . . . in its scoring, and in *Splinters* (1962, revised 1973), which separated the cycles, the [instrument] had the spotlight to itself. Originally written for guitar, this solo cimbalom suite offers a convincing overview of the instrument's flexibility, showing it both at its most assertive and in delicately balanced counterpoint. Ildiko Vekony gave it an assured, graceful performance. Ligeti, born three years before Mr. Kurtag, lived in an entirely different sound world, one that could be both more dense and more whimsical. His *Melodien* (1971), from the time when he was fascinated with harmonic clusters and close dissonances, begins as a study in slow, inexorable change within a rich sonic haze and becomes a contemplation of stasis, ending with two violins playing a sustained, searing dissonance. Stasis lies at the heart of Ligeti's *Cello Concerto* (1966) as well: in its first movement the solo cellist (Miklos Perenyi) begins with a drone, in which he is joined by members of the ensemble. The line expands gradually, but neither the cello writing nor the ensemble textures reach very far until the more kaleidoscopic second movement. Ligeti's fascination with clusters was far behind him when he wrote *Sippal, Dobbal, Nadihegeduvel* (With Pipes, Drums, Fiddles, 2000), an amusing and unabashedly tonal song cycle that touches on folk styles and is often strikingly beautiful. Katalin Karolyi, a mezzo-soprano, sang (and occasionally growled) it in exactly the right spirit, with vivid support from the Amadinda Percussion Group" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 2/2/09].



Items

[Anthony] McGill, 29, was plucked from the ranks of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, where he is one of two principal clarinetists, by [Yo-Yo] Ma, who was asked to help organize the [inaugural] performance [of John Williams's *Simple Gifts*].

"It's the most wonderful opportunity, obviously, I've ever gotten in my life," Mr. McGill said at a breakfast interview in an Upper West Side cafe near his home a week before the inauguration. "It's just great to be part of something like this, as a person, as an American, as a musician."

He continued, "If my life as a musician is about reaching out to people, being able to communicate music to the world and to people on my small scale — my clarinet playing — this is obviously such a gift."

A month after receiving the invitation, Mr. McGill still seemed a little stunned. "I thought they were going to say, 'Sorry,' " he said. Even when he saw his name on the news release, "I was like, 'That's crazy.' "

Mr. McGill is not a world-famous soloist like [Itzhak] Perlman or Mr. Ma; the Met is only his second job, which he took four years ago after a stint as the associate principal and E flat clarinetist in the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. But he has quietly come to be recognized among colleagues for his sensitive playing and refined musicianship.

Those qualities stood out for Mr. Ma eight years ago, when he and Mr. McGill played [Olivier] Messiaen's *Quatuor Pour la Fin du Temps* (Quartet for the End of Time) in Japan. "I was so struck just by his artistry," Mr. Ma said in a telephone interview. "I thought, 'Oh my gosh, I really want to play with him again.' "

Mr. Ma said he recalled that sentiment when the organizers of the inauguration asked him and Mr. Perlman to put together an ensemble.

He noted that the group consisted of the same instrumentation as the Messiaen piece. The Williams work, however, "will be more like *Quartet for the Next Four Minutes*," he said.

The piece evokes the music of Copland, who is said to be a favorite of Mr. Obama's. "We wanted something that could reference America, the president-elect's fondness for Copland, something that's both uplifting and solemn, that traverses time but is also quintessentially American," Mr. Ma said.

The musicians began rehearsing on Tuesday. They were not just thinking about the notes, but also about how to keep warm during the inauguration. Long underwear and hand warmers were on the agenda.

Mr. McGill is a product of the Merit Music School, a 30-year-old community program established to fill the gap in music education in Chicago schools. He attributes much of his success to that program.

His father is a retired deputy fire commissioner; his mother recently found a new career as an actress after retiring as an art teacher. His older brother, Demarre, now the principal flutist of the San Diego Symphony, was an important influence and role model, he said.

Anthony McGill attended the Whitney M. Young Magnet High School, Michelle Obama's alma mater, and finished high school at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Interlochen, Mich. He moved on to the elite Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia for his bachelor's degree, immediately winning the job in Cincinnati after graduation.

The McGills are among the few principal wind players in a major orchestra who are African-American, a distinction noteworthy in a field with far fewer people of color than other areas of American life.

Mr. McGill said that he recognized and valued the contribution of older African-Americans who integrated American orchestras. After encountering Norman Johns, a member of the Cincinnati cello section who is also African-American, Mr. McGill said, "I looked in Norman's eyes when I walked in, and I could see how proud he was of me." But like other African-American musicians of his generation, he does not wake up every day and think about his role. "If you're a musician, you play music," he said.

After the breakfast interview, Mr. McGill headed to Lincoln Center for a rehearsal with the center's Chamber Music Society. The group plunged into the sextet for piano and winds by Poulenc, to be performed in concert at the Rose Studio in Manhattan later that week.

Mr. McGill played sitting back in his seat. He moved his upper body in sympathy with the angular, jerky rhythms, adding unexpected dynamic inflections and blending or deftly emerging when his part called for it. He watched his colleagues when they had solos, at one point rubbing the floor with his foot to signify praise for a passage by Peter Kolkay, the bassoonist.

Though Mr. McGill did not guide the rehearsal, he did speak out occasionally. He also took some good-natured ribbing about his next gig. Stephen Taylor, the group's oboist, chanted, "You're getting ready for the inauguration!" to a march tempo and told him that once on the inaugural stage, "You have to take requests."

Daniel J. Wakin
The New York Times
1/18/09

Itzhak Perlman arrived in the fall of 2007 for his first rehearsal as conductor of the Westchester Philharmonic, he recognized many of the faces. He had studied with some of the musicians at Juilliard and soloed with other orchestras for which its members perform.

For the concertmaster, Robert Chausow, it was a camp reunion of sorts because as young men, he and Mr. Perlman had studied at Meadowmount School of Music, a summertime boot camp near Lake Champlain for accomplished violinists.

"There was an immediate sense of rapport," Mr. Chausow said of the orchestra's reaction to its new maestro.

The point is that Mr. Perlman's taking the Philharmonic's baton — a move that has injected the orchestra with new life — is not as startling a career move as some have said. Yes, Mr. Perlman, 63, the Heifetz of his generation, who was chosen to perform at the presidential inauguration last week, has decided for at least three seasons to lead a relatively unassuming regional orchestra that does not have a full schedule like that Philharmonic down in Manhattan.

But its 65 players are top-notch musicians who, for various reasons, have chosen a freelance life of hopscotching among groups, and a superstar like Mr. Perlman can feel at home. Mr. Chausow, 58, is a longtime member of the New York City Ballet's orchestra and has played frequently with the New York City Opera. The trumpeter Lowell Hershey plays with the ballet and for 21 years has been in the pit nightly for "Phantom of the Opera," Broadway's longest-running show ever.

Whatever Mr. Perlman's motivation, it's clear from interviews that the players are reveling in their new commander.

"It's a honeymoon, it's a love affair," is how Mr. Chausow put it. "By signing him, the future of the orchestra changed from bleak to bright in a heartbeat."

For one thing, it's far more satisfying to play before a full house, and Mr. Perlman's reputation has helped fill all 1,400 seats at the Performing Arts Center at Purchase College even when he's not there. Those full houses defy an industrywide decline as young people spend more of their time Twittering, friending and texting rather than cultivating the classics. Full houses bring in donations and corporate sponsors — the budget this year is \$1.4 million — while their absence produces a Sisyphean struggle.

"It's hard to raise money, and if you don't have full houses, it's even harder to raise money," Mr. Hershey explains. "Bringing in Itzhak was sort of a Hail Mary pass."

That desperate pass was hurled by Joshua Worby, the orchestra's executive director, after a season of half-empty houses. He serendipitously met Mr. Perlman backstage at a concert that featured Mr. Perlman's students, and with what-the-heck bravado, Mr. Worby e-mailed a proposition.

Teeming audiences also justify the presence of an orchestra less than an hour from Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. After all, the idea that there was a sizable pool of unserved Westchester aficionados was the idea behind the orchestra's founding 26 years ago by Paul Lustig Dunkel. On a shoestring, he built it into a jewel of the suburban cultural landscape — matching his players with top-drawer soloists — but he could not keep audiences, and donors, coming.

Members of the orchestra say Mr. Perlman, known for his emotionally expressive violin bowing, has elevated their playing by making it more expressive: lush for the Romantic warhorses, elegant for the classical ones.

"In a short time, he's been able to change the orchestra's sound," Mr. Chausow said. "Most violinists are taught to play soloistically, to express their personality, not to blend into a homogenized section sound." But with an orchestra, individuality sometimes gets sacrificed in sustaining a harmonious sound. Mr. Perlman, Mr. Chausow said, has managed to let the musicians "play out" while achieving that harmony.

Mr. Perlman confirmed this paradoxical observation in an interview, saying he tried to draw out each player's musical "fingerprint" while blending sounds into a whole.

"Each sound should be a solo sound — that's what makes the difference between an orchestra that sounds good and one that sounds great," he said. "It's a particular attitude that happens that says, 'I am an integral part of the section.' You are part of the whole, but you are not just an add-on."

There are different tales of how Mr. Perlman, who plays the violin as if it were an extension of his arms, has efficiently changed the tone of a symphonic phrase for the better. "Give me a fiddle!" he instructed a violinist, according to one teller, then tucked that violin under his chin and demonstrated a slightly altered fingering to the string section.

A comment sometimes made about Mr. Perlman's conducting is that it is mostly self-taught, but members say technique has not posed a problem.

"Itzhak Perlman does not focus on beating time," Mr. Chausow said. "He's more focused on the gesture of the music and the phrasing, and

he communicates a lot through facial expressions. It's easy to know what he wants by the way he looks at you."

Mr. Perlman modified that observation by emphasizing the mystery of what happens between a conductor and the orchestra, but admitted that he knows "in my head and in my ears" what he wants the orchestra to sound like. His model, he said, is Leonard Bernstein, "who choreographed his feeling about the music — he didn't just beat the time. He showed you his own personal, intimate feeling about the music he was conducting, and that was contagious."

If it's contagious for the audience as well, then the Philharmonic will have more than answered skeptics who wonder why Westchester needs its own orchestra.

Joseph Berger
The New York Times
1/22/09

[S]ince 2004 [Peter Maxwell] Davies, already a knight of the realm, has also borne the venerable title master of the queen's music. As such he is a public figure, and he hasn't let the opportunity slip.

A likable but fiercely principled, combative character whose penetrating gaze can burn through the unwary like a laser beam, he is now a highly visible spokesman for the British music establishment and more: a national scourge of mediocrity and compromise, firing broadsides at the art world for its commercialism and at the government for everything from cultural vacuity to the war in Iraq.

When asked recently what sort of composer he considered himself to be, he said without hesitation: "Troublesome. Not by design but by nature."

But Mr. Davies doesn't just make trouble. He occasionally lands in it, a victim of his own unworldly nature. And right now he is involved in criminal proceedings as the victim of a huge fraud that appears to have been perpetrated on him over 30 years by two people who were his managers, friends and surrogate family.

Speaking candidly about the case, which came to light last May, Mr. Davies called it a blow "as bad as any I've ever had," adding: "They were my family, I thought. And it's the only thing that's ever stopped me writing music. Even with bereavements I've carried on, never missed a deadline. With this, I froze. It took months to get going again."

Full details will not be disclosed until the end of the proceedings, which were adjourned over the holidays. But a previous civil case made it clear that the amount is at least \$725,000 and probably a lot more. Whatever the figure, it makes for a grim start to what should be a year of celebration, for Mr. Davies turns 75 in September.

When significant people reach significant ages there are varying narratives. They might look back on their achievement, God-like, and see it was good. Or they might be in denial, not ready to be grand old personages and admit that the end is near.

With Mr. Davies it's some of both, but with a concern that advancing age brings too many big birthdays too fast. "I spent 18 months being 70," he said, "traveling the world for celebrations and thinking, 'You might as well enjoy this.' Which I did. But I can't take off another 18 months so soon, so I've been telling people to hold fire till I'm 80."

Still, there will be celebrations: a major tribute at the City of London Festival, a concert series in Glasgow and other events around the world. And Mr. Davies will repeatedly be asked to look back over a

crowded creative life and evaluate his achievement — an exercise he generally avoids, he said, because "it amounts to curating your own museum, which doesn't interest me."

Moving on is more important. Asked whether any pieces or periods in his work mean more than others, he said: "It's always what I'm doing at this moment. I'm always right up against it, in my head, and it absorbs me totally, whether it's for the Boston Symphony or the Sanday Fiddle Club on Orkney."

But without being curatorial, can he admit to any shape, any coherence in his huge output, or has it been a random progress?

"Well, I do see a sort of line running through, with shifts and interruptions," he said. "But I've never known what was around the corner and still don't. There was a time in the late '60s when everything exploded, the whole style changed into a kind of expressionism that was perhaps the spirit of the times, but I hadn't expected it. It wasn't planned. It just happened."

Through the process of things simply "happening" you might trace several versions of Mr. Davies in the half-century of his mature work. The first emerges as an arcane musical intellect in the late '50s and early '60s, building scores from number games and fragments of medieval plainsong with an uncompromising rigor that says something about his background as a working-class youth from the back streets of Britain's industrial north.

Rebellious, single-minded, largely self-taught, he is the kind of scholarship boy for whom the stakes are high as he grasps the possibility to escape from his home culture. And like any convert to a new creed, he does it with a determination that turns white-hot (not to say purist) after he wins more scholarships to leave Britain and study with high-minded modernists like Roger Sessions and Milton Babbitt at Princeton.

But then, in the late '60s and early '70s, everything (as he says) explodes. He turns subversive, writing abrasively expressionist music-theater pieces like "Eight Songs for a Mad King," in which a baritone with extended vocal technique rants and howls in the persona of the deranged King George III. A signal statement of the '60s British avant-garde, it is music that sets out to shock. And its raw, essentially urban agenda of extreme emotional states is mirrored in larger works like the orchestral "Worldes Bliss," whose ear-splitting cacophony prompts an audience walkout when it has its premiere at the London Proms concerts in 1969.

Then comes Mr. Davies the classical industry, producing relatively conventional concertos and string quartets by the yard.

Finally there is Mr. Davies the popular communicator, an aspect of his work that has always been present in music for children and amateurs but comes to the fore in orchestral scores like "Orkney Wedding With Sunrise" (a Boston Pops commission), whose accessibility and dramatic use of a solo bagpiper win it the rare status of a contemporary-music crowd pleaser.

Taken at a glance, this simplified career path might suggest the usual trajectory through which young radicals turn into old conservatives. And it certainly looked that way when Mr. Davies agreed to become master of the queen's music, a 10-year job with few specific requirements beyond writing odd pieces for royal occasions but a definite sense of joining the establishment at its heart.

Some composers would not want to carry the baggage. But for Mr. Davies, he said, it was "a chance to communicate to a far larger audience than the usual one of new-music specialists."

“I was interested to see if I could do it without resorting to jingoism,” he added. “It was a challenge. And even at my ripe age, I like challenges. I like being asked to do things I’ve never done before.”

In his first four years in office he produced four Christmas carols for the Chapel Royal, two pieces for the queen’s birthday, a smaller one for Prince Charles’s 60th and a big score for the anniversary of the end of World War II. It’s not a great amount, but it’s enough to be growing into a distinct body of work. He insists that he does not approach these official pieces with a different mind-set from that of his others.

“All my life I’ve written music at someone’s request for specific circumstances, whether it’s a film score for Ken Russell, a symphony for the Philharmonia or a quartet for Wigmore Hall,” he said. “Writing for the queen is no different. And every piece I write makes a statement: I mean it, and it’s me.

“I know people say I wear a lot of different masks. It’s even been said that behind the masks there’s nothing at all, which is naughty. But life brings so many possibilities of expression. I see no reason for not exploring them all — even a birthday piece for Prince Charles — so long as I can do so with integrity.”

So no artistic compromise? No silent turning of the stomach when the queen says, “How about a jolly fanfare for the Order of the Bath investiture next month?”

“She doesn’t say that,” Mr. Davies replied. “But what she did say when we first met, and I can quote her exact words, was: ‘You won’t be expected to do anything you don’t wish to do. Prince Philip and I wish to learn, and we hope you’ll be pleased to write as you feel fit.’ Which is exactly what’s happened. So far I’ve suggested everything I’ve done, and she’s said yes.”

You can’t quite see the queen relishing Mr. Davies’s “Eight Songs” for her loony ancestor. Indeed, you have to wonder whether she sat through performances of any of Mr. Davies’s music before his appointment.

“Probably not,” he said, “but she takes advice. And when she’s come to anything since, she’s been extremely gracious and appreciative. Reciprocally, I’ve kept her in mind as part of my challenge to address listeners who are genuinely interested in music but not specifically in the new. There’s no point writing something the queen or whoever will attend and giving them a rotten time.”

As for his interests in the wider world, Mr. Davies clearly does not consider himself shackled by status and remains as troublesome as ever in berating the British government for its philistinism and its foreign policy. But as he has discovered, public status brings public scrutiny, and the minutiae of his life as a remotely cloistered composer have a habit of making it into print.

One recent example came when he found a dead swan by his Orkney house and decided to cook it, only to have three policemen knock at the door with a warrant to search his refrigerator on the ground that British swans are the personal property of the monarch. As it turned out, he had committed no offense, because the swan was (a) from Canada and (b) dead. But it still made news, not least because, as he said, “I found the whole thing funny and invited the policemen in for some swan terrine, which rather horrified them. That was a mistake, wasn’t it?”

Far more serious is the abiding matter of the fraud, which came to light only after he had repeatedly tried to withdraw money from a cash machine and been told that his account was empty.

For 30 years all his affairs were entrusted to Judith and Michael Arnold, a married couple who not only managed his life but also acted like parents, even though they weren’t much older than Mr. Davies. The close relationship was known to everyone in British musical life. He dedicated scores to them. And all his works were cataloged with J numbers, the J standing for Judy.

But according to the charges, they robbed him blind to feed Mr. Arnold’s gambling addiction. And blind is the word. Asked how this could have happened over such a long period without his knowing, Mr. Davies said that he had given Mr. Arnold power of attorney over his finances, an extreme measure usually associated with physical or mental incapacity. “I didn’t want to be concerned with any of that,” Mr. Davies said. “My life was focused on music, not managing money.”

Having been charged with fraud, the Arnolds cannot comment on the proceedings. But Mr. Davies says that because of the power of attorney, he never knew how much he was earning, and assumed that it was far less than it actually was. He didn’t know that as master of the queen’s music he had a salary; he thought it was an honorary position. Most extraordinary of all, he didn’t realize that his house on Orkney had been mortgaged, an unpleasant surprise outweighing even the discovery that he owed large amounts to the Inland Revenue for unpaid taxes.

Coming to terms with all this was a devastating process, and not just because of the money. As it happens, a recurring theme of Mr. Davies’s work from its earliest days has been betrayal, a subject for which he found musical analogues in the parodies and popular dance tunes that exploded disorientingly into his work through the ’60s and ’70s. Now, he says, he has himself been roundly betrayed.

Once he finally got past it, he set about work with a vengeance. He produced an avalanche of new projects last year, including two big choral pieces, a piano quartet, a string trio, a violin sonata, a cello sonata ... the list runs on. For 2009 he is finishing a second violin concerto for the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra; working on “Kommilitonen!,” a politically engaged opera for students at the Juilliard School; and “thinking hard,” he said, about two separate orchestral scores that he knows will both be symphonies — Nos. 9 and 10 — because “I can hear the harmony and structure even at a distance.”

“No. 8, the last one,” he added, “was more a tone poem than a symphony, but these will be real. And big.”

All of that, he said, is “why I said to hold the celebrations till I’m 80.”

Michael White
The New York Times
1/23/09

Recordings

Georgy Ligeti. *Lux Aeterna*, *Drei Phantasien Nach Friedrich Holderlin*, *Sonata for Solo Viola*. Robert Heppener. Im Gestein. Susanne van Els, violist; musikFabrik; Cappella Amsterdam, conducted by Daniel Reuss. Harmonia Mundi France. "Ligeti's mesmerizing *Lux Aeterna*, from 1966, is a bona fide avant-garde hit, partly because of its exposure in Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. The work wears its years lightly; Ligeti's slowly shifting harmonic clouds and throbbing tone clusters conjure cosmic mystery like little that came before or after. On this richly rewarding CD by the Dutch chamber choir Cappella Amsterdam, Daniel Reuss leads a broadly paced, pristinely voiced rendition, enhanced by an atmospheric yet finely detailed recording. A sense of time-loosed drift also saturates Ligeti's *Drei Phantasien*, a cappella settings of selected lines from three Friedrich Hölderlin poems composed in 1982. But here the music often turns animated, even eruptive, in response to especially potent emotional triggers in the texts. The chaotic passages recall some of Ligeti's more experimental works of the '60s, but the calmer sequences seem to reach back further still, to medieval polyphony and folkloric sources. In the *Sonata for Solo Viola* (1991-94), three of the six movements surround and separate the choral works here; demarcations between the ancient and the postmodern crumble as Ligeti taps fiercely demanding techniques to evoke folksy rusticity. Susanne van Els makes it sound effortless and natural. The Dutch composer Robert Heppener, born in 1925, two years after Ligeti, flourished briefly in the 1950s before he was overshadowed by more experimental composers. Im Gestein, Mr. Heppener's 1992 setting of six Paul Celan poems, applies floating harmonies and luminous textures not unlike Ligeti's to more conventional modes of expression, accompanied with brilliant daubs of instrumental color (performed here by the ensemble musikFabrik). *Libera me*, Domine, a Gregorian plainchant, concludes this unusually thoughtful, compelling collection" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 1/18/09].

The Light That Is Felt: Songs of Charles Ives. Susan Narucki, soprano; Donald Berman, pianist. New World Records. "MOST artists crave the limelight, but Charles Ives often worked in isolation, his day job in insurance providing the financial means to indulge his passion. He wrote nearly 200 songs and published 114 of them privately in 1922, describing their publication as 'a kind of house cleaning.' The painterly details of Ives's songs are vividly conveyed by the bright-voiced Susan Narucki and the pianist Donald Berman on a new disc whose 27 diverse selections (most from H. Wiley Hitchcock's 2004 critical edition) highlight Ives's multiple influences. Those included European Romanticism and religious and secular American tunes, which he meshed with his own inventive, radical harmonies. Like Bartok, Ives used both simple folk melodies and dissonance, sometimes blending them. Gentle, melodic songs are interspersed here with more tumultuous works, demonstrating the wide spectrum of Ives's emotional and musical palette. The spare and evocative *Where the Eagle Cannot See* is followed by the theatrical, astringent intensity of *General William Booth Enters Into Heaven*. The heavy weariness of *Like a Sick Eagle* is aptly conveyed by Ms. Narucki and Mr. Berman, before they plunge into the violent waters of *Swimmers*, whose wildly turbulent piano part underpins a soaring vocal line. The disc opens with the wistful, tonal *Songs My Mother Taught Me* and concludes with the Romantic *Romanzo* (di Central Park). Also included are the pictorial *Tom Sails Away*, with its lively evocations of town and family life, and *The Housatonic at Stockbridge*. Romantic, Brahmsian songs like *Du Bist wie Eine Blume* (You Are Like a Flower), *Feldeinsamkeit* (In Summer Fields) and *Minnelied* (Love Song) reflect Ives's interest in German lieder. His less familiar, moody settings of translations of poems by the medieval Italian poet Folgore da San Gimignano are more

harmonically imaginative" [Vivien Schweitzer, *The New York Times*, 1/18/09].

Tarik O'Regan. *Scattered Rhymes*. Orlando Consort; Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, conducted by Paul Hillier. Harmonia Mundi France. "The technique that pop musicians call sampling — taking bits of one recording and using them as elements in another — is very old news in classical music. In the 16th century, composers created parody Masses built around quotations from popular (and usually secular) songs instead of using plainchant, as earlier composers had done. The British composer Tarik O'Regan stands . . . in *Scattered Rhymes* . . . takes thematic fragments from a famous Mass as the basis of an elaborate setting of Petrarch sonnets and an anonymous 14th-century love song. Mr. O'Regan borrows his themes from the oldest existing polyphonic Mass by a single composer: Machaut's *Messe de Nostre Dame*, composed in the 1360s. Mr. O'Regan's often dense rhythms and counterpoint make it hard to spot the source material within the work's invitingly variegated textures. But he means you to hear it; he suggests performing *Scattered Rhymes* alongside the Machaut, as the Orlando Consort and (in the O'Regan only) the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir do here. The Orlando singers make the juxtaposition less odd by singing the Machaut with a velvety modern tone, a very different sound from what you can hear on the Ensemble Organum's conjectural 1995 recording on Harmonia Mundi, which presents the work in more rough-hewn timbres. As a performance of the Mass, it sounds pleasant but newfangled; as a companion piece for the O'Regan, it works beautifully. Two similar pairings are also included. *Douce Dame Jolie* is first performed in Machaut's version, as a single unaccompanied line, and then in Mr. O'Regan's playful reconfiguration, with the melody sped up, slowed down, harmonized and otherwise toyed with. And a beautiful account of Dufay's *Ave Regina Caelorum* precedes Gavin Bryars's serene, textually quirky *Super Flumina*" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 1/18/09].

Richard Rodgers. *Allegro* (libretto by Oscar Hammerstein). Sony Classics. "The first complete recording of *Allegro*, the unsuccessful 1947 Rodgers and Hammerstein show, fills a gap in the library of Broadway cast recordings. . . . The music looks both backward and forward. If some numbers have the singsong effervescence of early Jerome Kern, the dissonant title song about the frantic pace of city life is avant-garde for its time; there is a singing Greek chorus" [Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*, 2/1/02].

