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Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez Interview

TOM MOORE

Composer Carlos Sanchez- Gutierrez is a native of Mexico, who has been living and working in the United States for the last 20 years. He studied composition at Peabody Conservatory, Yale, and Princeton, and is presently on the faculty at the Eastman School. We spoke by Skype on December 1, 2009 while he was in residence at the Bogliasco Foundation's center in Liguria, Italy.

MOORE: Was there music in your family when you were growing up?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: There was no professional music until my older brother became a songwriter. My father was a music-lover, but never had the opportunity to cultivate his talent. He was given a piano when he was a child, but his parents never arranged for lessons. They were interested in having a wonderful piece of furniture in the living room. That piano eventually made it into my home after tremendous negotiations between my father and his parents. My older brother began taking lessons; and watching him, I was intrigued and interested. I started taking lessons when I was about eight years old, on and off. I was not a very good student. Instead of playing what I was supposed to play, I was more interested in making my own little tunes. My brother then joined a rock band. I followed suit, always thinking that music would just be a hobby. At the time, I was thinking of becoming an architect, which I never became. I was a cartoonist, and was hanging out with a lot of cartoonists, doing things with local newspapers, left-wing publications that I was associated with. This was in Guadalajara in the early 80's. I was playing in rock bands, and it got to the point where I was frustrated because I was taking it seriously and my bandmates weren't. They were there because they wanted to get chicks, and I wasn't getting chicks, so I figured I should be more serious about it. I was going to music school at the same time, and it got to the point where I had to make a decision, whether to move to Mexico City, or to go elsewhere. On a whim I applied to schools in the States, got a grant, and went to Peabody, and the rest I guess is the answer to the next question.

MOORE: What kind of rock-and-roll were you doing in Mexico?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: My kind.

MOORE: Was it in English?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: Mostly instrumental. I never learned how to play Delta blues properly, or any of the rock-and-roll breaks properly. I wasn't into doing covers, or anything like that. My brother was. My brother could grab the guitar and play you every Rolling Stones tune possible, imitate every style from Jeff Beck to you-name-it. I could never do that.

I was always doing my own little silly music, so the bands that I had were all progressive-rock bands, where I would compose and the band would play. That is what contributed to things evolving the way they did. I have always been a composer. At the time, I was doing rock-and-roll. Now I am doing this thing that I am doing, but it's the same. I haven't changed. What I do is emerging from the same source.

MOORE: Let's rewind. Where were you born?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: In Mexico City, but I moved to Guadalajara when I was five.

MOORE: What was the musical environment like in Guadalajara? What was the musical soundscape?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: It depended on who you hung out with. In my case, I grew up in a suburban area of Guadalajara, in a middle-class family. Most of the music my friends and I listened to was American or English music. I had a couple of friends who were well-off and had access to records from the States. They would make pilgrimages to San Francisco or Los Angeles and come back with records of the latest rock stuff -- obscure things, so I had access to more sophisticated music than what the radio was playing. There were a bunch of rock bands in the city as well. There was, of course, a symphony orchestra, which has always been a terrible orchestra, suffering from neglect, and labor problems, lack of funding and all of that. Even now there's almost no chamber music. There was an opera company when I was growing up, that did the usual repertoire. Now it is defunct. Music in Guadalajara was a mix between what you would expect in a kind of suburban environment with the kind of music that a provincial city with a dignified past would have. And of course there was mariachi, but I was not interested in that at all. Being from Mexico City, and the son of immigrants from Spain, we shunned mariachi: "Oh, mariachi, that's not serious music." I was not fond of mariachi, per se. It was just not my thing.

MOORE: How far is it from Guadalajara to Mexico City?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: About five hundred kilometers, a six-hour car ride. It's a city that is mainly a merchant's town -- a distribution point for goods -- and that mercantile mentality permeates everything, including the arts. The music that the city is interested in is music that you can get quickly, that doesn't make you think too much, and from which you can then move on to something else with the same ease that you had originally welcomed it. But the art scene is very rich, actually. There's a tremendous amount going on in the city, and there always has been, but it tends to be rather superficial, really; another reason that it got to a point where I couldn't deal with it anymore.

MOORE: Were you listening to music from Cuba or other parts of Latin America?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: Oh, yes. I was in a group with my brother. We started out singing Nueva Trova Cubana, and a lot of protest songs from Latin America. We actually got into that mainly for political reasons. This was shortly after the events in Chile, and the many other things that happened in Latin America in the late 70's and early 80's. So it was because of our political involvement with the left that we started doing that kind of music. We would sing Violeta Parra, Chilean protest-song writers – not so much Brazilian music. From there we started doing our own music, particularly my brother, who was a songwriter. We would play at all kinds of events sponsored by the Partido Comunista. We were playing in order to be revolutionary artists. That's another area where great disillusionment ensued, by the way.

MOORE: But do you see Mexico as being more politically open and liberal than it was at that time?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: That's a huge question, because on the surface you would imagine so. Now there is a democracy, but it is a democracy that is really not working. We simply switched from one type of government to another without addressing the essential issues which are at the base of why Mexico is in such terrible shape. Add to that the fact that for the last 12 years Mexico has been in the hands of this particular brand of right-wing Catholic politicians. I am not very optimistic about what they think they could do with the country. As far as being more open -- yes, I suppose the society is more open -- there is more room for disagreement. But growing up I never really faced serious repression. I was playing at events that the Communist Party was responsible for, and I was never harassed or in any way repressed. Personally, I never really experienced that. I should say that I have been away from Mexico for 20 years now, so whatever I have to say has to be taken with a grain of salt.

MOORE: Going from Guadalajara to Baltimore, to Peabody, must have been a shock.

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: It was. At the time I didn't even know where Baltimore was, and I didn't know anything about Peabody. What happened was that I got this crazy idea to get a Fulbright, and I did, and once I got it I didn't know what to do with it. The Fulbright people sent my applications to several big-name schools -- Columbia, Penn, Harvard -- and I was rejected by all of them.

MOORE: Where had you studied at the bachelor's level in Mexico?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: In Guadalajara. There was a program in music education, which was the only bachelor's degree in music offered there at the time, with great deficiencies in the program, unfortunately. I went to Peabody, because it was the only institution that would take a chance on me. They figured "we don't have to pay for this guy's tuition," and I had an interesting background, because I had been doing all these different things in music and in the arts. I had been a professional cartoonist, and had been playing in all these bands. They gambled on me, and accepted me into a professional studies program.

I didn't make it into the masters program until the second year. It was all very peculiar. I was supposed to return to Mexico after two years, but things had been going well, and I worked hard, and I decided to go to Yale. I came into contact with Jacob Druckman, and he liked what I was doing, and so he was instrumental in my going to Yale.

MOORE: Please say a little more about Peabody.

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: One of the reasons that I did well at Peabody was because I encountered someone who is not very well-known as a composer, though he should be: Robert Hall Lewis. He was a terrific composer, but a horrible grouch - - nobody liked him. Nobody at Peabody wanted to study with him because he was a difficult man. He liked me, perhaps because I was exotic, and at the time he was interested in Nancarrow, and particularly in Revueltas. As soon as he found that there was this Mexican there, he actually looked for me. I can't say why he was so unusually gentle with me, but it was fantastic. I learned a tremendous amount from him in a very short time. He was a phenomenal mentor. The first thing he said to me was that he liked me because I was Mexican, and I said, "Really? Just because I am Mexican?", and he said "Well, it's because there's this composer, Silvestre Revueltas, who was Mexican, and I very much admire him." I was expecting the standard answer, that he was a great composer, and he said "No, no, no -- what I admire most about him is the fact that he composed himself to death." Revueltas literally, in the last years of his life, worked like a horse, and died of exhaustion. So thanks to Revueltas, I had a way in to this man's otherwise very hard heart. He helped me a lot. In the mean time I was catching up with all these things that I had been supposed to have studied in Mexico, and had covered very poorly, so it was a very intense couple of years at Peabody. Thank God that I landed there and not at one of the big-name universities, because I would have been miserable, and nothing of what has happened for me in the last 20 years would have happened.

MOORE: What contemporary music had you been exposed to in Guadalajara?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: I had been exposed to a lot of it actually, and I will tell you why. There was a library in Guadalajara sponsored by the United States Information Service -- the people who administer the Fulbrights, by the way. I discovered this place that nobody knew about, and which had a tremendous record collection, mostly brand-new records that nobody listened to, a lot of it contemporary music which had been donated to them by New World Records and Composers Recordings, and some European companies as well. I found this treasure, and would go and spend entire afternoons listening to all kinds of bizarre music. Thanks to this, I learned my modernist repertoire really well, became familiar with Nono and Stockhausen, Maderna, Dallapiccola, and then the Americans from Ives to Cowell, and of course George Crumb and John Cage, and so forth. It was thanks to those records. Because I didn't have any scores (I just had the records), I learned the music, I think, in the best possible way.

I truly learned it by ear, and that marked me, made me the kind of listener that I am when it comes to contemporary music. Although I was listening to Nono and Stockhausen at the time, I now think that, as far as I am concerned, all that was necessary, but a necessary evil, nonetheless. I have no interest in Nono and Stockhausen anymore -- none whatsoever.

MOORE: What was the focus of Robert Hall Lewis as a teacher of composition?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: He was trained in Europe, so he had hard-core European ideals. He studied with Boulanger, and made me write a lot of music that was not really music, but exercises. He would give me several exercises every week on counterpoint, as he conceived it, which was obviously a somewhat peculiar type of atonal counterpoint. The idea was that I should learn to control voices in a way that was specific to a piece, or to what the piece was trying to do. His point was that I had all this empirical experience of contemporary music, and had to reconcile that with the craft of writing music. He would say "OK, you have listened to Stockhausen. Now write a piece that lasts for three minutes and which brings everything that you think you know about Stockhausen into focus." He was very generous, because unlike most teachers in America, he would see me more than once a week. I was his only student at the time, so I would do this sort of thing three or four times a week. And I was willing, because I was there, and I was lonely, so I would just write little piece after little piece under his guidance, and that was phenomenal training. A lot of it had to do with imitating styles that he considered imitable -- very important. However, a lot of that music I don't feel close to any more.

MOORE: Please talk a little about Druckman and Yale.

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: It's interesting, because Druckman was completely the opposite. Druckman was the kind of teacher (at least this is my experience) who didn't seem to be teaching you very much, but then, every once in a while, would give you this pearl of wisdom, which in my case, I might not digest until years later. I was actually quite frustrated while I was studying with him, because of that. I had gone there hoping that he would be involved in my development in the way that Lewis had been involved, and Druckman was not like that at all. Not that he was a bad teacher, just that he was not the teacher that I had been expecting. I got a little frustrated, and switched to Martin Bresnick's studio, which was really a turning point for me. Martin made me think about things that I had never really considered. He made me realize that I was focusing too much on issues of orchestration, timbre, and sound, and not enough on the articulation of my ideas. I can give an example which is very typical of my experience with Martin Bresnick. At our first or second lesson, I was showing him a piece that was very pastoral, and he just scratched his head, and said "Carlos, listen to the way you talk, to the way you wave your hands, and move while you talk, to how intense you seem to be verbally. Your music is not at all like that. You are not writing the music that speaks about you -- about who you are."

He really made me think about that, and the following week I came back with a piece that was completely different, and which I think is truly my "opus one," the first work that truly reflects what I can contribute. It was thanks to that simple question -- to what extent does your music reflect who you really are. From that point on my music became very pulse-driven, very angular, full of the type of gestures that I have continued to cultivate.

MOORE: What was the name of the piece?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: Calacas y Palomas, a piece for two pianists.

MOORE: Which has been recorded and released commercially.

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: Yes.

MOORE: If I had to describe your style I would say it was "caffeinated." What dates were you at Yale?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: '89 to '91. I left because I ran out of money, basically, and also because while I was there I met Steven Mackey. I liked him, I liked what he was doing, I felt I needed a change, and I couldn't have stayed at Yale because there was no money. I went to Princeton where there was money. I had been doing a second masters at Yale, which is often the case. Many composers go to Yale who already have a masters, and get a second one there.

MOORE: And you entered the doctoral program at Princeton. When did you arrive there?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: In '91.

MOORE: Perhaps you could say a little about the environment at Princeton. As I look back the fundamental distinction seemed to be between the people who were doing computer music with Paul Lansky, and the people working with Steve. There was a very productive mix, a stew, a brew of people who were there in the 90's.

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: I agree. As you know, it's a very open program, or a very open-ended program, I guess. As a student you do whatever you want. They want you to be productive, and to pursue your interests, and they will support that. At the time there was no specific lesson schedule. I couldn't possibly say that anyone there was my teacher. I worked alone, and if I needed help I would shout, and somebody would come to my rescue, sometimes Peter Westergaard, sometimes Steve. I didn't really study with anyone. I met with them mostly to show them finished pieces, and to get their criticism. What I learned there was to be an independent composer. Facing the world of the lonely composer who is his own judge. It was hard; it was difficult. Not just for me, but many people don't thrive in a place like Princeton precisely for that reason. I had to, because by that time I had a daughter already, and I had to be a professional. That's the way I saw it -- I had to work hard, do what I had to do -- write music, and hope that it would be good.

MOORE: How would you describe what you wanted to do as a composer? What was your focus, your direction?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: I don't think I knew, frankly, and I still don't know. I really don't. It's a trajectory, more than a direction. I think in that sense I haven't changed. I showed up at Princeton, and the only thing I knew was that I had four years of financial support, that I was going to be in a very challenging and at the same time supportive environment, that I could get help if I needed it, and that I needed to write as much music as possible. What I needed, similar to my situation at Peabody and at Yale, was to hear my music played, to experience music that way. I had no conceptual ideas as to what my music should be like. It may seem strange, but it's not more complicated than what I just described about what Bresnick made me realize: that music should be an expression, a gesture that represented myself. In retrospect I could say that who I am means what interests me in life, what interests me in art, and I have gravitated for many years toward the same kinds of things, the same kind of literature, the same kinds of life gestures and life experiences. My trajectory really is one where I observe all these things in the world, and I find ways to place them into this little garden that I am putting together. That's what being a composer consists of for me -- bringing together my experiences, bringing together what attracts my attention, and somehow making it work in the context of a piece of music.

MOORE: Composing is a way of becoming familiar with parts of your self in a more explicit way.

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: Yes, except that I don't want to say that I use composition as a means to self-discovery -- it's just what happens. It is what in retrospect I notice myself doing constantly. And what people tell me that they hear in my music, by the way.

MOORE: Do you feel like you took away anything stylistically or technically from your encounters with Mackey and Lansky?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: Yes, I suppose so. One thing that attracted me to Steve is something that I am sure attracts many people to Steve -- the fact that there is this guy who came out of the gutter like I did, playing in rock bands, and has cultivated himself in a way that shows that it is possible to transform yourself into who you want to be. I played rock-and-roll as a kid as well, and also wanted to be something else. I saw Steve as a sort of role model. I am not sure that that is how it worked out, ultimately, because I think Steve and I are very different people. I know I got from Steve this notion of music being what you do regardless of what style you do it in. If what you happen to have in front of you is an electric guitar, you do that. If you get tired of the electric guitar, then it is entirely possible to switch to writing for symphony orchestras. From Paul, what is so fascinating about his music is that it is so elegant. But it's hard to tell what each of them taught me, really. I met with Peter Westergaard more often than I did with anybody else there, and yet I am not sure I can say what it is that he taught me. I liked his music, and studied it.

MOORE: Westergaard is from a generation earlier, and is perhaps not as well-known.

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: It's very sexy music. One thing I always liked about his music is that it comes from the Princeton tradition, but it is very lyrical, colorful, very elegant, very emotional as well. It's beautiful music.

MOORE: Is there a particular piece from that period that stands out, that marked your trajectory?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: My most important piece from those years is *Son del Corazón*, which I wrote for the *Nouvel Ensemble* from Montreal. It was the longest piece I had written -- over 20 minutes, for a large ensemble -- and I basically put everything into it that I knew I could. Now, when I listen to it, it seems a little bit like that: the kind of piece that a composer that can't have enough would write. It's a bit too eclectic, but I think it is still a pretty cool piece. It's one of the last pieces that I wrote that has no direct association with anything visual, with the visual arts, specifically. After that I began increasingly to write pieces that somehow have a connection with something I see. Often what I see is a work of art. It's just something I have noticed.

MOORE: You mentioned your cartooning. Do you still work visually?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: Unfortunately not.

MOORE: Is that something that you think about going back to, perhaps?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: Maybe, but I don't know if I can. I think I have lost my mojo!

MOORE: Where did you move on to from Princeton?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: When I was finishing at Princeton, I actually got a job in Mexico, and was firmly intent on going back to Mexico. This was in 1994. The job was in the city of Guanajuato, because a friend of mine, who now also teaches at Eastman, Ricardo Zohn-Muldoon, had gone to Mexico and was working there. He convinced the school that they should hire me. They offered me the job, in a small town, Guanajuato, and I was going to go. However, in 1994 there was a horrible financial crisis in Mexico, with devaluation of the peso, so what would have been an already very low salary became almost nothing. I was having coffee one day with Paul Lansky, and told him the news, since I didn't know what to do about it. I was going to go there and starve, and he said "why don't you apply for some jobs in the US?" This was in October, right before the deadlines for applications were coming up, so I very quickly put together applications for jobs in the States, and got a position in San Francisco. I stayed there for eight years, until I went to Eastman.

MOORE: San Francisco is at least a little closer to Mexico....

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: Well, it is and it isn't, you know? It is, geographically, of course, but.

This has been a conflict of mine, ever since I moved to the States. There are at least two kinds of Mexicans that emigrate -- migrant workers, and people like me, who go to school, and get an advanced degree -- and we don't quite mix. There are two different cultures. The Chicano culture, or the culture of what constitutes the great majority of Mexicans living in a place like San Francisco, is one that I have little in common with. I love the same food, and all of that, but culturally I couldn't interact with them that much. They would see me as the upper-crust, pretentious white kid from a suburban area, and I would see them as migrant workers. There is a class thing that is very pervasive, unfortunately. I say this with great trepidation. There will be people who will disagree with this. I specifically know one composer from Mexico who would disagree. She says that it is entirely possible to work with Chicanos, and that I just have to find a way, but I just don't know how to do it. I have never known. This is a long answer to a simple question: geographically yes, but culturally no. And that was strange, that was weird. I read Chicano literature, I look at the art of many Chicano artists, and I don't understand it. It's as foreign to me as something which belongs to a culture I don't know.

MOORE: Now you are in the tundra of New York State....

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: It just snowed this morning (I got a message from a friend).

MOORE: It must be a wonderful place to be working. Who are your fellow composers there?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: There is Ricardo Zohn-Muldoon, "the other Mexican," as I refer to him. Robert Morris is the chair, and has been there for many years, and David Liptak, who has also been there for a while, and Allan Schindler, who does computer music. Ricardo and myself are substantially younger than the other three, and have much shorter tires with the institution than they have. Eastman is a great institution. For me it is the only music school that I can imagine recommending to an aspiring composer, in the sense that it offers exactly what composers need most -- great performances constantly, access to great musicians who are very friendly to us, and very willing to play our music. Very intrepid also. They will just do anything; they are fearless. I think there is too much speculation, too much of this theoretical academic music going on, precisely as a result of a lack of contact with those who will ultimately bring our music into the "real world" through performance, and that is exactly what you get at Eastman.

MOORE: It's important to hear and get feedback from the people you give your scores to. If we could go back a bit, I am interested to hear in what way being Mexican might have an effect on your music. If we think about Eastman, what makes "American" music a concern for Howard Hanson, for example. Is there a quality of *mexicanidad* in your music, in Ricardo's music?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: Yes and no.

Our music reflects who we are, and there are all kinds of things that we are interested in, regardless of where we come from geographically. Of course Ricardo and I, for example, grew up in the same city, listening to similar music, looking at the same architecture and reading the same sort of literature, so I think our music reflects that, rather than the fact that any of that is Mexican. I don't think that amounts to what I would call *mexicanidad*, it is more a reflection of what a generation of composers do and have experienced, sometimes collectively, and often privately. There is a composer with whom both Ricardo and I have worked regularly, Juan Trigos, who comes from quite a different background. He is from Mexico City originally, went to school in Rome, and while I was playing rock-and-roll, he was playing in salsa bands. And yet, perhaps not on the surface, but in the way he works, and the type of musical procedures that he employs, he has a lot in common with both Ricardo and myself. We all have this obsession with music that is driven by a clear pulsation, which, of course, is something that many people associate with Mexican music, but for me it is more Thelonious Monk or the Beatles or Bartok. For Juan, it is a combination of salsa (which is not Mexican), and the fact that for a long time he worked as a keyboard player for Baroque orchestras; he was playing continuo. We can make easy generalizations, often having to do with ethnicity and national origin, and we lose track of the fact that we are all individuals. If anything, what we are trying to do as composers is to be individual, to show that individuality.

MOORE: What are you working on right now?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: I have just finished a piece for percussion ensemble, a couple of days ago. I like it very much, and it is a piece I consider important. It responds to the writings of Italo Calvino, specifically his *Six Memos for the New Millennium*, where he discusses what he considers to be the values that are likely to represent 21st-century literature and art. I am fascinated by his work, and in this case I wrote thinking more consciously about what he had to say about those values, which are velocity, lightness, multiplicity, visibility, and exactness. Those are abstract terms, but I have discovered that they encompass exactly what I have been trying to do with my music. So I decided to write a piece where I consciously address these notions in a way that I felt could only be expressed musically. The piece is called *Memos*. The work is the result of my having been given the Barlow Prize, which entailed a commission to write a piece for three different percussion ensembles: So Percussion, from New York; Kroumata, from Oslo; and Nexus, from Canada. All the groups will perform the piece, but I think the premiere will be done by Nexus.

MOORE: You have a chamber opera in your catalogue.

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: I do, but I don't want it to be performed anymore. It was done once, and it was an interesting experiment, but I don't think I can write opera. I don't think it's in me. There are people who love opera more than I do, people who grew up attending opera performances, which I didn't. When I wrote that opera, I felt like a fake.

Who am I to write a piece of musical drama, when I can count on my fingers the number of performances that I have attended?

MOORE: Or you could connect it to your rock-and-roll with no vocals.... Other projects?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: Right now I am working on a piece for Eighth Blackbird. I am reworking the same material from the percussion piece, though it looks as if it will be quite different actually. That will be done in May 2010 at the Look and Listen Festival in New York, which takes place in art galleries, mostly around Chelsea, which I think is the greatest thing. And then there is a piece for shakuhachi and string quartet. I am writing the music that people ask me to write, basically.

MOORE: Could you expand a little on the connection between the visual inspiration and the musical result?

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: It's always there. I gravitate toward a certain kind of art, of course. I wrote a piece called Ex Machina last year, which consists of eight movements, each written in response to a work of art. Most of the works I am responding to in Ex Machina are pieces of kinetic art. I am writing music that comes out of the emotional experience that I had, or that I think I had, or continue having, when experiencing these works. In some cases the connection between the music and the existing work of art is quite obvious, and in others it may be more personal, and that's fine, because I am not making a musical portrait of the works, I am simply responding to them. The works I chose have in common an element of precariousness, fragility, and emotional depth. I am talking about the work of Arthur Ganson, an artist from Boston, who builds little machines that move and are at the same time works of art.

He describes himself as a cross between an engineer and a choreographer. All of his work is very influenced by Paul Klee -- the lines are very simple and at the same time very detailed. One of the works that I also use for this piece is Paul Klee's Twittering Machine, with little birds, a machine with a crank, and you don't know where the birds end and the machine begins, and it all looks like it is going to fall apart, so it is the drama created by the fragility of the work that drives my response. There is another piece, The Way Things Go, by two Swiss artists, Fischli and Weiss, who built a sort of chain-reaction machine out of trash -- brooms, old mops, ladders, paint cans -- and it works beautifully, but always on the verge of not fulfilling its goal. I think that is something that people find in my music all the time -- there's an element of caffeine-driven energy, and yet the music is always on the verge of coming apart. It's not something I do deliberately, it just happens. Probably a reflection of my life in general: I am a chaotic type of thinker.

MOORE: My son saw the video of The Way Things Go at the Franklin Institute and was fascinated.

SANCHEZ-GUTIERREZ: Another thing that all this has in common -- Calvino, Paul Klee, Arthur Ganson, The Way Things Go -- in addition to the fragility and the depth of detail in an otherwise kind of cartoonish environment, there is a very important thing: they are all very light works, and not in the sense that they are superficial. They are light in the sense that they bring a smile to your face. As you said, your son was mesmerized. I wish my work could be like that. If I have a goal, that is it. My work could be something that a child listens to and responds to immediately that way. That takes an element of elegance, because children are very demanding. Lightness in the sense that it levitates; it's not reality. Something that is above reality, that has that quality that children are very good at perceiving.



Andrew Shapiro, Solo Piano

A.J. CHURCHILL

Andrew Shapiro, Solo Piano. March 21, 2010. The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.

“You can always tell what kind of show’s going on here by looking at the audience,” the production assistant at the Kennedy Center’s Millennium Stage said to me before the concert. I could see a mix of personalities in the crowd of around three hundred: There were business people in suits, teenagers dressed haphazardly, husbands and wives and college students. What sort of music could draw such a diverse crowd?

Moments later, Brooklyn-based composer/pianist Andrew Shapiro walked on stage and sat at the piano. He opened with his most recent piece Jean. The song starts out with jazzy undercurrents but then gives way to lush, unsettling melodic contours we might not expect to hear from a minimalist. Afterwards, Shapiro performed works from his most recent album Numbers, Colors, and People. Notably, he played Gosia, a piece dedicated to a woman he met on a train across Poland. The song starts out heavily, burdened by the dissonant proximity of the two starting notes played in repeated unison. Then, the melody quickly departs into a deep flutter, which is propelled by dangerous-sounding upward half-steps. Shapiro played it with poise and grace, and with a deep understanding of the sensitivity his song demands.

Shapiro’s music bridges classical and popular styles, drawing influence from Philip Glass and the ‘80s British New-Wave band Cocteau Twins. But Shapiro’s music is less repetitive than it is reflective. The feelings are genuine, mostly because the emotions do not sound fake or strained. Shapiro artfully avoids revealing his true intentions in every song so as to leave a lot of room for the listener to have his or her own interpretation.

Shapiro closed with Mint Green, perhaps his most accomplished work. With its descending arpeggios and its sympathetic simplicity, the song grows until its melodic climax, then receding into thick piano textures.

At the end of the concert, it was interesting to hear comments from other people in the audience. “His music needs more of a hook,” said one. Another, a young man sitting next to me, simply stated, “That’s beautiful.” An usher walked by and insisted the man selling CDs bring her a signed copy at the end of the show.

As I left the building, I overheard two older ladies in conversation. “I have not felt so relaxed in months,” said one as she opened the door to leave, two CDs in her left hand.

Note: An archived video of the concert is available online at The Kennedy Center’s website.



Chronicle

January 10

America-Israel Cultural Foundation's 70th-anniversary gala concert, including the Presto from Piano Sonata No. 2 (2000) by Avner Dorman, and music of George Gershwin, sung by Tovah Feldshuh. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY.

January 13

Jimmy Lee Lindsey Jr. (b. Lilbourn, MO), a prolific songwriter who, under the stage name Jay Reatard, was a force in the worlds of punk and garage rock, is found dead in his home, at 29. Memphis, TN. "The Commercial Appeal of Memphis reported that a roommate had found him in bed, and the police have opened an investigation into his death. A spokeswoman for the Shelby County medical examiner in Tennessee said an autopsy had been performed but that a cause of death had not been determined. With a discography of 22 albums and more singles than even he could keep accurate count of, Mr. Lindsey was a creative tornado. And while his aesthetic was deliberately rough -- he favored corrosive blasts of guitar and simple smacks on the drums, usually recorded by Mr. Lindsey alone with the most minimal equipment -- his facility with sweet melodies and his concise, economical songwriting style earned him wide respect among critics and fans. Mr. Lindsey . . . moved with his family to Memphis when he was 8; his precociousness as a teenage noisemaker got the Lindseys ejected from more than one address. "We'd stay three to six months in a place, and they'd make us move 'cause he wouldn't turn that volume down," his father, Jimmy Lindsey, said. "They even said, 'Don't worry about the lease, just go.' " With help from members of the Oblivians, a proudly sloppy veteran Memphis garage-rock band, Mr. Lindsey started his recording career at 15 and released music with numerous bands, including the Reatards, the Lost Sounds, the Bad Times and the Final Solutions. By the mid-2000's he had established a reputation in the rock underground for his songwriting skill and devotion to do-it-yourself production methods, as well as for a sometimes belligerent stage manner. Mr. Lindsey began to reach a wider audience in 2006 with his first solo album, *Blood Visions* (Fat Possum), and in recent years he continued to produce music at a rapid pace. 'Few indie-rockers have ever been on a roll like this,' Spin magazine said in a review of his latest album, *Watch Me Fall*, released in August on Matador Records, a trend-setting independent label in New York. . . . Lindsey's productivity was a source of as much admiration as curiosity in the music press, and he was often asked to explain his compulsion to create so much music so quickly. 'I'm just trying to get the idea out before the inspiration is gone,' he said. 'Everything I do is motivated by the fear of running out of time'" [Ben Sisaro, The New York Times, 1/14/10].

David Gilmore's *Numerology*. Jazz Standard, New York, NY. "With its whiffs of occult practice and brow-furrowed calculation, [Numerology] could apply to Mr. Gilmore's entire body of work.

So far his output consists of a pair of accomplished albums -- *Ritualism* (Kashka), his 2001 debut, and *Unified Presence* (RKM/Koch), from 2006 -- along with *African Continuum*, another commission, never released. Some of this week's shows were recorded for future use; at the end of his first set on Wednesday he had his band repeat a coda, yielding fodder for a digital splice. . . . As a composer Mr. Gilmore has always seemed intent on striking a balance between art and science, and in "Numerology" that tension played out almost constantly. The suite took the shape of two long movements, with each half subdivided, and most actions unfolding in sequence. Melodies took the form of a bob-and-weave unison between Mr. Gilmore's guitar and either saxophone or wordless vocals. Most solos were succinct, potent and hyper-fluent, set against a whitewater roil. It's no mystery why Mr. Gilmore enlists players so adept at polyrhythmic aggression: his music stacks one elaborate system atop another, drawing from African music and many strains of fusion. A stretch in the first movement featured a quintuple pulse overlaid by syncopated triplets; the second half began in free tempo but then lurched in another asymmetrical groove. That led to a long vamp in 21/8 -- parsed, it seemed, into units of seven, five and nine -- over which Mr. Perdomo improvised sure-footedly, followed by Mr. McBride. The band played so forcefully that there was no hint of number crunching. But as in the case of some vintage jazz-rock bands Mr. Gilmore admires, like *Return to Forever*, the suite sometimes threatened to buckle under its own weight. The first true clearing for Mr. Gilmore's crisp guitar playing came about 15 minutes in and felt more like a segue than a solo. But the point of "Numerology" was something else, anyway: cosmic alignments, predictive arrangements or maybe just the information superhighway in his head" [Nate Chinen, The New York Times, 1/14/10].

Continuum presents music of Ursula Mamlok. Merkin Concert Hall, New York, NY. "Mamlok remains an eloquent advocate of the 12-tone technique, though in a modified form that pulls her music toward an almost neo-Romantic warmth. Two short, energetic unaccompanied flute works that Ms. Mamlok wrote as a [Stefan] Wolpe student opened the program . . . and as the earliest of the 11 chamber and solo scores Continuum offered, they helped illuminate her stylistic path. Or part of it, anyway. As presented here, that path began with her immersion in 12-tone music and set aside the milder, more Neo-Classical style she preferred during her first 20 years in New York. In *Arabesque* (1960), Ms. Mamlok fully embraces the angular leaps that have always made 12-tone music seem baffling to listeners who prefer the gentler contours that tonality typically fosters. The flute line, played deftly by Ulla Suokko, is all over the place, with huge leaps from dark-hued low tones to piercing notes at the top of the instrument's range, and with similarly abrupt shifts in dynamics. *Variations* (1961) is more pleasing, not least because it channels the thorniness of *Arabesque* into a traditional form that shows Ms. Mamlok's ingenuity to better effect. A pair of solo piano works performed by Joel Sachs afforded a longer view of Ms. Mamlok's development.

In *Sculpture I* (1964), she is still enamored of the high-contrast bursts that propel *Arabesque*. But in *Love Song of Two Pigeons* (1991), the angles are softened, and Ms. Mamlok's greater concern appears to be the juxtaposition of sound, silence and the atmospheric space a pianist can suggest with judicious use of the sustain pedal. A solo viola work, *From My Garden* (1983), and the *Sonata for Violin and Piano* (1989) move even further from doctrinaire serialism. Stephanie Griffin's rich account of the viola score brought out the lugubrious moodiness in its chordal writing, and the violinist Renée Jolles and Mr. Sachs tempered the spikiness of the violin and piano writing with a performance that focused on the dramatic scampering that keeps the work in motion. And in the program's newest score, *Aphorisms II* (2009), for two clarinets (Charles Neidich and Ayako Oshima), you are so taken with the music's energy, invention and virtuosic give and take that the angularity of Ms. Mamlok's themes barely registers. The program also included a handful of satisfying ensemble scores, including a *Rhapsody* (1989) for clarinet (Moran Katz), viola (Ms. Griffin) and piano (Cheryl Seltzer), which thrives on a careful balance of acerbity and lyricism, and the *String Quartet No. 2* (1998), which, in its most striking moments, sets a pizzicato cello theme against lush, melancholy chordal writing" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 1/14/10].

January 14

New York Philharmonic in John Adams's *The Wound Dresser* and Alban Berg's *Three Pieces for Orchestra*. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY. "Berg's wrenching *Three Orchestral Pieces* (Op. 6) ended the evening. The central work was John Adams's baritone setting of *The Wound-Dresser*, from 1988. The piece uses a fragment from the Walt Whitman poem of that title, which recounts Whitman's work caring for maimed Union soldiers during the Civil War. Thomas Hampson, artist in residence with the Philharmonic, gave a lucid and poignant performance of what came across as a 20-minute monologue. In an astute description of the poem in a program note, Mr. Adams calls it the most intimate, graphic, and profoundly affecting evocation of the act of nursing he knows of, a text "astonishingly free of any kind of hyperbole or amplified emotion," yet filled with imagery "of a precision that could only be attained by one who had been there." Personal associations enhanced Mr. Adams's emotional reaction to the text: memories of friends in San Francisco who were dying of AIDS in the late 1980s, and of his father's slow decline from Alzheimer's disease, attended to by his mother. As the work opens, hazy, piercing string chords hover over sustained bass tones. Soon the chords fall into an inexorably steady pattern, as the baritone intones the opening lines. . . . The orchestra almost doubled in size for the Berg. Here was a gripping, brilliant yet never flashy performance of a landmark expressionistic work, which ends with cataclysmic terror" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 1/15/10].

Cleveland Orchestra in Thomas Adès's *Violin Concerto*. Severance Hall, Cleveland, OH.

January 15

The Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Daniel Barenboim, in Arnold Schoenberg's *Variations for Orchestra* (Op. 31). Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "The variations form makes for a clear structure, which Schoenberg fills with wildly varied and colorful orchestration, surprising twists and even tinges of humor. He also offers a melodic hook beyond the elusive tone rows, a theme historically used to represent and honor Bach (B flat, A, C, B natural, or in German nomenclature, B, A, C, H), stated in the Introduction and developed into a vast fantasy in the Finale" [James R. Oestreich, *The New York Times*, 1/17/10]

January 16

Conrad Cummings's *The Golden Gate* (after Vikram Seth). Rose Studio, New York, NY. "Cummings has fashioned an . . . improbable fusion: lithe melodic lines that flow and entwine in the manner of Monteverdi, peppered with musical references to Henry Mancini and the punk band Black Flag. . . . Cummings [has] his own sly nods: a character growls his distaste for Schoenberg's music in gnarled dissonances; a singles-bar scene romps to the melodic riff from Michael Jackson's *Beat It*. Those cues enrich Mr. Cummings's clear, appealing score without overpowering or derailing it" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 1/17/10].

Death of George Jellinek (b. 12/22/19, Budapest, Hungary), a former music director of the New York radio station WQXR and the host of a weekly program on opera singers and singing that ran on the station for 36 years, at 90. Sleepy Hollow, N.Y. "From 1968 to 1984, Mr. Jellinek was in charge of choosing the music listeners heard throughout the day on WQXR, then owned by The New York Times Company. They also heard him once or twice a week. He had an uncharacteristic voice for a commercial radio station . . . he was a quiet and serious-sounding perfectionist, with more than a hint of a central European accent left over from his Hungarian boyhood. His hourlong weekly program, "The Vocal Scene," ran until 2004 and was syndicated around the country. It allowed him to dip into his encyclopedic knowledge about singers and singing -- and into his own huge record collection. . . . Mr. Jellinek became a frequent panelist on Texaco's *Opera Quiz*, a segment of the Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera. He also produced another syndicated program for WQXR, *First Hearing*, in which a panel of music critics gave on-the-spot reactions to new recordings without knowing who had performed the music they had just heard. . . . [H]e gave up the violin as a teenager after he heard his first Traviata, in Budapest in 1936. It turned him into an 'almost insane operagoer,' he said in 1990. His parents sent him out of the country in 1939, when he was 18, so he could avoid being drafted. At the train station, his father gave him his gold watch. That was the last day he saw his parents, who were later sent to Auschwitz, Ms. Berezin said. Mr. Jellinek made his way to Hamburg, Germany, and then to Havana, where he ran a coffee shop while waiting for a visa to the United States.

On his first day in New York, in 1941, he met Hedy Dicker -- it was her 18th birthday and he was invited to a party by two of her cousins, who had also just arrived from Cuba. She and Mr. Jellinek married the next year. Besides Mrs. Jellinek and their daughter, who lives in South Orleans, Mass., Mr. Jellinek is survived by a granddaughter and a great-granddaughter. Mr. Jellinek was soon drafted into the United States Army. He was eventually sent back to Hungary, where, after V-E Day in May 1945, he identified the Hungarian Nazi leader Ferenc Szalasi for American officers. In New York after the war, Mr. Jellinek worked in export-import trading, but spent so much time at the Merit Music Shop in Midtown Manhattan that the owner hired him as a clerk. He wrote record reviews for Stereo Review and articles for Opera News, and in 1960 published his first book, *Callas: Portrait of a Prima Donna*. He stepped down as music director of WQXR in 1984, but continued his work on The Vocal Scene and First Hearing and was also the host of a Sunday-evening opera program. WQXR is now at 105.9 FM" [James Barron, The New York Times, 1/19/10].

January 30

Pierre Boulez conducts the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in works of Bartok, Dalbavie, and Ravel. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "Boulez seemed a lion in winter on his latest visit . . . and not only because of the bitter cold and wind outside. Once feared as a sharp-tongued advocate for modernist revolution, Mr. Boulez, who turns 85 in March, has mellowed in recent decades, embracing a broader repertory that includes works by composers he once dismissed, like Bruckner and Janacek. For these concerts, part of a monthlong Boulez celebration by the Chicago Symphony, he was content to survey past triumphs, focusing on pieces by composers with whom he has had long associations: Bartok, Ravel, and Stravinsky. To complete the menu, he added a work of his own and the Flute Concerto by Marc-André Dalbavie, a French composer who studied with him. From the opening notes of Ravel's *Tombeau de Couperin* . . . Boulez's vaunted knack for lucid balance and structural clarity was evident. Airy, blithe and affectionate, the music showed off the orchestra's silken string sound and excellent winds, in particular the principal oboist, Eugene Izotov. Another principal, the flutist Mathieu Dufour, was featured in Mr. Dalbavie's single-movement concerto, in its New York premiere. The piece is less a dialogue between soloist and ensemble than a feat of sonic legerdemain. As Mr. Dufour produced rippling gushes of rapid-fire notes, the orchestral parts seemed to ooze out from the tiny spaces amid his torrents. In a slow central section, ghostly contrails shimmered in Mr. Dufour's wake like phantom images trailing a moving object in a slow-motion film. The concerto ended with another kinetic sequence of sprints, vaults and plunges. Despite its evident rigors, the concerto radiated effervescence and charm, earning hearty applause for both Mr. Dufour and Mr. Dalbavie. Bartok's one-act opera, *Bluebeard's Castle*, deals primarily in dialogue and psychological shadings, making it a challenge to stage. As a concert piece it can be a tour de force, as it was in Mr. Boulez's hands . . . Singing the role of Judith, Bluebeard's doomed bride, the mezzo-soprano

Michelle DeYoung underscored the hope and dread in her words with her facial expressions and physical gestures. The bass-baritone Falk Struckmann, a more taciturn stage presence as Bluebeard, expressed volumes through his nuanced singing. Each projected powerfully, and Mr. Boulez ideally captured the score's exquisite shimmers, myriad grotesqueries and fiery climaxes. The orchestra's fabled brass section was unquestionably in its element" [Steve Smith, The New York Times, 2/1/10].

Focus! Festival presents Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land*. Peter Jay Sharp Theater, New York, NY. "Having devoted . . . [the] festival to the to the composers who sought to create a mainstream American style after World War II, the Juilliard School found an ideal finale in Aaron Copland's second opera . . . Of all the composers under examination, Copland has proved by far the most durable. And if *The Tender Land* is hardly his most successful work, it is as close as he came to doing for American opera what he did for homegrown ballet in works like *Appalachian Spring* and *Billy the Kid*. At a glance *The Tender Land* should have been as endearing a piece of Americana as any of Copland's other middle-period works. Set on a farm in the Midwest during the Depression, it touches on themes -- awakening sexuality and adolescent rebellion -- that were current when Copland completed the score, in 1953, and have been evergreens of popular culture ever since. Inspired by the Walker Evans Depression photographs in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the opera revolves around Laurie Moss, who is about to graduate from high school and is aching to escape her family's farm. At her graduation party she falls in love with Martin, one of two migrant harvesters, and plans to leave with him at dawn. But Martin's companion, Top, persuades him that the road is no place for Laurie. When she discovers that they left without her, Laurie decides to leave home on her own. Copland couched the score in the folksy melodies and fluid, sweetly transparent orchestral scoring that had made his American-theme ballets so beloved. That alone should have guaranteed its success. But the opera has had a fraught history. Copland was blacklisted in 1950, and in 1953 his *Lincoln Portrait* was dropped from President Dwight D. Eisenhower's inaugural celebrations after a congressman objected. That spring Copland was called to testify before Senator Joseph R. McCarthy. And though *The Tender Land* had been commissioned for NBC television, when Copland submitted his first version, in 1953, the network rejected it. Picked up by the New York City Opera in 1954, it achieved only middling success. The Juilliard Opera production probably did not win the work many new fans. Copeland Woodruff's staging surrounded the Moss family and the handful of other singing characters with a mostly nonsinging crowd that represented the community. It was a useless distraction. Mr. Woodruff had these extras periodically shift position or make odd gestures, and the principals were sometimes lost among them. Apart from rows of chairs, there was no scenery. The costumes, by Kimberly Glennon, were basic Depression-frumpy for the women and nondescript for the men. Devon Guthrie's portrayal of Laurie was a few shades grimmer than necessary, even given the adolescent angst that drives her character: during her love duet with Martin, she seemed more overwrought than joyful.

That said, Ms. Guthrie's clear, slightly dark-hued soprano suited the music well, and she gave beautifully shaped performances of 'Once I Thought I'd Never Grow' and 'The Sun Is Coming Up.' It could be argued that if Laurie is the work's focus, her mother, Ma Moss, is its emotional center. Copland, after all, gave her the work's closing aria, 'All Thinking's Done,' and described it as the key to the work. Lacey Jo Benter, a mezzo-soprano with a rich, warm tone, sang the role affectingly and had the broadest emotional palette of any of the young singers here. Paul Appleby gave a superbly innocent, lyrical portrayal of Martin. And Nicholas Pallesen, as Top; Matt Boehler, as Grandpa Moss; and Deanna Breiwick, as Laurie's younger sister, Beth, also made solid contributions. David Effron led the orchestra in a gracefully paced account of the score, but though he used Murry Sidlin's reduced chamber orchestration, the ensemble sometimes covered the singers" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 1/31/10].

January 31

Pierre Boulez conducts the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in his *Livre Pour Cordes*, Bela Bartok's *Concerto for Two Pianos, Percussion, and Orchestra*, and Igor Stravinsky's *Firebird*. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "Mr. Boulez has long tended to rethink his works over time. His *Livre Pour Cordes* . . . was created as a string quartet, then fashioned into a two-part work for string orchestra and eventually refined into its present single-movement form. Crepuscular, fitful and dreamy by turns, the piece was a compelling display for the Chicago strings, which maintained a clear, balanced sound even during passages of mounting violence. Bartok was represented again . . . this time by his *Concerto for Two Pianos, Percussion, and Orchestra* . . . with the orchestra used sparingly for emphasis and reinforcement. The bulk of this bristling, imaginative work remains in the hands of its soloists: here, the vibrant pianists Pierre-Laurent Aimard and Tamara Stefanovich and the deft percussionists Cynthia Yeh and Vadim Karpinos, sensitively supported by Mr. Boulez. The program concluded with Stravinsky's *Firebird*, heard in its entirety rather than in one of the more frequently encountered suites. . . . Boulez's muscular conception was fierce and revelatory. Mr. Dufour, Mr. Izotov and David McGill, the principal bassoonist, made eloquent contributions" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 2/1/10].

Prism Quartet. Le Poisson Rouge, New York, NY. "The saxophone, invented by the Belgian-born instrument maker Adolphe Sax around 1840, has seldom achieved prominence in the classical instrumentarium. Master orchestrators like Strauss, Ravel and Rachmaninoff have used it for coloristic purposes, and a number of composers have featured it as a solo instrument. But its chamber repertoire is sorely limited, as Matt Levy found when, as a student at the University of Michigan 25 years ago, he started the Prism Quartet, a classical saxophone ensemble. The group plunged into the core of the repertoire, such as it was: mainly mid-20th-century works by French composers like Pierre Lantier, Jacques Ibert and Alfred Desenclos.

The Michigan music professor and composer William Albright, a mentor for Prism until his death in 1998, was unimpressed. "You guys really sound great," Mr. Levy, the lone remaining original member, quoted Albright, "but you have got to stop playing that French' stuff (though he used an expletive). 'This is not your destiny.'" Prism quickly heeded the advice. It has since commissioned at least 120 works for saxophone quartet, many of them by Americans, and will perform several at its anniversary concert this Sunday at Le Poisson Rouge in Greenwich Village. Prism, the program makes clear, found its footing by exploring a range of music with one unifying credo. It will play only works by composers who think about the saxophone idiomatically. 'We don't want a work that could be a string quartet but written for saxophone,' Mr. Levy said, 'and we have had a few of those. The instrument may be one of the most flexible in range of color. It has potential to be brutal and grotesque and sublimely beautiful. Our own interests capture that spectrum.' The saxophone's wide range of timbre can be heard to fine effect on the five discs Prism has released since 2008. One, recorded with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, features William Bolcom's gregarious *Concerto Grosso* (2000), which reflects pop, blues, bebop and classical influences, and Steven Mackey's *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral* (2005), a saxophone concerto that Prism will play in a version for quartet alone on Sunday. Mr. Mackey found the saxophone a rewarding compositional medium, he said. It has 'the agility of a trumpet or even a clarinet and the power of a trombone,' he added. He weaved contrasting textures into his concerto, ranging from what he described in the liner notes as 'the bellowing hee-haw of a jackass' to the wailing sound of bagpipes. Zachary Shemon, an alto saxophonist and Prism's newest member (since 2007), said, 'We still play for audiences that are surprised when they hear our sound, as they haven't heard saxophones play that way.' On *Antiphony*, a forthcoming disc, Prism and the ensemble *Music From China*, which includes instruments like the pipa and the erhu, commissioned works for Chinese instruments and saxophone quartet from composers including Chen Yi, Zhou Long and Lei Liang, whose hauntingly beautiful and sonically colorful *Yuan* is on [the] program. 'We enjoy crossing over into other ethnicities and styles of music,' said Taimur Sullivan, the baritone saxophone member of Prism, which has also recorded a jazz CD and sometimes performs with jazz musicians. 'The sax is a chameleonlike instrument.' The Poisson Rouge concert will also feature *Jesus Is Coming* by the Dutch composer Jacob TV, who uses Steve Reich-style sampling techniques to juxtapose an infant's babbling with snippets of a street evangelist in Times Square. On its recording of Albright's *Fantasy Études*, which Prism will perform in part . . . the quartet's silky, mournful sound in the choralelike *Harmonium* (*Heiliger Dankgesang*) -- reminiscent of the third movement of Beethoven's *Opus 132 String Quartet* -- recalls remarks by Berlioz, one of the saxophone's first champions. The saxophone, Berlioz thought, is the instrument that most closely resembles the human voice and is 'the finest voice we have' for somber works. Though Sax promoted his creation as an orchestral instrument, unreliable intonation hindered its integration into the orchestra. Apart from such technical problems, Sax's promotion of the instrument was often divisive" [Vivien Schweitzer, *The New York Times*, 1/29/10].

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