

8.1 PLAY PROGRAM NOTES

***Sky Madrigal* (2014)**

Dylan Mattingly (b. 1991)

[World Premiere]

In June of 1924, British mountaineers George Mallory and Sandy Irvine climbed into the sky. Ascending towards the summit of the highest mountain on the planet, they disappeared into a cloud and never came back. The peak of Mount Everest is 29,029 feet above the sea, a height at which the world is more space than earth. The atmosphere is so thin, climbers need the assistance of an oxygen tank just to breathe. When asked what reason there was to go, Mallory, who was the first to try for the peak, stated that the journey was of absolutely “no use,” and that “there is not the slightest prospect of gain whatsoever.”

Sky Madrigal is a piece about perfection. A strange human desire within a world of explosive and untenable beauty, our history is punctuated by bursts of creative perfection. From the fractals of microscopic imaging to the construction of cathedrals, we yearn for underlying patterns and their physical manifestations. After a year spent decoding the beautiful and terrifying rhythmic and intonational patterns of ancient Greek music, followed by a cross-country road trip DJ-ed by Leonin and Perotin, I found myself haunted both by the specters of motets and masses of the late Medieval period, obsessed with the “sounding number” and divine order, as well as the cosmic pull of the mathematics of intonation (from Pythagoras to Ben Johnston). I wrote *Sky Madrigal* as my own secular testament to this world of astral synchronicity. Whatever the randomness and missed connections that occur throughout ordinary time, music has the opportunity to transcend; and as a composer, in some ways I have the opportunity to perfect time —that canvas on which our chaos is splattered.

Sky Madrigal is a celebration of interconnectedness, real and imaginary, and our historical quest for harmony. The title is an allusion to both the ancient Greek synchronicity between our soul and the natural order of the cosmos, and the Medieval devotion to the divine fractals of form. Hence the name is *Sky Madrigal* (a madrigal being the secular Renaissance heir to the religious Medieval forms).

Architecturally, the piece is drawn entirely from its opening chords (structurally as well as thematically), themselves drawn entirely from the overtone series of a single pitch within them. Thus these chords serve as an amplification of the natural harmony within their atoms, and the piece as a whole follows the trajectory of these opening chords along a geological time scale. Spinning outward from the opening, the music coalesces into a centrifugal 52 note melody which climbs continually, sometimes on the surface and sometimes beneath, until the final breath of the piece.

Narratively, the piece tells a story of ascent. Drawn from both the intrigue of George Mallory’s legendary climb and my own

highway constellations, *Sky Madrigal* is a work fashioned from stargazing. Whether or not Mallory made it to the top (evidence is inconclusive), his journey into the sky, like the building of a cathedral and the tuning of a lyre to the laws of the universe, captains our imaginations toward a destination that could only be the result of the bliss, terror, inspiration, and yes—perfection—of a human life. That is the kind of perfection I want to chase.
—Dylan Mattingly

Sky Madrigal was written for the *Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music and Maestra Marin Alsop* for this world premiere performance.

Not recorded

***The Impostor:* Concerto for Banjo (2011)**

Béla Fleck (b. 1958)

[West Coast Premiere]

This program note was originally written for the Nashville Symphony program book.

It wasn’t until 1973, while he was a teenager, that Béla Anton Leoš Fleck received his first banjo, but in less than a decade he had recorded his first solo album, *Crossing the Tracks* (1979) — and was well on his way to reclaiming the instrument for a new era. With a unique combination of virtuosity, imagination, and insatiable curiosity, Fleck has devoted his career to exploring and revealing the hidden potential of the banjo. The iconic style of Earl Scruggs, to whom Fleck’s Banjo Concerto is dedicated, was a formative influence, yet one that Fleck characteristically fuses with those of jazz legends Chick Corea and Charlie Parker. In this concerto, we also hear the stimulus of voices from classical tradition — particularly Bach and Beethoven — filtered through a new perspective. Fleck’s innovative approach extends across an astounding spectrum of achievements, from his early work in progressive bluegrass with the New Grass Revival (which led him to settle in Nashville three decades ago) to the “blu-bop” blend of jazz and bluegrass he continues to pioneer with his group, Béla Fleck and the Flecktones.

The African origins of the banjo have provided yet another area of exploration for Fleck in recent years, leading to such world music collaborations as the recording sessions *Throw Down Your Heart* in 2009.

On a parallel track, Fleck continues to enrich the expressive language of the banjo by forging unprecedented connections with the realm of classical music—a world introduced to him during childhood by his stepfather, a cellist. Fleck, in fact, was named after no fewer than three great composers—Béla Bartók, Anton(in) Dvořák, and Leoš Janáček—making the classical past

continued...

8.1 PLAY PROGRAM NOTES

literally part of his identity. He credits Edgar Meyer, the bassist with whom he has collaborated on numerous projects since the early 1980s, with reawakening his mature interest in classical music. Meyer also helped instill in him the desire to undertake a classically based composition of his own, following two previous collaborative efforts. The Concerto for Banjo marks a significant new departure for Fleck, which he describes as “a liberating experience for my efforts as a composer, and hopefully the banjo as well.”

No familiar models for such a piece exist. Fleck mentions just three previous examples, which include a concerto written for Pete Seeger in the 1960s, one by Swiss banjo player Jens Kruger, and a farcical send-up by the parodist P.D.Q. Bach. With his own Banjo Concerto, Fleck has crafted a large scale composition requiring intricate organization, and he has taken on his first experience of writing for a hefty orchestra.

The challenge, he recalls, led him to evoke “different sounds on my banjo than I was used to doing.” Fleck observes that, unlike a traditional string concerto, where the solo instrument is already mirrored in the larger ensemble, the banjo possesses “a voice that is not present in the orchestra” and which is resonant enough to play effectively with it. The specific instrument for which Fleck wrote his concerto is a vintage 1937 Gibson Mastertone banjo made of mahogany—a prized possession he calls the “holy grail” of banjos, much as a violinist might treasure an instrument made in the workshops of Stradivarius.

During initial rehearsals with the Nashville Symphony, Fleck recalls conductor Guerrero observing that “the banjo doesn’t sound like a banjo at the beginning” but becomes emphatically banjo-like by the end. The remark shed light on a scenario that runs through the three-movement score, though Fleck points out that this was the creative work of his “subconscious” rather than a deliberate plan: “The banjo is the hero in this play and is trying to avoid the truth of who he is, but in the end cannot avoid it.” Fleck notes that the musical arc could be likened to the pattern by which, “when you’re young, you try every possible idea, but as you become wiser, sometimes the obvious is not such a terrible thing. So in the first movement, especially with its solo cadenzas, the banjo is at its most ‘classical,’ even though I wasn’t trying to emulate any particular composer. But you can hear an evolution in my own writing of the piece as it goes on. As it continues, I become more comfortable with the idea that this can be whatever I want it to be, and it ends by returning to my roots in bluegrass and Earl Scruggs.” At the same time, to establish this identity, Fleck had to make the ending sound like the inevitable outcome of the preceding music rather than an arbitrary change of tack. “I needed to make the concluding section, where I rip into this style, reflect the sound of the banjo as a bluegrass instrument, while also combining it with the orchestra.”

—Thomas May

The Impostor was commissioned by the Nashville Symphony and was premiered on September 22, 2011 at Schermerhorn Symphony Center in Nashville, TN, conducted by Giancarlo Guerrero, with the composer as soloist. It is dedicated to legendary bluegrass player Earl Scruggs.

Recommended Recording: Nashville Symphony conducted by Giancarlo Guerrero.
Decca B00D8H3Q62

Play (2013, rev. 2014)

Andrew Norman (b. 1979)

[West Coast Premiere]

I am fascinated by how instruments are played, and how the physical act of playing an instrument becomes potent theatrical material when we foreground it on stage at an orchestra concert. I’m also fascinated by how the orchestra, as a meta-instrument, is played, how its many moving parts and people can play with or against or apart from one another.

While the world “play” certainly connotes fun and whimsy and a child-like exuberance, it can also hint at a darker side of interpersonal relationships, at manipulation, control, deceit, and the many forms of master-to-puppet dynamics one could possibly extrapolate from the composer-conductor-orchestra-audience chain of communication.

Much of this piece is concerned with who is playing whom. The percussionists, for instance, spend a lot of their time and energy “playing” the rest of the orchestra (just as they themselves are “played” by the conductor, who in turn is “played” by the score). Specific percussion instruments act as triggers, turning on and off various players, making them (sometimes in a spirit of jest, sometimes not) play louder or softer, forwards or backwards, faster or slower. They cause the music to rewind and retry things, to jump back and forth in its own narrative structure, and to change channels entirely, all with an eye and ear toward finding a way out of the labyrinth and on to some higher level.

—Andrew Norman

Play was commissioned by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project as part of Andrew Norman’s New Music USA/League of American Orchestras “Music Alive” residency. It was premiered on May 17, 2013, at Jordan Hall in Boston, MA, *conducted by Gil Rose.*

Not recorded