

**Quanta (2012)****Sebastian Currier** (b. 1959)

[United States Premiere]

When I first came to China with a group of my colleagues, I was often asked, “how is China different from the United States?” Implicit in the question is that it is indeed very different, and of course in many ways it is. But touching down in Beijing from New York, one cannot help but note the many similarities. Sure, when one visits the treasures of the past, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, one encounters difference. But that is to travel far back in time. The more modern the context the more similar we seem. The grid structure, the materials used for roads, the design of traffic lights, the more modern architectural structures—all have close parallels not only in the United States, but in most modern cities. But there was one thing, totally ubiquitous, that did remind me at every turn of my head. That was the written Chinese language: a testament not only to a divergent past, but a different present. To a westerner, one is immediately struck both by its aesthetic beauty and its total incomprehensibility. The piece I wrote, *Quanta*, starts from this perspective.

*Quanta* creates a sonic analog to a series of Chinese characters, but from an outsider’s point of view: that is, they exhibit energy, gesture, form, and emotion, but not meaning per se. Nearly the entire piece consists of a series of short fragments, each separated by a rest—fragments are two measures long, the rest is one measure. Thus, in my mind, it simulates the graphic structure of a Chinese text, but in sound rather than image. In doing this I wanted to create a dialogue between my world and theirs. I am fascinated by the Chinese language and like to look at it without comprehending it, but feel drawn to it. I hope that you will listen to my piece in the same spirit. As we traveled around China on our wonderful trip orchestrated by the National Centre for the Performing Arts (Beijing)—driving through stunningly beautiful rice-growing regions, boating down the Li River, walking through the electrified streets of Shanghai, seeing the awesome view from the Great Wall—as time went on, I would start to recognize certain characters and felt that the slow process of decoding had started. I wanted my piece to parallel this process. As one listens it first seems like a series of (hopefully pleasing) random gestures, but as time goes on, one starts to recognize some of them and the piece starts to take on a larger, less fragmented form.

—Sebastian Currier

*Quanta* was commissioned by China’s National Centre for the Performing Arts for the “Composing China” project. It was premiered on March 17, 2013, in Beijing with the National Centre for the Performing Arts Orchestra, conducted by Kristjan Jarvi.

Not recorded

**The Color Yellow:  
Concerto for Sheng (2007)****Huang Ruo** (b. 1976)

[West Coast Premiere]

*Sheng*, the Chinese mouth organ and a thousand-year-old traditional instrument, is often referred to as the ancestor of the Western organ. The modern *Sheng* contains 37 bamboo pipes ranging from the pitch G below middle C, up to the G above the treble clef—four complete octaves with every chromatic pitch in between.

Creating a concerto for a Western orchestra with a Chinese solo instrument is not an easy task. My challenge is to mix these very different instruments from both the Eastern and Western worlds into one united whole, as they not only sound quite different, but also tune differently. One of my solutions is to “de-tune” the Eastern and Western instruments, using sounds between pitches, then melting them into a big pot to create a common ground for each to express its own character and identity freely.

The title of my Concerto for Sheng and Chamber Orchestra is *The Color Yellow*. In Chinese, 玄黃. 玄黃 means a gate, with something hidden inside, and many paths that could lead to an entirely different journey. However, one could only take on such a journey by passing through the same entrance. The very same gate, in this concerto, is the *Sheng*. The solo *Sheng* not only guides the orchestra, but also the listeners, as it goes through its various stages and worlds. Yellow is the color of skin, yellow is the Yellow Earth, the Yellow River, and the Yellow Mountain. *The Color Yellow* is a work that echoes the past, spells the present, and foresees the future.

—Huang Ruo

*The Color Yellow* was premiered on Friday, March 14, 2008, at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall in Albany, NY with Wu Wei and the Albany Symphony, conducted by David Alan Miller. The work was written for Wu Wei.

Not recorded

**Blow It Up, Start Again****(2011)****Jonathan Newman** (b. 1972)

If the system isn’t working anymore, then do what Guy Fawkes tried and go anarchist: blow it all up, and start again.

—Jonathan Newman

*Blow It Up, Start Again* was commissioned by the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras and premiered on May 13, 2012, at Chicago Symphony Center, conducted by Allen Tinkham.

Not recorded

**Chroma (2007)****Joby Talbot** (b. 1971)

*Chroma* is a suite of seven short pieces of music that I assembled at the request of choreographer Wayne McGregor for his Olivier Award-winning 2006 ballet of the same name. I had met Wayne in spring of that year, and he told me that he had heard a recent orchestral piece of mine—*Hovercraft*—that he was keen to choreograph for his first work as resident choreographer of The Royal Ballet in London. He asked if I had any other music that might work well alongside it, and outlined his vision for a 25-minute piece consisting of alternating sections of darkness and light.

For the “light” sections I suggested three of the miniatures I’d written for my album *Once Around The Sun: Cloudpark, A Yellow Disc Rising From The Sea, and Transit Of Venus*. Originally scored for a handful of players, I reworked these chamber pieces to match the full symphonic sound of *Hovercraft*, using gongs, tuned percussion, and solo strings to try to create a sense of empty space and effortless stillness.

For the “dark” sections Wayne wanted something completely contrasting. At one point there had been talk of playing loud rock music through the speakers of the Royal Opera House while the orchestra took a break, but, by happy coincidence, I was just finishing off a project of my own which I thought might fit the bill. I played Wayne some of the unfinished mixes from *Aluminium*—an album of orchestral re-imaginings of songs by the Detroit-based two-piece rock band, The White Stripes—that I had been working on, and he chose three tracks: the (almost) title track *Aluminium*, *The Hardest Button To Button*, and *Blue Orchid*.

*Aluminium* was the idea of Richard Russell, boss of the hugely successful independent

record label, XL Recordings, that numbers The White Stripes amongst the artists they put out. A recent convert to classical music, Richard had been listening to The Andrew Oldham Orchestra's extraordinary 1966 album, *The Rolling Stones Songbook*, and was wondering why the practice of recording orchestral versions of contemporary rock music seemed to have gone out of fashion since its 1960's heyday (or at least had mostly become the province of kitschy, tongue-in-cheek, pastiche). The White Stripes were a band of legendary asceticism, with songs stripped back to a bare minimum of voice, drums, and electric guitar (even the color palette of their artwork and live shows was restricted to three shades: red, black, and white), and would seem an odd choice for a classical album. But our plan—

which we realized with the help of my long-time friend and collaborator, conductor and arranger, Christopher Austin—was to use the orchestra to try to capture, and indeed enhance, the raw intensity of the original songs.

Since its premiere, *Chroma* has been revived several times at Covent Garden, toured internationally by The Royal Ballet, and subsequently taken up as a repertory piece by other companies worldwide, but the music has never been played in its entirety in concert before now. I can think of no better place for that to happen than at the wonderful Cabrillo Festival at the hands of Maestra Alsop, and only wish that I could be there to hear for myself what I'm sure will be a thrilling performance.

—Joby Talbot

*Chroma* was premiered on November 17, 2006, by The Royal Ballet and Royal Opera House Covent Garden Orchestra in London, conducted by Daniel Capps, with choreography by Wayne McGregor.

*Recommended Video Recording:* Wayne McGregor: Three Ballets: *Chroma, Infra, Limen*. Royal Ballet and Royal Opera House Covent Garden Orchestra, conducted by Daniel Capps.