

CABRILLO FESTIVAL *Program Notes: Courage & Connection*

Scherzo Crypto (2014)

Alexander Miller (b. 1968)

Scherzo Crypto fuses two great loves of my life: orchestral virtuosity and brain-twisting puzzles. When the San Antonio Symphony commissioned a new work from me for their 75th anniversary season, I decided to compose a musical meta-puzzle: a piece with an answer that could be solved by adventurous listeners. The only hint I will give is that the answer is the name of a musical instrument. This hidden instrument is somehow woven into the sound, continually appearing and disappearing. What is it? To date, six people have solved it.

To depict the excitement and occasional panic of intense puzzle solving while a clock ticks down to zero, the instrumental parts are wildly virtuosic, with a particular emphasis on strings and percussion. The form is A-B-A with a coda. The opening material is vigorously rhythmic with violins, violas and cello playing the same melodic shapes in strict unison or octaves. The woodwinds follow the contours of the string scales while the brass and percussion interject short bursts of discord. The middle section begins meditatively with a murmuring pulse in the celesta and vibraphone. Low woodwinds and low brass engage in conversation, with short melodic fragments traded back and forth. Just as the mood lightens and more instruments join the puzzle-solving party, the timpani barges in and orders everyone back to square one. After the panicky opening material is revisited in condensed form, a final, brassy coda shouts out the puzzle's answer in a manner less veiled than earlier in the piece. A solo tambourine jangles, representing the "aha!" light bulb above a solver's head. The rest of the orchestra then joins in on a fast accelerando that leaves everyone tumbling into the final bars.

—Alexander Miller

Scherzo Crypto was commissioned by the San Antonio Symphony for their 75th anniversary season. It was premiered at the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts on November 14, 2014, by the San Antonio Symphony, conducted by Teddy Abrams.

Not recorded

Violin Concerto (2008)

Jennifer Higdon (b. 1962)

[West Coast Premiere]

I believe that one of the most rewarding aspects of life is exploring and discovering the magic and mysteries held within our universe. For a composer this thrill often takes place in the writing of a concerto—it is the exploration of an instrument's world, a journey of the imagination, confronting and stretching an instrument's limits, and discovering a particular performer's gifts.

The first movement of this concerto, which was originally written for the violinist Hilary Hahn, and is now played here by Justin Bruns, carries a somewhat enigmatic title of "1726." This number represents an important aspect of this concerto, for both the composer and soloist. 1726 happens to be the street address of the Curtis Institute of Music, where I first met Hilary Hahn as a student in my 20th Century Music class. As Curtis was also a primary training ground for me as a young composer, it seemed an appropriate tribute. To tie into this title, I make extensive use of the intervals of unisons, 7ths, and 2nds throughout the movement.

The excitement of the first movement's intensity certainly deserves the calm and pensive relaxation of the second movement. The title "Chaconne" comes from the word "chaconne." A chaconne is a chord progression that repeats throughout a section of music. In this particular case, there are several chaconnes, which create the stage for a dialogue between the soloist and various members of the orchestra. The beauty of the violin's tone and the artist's gifts are on display here.

The third movement, "Fly Forward," seemed like such a compelling image that I could not resist the idea of having the soloist do exactly that. Concerti throughout history have always allowed the soloist to delight the audience with feats of great virtuosity, and when a composer is confronted with a real gift in the soloist's ability to do so, well, it would be foolhardy not to allow that dream to become a reality.

—Jennifer Higdon

The Violin Concerto was commissioned by the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and the Curtis Institute of Music, with further support from LDI, Ltd., the Lacy Foundation, and the Randolph S. Rothschild Fund. Higdon was awarded the 2010 Pulitzer

Prize for Music for the Violin Concerto. It was premiered at the Hilbert Circle Theatre on February 6, 2009, by the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Mario Venzago.

Recommended Recording: Hilary Hahn plays Higdon & Tchaikovsky Violin Concertos. Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Vasily Petrenko. Deutsche Grammophon B003YOMNCM.

The B-Sides (2009)

Mason Bates (b. 1977)

It was between Tchaikovsky and Brahms that Michael Tilson Thomas, surprisingly mellow in his dressing room during one intermission, broached the idea of a new work. Fresh off the podium after the concerto, and apparently undistracted by the looming symphony in the second half, he suggested a collection of five pieces focusing on texture and sonority—perhaps like Arnold Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra. Since my music had largely gone in the other direction—large works that bathed the listener in immersive experiences—the idea intrigued me. I had often imagined a suite of concise, off-kilter symphonic pieces that would incorporate the grooves and theatrics of electronica in a highly focused manner. So, like the forgotten bands from the flipside of an old piece of vinyl, *The B-Sides* offers brief landings on a variety of peculiar planets, unified by a focus on fluorescent orchestral sonorities and the morphing rhythms of electronica.

The first stop is the dusky, circuit-board landscape of "Broom of the System." To the ticking of a future clock, our broom—brought to life by sandpaper blocks and, at one point, an actual broom—quietly and anonymously keeps everything running, like a chimney-sweep in a huge machine. The title is from a short-story collection by David Foster Wallace, though one could place the fairy-like broom in Borges' *Anthology of Fantastic Zoology*.

The ensuing "Aerosol Melody (Hanalei)" blooms on the Northshore of Kauai, where a gentle, bending melody evaporates at cadence points. Djembe and springy pizzicati populate the strange fauna of this purely acoustic movement, inspired by several trips with the Fleishhacker family. The lazy string glissandi ultimately put the movement, beachside, to sleep.

"Gemini in the Solar Wind" is a re-imagining of the first American spacewalk, using actual communication samples from the 1965 Gemini IV voyage provided by NASA. In this re-telling,

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clips of words, phrases, and static from the original are rearranged to show Ed White, seduced by the vastness and mystery of space, deliriously unhooking from the spacecraft to drift away blissfully.

His final vision of the coast of Northern California drops us down close to home. The initial grit of “Temescal Noir,” like the Oakland neighborhood of the title, eventually shows its subtle charm in hazy, jazz-tinged hues. Unbothered by electronics, this movement receives some industrious help in the rhythm department by a typewriter and oil drum. At its end, the broom returns in a cameo, again altering the tempo, and this propels us into “Warehouse Medicine.” An homage to techno’s birthplace—the empty warehouses of Detroit—the final stop on *The B-Sides* gives no quarter. Huge brass swells and out-of-tune pizzicati emulate some of the visceral sonorities of techno, and on this pounding note *The B-Sides* bows out.

The work is dedicated to Michael Tilson Thomas, whose impromptu composition lessons informed the work to an enormous degree, in addition to the countless concerts I have experienced while living in the Bay Area.

—Mason Bates

The B-Sides was commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony and Michael Tilson Thomas, with support from the Ralph I. Dorfman Commissioning Fund. It was premiered at Davies Symphony Hall on May 20, 2009, by the San Francisco Symphony, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas.

Recommended Recording: Mason Bates: Works for Orchestra. San Francisco Symphony, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas. SFS Media.