

CABRILLO FESTIVAL *Program Notes: Inspiration & Impact*

Lola Montez Does the Spider Dance (2016)

John Adams (b. 1947)
[World Premiere]

Commissioned by the musicians of the Cabrillo Festival Orchestra in honor of Marin Alsop

The Irish-born actress and dancer Eliza Gilbert (1821–1861) achieved international fame under the name “Lola Montez, the Spanish Dancer.” After a controversial career on the continent, including a sojourn in Bavaria where she became both the lover as well as political advisor to King Ludwig, she returned to London, where she eloped with and married the very young son of an aristocrat family. The family, scandalized by the relationship, sued her for bigamy, and she was forced to flee to the United States, eventually ending up in the Sierra foothills, performing for audiences of gold miners.

This description of her famous “Spider Dance,” appeared in the *San Francisco Whig*, June 3, 1853.

*Up went the curtain, and on came Lola,
fermenting the pit, agitating the gallery,
and sensationising the dress circle.*

And the Spider Dance!

*Has not every son of Columbia witnessed
the Spider Dance?*

*No? Well then...Lola comes in—sails in—
flies in—arrayed in a costume to which
Joseph's coat could never think of comparing.
She stands an instant full of fire, action
and abandon...*

*She commences to dance and cobwebs
entangle her ankles.*

*The myriads of spiders...begin to 'colonise.'
The spiders accumulate—hairy monsters
with five clawed feelers and nimble shanks
—crawl and sprattle' about the stage,
invading the fringe of Milady's petticoats,
and taking such unwarranted liberties,
that the spectator imagines
an inextricable mass of cobwebs
and enraged spiders.*

It is Lola versus the spiders...

She stamps daylight

*out of the last of the ten thousand,
and does it with so much naivete,
that we feel a sort of satisfaction at
the triumph.*

The picture winds up with Lola's victory,

and she glides from the stage

*overwhelmed with applause,
and smashed spiders,
and radiant with parti-colored skirts,
smiles, graces, cobwebs and glory.*

Lola Montez Does the Spider Dance was commissioned by members of the Cabrillo Festival Orchestra in celebration of Marin Alsop's twenty five seasons as music director, and it is dedicated to her.

—John Adams

Absolute Jest (2011)

John Adams (b. 1947)

The idea for *Absolute Jest* was suggested by a performance by Michael Tilson Thomas of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, a piece that I'd known all my life but had never much paid attention to until hearing Michael Tilson Thomas conduct it. Hearing this (and knowing that I was already committed to composing something for the San Francisco Symphony's 100th anniversary) I was suddenly stimulated by the way Stravinsky had absorbed musical artifacts from the past and worked them into his own highly personal language.

But there the comparison pretty much ends. Stravinsky was apparently unfamiliar with the Pergolesi and other Neapolitan tunes when Diaghilev brought them to him. I, on the other hand, had loved the Beethoven string quartets since I was a teenager, and crafting something out of fragments of Opus 131, Opus 135 and the *Große Fuge* (plus a few more familiar “tattoos” from his symphonic scherzos) was a totally spontaneous act for me.

“String quartet and orchestra” is admittedly a repertoire black hole—is there a single work in that medium that is regularly heard? And there are good reasons for why this is. The first is a simple issue of furniture: the problem of placing four solo players in the “soloist” position but still in front of the podium (so that they can follow the conductor) is daunting. The inner players, the second violin and viola, are frequently lost to the audience both visually and aurally.

But placement on the stage aside, the real challenge is in marrying the highly charged manner and sound of a string quartet to the mass and less precise texture of the large orchestra. Unless very skillfully handled by both composer and performers, the combining of these two ensembles can result in a feeling

of sensory and expressive overload.

At its premiere in March of 2012, the first third of the piece was largely a trope on the Opus 131 C# minor quartet's scherzo and suffered from just this problem. After a moody opening of tremolo strings and fragments of the Ninth Symphony signal octave-dropping motive, the solo quartet emerged as if out of a haze, playing the driving foursquare figures of that scherzo material that almost immediately went through a series of strange permutations.

This original opening never satisfied me. The clarity of the solo quartet's role was often buried beneath the orchestral activity resulting in what sounded to me too much like “chatter.” And the necessity of slowing down Beethoven's tempo of the Opus 131 scherzo in order to make certain orchestral passages negotiable detracted from its vividness and breathless energy.

Six months after the premiere I decided to compose a different beginning to *Absolute Jest*—a full 400 bars of completely new music, replacing the “quadrangular” feel of the Opus 131 scherzo with a bouncing 6/8 pulse that launches the piece in what is to my ears a far more satisfying fashion.

The rolling 6/8 patterns recall the same Ninth Symphony scherzo but also summon up other references—of the Hammerklavier Sonata, of the Eighth Symphony and other archetypal Beethoven motives that come and go like cameo appearances on a stage.

The high-spirited triple-time scherzo to the F major Opus 135 (Beethoven's final work in that medium) enters about a third of the way through *Absolute Jest* and becomes the dominant motivic material for the remainder of the piece, interrupted only by a brief slow section that interweaves fragments of the *Große Fuge* with the opening fugue theme of the C# minor quartet. A final furious coda features the solo string quartet charging ahead at full speed over an extended orchestral pedal based on the famous Waldstein Sonata harmonic progressions.

Absolute Jest had elicited mixed responses from listeners on its first outing. Quite a few reviewers assumed, perhaps because of its title, that the piece was little more than a backslapping joke. (One Chicago journalist was offended and could only express disgust at the abuse of Beethoven's great music.)

There is nothing particularly new about one

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composer internalizing the music of another and “making it his own.” Composers are drawn to another’s music to the point where they want to live in it, and that can happen in a variety of fashions, whether it’s Brahms making variations on themes by Handel or Haydn, Liszt arranging Wagner or Beethoven for piano, Schoenberg crafting a concerto out of Monn or, more radically, Berio “deconstructing” Schubert.

But *Absolute Jest* is not a clone of Grand Pianola Music or my Chamber Symphony. Of course there are “winks,” some of them not entirely subtle, here and there in the piece. But the act of composing the work (one that took nearly a year of work) was the most extended experience in pure “invention” that I’ve ever undertaken. Its creation was for me a thrilling lesson in counterpoint, in thematic transformation and formal design. The “jest” of the title should be understood in terms of its Latin meaning, “gesta:” doings, deeds, exploits. I like to think of “jest” as indicating an exercising of one’s wit by means of imagination and invention.

—John Adams

Absolute Jest was commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony in celebration of its 100th anniversary. It was premiered at Davies Symphony Hall on March 15, 2012, by the San Francisco Symphony with the St. Lawrence String Quartet, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas.

Recommended Recording: Adams: *Absolute Jest* & Grand Pianola Music. San Francisco Symphony with the St. Lawrence String Quartet, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas. SFS Media.

***Spinning Music* (2016)**

Michael Kropf (b. 1992)

[World Premiere]

This work is the sixth commission made possible by composer John Adams and his wife Deborah O’Grady at the Cabrillo Festival in support of emerging young composers; the commission was funded by their Pacific Harmony Foundation. Michael Kropf has provided the following note:

When I learned that I would have the opportunity to write a new orchestral work for the 25th and final season of Marin Alsop’s tenure leading the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, my first thought was of the sheer physicality

involved in conducting and performing the energetic and challenging new music that the festival is known for. Composing would on the surface appear to be the musical activity most divorced from this kind of physical reality, which might be why I often find myself creating musical arguments inspired by movement.

In *Spinning Music*, these arguments involve both the sensation of spinning outwards, in which brass swells and dissonant circular figures fling musical material outwards from some imagined center, and the sensation of spinning inwards, where moments of predominant harmony create whirlpools around tonal centers. Motivic ideas seem to be in orbit as they return at various points in time, transformed and re-contextualized with each pass.

The act of spinning has both been used for spiritual purposes, such as in the Sufi traditions of physical meditation, or for the creation of fun and ecstasy—in this case I think of Santa Cruz’s famous Giant Dipper roller coaster. My goal in this piece is to evoke a feeling of both a deepening into one’s self and an expansion into the outer world.

—Michael Kropf

Not recorded

***The City* (2016)** **Kevin Puts (b. 1972)**

[West Coast Premiere |
Festival Co-Commission]

Though inspired by the city of Baltimore, *The City* was intended as an exploration of many aspects of urban centers in America. My work on the piece intensified following the unrest of April 2015 in Baltimore, whereupon I realized the potential for the work to transcend mere illustration and aspire to the territory of healing.

Accompanied by a film created by James Bartolomeo, the work begins kaleidoscopically with panoramic views of the city—its spires, monuments, buildings and infrastructure. Anchored by a simple two-note motive, this opening evolved into a depiction of people—all sorts of people—involved in a variety of situations. Drums and strings create a groove together, while woodwinds and brass introduce primal-sounding melodies. An anthem arises in the string section, followed by a deconstruction and rebuilding of this theme, though on less-stable harmonic ground. A moment of suspense follows as a single note is sustained and passed

through the sections of the orchestra. From here the work gradually builds to cataclysmic dimensions until the opening motive—and then the anthem—are rediscovered. *The City* ends in a haze of uncertainty. I imagined a helicopter making a final pass over the city until it recedes into the distance.

We are a species suffering the pains of its adolescence. Let us have the resolve, the compassion and the foresight to force our own evolution to a place of reason and harmony.

—Kevin Puts

The City was co-commissioned by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in celebration of its 100th anniversary, by Carnegie Hall in honor of its 125th anniversary, and by the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music in honor of Marin Alsop. It was premiered at the Music Center at Strathmore on April 14, 2016, by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Marin Alsop.

Not recorded