

8.9 FIRE PROGRAM NOTES

***Tumblebird Contrails* (2014)**

Gabriella Smith (b. 1991)

[World Premiere | Festival Commission]

This work is the fourth 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. Gabriella Smith has provided the following note:

Tumblebird Contrails is inspired by a single moment I experienced while backpacking in Point Reyes, sitting in the sand at the edge of the ocean, listening to the hallucinatory sounds of the Pacific (the keening gulls, pounding surf, rush of approaching waves, sizzle of sand and sea foam in receding tides), the constant ebb and flow of pitch to pitchless, tune to texture, grooving to free-flowing, watching a pair of ravens playing in the wind, rolling, swooping, diving, soaring—imagining the ecstasy of wind in the wings—jet trails painting never-ending streaks across the sky. The title, *Tumblebird Contrails*, is a Kerouac-inspired, nonsense phrase I invented to evoke the sound and feeling of the piece. —*Gabriella Smith*

Not recorded

Saxophone Concerto (2013)

John Adams (b. 1947)

[West Coast Premiere]

My Saxophone Concerto was composed in early 2013, the first work to follow the huge, three-hour oratorio, *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*. One would normally be hard put to draw lines between two such disparate creations. One deals with such matters as crucifixion, raising the dead and the trials of battered women. The other has as its source my life-long exposure to the great jazz saxophonists, from the swing era through the likes of Coltrane, Eric Dolphy and Wayne Shorter. Nonetheless there are peculiar affinities shared by both works, particularly in the use of modal scales and the way they color the emotional atmosphere of the music. Both works are launched by a series of ascending scales that energetically bounce back and forth among various modal harmonies.

American audiences know the saxophone almost exclusively via its use in jazz, soul and pop music. The instances of the saxophone in the classical repertory are rare, and the most famous appearances amount to only a handful of solos in works by Ravel (his *Bolero* and his orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*), by Prokofiev (*Lieutenant Kijé* Suite and *Romeo and Juliet*), Milhaud (*La Création du Monde*) and of course the *Jet Song* solo in Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, probably one of the most immediately recognizable five-note mottos in all of music. Beyond that, the saxophone appears

to be an instrument that classical composers employ at best occasionally and usually only for “special” effect. It is hard to believe that an instrument that originated in such straight-laced circumstances—it was designed in the mid nineteenth century principally for use in military bands in France and Belgium and was intended to be an extension of the brass family—should have ended up as THE transformative vehicle for vernacular music (jazz, rock, blues and funk) in the twentieth century. Nonetheless, its integration into the world of classical music has been a slow and begrudged one.

Having grown up hearing the sound of the saxophone virtually every day—my father had played alto in swing bands during the 1930s and our family record collection was well stocked with albums by the great jazz masters—I never considered the saxophone an alien instrument. My 1987 opera *Nixon in China* is almost immediately recognizable by its sax quartet, which gives the orchestration its special timbre. I followed *Nixon* with another work, *Fearful Symmetries*, that also features a sax quartet in an even more salient role. In 2010 I composed *City Noir*, a jazz-inflected symphony that featured a fiendishly difficult solo part for alto sax, a trope indebted to the wild and skittish styles of the great bebop and post-bop artists such as Charlie Parker, Lennie Tristano and Eric Dolphy. Finding a sax soloist who could play in this style but who was sufficiently trained to be able to sit in the middle of a modern symphony orchestra was a difficult assignment. But fortunately I met Tim McAllister, who is quite likely the reigning master of the classical saxophone, an artist who while rigorously trained is also aware of the jazz tradition.

When one evening during a dinner conversation Tim mentioned that during high school he had been a champion stunt bicycle rider, I knew that I must compose a concerto for this fearless musician and risk-taker. His exceptional musical personality had been the key ingredient in performances and recordings of *City Noir*, and I felt that I'd only begun to scratch the surface of his capacities with that work.

A composer writing a violin or piano concerto can access a gigantic repository of past models for reference, inspiration or even cautionary models. But there are precious few worthy concertos for saxophone, and the extant ones did not especially speak to me. But I knew many great recordings from the jazz past that could form a basis for my compositional thinking, among them *Focus*, a 1961 album by Stan Getz for tenor sax and an orchestra of harp and strings arranged by Eddie Sauter. Although clearly a “studio” creation, this album featured writing for the strings that referred to Stravinsky, Bartók and Ravel. Another album, *Charlie Parker and Strings*, from 1950, although more conventional in format, nonetheless helped to set a scenario in my mind for way the alto sax could float and soar above an orchestra. Another album that I'd known since I was a teenager, *New Bottle Old Wine*, with Canonball Adderley and that greatest of all jazz arrangers, Gil Evans, remained in mind throughout the composing of the new concerto as a model to aspire to.

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Classical saxophonists are normally taught a “French” style of producing a sound with a fast vibrato very much at odds with the looser, grittier style of a jazz player. Needless to say, my preference is for the latter “jazz” style playing, and in the discussions we had during the creation of the piece, I returned over and over to the idea of an “American” sound for Tim to use as his model. Such a change is no small thing for a virtuoso schooled in an entirely different style of playing. It would be like asking a singer used to singing Bach cantatas to cover a Billy Holiday song.

While the concerto is not meant to sound jazzy per se, its jazz influences lie only slightly below the surface. I make constant use of the instrument’s vaunted agility as well as its capacity for a lyrical utterance that is only a short step away from the human voice. The form of the concerto is a familiar one for those who know my orchestral pieces, as I’ve used it in my Violin Concerto, in *City Noir* and in my piano concerto *Century Rolls*. It begins with one long first part combining a fast movement with a slow, lyrical one. This is followed by a shorter second part, a species of funk-rondo with a fast, driving pulse.

The concerto lasts roughly thirty-two minutes, making it an unusually expansive statement for an instrument that is still looking for its rightful place in the symphonic repertory.

—John Adams

The Saxophone Concerto was commissioned by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and Sinfonica Do Estado De São Paulo. It was premiered on August 23, 2013, at the Sydney Opera House with Timothy McAllister and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, conducted by John Adams.

Recommended Recording:

St. Louis Symphony with soloist Timothy McAllister, conducted by David Robertson. Nonesuch 541356.

Fire Music (2011)

Brett Dean (b. 1961)

[U.S. Premiere]

*Brett Dean was born in Brisbane, Australia and graduated from the Queensland Conservatorium, where he studied violin and viola. In 1985, he was appointed a viola player in the Berlin Philharmonic, a post he held until 1999. He began arranging and writing music for film and radio before establishing himself as a major composer when his clarinet concerto *Arial’s Music* (1995) received an award from the UNESCO International Rostrum of Composers. He has subsequently been commissioned by Carnegie Hall, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony, and other leading ensembles and presenters, and his violin concerto *The Lost Art of Letter Writing* won the Grawemeyer Award in 2009. He is active as a conductor and a chamber musician, and has performed his own viola concerto with major orchestras around the world.*

Fire Music was written in response to the disastrous “Black Saturday” bushfires of 2009. As part of my background reading while writing the piece, I studied the uses and restorative power of fire in Australian and other indigenous traditions. Fire was (and still is) used in Australia not only for land management purposes (controlled burning), and as an agricultural technique (fire-stick farming) but also as a significant part of indigenous ceremonial and cultural life, such as in Aboriginal smoking ceremonies.

Whilst the 2009 fires obviously had utterly disastrous consequences, fire can also cleanse and replenish; these thoughts, as well as its use in ritual, informed aspects of my *Fire Music*, especially in the slow middle section. The material which developed even included specific musical evocations of the event; for example, the extended electric guitar solo about half way through the piece evolved as a musical interpretation of the momentous, dizzying heat that greeted Victorians on the morning of February 7th, 2009.

As the composition progressed I moved beyond the original trajectory of the fire itself and the piece started to follow its own internal, music-based logic. Nevertheless, the character of the force of destruction and ultimately rebirth that comes from such a fire remained the energetic source of material. It’s not an uncommon working process for me; strong extra-musical ideas, after providing an initial stimulus, then recede into the background as the piece evolves in purely musical terms. The remnants of original ‘programmatic’ ideas become a point of reference only.

From the onset, I knew that *Fire Music* would also be choreographed. I was approached almost simultaneously by both the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic for a new orchestral work (co-commissioned by the BBCSO) and the Australian Ballet for a new score for Australian master-choreographer Graeme Murphy as part of the company’s 50th anniversary celebrations in 2012. It was my suggestion to combine these two projects into one.

In first discussions with Graeme, he stressed to me that he wasn’t planning a narrative ballet and didn’t want its dance use to influence how the work might unfold. This was liberating as choreographers often come to composers with very specific ideas of subject matter and even timings. The accompanying thought that the music I was writing was destined to determine the unfolding of a new ballet and its language of movement helped shape and inform *Fire Music*’s energy flow and dramaturgical nature.

The orchestration affects the entire space of the hall: in addition to the orchestra on the podium, there are three satellite groups of musicians placed around the hall, in order to let the audience be swept into the soundscape of *Fire Music*.

Not recorded