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AMERICAN
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William Bolcom Mixes It Up

The American composer's chamber music
combines influences high and low.

by Fred Cohn

Part of an ongoing series spotlighting performances supported by the NEA's

AMERICAN MASTERPIECES:
CHAMBER MUSIC initiative

*The July and August calendar of
AMERICAN MASTERPIECES
activities can be seen on page 12.
Some of the works being performed are
acknowledged American classics,
others are worthy but little known
and rarely performed, and still others
are very recent commissions.*

At a concert during his residency at Green Mountain Chamber Music Festival last summer, composer William Bolcom spoke to the audience from the stage, prefacing the performance of each of his pieces with a short explanation. During the intermission, a concertgoer accosted him and complained, “You’re talking too fast. We can’t hear what you’re saying!”

Bolcom took the criticism in stride. At the beginning of the concert’s second half, he told the crowd: “I’ve been told that I’m talking too fast. I’ll try to talk slower—now you try to listen faster!”

As a composer and as an individual, Bolcom is someone who demands—and rewards—“fast listening.” His wildly eclectic music, drawing from myriad influences both high- and lowbrow, never exactly follows expectations: it tends to deviate off-course in surprising, rewarding ways. And in conversation, words pour out of him in riotous profusion, as he moves, with scarcely a pause for breath, from Milton Babbitt to Jerome Kern to politics to a sexed-up Barcelona production of *Don Giovanni*.

He is the rare contemporary composer whose works regularly make their way onto concert programs and opera schedules. But the NEA’s *American Masterpieces: Chamber Music* initiative helped focus attention on his chamber music and provided support for activities such as his Green Mountain residency. “Chamber music is probably my favorite thing, aside from the voice,” Bolcom says. “I love the collaboration with chamber music people. I love working one-on-one with them—wonderful people who aren’t famous, and some who are.”

One famous performer whom Bolcom likes to work with is Gil Shaham, who played the Canadian premiere of his Concerto in D for Violin two years ago. Bolcom is now hoping to write a solo work for Shaham; it would be a follow-up to his first solo violin suite, written in 1977 for the late Sergiu Luca. “It really is a collaboration,” Bolcom says of the process. “You focus in on the performer. Sergiu’s style was very aggressive, but I see Gil Shaham as being more gentle. You get that image clicked in your head. The *paradox* of that focus is that it makes it easier, not harder, to find your niche. But the piece of course is translatable to other performers.”

If vocal music takes first place in Bolcom’s affections, it can only be expected. His wife is the mezzo-soprano Joan Morris; for years he has served as her accompanist, in concert

and on disc, in the works of the great American songwriters. The sounds of vaudeville and Broadway, of Kern and Irving Berlin, often make their way into his work. Ragtime has exerted an especially strong pull on Bolcom. His single most-performed work may be the *Graceful Ghost Rag*; originally a piano piece, he later arranged as a violin/piano duet—a version that turned up at a number of NEA-supported events, including a Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings concert and an outreach program given by the Green Mountain festival.

Bolcom began his compositional life in the early 1960s as a serialist. In that, he was working very much in the musical language of the time—a language, he feels, that was engendered by the horrors of World War II. “I understand why someone who had been through the traumas of war would take a certain attitude,” he says. “They wanted to destroy the past because it was impossible to take. As Edie Piaf sang, ‘I start from zero’—the past really was dead and you could start all over again, using a rational, non-culturally based *modus operandi*.”

“I wrote plenty of that stuff,” he says. “I was influenced by Boulez and company—very much so.”



Fairly early on, though, he began to embrace the broad range of musical styles that has categorized his work to the present day. His new manner brought with it a fair share of controversy, which has never entirely died down. “I’ve been amazed at reports of people who are hostile to me *personally*,” he says. “When I was a resident at Berkeley in 2005, I had no interaction with the other faculty. It’s like Gabriela Lena Frank—she was told she’s not a ‘Bay Area’ composer. What makes me angry is when people pass on their prejudice to students.”

His complaint isn’t with serial music, but with *bad* music—and with self-serving rhetorical poses that reject alternate approaches. “It became *de rigueur* to write your own polemic in defense of your own stance,” Bolcom says. “All these composers you’ve never heard of did it. I have great respect for Boulez, and great pride in having played his music. But that has nothing to do with the b—s— people were saying.” With the waning of the serialist orthodoxy, Bolcom’s works have come increasingly to the forefront, admired by musicians and popular among audiences.

“His music is really cerebral, but really accessible at the same time,” says Maury Okun, Detroit Chamber Winds’ executive director. “It can appeal to high-modern intellectuals, but also to a relatively unsophisticated audience.”

“There’s an awful lot behind the pleasant surface of this stuff,” says Kevin Lawrence, Green Mountain’s artistic director. He has been a Bolcom fan ever since 1985, when he first encountered the Second Violin Sonata. “I can’t tell you how excited I was by this music, and how eager to explore every new thing I heard about,” he says. “The musical language is so unlike anything else. There’s such freshness and imagination in his work; I always want to hear what he’d going to do next.”

Bolcom partly resists the idea that he is specifically an “American composer.” Still, when finding fault with the composers of the 1950s and ’60s, he notes, “You really couldn’t tell where they were *from*.” And he points to Kurt Weill as a composer who *decided* to become American, in response to the European nightmare he had left behind: “He’s someone who really wanted to remake himself,” Bolcom says. “He wanted to say goodbye to all that.”

Bolcom himself may have made no such conscious decision, but in its incorporation of our native vernacular styles, he comes across as a true American voice. Lawrence said that this element proved an eye-opener for the students at Green Mountain. “It was an unknown musical world for them,” he says. “It was especially wonderful for our nerdy violin students. Their focus is so narrow; for them to encounter someone who’s so open to all kinds of music, who doesn’t put artificial restrictions on what’s worth of attention, who takes American music so seriously—well,

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that was a fresh experience for these kids.”

A group of professionals at Green Mountain prepared a performance of Bolcom's Octet. But when they rehearsed it for him, the day before the performance, they encountered a minor shock. “The parts they had were not the most up-to-date,” Lawrence says. “About eight to twelve measures were missing. He took out his own copy and said, in his pleasant way, ‘This is the latest score.’ They were kind of put out, thinking, ‘He really wants us to write this out!’ They sighed and rolled their eyes, but they did it.

“In his demeanor, he's easy-going,” Lawrence continues. “But he means business. He knows what he wants, no getting around it. I was impressed—he wasn't going to compromise, even though he knew darned well it was pretty inconvenient.”

The result was well worth it. “There really hasn't *been* a better concert,” Lawrence continues. “He was really an inspiration.”



BOLCOM WITH STUDENTS

Performances in July & August

JULY 6 Boulder, CO

JULY 9 Lafayette, CO

PRESENTER **Colorado Music Festival** PROGRAM Wynton Marsalis, *Fiddler's Tale* ARTISTS Wu Joe Meyer, violin; Sarah Hogan, bass; Boris Allakhverdyan, clarinet; Glenn Eischlas, bassoon; Jeff Work, cornet; Donna Parkes, trombone; Michael LaMatyina, percussion
Leonard E. Barrett Jr., narrator
www.coloradomusicfest.org

JULY 16 Woodstock, NY

PRESENTER **Maverick Concerts** PROGRAM *Bernstein and Friends / Young People's Concert: "Music of Bernstein, Dvořák, and Copland"* (including the "Hoe-Down" from Copland's *Rodeo* ARTISTS **Trio Solisti** ?
<http://maverickconcerts.org>

JULY 17 Woodstock, NY

PRESENTER **Maverick Concerts** PROGRAM *Bernstein and Friends / American Traditions: Great Music for Piano Trio*. Pre-Concert Lecture/Demonstration by composer Bright Sheng with Trio Solisti. Copland: Vitebsk for Piano Trio; Bernstein, Piano Trio; Bright Sheng, Four Movements for Piano Trio; Dvořák: Piano Trio in E Minor ("Dumky"); Copland/Klibonoff, "Hoe-Down" from *Rodeo* ARTISTS Trio Solisti <http://maverickconcerts.org>

JULY 22 Katonah, NY

PRESENTER **Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts** PROGRAM *Prizing the Pulitzer: Bernstein, Songs; Cage, Living Room Music; Moravec, "Ariel" from Tempest Fantasy; Del Tredici, "Acrostic Song" from Final Alice; Musto, selections from Dove Sta Amore; Bolcom, selections from 12 New Etudes; Higdon; Dash, for clarinet, violin, and piano; Bright Sheng, Four Movements for Piano Trio* ARTISTS Derek Bermel, clarinet; Nicholas Kitchen, violin; Michael Boriskin, piano; Lauren Worsham, soprano; Joshua Roman, cello; Michael Barrett, piano.
www.caramoor.org

JULY 22-30 Austin, TX

PRESENTING ARTISTS **Austin Chamber Music Center** PROGRAM *Michael Torke Residency Concerts: 7/22 Torke, Comer in Manhattan* (with works by Janáček and Dvořák) ARTISTS Emerson String Quartet 7/23 Torke, *Telephone Book* (with Schumann and Brahms trios) ARTISTS Trio Cavatina 7/24 Torke, *Chalk* (with Mozart and Ravel quartets) ARTISTS Calder Quartet 7/29 Torke *Retrospective: Music on the Floor*, for chamber ensemble; *Four Proverbs*, for soprano and ensemble; *Song of Isaiah*, for soprano and ensemble; *After the Forest*

Fire, for marimba, flute, and cello; *Mojave*, for string quartet and marimba www.austinchambermusic.org

JULY 23 Woodstock, NY

PRESENTER **Maverick Concerts Bernstein and Friends II** PROGRAM *The Leonard Bernstein Songbook* ARTISTS Perry Beekman, vocals and guitar; Bar Scott and Terry Blaine, vocals; Peter Tomlinson, piano; Lou Pappas, bass
<http://maverickconcerts.org>

JULY 27 Boulder, CO

PRESENTER **Colorado Music Festival** PROGRAM Barber, String Quartet, Op. 11; Gideon Klein, String Trio; Reich, *Different Trains* ARTISTS Calin Lupanu and Monica Boboc, violins; Shannon Farrell Williams, viola; Bjorn Ranheim, cello www.coloradomusicfest.org

JULY 30 Woodstock, NY

PRESENTER **Maverick Concerts** PROGRAM *Young People's Concert / Bernstein Magic: Highlights from West Side Story* ARTISTS Andrew Russo and Frederic Chiu, Piano Duo <http://maverickconcerts.org>

JULY 31 Woodstock, NY

PRESENTER **Maverick Concerts** PROGRAM *Bernstein and Friends III* Mahler, *Nachtmusik I and II* from Symphony No. 7, "Song of the Night" Bernstein: Symphony No. 2 ("The Age of Anxiety") and *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story* ARTISTS Andrew Russo and Frederic Chiu, piano duo <http://maverickconcerts.org>

JULY 31 Katonah, NY

PRESENTER **Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts** PROGRAM *Prizing the Pulitzer: Copland, Appalachian Spring; Barber, String Quartet, Op. 11; Ives, Tone Roads No. 1; Foss, Tashi* for Clarinet, Piano and String Quartet; Menotti, Suite for Two Cellos and Piano; Toch, *Geographical Fugue*; Piston, Quintet for Flute and String Quartet ARTISTS Paul Lustig Dunkel, flute; Derek Bermel, clarinet; Wilhelmina Smith, cello; Michael Boriskin, piano; and guests Peter Kolkay, bassoon; Harumi Rhodes, Tim Fain, Susie Park, Ayano Ninomiya, violins; Leslie Tomkins, Kathryn Lockwood, violas; Joshua Roman, cello; Robert Black, double bass; Michael Barrett, conductor www.caramoor.org

AUGUST 28 Woodstock, NY

PRESENTER **Maverick Concerts** PROGRAM *Bernstein and Friends IV* ("American Romantics") Copland, Two Pieces for String Quartet; Bernstein, Three Meditations from *Mass*, for cello and piano; Beethoven, String Quartet in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3 ("Razumovsky"); Foote, Piano Quintet in A Minor (1897) ARTISTS Shanghai Quartet; Joel Fan, piano
<http://maverickconcerts.org>