

NEA



AMERICAN
MASTERPIECES
CHAMBER
MUSIC

Americans from Around the World

This generation of leading U.S. composers
includes a significant number of people
who weren't born here.

by Fred Cohn

Part of an ongoing series spotlighting performances supported by the NEA's AMERICAN MASTERPIECES: CHAMBER MUSIC initiative

The January-February 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.

What makes a composer “American”? The San Francisco Contemporary Music Players offer a partial answer in its programming this season. Under the auspices of the NEA's *American Masterpieces: Chamber Music* initiative, the Bay Area new-music ensemble is performing pieces by two celebrated foreign-born composers—Brian Ferneyhough and Tan Dun—both of whom have put down roots in the U.S. Ferneyhough, born in England, has been teaching here since 1987, first at University of California at San Diego, then at Stanford. And Tan Dun, a true citizen of the world, came to New York as a doctoral candidate, studying with Edgard Varèse and getting exposed to Western composers like John Cage and Steve Reich. He now divides his time between the city and his native China.

“I don't think being American has anything to do with where one was born,” says Christopher Honett, SFCMP's executive director. “I feel strongly that we should define ‘American’ as broadly as possible. Most of us, except for the native population, came from somebody who came from somewhere else—which doesn't necessarily impact our identity as Americans.”

Ferneyhough himself sees his work *Flurries* (a nine-minute composition that SFCMP will perform on January 25) as American, for a simple reason: “The title is taken from by poem by [North Carolina-born] A.R. Ammons, one of my favorite poets,” he writes via e-mail. “The final line of his poem ‘Flurries’ goes ‘...but meaning undermines meaning with meaning.’ Brain-bendingly true, no?”

Flurries is a sextet for piccolo, clarinet, horn, violin, cello and piano. “I initially thought of three little pieces for contrasting instrumental forces...as usual in such cases, the work, like *Topsy*, ‘just grew,’” Ferneyhough writes. “After the initial three crassly opposed segments (violin and cello, clarinet and piano, piccolo and horn) there now follows a lengthy ‘reasoning’ (as Ives might have said, ‘wrestling’) with the material, seeking to impose a (perhaps spurious, but nonetheless sublime) order upon these gruff individualities. That part of the piece was hard to compose!

“I always imagine the general atmosphere of the piece as evoking those unpredictable vortices of leaves and other undefined detritus that spontaneously spring into being on city street corners in fall,” he writes. “Chaos cheekily intruding upon ‘logical’ street grids,



BRIAN FERNEYHOUGH

as it were; immutable laws of nature nestled in pre-garbage-truck reality.”

When Handel used the title “Water Music,” he was referring to a performance venue—his suites were first performed on a barge floating on the Thames—but Tan Dun, in his 2004 *Water Music*, actually incorporates the element into the instrumentation. The piece, for four percussionists, grows out of Tan’s experimental music/art installations; its instruments include hemispherical, transparent water basins, water bottles, water tubes with foam paddles, water shakers, water drums (made of floating wooden salad bowls), a water gong, water agogo bells, slinkyphone (the toy for children, with styrofoam attached to one end), and waterphone—one of Tan Dun’s favorite instruments, used on the soundtrack of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and in his opera *The First Emperor*. The SFCMP performance of the 20-minute work will take place April 26.

Another one of SFCMP’s *American Masterpieces* this season is John Harbison’s song cycle *The Seven Ages*. The work is a Koussevitzky commission for SFCMP and the New York New Music Ensemble. It had its premiere in New York in April and the San Francisco performance took place



TAN DUN

on October 5; mezzo Pamela Dellal was soloist for both.

The NEA funding helped the organization bring Harbison and Dellal out to San Francisco, allowing the composer to appear at an event in SFCMP’s “Contemporary Insights” series, the day before the performance. Harbison discussed the piece, sometimes making comments as the musicians played through it, and took questions from the audience. Christopher Honett sees endeavors like these as important tools in bringing new works before an audience: “You don’t realize what a difference this makes to an audience that’s *trying* to get into the music.”

The Seven Ages is set to six poems by Louise Glück. Harbison had used one of her poems in his Symphony No. 5, then met her in 2008, when she came to give a talk to the Tanglewood composition department, which he chairs. He discovered they share some of the same problems: Glück talked about her tendency to suffer



JOHN HARBISON

from writer’s block, a problem that Harbison himself faces. “It sounded to me very familiar,” he says. “She has a lot of periods where she doesn’t think she can continue to be a poet, and there are times I don’t try to compose because I know there’s no point. That’s one of the reasons I wanted to work with her words: a sense that the words weren’t so much thought about and arranged, as coming from a place of intensity.”

Harbison decided that his next vocal work would represent a “larger engagement,” with Glück’s work, a goal the Koussevitzky commission allowed him to achieve. After considering poems written

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throughout her career, he eventually decided to limit himself to a selection from her book *The Seven Ages*, keeping them in the order in which they appear in print. Glück's poems are longer than typical song texts, but the cycle's twenty-five-minute performance time, stipulated with the commission, gave Harbison the space to explore them. "They have a longer line and a larger span than I would generally set," he says. "I had to find a way to encompass that."

In the cycle, the mezzo-soprano soloist is joined by flute, clarinet, violin, cello, percussion and piano. "I've always found a Pierrot ensemble difficult to work with," Harbison said in a phone conversation. "I proposed a larger instrumentation, but the commissioner said 'no.' I hit on the idea that there would be no doubling, and that the piano and percussion would only be used in a specific color role—that they would not be participating in the web of the piece some of the time."

In his spare, allusive settings, Harbison has sought to reflect the complex, ambiguous emotional stance of the poems themselves. "Ambiguity is a long-standing condition of the song cycle," he says. "Take the Schubert cycles: What happens to the hero? And what state has he reached? Here, it's 'what happens to the heroine?' Some people who write about Louise's poetry go way too far towards describing it as nihilistic and despairing. It's not that simple. Would that it were—it would be easier to deal with."

Fred Cohn is Chamber Music magazine's consulting editor.

JANUARY 9 Boston, MA

PRESENTER: **Boston Chamber Music Society** PROGRAM: *Music and Time*: Andrew Imbrie's *Serenade for Flute, Viola and Piano*; Libby Larsen's *Black Birds, Red Hills*; George Crumb's *Eleven Echoes of Autumn*; Ravel's *Piano Trio in A minor* ARTISTS: Fenwick Smith, flute; Thomas Hill, clarinet; Ida Levin, violin; Marcus Thompson, viola; Astrid Schween, cello; Randall Hodgkinson, piano www.bostonchambermusic.org

JANUARY 16 Boston, MA

PRESENTER: **Boston Chamber Music Society** PROGRAM: *Time as Subject and Substance of Music*, Peter Child: *Skyscraper Symphony* (for string quartet) ARTISTS: Harumi Rhodes, violin; Jennifer Frautschi, violin; Roger Tapping, viola; Marcus Thompson, viola; Andrew Mark, cello

JANUARY 17 Philadelphia, PA

PRESENTERS: **Dolce Suono Chamber Music Concert Series & Curtis Institute of Music** PROGRAM: *Samuel Barber at 100: The Composer and His World*: Barber, *Summer Music for wind quintet*, Op. 31; *Capricorn Concerto for flute, oboe, trumpet, and strings*, Op. 21; *Rorem, Trio for Flute, Violoncello and Piano*; Jennifer Higdon, *Autumn Music for wind quintet*; David Ludwig, *Haiku Catharsis* ARTISTS: Mimi Stillman, flute; Geoffrey Deemer, oboe; Samuel Caviezel, clarinet; Paul Demers, clarinet; Michelle Rosen, bassoon; Shelley Showers, French horn; Jeffrey Cumow, trumpet; Hirono Oka, violin; Yumi Kendall, cello; Charles Abramovic, piano; Gabe Globus-Hoenich, percussion www.dolcesuono.com

JANUARY 23 Boston, MA

PRESENTER: **Boston Chamber Music Society** PROGRAM: *Music and Time*: Charles Loeffler's *Two Rhapsodies for Oboe, Viola and Piano*; William Grant Still's *Suite for Violin and Piano*; Lukas Foss's *Time Cycle* ARTISTS: Judith Kellock, soprano; Michael Norsworthy, clarinet; Peggy Pearson, oboe; Harumi Rhodes, violin; Marcus Thompson, viola; Joshua Gordon, cello; Mihae Lee, piano; Robert Schulz, percussion www.bostonchambermusic.org

JANUARY 25 San Francisco, CA

PRESENTING ARTISTS: **San Francisco Contemporary Music Players** PROGRAM: Brian Ferneyhough's *Flurries*, for piccolo, clarinet, horn, violin, cello and piano EDUCATIONAL PREVIEW: January 24, School of the Arts in San Francisco. Open to the public www.sfcmp.org

JANUARY 26 Rochester, NY (Eastman School of Music)

PRESENTING ARTISTS: **American Brass Quintet** PROGRAM: Shafer Mahoney's *Brass Quintet*, David Sampson's *Entrance*, Eric Ewazen's *Colchester Fantasy* www.americanbrassquintet.org

FEBRUARY 12 Kalamazoo, MI

PRESENTER: **Fontana Chamber Arts** ARTISTS: Ben Allison's *Man Size Safe* (Ben Allison, bass; Ron Horton, trumpet; Michael Blake, saxophones; Steve Cardenas, guitar; Michael Sarin, drums) www.fontanachamberarts.org

FEBRUARY 17 Philadelphia, PA

PRESENTER: **Dolce Suono Chamber Music Concert Series** PROGRAM: *Samuel Barber at 100: The Composer and His World*: Barber's *Dover Beach*, for baritone and string quartet, *String Quartet*, *Songs for baritone and piano*, *Canzone for flute and piano*, *Song for a New House for Voice, Flute, and Piano*; *Songs by Leonard Bernstein and Lukas Foss*; Elliott Carter, *Duo for flute and cello*; Benjamin C.S. Boyle, *Sonata-Cantilena for flute and piano* ARTISTS: Randall Scarlata, baritone; Mimi Stillman, flute; Charles Abramovic, piano; Hirono Oka, violin; Igor Szewec, violin; Burchard Tang, viola; Yumi Kendall, cello PANEL DISCUSSION: Barbara Heyman, scholar; Benjamin C.S. Boyle, composer www.dolcesuono.com

FEBRUARY 19, 20 Columbus OH

PRESENTER: **Jazz Arts Group of Columbus** PROGRAM: *Music of Louis Armstrong* "Heebie Jeebies," "Muskrat Ramble," "Wild Man Blues," "Alligator Crawl," "Potato Head Blues," "Struttin' With Some Barbecue," "West End Blues," "Basin Street Blues," "St. James Infirmary," "Tight Like This," "Big Butter and Egg Man," "Chicago Breakdown," "Hot Seven," "Gully Low Blues" ARTISTS: Bob Breithaupt (drums); Larry Cook (acoustic bass, as needed); Mark Flugge (piano); Wycliffe Gordon (trombone); Byron Stripling (trumpet); Allan Vache (clarinet); and Don Vappie (banjo) www.jazzartsgroup.org

FEBRUARY 20 Blue Bell, PA

PRESENTER: **Montgomery County Community College** PROGRAM: *Works by African American and Other Composers*, including George Walker, Coleridge Taylor-Perkinson, William Grant-Still, Alvin Singleton, Ulysses Kay, and Dorothy Rudd Moore ARTISTS: Marian Anderson String Quartet www.mc3.edu

FEBRUARY 28 Brooklyn, NY (Brooklyn Public Library)

PRESENTER/ARTISTS: **American Brass Quintet** PROGRAM: Eric Ewazen's *Colchester Fantasy*, David Sampson's *Entrance*, Joan Tower's *Copperwave* www.americanbrassquintet.org