

A Living Context

The American Composers Residency at Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival lets audiences see composers as flesh-and-blood beings.

The Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival's commitment to the works of contemporary composers is longstanding. Now, with support from the NEA's *American Masterpieces: Chamber Music* initiative, the festival has instituted an American Composers Residency program, bringing composers on site for several days, during which they work with musicians, give pre-concert talks, and lead masterclasses with composition students from the University of New Mexico and the College of Santa Fe.

In the view of the festival's artistic director, Marc Neikrug—not insignificantly, a composer himself—the involvement of living composers is central to the vitality of chamber music. “Were there not a significant amount of new music, the performance of classical music would become a museum,” he says. “We would be charged with caring for an increasingly aging art form with increasingly aging pieces.”

New music, he says, isn't just an end in itself; it's a way of deepening our understanding of the old: “[New pieces] give us our perspective on music from the recent past, the more distant past and the very distant past. It's pretty crucial.”

By allowing audiences and the Santa Fe community to get to know the composers themselves, the residency program helps demystify the whole notion of what it is to be a composer. “We can't imagine a Mozart or a Chopin or a Brahms being born today, because we can't *see* them,” Neikrug says. Thus he feels that the resident composers' very physical presence is highly significant. “It's an understanding that these people exist—that they're *human*. The reference is, ‘Wow, Brahms was a person. He could have flown to Santa Fe and talked to us.’ It changes everything and humanizes all of the music we listen to.”

The American Composers Residency started in the 2008 season. This year's participating composers are Gunther Schuller, Jerod Impichchacha' Tate and George Tsontakis, all of whom have world premieres in the 2009 festival.

The French horn is **Gunther Schuller's** instrument, but in 65 years of composing, he has seldom had a chance to write for it. “I've always wanted to write a horn quintet or a horn trio,” he says, “but everything I've written has been on commission. There's never any time to write a piece that no one is commissioning.” The SFCMF request for his Quintet for Horn and Strings will go some way toward righting the balance.

Schuller has found a surprising model for the quintet in a favorite work: Mozart's Horn Quintet K. 407. “When I was a horn player, I played that work very often,” he says. “It's been floating around in my mind and ear.” Schuller's own harmonic language, needless to say, is quite different from Mozart's. “Here I am, a composer in a highly chromatic style—and Mozart's a pure, highly Classical style,” he says. “People will say ‘How the heck can you do that linguistically?’ I can do it, but it's only by allusion. I'm



taking one of the themes of the quintet and playing with it in a disguised way, in my own style and language.”

One aspect of the quintet that will be immediately recognizable as ‘Classical’ is its structure—three distinct movements. The first is an Allegro with a slow introduction; the second, a lyrical slow movement; and the third, a “bright, energetic finale.” Schuller plans for the work to last 15–18 minutes.

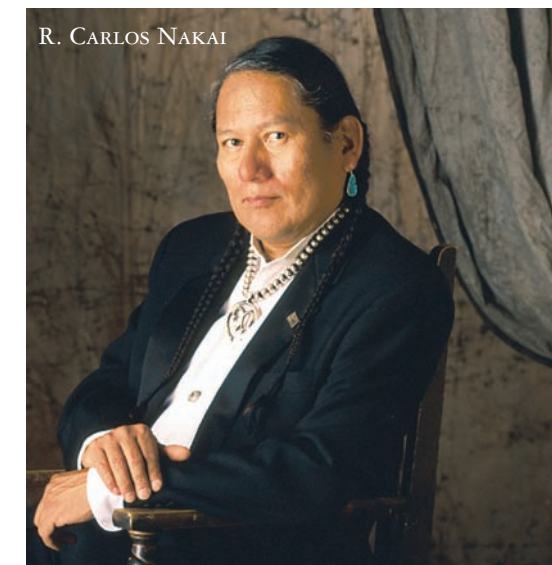
The Mozartean influence is typical of Schuller's working method. “I have been a conductor and performer of all the great past literature,” he says. “It's unlike some composers today, who want to separate themselves totally from the past. I'm not like that—I like to *connect* myself to the past, from which I've learned and gained so much. The thing that distinguishes my brand of 12-tone writing: While the surface is atonal (I *hate* that word—I prefer ‘chromatic’), there's always the underpinning, the *infrastructure* that relates to tonality and earlier periods of music.”

Despite the complexity of his musical language, Schuller hopes that audiences will find the work accessible. “I try to write music that one would call ‘melodic,’” he



says. “I know that for 90 percent of all audiences, when you use that word, they expect something in C major and in conjunct motion. But I try to write melodic themes in an atonal context. I think of my music as always being very lyrical.”

The performers at the quintet's July 26 premiere will be Julie Landsman and the Miró Quartet. As of this writing, the work had not been completed, and the musicians had not seen their parts. “You never know what to expect from Schuller,” says John Largess, the Miró's violist. “The pieces we've played of his before have had a surprising mixture of a jazz element with out-there modernism. We're waiting to see how he's planning to integrate the French horn with the string quartet—or vice versa. Not many composers have the intimate knowledge of



the instrument that he has. I'm excited to see what comes out.”

George Tsontakis is calling his new chamber work *Stimulus Package*. “In three years, it'll sound stupid,” the composer guesses. “If it doesn't—we're in trouble!” The piece, a SFCMF co-commission with the La Jolla Music Society, is being written for the cello/piano/percussion trio known as Real Quiet. Tsontakis recently finished a cello/piano work for David Finckel and Wu Han, and he views his experience with that piece as a kind of preparation for his new work. “I'm sort of

by Fred Cohn

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

The current late April–June calendar of AMERICAN MASTERPIECES activities can be seen on page 15. 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.

in gear,” Tsontakis says. “You think of a cello/piano piece, then you add a drum. It becomes a very different piece.”

The Duo for Cello and Piano consists of two substantial movements interspersed with “love songs”; Tsontakis is using a similar tactic in *Stimulus Package*, combining long movements with “vignettes.” “I’m trying to get away from the Classical expectation of balanced movements,” he says.

Tsontakis’s 2001 piece *Mirologhia* is a percussion concerto, and he’s welcoming the renewed opportunity to write for percussion. “Some modern composers will put a tam-tam here, wind chimes there,” he says. “But I think of percussion as continuous rhythm.” The work will in part be a tribute to the composer’s Greek heritage. One movement, “Papou,” will imitate the sounds of the *lyra* and *lauto*, traditional Cretan instruments. “The closest thing to the *lyra* is a viola da gamba,” Tsontakis explains. “And in Crete, the lute [*lauto*] is the rhythm.” He describes the *lyra* as making a “klezmer, clarinet sound, rather than a string sound.” Rather than pressing the string down, the player puts his fingers alongside the string, pushing his nail into the side of the string to stop it. “It produces a lot of overtones, because rather than have 90 percent of the vibration below the finger, both sides vibrate more freely. It’s a rich but whiny sound.”

In the “Papou” movement, the piano and percussion will evoke the *lauto*, while the cello will conjure the *lyra*’s clarinet-like nature by playing a bit above its range—“like the bassoon that’s not supposed to play that high in *Le sacre*.”

The word “Papou” is a Greek endearment for “grandfather,” and the movement itself will conjure the kind of music that Tsontakis’s grandfather loved. It’s a gesture that has deep sentimental meaning for the composer. As an adolescent, he would stay with his “Papou” and play his achingly serious twelve-tone compositions. “I

wrote ‘beep, splat, burp’ type of music,” Tsontakis says. “Regardless—he would put down his glass of brandy at the side of the piano and in the background, dance like Zorba the Greek. It was his grandson playing music; that’s all that mattered. I’m sure what he was hearing was *lyra* and *lauto* music, not mine.”

Stimulus Package will have its premiere on August 16.

Jerod Impichchaachaha’ Tate’s *À Bec Quintet* isn’t seeking to invent a new form; its movements will conform to classical models. But the musical materials themselves will incorporate American Indian folk idioms. And most unusually, the piece will meld four Western woodwinds—flute, clarinet, bassoon and bass clarinet—with the Native American flute, an instrument that has seldom been used in concert music.

The work was commissioned by the Native American flute player R. Carlos Nakai, who will take part in its August 20 premiere. “It represents the first attempt by a Native American composer to write a piece for this instrument,” Nakai says. “Hopefully it will be a breakthrough. People will say ‘Yes, this instrument can do it. It can fit into that realm [Western European music] successfully.’”

The instrument (called “à bec” by French settlers, who saw its resemblance to the medieval “flute à bec”) is played like a recorder, and Tate describes it as looking “like a beak.” It typically has five or six holes and a range of a minor ninth; in fact, Nakai will use eight different flutes through the course of the quintet. “It’s a valuable instrument,” says Nakai. “It has severe limitations, but if one is a good performer of music, one should be able to overcome those limitations easily.”

The 25-minute work will consist of three movements. The Sonata Allegro first movement is inspired by Ute bear dances, the Indian flute and the piccolo playing in parallel ninths to create what

Tate calls an “impressionistic representation” of a drum’s driving rhythm. The second movement, Adagio, will evoke the slow, irregularly metered, plainsong-like chants sung by men’s ensembles at the Navajo healing ceremonies known as *Yeibichei*. “The signature sound is almost like a scooping up—a characteristic rise, almost like yelps,” Tate says. He says the movement, which will offer a fugal treatment of its *Yeibichei*-inspired material, will offer “a hint of that high yelping sound—but I do it very subtly.” In the Rondo-Finale third movement, bear-dance rhythms reappear, now combined with Hopi buffalo dances and (in Tate’s words) “themes from all over the place.”

Tate has worked to synthesize these folk influences into a piece that falls within the Western classical tradition. “It won’t necessarily fit the stereotype [of Native American music] that people have in their minds,” he says. “People are going to be able to detect these things, but they won’t pop out, like in a New Age recording.

“What I’m doing is nothing new to the development of classical music,” Tate notes. “Everyone has brought their own national identity into classical music. I’m inspired by Bartók, Debussy, Beethoven—you couldn’t *be* more German than Beethoven. I feel really good and strong and in good company.”

Fred Cohn is Chamber Music’s consulting editor. He is also a frequent contributor to Opera News, writing reviews of concerts, opera performances and recordings, as well as profiles of musicians and singers.

American Masterpieces Chamber Music

Performances in
Late April, May and June

APRIL 25, 26 Brooklyn, NY

PRESENTER: **Bargemusic** PERFORMER: American String Quartet (Laurie Carney and Peter Winograd, violins; Daniel Avshalomov, viola; Wolfram Koessel, cello) PROGRAM: Irving Fine, String Quartet (1952); Robert Sirota, *Triptych* (2002); Henry Cowell, String Quartet No. 3, “Mosaic” (1935); Walter Piston, String Quartet No. 1 (1933). www.bargemusic.org

APRIL 26 Norfolk, VA

PRESENTER: **Virginia Arts Festival** PERFORMER: Kronos Quartet PROGRAM: selections from Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Harry Patch, Terry Riley, Raymond Scott and John Zorn. www.vafest.org

MAY 1 Somerville, MA

PRESENTER: **Boston Musica Viva** PROGRAM: *In Aeternum* (Consortium IV), Joseph Schwantner; New work (world premiere), Michael Gandolfi; *Pierrot Lunaire*, Arnold Schoenberg. www.bmv.org

MAY 3 Dallas, TX

Caruth Auditorium, Southern Methodist University
PRESENTER/PERFORMERS: **Voices of Change** PROGRAM: *Dreamcatcher*, by Augusta Read Thomas (commission and world premiere); winners of the VOC/DSO Young Composers Project Competition; Steven Hartke’s *Oh, Them Rats Is Mean in My Kitchen* and music of Simon Sargon. www.voicesofchange.com

MAY 5 Cortlandt Manor, NY

PRESENTER/PERFORMERS: **Music from Copland House** and guest artists PROGRAM: “Exploring Copland and His World,” with Alex Ross. Music by Copland and others. www.coplandhouse.org

MAY 6 Portsmouth, VA

PRESENTER: **Virginia Arts Festival** PERFORMERS: Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio and Miami String Quartet PROGRAM: A commissioned septet by composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. www.vafest.org

MAY 7 New York, NY

PRESENTER: **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center** PROGRAM: David Ludwig, *Haiku Catharsis* (2004); George Tsontakis, *Duo* (2008); William Bolcom, *Let Evening Come* (1994); Kristin Kuster, *Ando: light against shade* (2003); William Bolcom, *Graceful Ghost from Three Rags* (1989) PERFORMERS: Amy Burton, soprano; Inon Barnatan, Gilles Vonsattel, Wu Han, pianos; David Finckel, cello; Escher String Quartet; Tara Helen O’Connor, flute; David Shifrin, clarinet; Ayano Kataoka, percussion. www.chambermusicsociety.org

MAY 11 New York, NY

Zankel Hall
PRESENTER: **Carnegie Hall Society** PROGRAM: Elliott Carter’s Cello Sonata, selections from Eight Pieces for Timpani, the Quintet for Piano and Winds. PERFORMERS: Daniel Barenboim, piano, with members of the Staatskapelle Berlin; cellist Claudius Popp and percussionist Torsten Schönfeld

MAY 15, 16, 17 Virginia Beach, VA

PRESENTER: **Virginia Arts Festival** International Drum Festival PROGRAM: Terry Riley’s *In C*; other works may include John Cage’s *Third Construction* (1941), Christopher Rouse’s *Bohnam* (1988), works by Steve Reich. www.vafest.org

MAY 16 Brooklyn, NY

Brooklyn Public Library
PRESENTER: **Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra** PROGRAM: “Off the Shelves,” a free family concert of music by American composers. www.brooklynphilharmonic.org

MAY 17 Chicago, IL

PRESENTER/PERFORMER: **Cube Contemporary Music Ensemble** Lawrence Axelrod, keyboards/conductor; Caroline Pittman, flute; Douglas Brush, percussion; Dane Richeson, percussion; Christie Miller, clarinets; Janice Misurell-Mitchell, flute/voice; Patricia Morehead, oboe/English horn; Phil Morehead, keyboards/conductor venue: Elizabeth Stein Company, Fine Arts Building PROGRAM: Margaret Brouwer, *Skyriding*, for flute, violin, cello and piano; Janice Misurell-Mitchell, *Everything Changes* for flute/voice and percussion; William Bolcom, *Aubade*, for oboe and piano; Ralph Shapey, *Discourse Two*, for violin, cello, clarinet and piano; Ralph Shapey, *Discourse Encore* for violin, cello, clarinet and piano; Terry Riley, *Cinco de Mayo* for piano four hands; Rachel Eubanks, *Five Interludes* for solo piano; Samuel Barber, *Despite and Still*, for voice and piano. GUEST ARTISTS: baritone Daniel Billings and the Belsky Maxwell Duo. www.cubeensemble.com

MAY 17 St. Louis Park, MN

Westwood Lutheran Church
PRESENTER/PERFORMER: **Cantus Vocal Ensemble** ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM: *Lux Aurumque*, Eric Whitacre; Daniel, “Daniel Servant of the Lord,” by Maura Bosch, arr. Undine Smith Moore; “Oolichan-Sliammon,” chant, arr. Stephen Hatfield; “Deep River,” arr. Harry T. Burleigh; “Witness,” arr. Moses Hogan

MAY 28 Newport News, VA

PRESENTER: **Virginia Arts Festival** PERFORMERS: New England Conservatory String Quartet; members of the Virginia Symphony PROGRAM: Samuel Barber’s *String Quartet, Op. 11*; George Gershwin’s *Lullaby*; Copland’s original version of *Appalachian Spring*. www.vafest.org

MAY 30 Brooklyn, NY

Brooklyn Conservatory Concert Hall
PRESENTER: **Brooklyn Queens Conservatory of Music** PROGRAM: David Amram’s “Splendor in the Grass,” “Kwahere,” “Home on The Range,” “Birds of Montparnasse,” “Traveling Blues” PERFORMERS: David Anram, the Jazz & Gospel Choir, Renée Manning, Hasan Bakr, Trifon Dimitrov, Earl McIntyre, and others (8-piece band and choir)

MAY 31 Brooklyn, NY

Brooklyn Conservatory Concert Hall
PRESENTER: **Brooklyn Queens Conservatory of Music** PROGRAM: David Amram string improvisation clinic (Suzuki), 3:00-4:00 p.m. CONCERT: 5:00 p.m. David Anram’s “Native American Portraits,” “Red River Valley,” “Sioux Rabbit Song,” *Giants of the Night* (slow movement) PERFORMERS: Masha Lankowsky, David Wexler and a children’s choir directed by Renée Manning

JUNE 6, 7 Brooklyn, NY

PRESENTER: **Bargemusic** PERFORMER: American String Quartet PROGRAM: Ruth Crawford (Seeger), String Quartet (1931); Charles Ives, String Quartet No.1 (A Revival Service), and George Tsontakis, String Quartet No. No. 4 (“Beneath Thy Tenderness of Heart”) www.bargemusic.org

JUNE 14 Cortlandt Manor, NY

PRESENTER/PERFORMERS: **Music from Copland House** PROGRAM: “The Composer’s Hour,” with Ned Rorem (Music by Ned Rorem). www.coplandhouse.org