



# THE UNIQUE VOICE OF SEBASTIAN CURRIER

SOME OF THIS COMPOSER'S MOST ARRESTING CHAMBER WORKS INHABIT AN AMBIGUOUS TERRITORY WHERE STASIS MEETS FRENZY, NOISE TRANSFORMS ITSELF INTO MUSIC, AND WHERE THE COMPOSITIONAL VANTAGE POINT IS ALWAYS SHIFTING.

by Michael Boriskin

Almost as soon as Kentucky industrialist and philanthropist H. Charles Grawemeyer established a prize in the mid-1980s “in recognition of outstanding achievement by a living composer in a large musical genre,” the award bearing his name gained widespread attention. The first, in 1985, went to the stunning new Symphony No. 3 by the widely esteemed Witold Lutosławski. Even more important in capturing the world’s attention was the cash prize of \$150,000—a generous amount today, but even more eye-popping back in 1985—placing it among the elite of international music prizes. (The award has since been increased to \$200,000.) Over the years, the Grawemeyer Award has solidified its reputation through highly discriminating choices, which included major compositions by Györgi Ligeti, Pierre Boulez, Toru Takemitsu, György Kurtág, Krzysztof Penderecki, John Corigliano, John Adams, Joan Tower, Aaron Jay Kernis, and Kaija Saariaho, as well as by younger composers like Tan Dun, Thomas Adès, and Unsuk Chin. All were honored for large orchestral works or operas (except Ligeti’s landmark Piano Études and Boulez’s *Sur Incises*, the latter hardly a chamber work with its idiosyncratic instrumentation for three pianists, three harpists, and three percussionists playing an enormous battery of instruments, and requiring a conductor).

This year, for the first time, the Grawemeyer Award was conferred on a traditionally scored chamber work: *Static*, for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano, by American composer Sebastian Currier. It is appropriate that the 48-year-old Currier has been recognized for a composition for a small ensemble. Though he has produced important and compelling pieces for orchestra, chorus, voice, and individual instruments, chamber music has stood at the heart of his work. For twenty years, he has been inventing wondrously intriguing, invigorating, and mysterious musical creations for small instrumental groups. These include works for mixed ensembles with and without voice, string quartets, and an assortment of duos (violin and piano, cello and piano, flute and piano, violin and harp). As Currier explained in a National Public Radio interview that followed the award’s announcement in March, “Chamber music is very important to me, because of its intimacy, the nature of performance, and the interacting of performers. It’s so much more personal than an orchestra. You have a chance to shape things and think things out in a more nuanced way—and there’s also more freedom in terms of performance.”

My own musical journey with Currier’s music began over two decades ago. Helping to start the Rhode Island Music

Festival in Providence back in the mid-1970s, I performed with a variety of wonderful artists for several summers, including a scholarly, affable violist named Robert Currier. It turned out that Bob headed a rather unusual family entirely made up professional or aspiring musicians. (One can only imagine conversations at their dinner table!) Bob’s wife, Marilyn, was an accomplished composer, and the couple’s two teenage sons, Sebastian and Nathan, were obsessed with guitars and rock music. “My brother and I drove our neighbors to despair with our take on Black Sabbath and other heavy metal bands,” Sebastian recalled at a recent discussion with music students, faculty, and visitors at the University of Louisville, where the Grawemeyer Awards program is based. “I was obsessed with rock and roll, but discovered something deeper while listening to my parents’ recordings of classical music. Rock songs begin and end, but the variety of sound, breadth, and emotion in classical music is a journey.”

By the time I really got to know Sebastian, he had already exchanged amps and metal strings for the composing table, and had been writing for a while. He was completing in his studies at Juilliard with Milton Babbitt, and the first piece of his I had ever seen was a Partita from the 1980s for solo piano. I’m not sure whether or not he still owns up to this youthful work, but

it struck me then (as now) as an invigorating, impressively assured piece—all the more so coming from a novice composer in his mid-20s. When I subsequently performed the Partita, I worked with the young composer and was struck by how professional and articulate he was. Like a seasoned veteran, he knew precisely where everything came from, what he wanted from a performance, and how to gently but firmly persuade a performer to do what he was asking for.

Over the next dozen years or so, Currier and his catalog continued to grow. It was always an adventure to get to know his latest works, and I continued to perform a number of them. With the formation of Music from Copland House, in 1999, my ensemble colleagues and I were in a position to more actively champion his work. Having performed several of his compositions on various occasions, it was natural for us to think of commissioning him to write a piece for us. A generous grant from

Meet the Composer's Commissioning Music/USA program helped make this happen, and we will always be indebted to this invaluable organization for enhancing this collaboration. The resulting work was *Static*—written for Music from Copland House's core instrumentation of flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano. Following our world-premiere performance in early 2005 at New York's Miller Theatre, we recorded *Static* (and three other chamber works) for an all-Currier CD called *On the Verge* for Koch International Classics, which released it this past spring.

In so many ways, *Static* embodies Currier's musical approach. Describing his exhilarating violin-clarinet-piano trio *Verge*, Currier writes, "The idea of being on the verge of extremity but not crossing it is appealing to me. It seems like an ideal place to be, both in life and art." Indeed, most of Currier's music, like *Static* and *Verge*, journeys inquisitively and in various intriguing ways around this border region, inhabiting a world of ambiguities, shifting perspectives, and multiple meanings. He revels in the tension and energy created by bringing together and exploring opposites.

Refusing to be constrained by a single aesthetic stance, Currier often conceives and then treats his material from diverse vantage points. *Theo's Sketchbook*, for solo piano, traces the entire life of a fictitious composer, using fragments from an imaginary musical journal ranging from *Juvenilia* through *Youth* and *Mature Works* on to *The Last Year*. Quartetset giddily careens across stylistic borders. *Verge* is inspired by the implication of Robert Schumann's curiously titled little piano piece *Fast zu Ernst* ("Almost Too Serious"), and dangerously explores the edge of extremities of speed, intensity, cohesiveness, and inaudibility. In his stunning orchestral work *Microsymph*, Currier composes a full, five-movement symphony but compresses it into a mere 10 minutes. His *Vocalissimus* for voice and small chamber ensemble reinterprets one 13-word Wallace Stevens poem 18 different ways, as if set by that many different composers

pieces he so often creates. (Charles Rosen's insightful observation about the miniature works of Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg is also pertinent to much of Currier's work: these compressed forms "do not diminish the emotions they express but enlarge them, as if fragments of feeling were blown up by a powerful microscope.")

Currier values the intelligence of his listeners and neither panders to nor alienates them. His work is exquisitely detailed, and combines the atmospheric and the rigorous. Melodies tend to be epigrammatic. The instrumental virtuosity called for is of a more subtle kind, rather than overt razzle-dazzle. Composer-critic David Cleary has described Currier's music as "polished without being glib, lucid without being empty, and substantial without being forbidding ... fluid stuff that tantalizes the ear."

All of the foregoing describes the Grawemeyer Award-winning *Static*, a major work both in scale and content. Currier has called the title "some sort of Rorschach's test." Does it refer to something immobile and unchanging, or to a chaotic, unpredictable, and distracting energy? The music suggests both meanings of the term. The work opens onto what Currier describes as an inert, interior landscape (in the movement titled "remote"), with the slow, wavelike chords that are heard or felt in almost every one of the work's six movements. In the second movement (called "ethereal"), hints of the other kind of "static" emerge. "This musical 'interference,'" Currier has explained, "takes several forms, but one of the most characteristic is where string trills are played in harmonics, paired with changes in bow pressure and placement, which causes various harmonics to stand out in a constantly changing and random fashion." The juxtaposition is most stark in the third movement ("bipolar"), with a long-held motionless chord

unexpectedly interrupted by a frenzied passage that ends as abruptly as it began, leaving the still (static) chord in its wake. Affecting, long-lined string melodies in the fourth movement ("resonant") soar above the irregular, unpatterned background static in the piano. The work reaches a sustained zenith of intensity in the fifth movement ("charged"), before the finale ("floating") recapitulates material from the previous movements, as what Currier calls "disembodied fragments of memory that float by, emerging out of an ethereal static."

*Static* also explores the frontier where sound becomes music, and vice-versa, and seems at times to question (perhaps even reassign) some of the attributes of each. Each movement grows out of ethereal, seemingly unmeasured, and at first indistinct sounds, imparting an ominous character to the whole. Moments abound when resonant gusts of air or tiny flecks of sound grow into pitched melodic kernels, or, conversely, when thematic fragments or chordal passages disintegrate into barely recognizable wisps of sound.

Sebastian Currier has been well rewarded with the Rome Prize, Berlin Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, honors and grants from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Koussevitzky Foundation, and many others. It is to be hoped that the Grawemeyer Award will bring even wider recognition and acclaim to a composer whom those of us who have known and performed his music over the years have long regarded as one of America's finest and most quirkily imaginative creative voices.

*Pianist Michael Boriskin has performed in more than thirty countries and written for Chamber Music, Symphony, Stagebill, American Record Guide, and many other publications. He is artistic and executive director of Copland House, in New York, and a founding artist of the Music from Copland House ensemble.*

## SELECTED CHAMBER WORKS OF SEBASTIAN CURRIER\*

### QUARTETS AND MIXED ENSEMBLES

**BROKEN CONSORT** (1996) Flute, oboe, violin, cello, two guitars 14'

Playing on the Renaissance term for an ensemble of diverse instruments, the one-movement piece veers back and forth between mechanical order and uncontrolled chaos, resolving calmly and lyrically.

**NIGHTMAZE** (2005) Flute, clarinet, trumpet, violin, cello, double bass, piano, digital keyboard, percussion, narrator, video projections, 4-channel electronics 45'

This multimedia piece is based on a text by Thomas Bolt, in which a college student exhausted by exams falls into a deep sleep, and—his mind filled with half-understood ideas—dreams or hallucinates about speeding along a dark highway with road signs pointing to exits into remote corners of his psyche.

**QUARTETSET** (1995) String quartet 36'

**QUIET TIME** (2004) String quartet 23'

Companion pieces that can be performed separately, the works pay homage to the great quartet tradition of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, while constantly subverting it through interpolations employing contemporary language, timbre, and other devices.

**REMIX** (2005) Flute, clarinet, horn, harp, violin, viola, cello, double bass, percussion, piano, pre-recorded electronics 15'

An extended antiphon of two alternating instrumental groups, using instruments and material inspired by Brahms's Trio for Violin, Horn, and Piano. Musical ideas are echoed, answered, and elaborated upon by the remaining instruments and electronic samples.

**STATIC** (2003) Flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano 27'

Full discussion of the Grawemeyer prize-winning piece is within the main article.

**VERGE** (1997) Violin, cello, piano 17'

Perhaps Currier's most-often performed chamber work, *Verge* explores aesthetic boundaries via nine movements lying at the edge of excess—with such titles as "Almost Too Fast," "Almost Too Much," "Almost Too Fractured."

**VOCALISSIMUS** (1991) Soprano, flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, percussion 32'

Eighteen settings of Wallace Stevens's poem "To the Roaring Wind" examine the interaction between music and words from various compositional points of view.

**WHISPERS** (1996) Flute, cello, piano, percussion 13'

In tones suggesting human voices, quick, accented whispers dominate an urgent central section, which is framed by episodes of repose and quietude.

### DUOS

**AERIALISM** (2004) Cello and piano 20'

**AFTERSONG** (1993) Violin and piano 14'

**CLOCKWORK** (1989) Violin and piano 18'

**ENTANGLEMENT** (1992) Violin and piano 26'

**FRAMES** (1998) Cello and piano 23'

**INTIMATIONS** (1989) Clarinet and piano 12'

**NIGHT TIME** (1998) Violin and harp 14'

**PULSE** (2002) Viola and guitar 16'

**UNCERTAINTIES** (1993) Viola and piano 17'

**VARIATIONS ON "TIME AND TIME AGAIN"** (2000) Flute and piano 9'

\*Works available from Carl Fischer, Inc.

### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

**ON THE VERGE** *Static, Verge, Night Time, Variations on "Time and Time Again"*  
Music from Copland House  
(Koch KIC-CD-77691)

### QUARTETSET AND QUIET TIME

Cassatt Quartet  
(New World 80634-2)

**Vocalissimus, Theo's Sketchbook, Whispers**  
Mosaic Ensemble  
(New World 80527-2)

Intimations

### IN SPONTANEOUS LINES: 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN MUSIC FOR CLARINET AND PIANO

Nathan Williams, clarinet; Audrey Andrist, piano  
(Albany TROY311)



The Curriers in the 1980s: Nathan (standing), Sebastian, Marilyn and Robert

from that many varied perspectives. His violin-and-piano duo *Entanglement* approaches the same basic material from the differing perspectives of the two instruments. His works challenge the listener to reconsider generally accepted concepts and boundaries of time, sound, context, character, narrative, and structure, as well as the very nature of artistic creativity. Currier's work simultaneously explores and re-positions music's traditional confines.

The urgency and dynamism of Currier's compositions grow out of a rich, pungent musical vocabulary that perhaps owes something to the highly evolved post-tonal harmonic language of one of his other main teachers, the superlative George Perle—though with an even more propulsive rhythmic energy. Indeed, the electricity and mystery in Currier's music seem only to be heightened by being condensed into the short movements and