

# Overstepping Interview with Eve Beglarian

MICHAEL DELLAIRA

"One of new music's truly free spirits," Eve Beglarian's current projects include an opera based on Stephen King's *The Man in the Black Suit* with co-librettist and director Grethe Holby, a Meet the Composer co-commission for The Bilitis Project; a song cycle/concept CD with boombox virtuoso and composer Phil Kline; music for Lee Breuer's production of *A Doll's House* at New York Theater Workshop; and *A Book of Days*, a long-term project of 365 multimedia pieces for live performance as well as internet delivery. For more information about Eve Beglarian visit [www.evbvd.com](http://www.evbvd.com).

DELLAIRA: I've taken the title of one of your pieces – a very moving piece, which is also the title track of the CD in which it appears – *Overstepping* – as a theme. If I understand "overstepping" as in overstepping oneself, going beyond what you think you can do, I'd like to apply that to your own life. Looking at your life's trajectory, it seems like you've overstepped in several places. You grew up in a house that was filled with musicians and music, and yet when you finally went off to college you went as a scientist. So in a way you started by rebelling – your first overstepping?

BEGLARIAN: That's a nice way to think about it! I think in terms of getting started in music, growing up in the musical family that I did, it never occurred to me that I would want to be a musician, because in a sense the boundaries of what constituted music-making were very well defined. And not particularly interesting. It was very much in the tradition of classical-music performance and virtuosity. I had no way of applying the totality of my interests to that activity. I think people who are ready to become virtuosos have a way of putting their entire lives' thoughts into practicing Czerny or whatever, and I simply did not have the ability to be able to do that.

DELLAIRA: Did you play an instrument, have lessons?

BEGLARIAN: Yes, I started out with piano lessons when I was four or five years old, and then when I met Piatigorsky as an 11-year-old I was so enamored of him and his musicianship I decided to switch to the cello, and so I studied that all through junior high and high school. But I really did not have the sensibility to be able to apply myself properly. So it never occurred to me that I could be a musician.

DELLAIRA: Were you expected to pursue a musical career?

BEGLARIAN: No. Certainly my parents felt that having musical training was part of being a well-rounded person. In fact my main connection to music was going to a thousand concerts and also I worked at the radio station starting when I was 16 ...

DELLAIRA: Your father was the Dean of the Performing Arts School at the University of Southern California.

BEGLARIAN: Yes. My father was trained as a composer and then he became the Dean of the School of Performing Arts at USC in Los Angeles which in those days – the 60's and 70's --had a whole group of incredible musicians on the faculty because so many people emigrated to LA before the war. There was this amazing émigré community, not just in music but in all the arts. So LA was this place where you had Hollywood on the one hand and that sort of corrupt business world depicted in the movie *Chinatown*, and on the other hand you had this amazing European émigré community, and the two never really made sense of one another.

DELLAIRA: And this was a community that represented European tradition, with a capital E and T. USC was not, for example, Cal-Arts.

BEGLARIAN: No, it wasn't Cal Arts. And it wasn't Henry Cowell going to Chinatown. It was squarely in the center of the classical European tradition. I sometimes wonder what it would have been like for me had it been more of an experimental community (the Henry Cowell, Harry Partch tradition) whether I would have latched onto it earlier and not had the same oppositional relationship – both loving it and feeling it couldn't belong to me –

DELLAIRA: So you got to Princeton with really no idea that you were going to wind up in the music department.

BEGLARIAN: Right. When I chose Princeton I certainly wasn't thinking about the music department. As a freshman I came in as sort of a pre-med; I wanted to do research on neurology, the chemistry of the brain. By October of my freshman year I was losing my mind.

DELLAIRA: That's only a month into it ...

BEGLARIAN: Exactly! I didn't have a record player. I had all my records but no record player. I was waiting until fall break to go up to Boston to get advice from a friend about what stereo system to buy, so I hadn't brought a record player with me, so I couldn't listen to music for a month. I thought I would lose my mind. It was then I realized that if music was that central to my life, I was going to have to find some way of doing music as my profession – because I didn't want to be a violin-playing physicist. That's not my model of how to relate to music. There's a wonderful tradition of that, scientists who love music, but I realized that was not going to work for me, that music was far more central to my being. So the question was, what am I going to do in music?

DELLAIRA: And you didn't know anything about the music department?

BEGLARIAN: Well I knew Milton Babbitt as a child -- in fact I used to call him Milton Babbitt-Rabbit -- he was a family acquaintance and he and my father have known each other for years. But it wasn't until my sophomore year that I took a music course and I absolutely loved it. And what was sort of wonderful and of course completely by chance was that the Princeton music department had (as most people who are going to read this know) had a logical positivist approach to what music is and a "fake" scientific idea of how to think about music.

DELLAIRA: Right, because, oddly enough, Princeton wasn't CalArts either.

BEGLARIAN: I never did get to Cal Arts! But in a way Princeton fit perfectly with where I was coming from -- wanting to have a kind of intellectual pleasure that, in fact, the music department could supply endlessly, right? Because they had this whole way of talking about music that I actually hadn't known existed. Coming from my background, the only writing about music I had ever seen were things like program notes and Tovey: descriptive writing about music that seemed completely lame to me. You go hear the Brahms Fourth and you read the program notes and you know this has absolutely nothing to do with the musical experience I'm having. So at Princeton they were not having those kinds of descriptive conversations about music. And so the very scientism, if you want to call it that, of the way of talking about music I found completely delightful. And so I had a great time at Princeton.

DELLAIRA: You also knew at that point that this was something you could do, whereas back in Los Angeles growing up, music was something you thought you couldn't do.

BEGLARIAN: That is certainly true. I started out, of course, doing theory. And the fact that there was no performance taught for credit was perfectly fine with me too because the last thing I wanted to do was practice the cello.

DELLAIRA: We want to keep this in line with where we're headed, since you do quite a bit of performing now.

BEGLARIAN: Exactly! The question then was what was I going to do. I knew I did not want to be a college professor and that I did not want to be a theorist. Even though I love theory that was not how I pictured living my life. And so the idea came to me that I would be a conductor: that would be the right use of my skills and talents. So I started thinking about what skills I would need to learn in order to be a conductor and one of the things that occurred to me was that I ought to write some music so I would know from the inside what it's like to make a piece of music, and that would make me a far more effective and sophisticated conductor of other people's music. And so I started writing music. And I absolutely loved writing music. It was like totally great. And I'm pretty sure that if I had said to myself in advance "I'm going to be a composer and now I'm going to sit down and write music"

I would never have had the courage to do it. I was only writing some pieces, and that's OK, and it was only later that then I could give myself the title "composer."

DELLAIRA: So what happened to conducting?

B EGLARIAN: After Princeton I moved to the New York area and started studying conducting privately with Jacques-Louis Monod. Who is by far the best teacher in music that I ever had. We were studying conducting (we weren't studying composition or theory), and his whole way of approaching the subject was totally incredible, totally intense, and totally marvelous. These were private lessons, so I would prepare the piece and I would go in with a baton and the score. He would sit and watch me and I would conduct.

DELLAIRA: Conduct silently?

B EGLARIAN: Silently. No music, nothing. And he would say "the horns did not come in on their entrance ...."

DELLAIRA: Wait, wait, wait a minute ... You both have a score?

B EGLARIAN: We both have a score. And he is following me and knew where I was in the piece and would critique every technical error I made. And the two of us were having this brain meld of hearing the performance of the piece I was conducting.

DELLAIRA: It's not like he said "The trumpet's flat!"

B EGLARIAN: No, he didn't say that!

DELLAIRA: Incredible. How long did you do this?

B EGLARIAN: Three to four years.

DELLAIRA: These were one-hour lessons?

B EGLARIAN: Yes.

DELLAIRA: And you would do a whole piece? Or a movement?

B EGLARIAN: Standard rep. We started with Mozart and went through the classical repertoire and the last piece I did was *Pierrot Lunaire*. It was the best education in music ever. Because I had to learn to really hear those scores so deeply. At the same time I was studying with him privately, I went to Columbia for a masters in composition. That was not a good choice. I really should not have done that, because in a sense it was like a poor man's Princeton at the time.

DELLAIRA: In what sense?

B EGLARIAN: The methodology of theorizing about music was the same as Princeton's but it wasn't as sophisticated because there were people at Princeton who were better at doing that than there were at Columbia.

DELLAIRA: And you were studying with Jacques Monod at the same time. He has a reputation for being severe and hypercritical, and it's not like you had any conducting experience before, so that you were going to him to sharpen those skills or look at things differently. You were going in essentially as a novice to a person with a reputation that strikes fear into the hearts of a lot of people. What made you think you could do that?

B EGLARIAN: Well, in a sense, Milton was very generous and he said I should go and study with Jacques. So it didn't occur to me that I shouldn't do that. I didn't feel it as a risky move at the time. Being a novice meant I had nothing to lose.

DELLAIRA: Well, you risked him saying, "This isn't going to work out, you have no talent for this."

B EGLARIAN: ...Yes.... That didn't occur to me. It's nice that you point that out. But he was very good to me. I remember when we got to the end of my studies him saying something like, "You've got the goods here and I don't know what you're going to do with them." I think he said it in the context of me being a woman. When it came to his trying to visualize what kind of life I would have, what career I would have, he really saw that was going to be quite difficult, and couldn't imagine me in the professional world of managers and ICM.

DELLAIRA: Did that bother you? Were you really envisioning a career as a conductor?

B EGLARIAN: By that time I wasn't really concerned with that. It hadn't occurred to me that what I was going to do with what I learned was become the Assistant Conductor of the Houston Symphony or something. That was no longer on my mind as a goal.

DELLAIRA: Because you were also studying composition at the same time.

B EGLARIAN: That's right. That's right. And in fact by then I was done with Columbia. After the Masters I quit. That is, I did not apply to any doctoral programs or attempt to switch into the DMA program at Columbia. I felt very strongly that studying composition with these folks was not helping me or teaching me what I needed to learn.

DELLAIRA: What was the first piece you wrote after leaving? Your first work as a solo composer?

B EGLARIAN: It was for sax quartet and TR-808 drum machine and a monophonic synthesizer called a Pro-1 (a one-voice version of the Prophet 5), and it was called *Fresh Air* -- a four-minute 12-tone piece, completely and strictly Charles Wuorinen-like with time-points and everything, but that doesn't sound like it. Who knew that the 808 drum machine was going to become the sound of a whole genre of music? It refers forward to all of hip-hop which is based on that kick drum.

DELLAIRA: Is it recorded?

B EGLARIAN: I have a pretty good live recording of it by Relache. What happened was I was fresh out of school and was mystified as to what was going to become of me and I sent the piece to Relache -- they had a call for scores that included sax quartet. So I sent it down to them and Joseph Franklin called me up and said they were going to perform it. It was my first professional performance and it was like totally cool.

DELLAIRA: So that was major event for you.

B EGLARIAN: Yes. At the same time I was free-lancing for CRI as a producer. I got lucky that way. Carter Harman was still there and he was beginning to lose his hearing. And so there were recording sessions all the time and I quickly became the producer of about 50 records at CRI in the space of about two years.

DELLAIRA: Can you name a few?

B EGLARIAN: I remember a really cool duo by Lou Karchin, there was a Ben Johnston string quartet, a Bernard Rands CD. The last one I did was a Milton Babbitt CD.

DELLAIRA: I'll bet your conducting studies with Jacques Monod came in really handy then.

B EGLARIAN: Yes, that's when I became fully aware of it! It's not like they gave me the score ahead of time and I would spend weeks studying it. No. I'd show up, they'd hand me the score and it's like my job to say "we're covered on this take, and we're not covered on that." It required this incredible virtuosity of listening, and definitely what Jacques taught me.

DELLAIRA: You were also meeting composers as a professional colleague, rather than as student.

B EGLARIAN: True. At the same time I was doing administrative work. I was the President of the League-ISCAM, and that was a really great learning experience as well, because I was presenting five concerts a year and chairing the program committee and deciding what to program and all that kind of stuff. There was a board of 35 people that one had to answer to, and I really made an effort to transform the organization into a less stylistically limited presenting organization.

DELLAIRA: You mean less academic?

B EGLARIAN: Yes. That was in the days when you would still get reviews from The Times or New York Magazine and they would invariably say, "The League-ISCAM which is known for its really boring concerts of really bad music presented a strikingly uncharacteristic concert of interesting music last night..." But it was really hard work.

What I learned was that institutions have a personality just as much as people do. You can try to shift what an institution stands for and, if you put a lot of effort into it, yes, you can influence the organization with your own personality, but the second I left it went back to being what it had been before.

DELLAIRA: So, perhaps I should tread lightly here, but it sounds as if you're now following in your father's footsteps as administrator.

B EGLARIAN: It was important to me in relation to my father! Because he had taken his creative skills and devoted them to organizing things and making things possible for other people to do. And I realized that, yes, that is creative work and it's interesting, and it actually has in certain ways more instant feedback than writing music because you see the results immediately. And you have a certain amount of visibility and a certain amount of power, and if you're responsible you can use that power to do good and that's really great. But I also saw that if you make that choice you're making that choice.

DELLAIRA: Is that why you left? It was taking up too much of your energy?

B EGLARIAN: Yes. And I also realized that at a certain point – and this is a hard thing to say – I do feel that being of service to the community of music is a really important thing, but it's definitely a balance. One can get sucked up with community building to the exclusion of the narcissistic “go in your room and do your own work”. It's really important to be really conscious of maintaining that balance. And also it was becoming clearer and clearer to me that I was in the wrong community. I could present concerts and be visible from now to eternity and it didn't mean that *Speculum Musicae* was going to play my music.

DELLAIRA: Pause there for a moment, because that isn't obvious. You just mentioned a piece that Relache did, so the kind of music you followed that with was still in the wrong camp?

B EGLARIAN: What I did for about several years is write pieces which struggled with applying the techniques I had learned of 12-tone and serial music, combinatorial “fake” mathematics to make pieces I thought were beautiful. That was a really useful thing to do.

DELLAIRA: OK, but that description would apply to virtually every other person writing 12-tone or serial-based music ...

B EGLARIAN: Right, but what I was doing was trying to use those techniques in ways that one would never say “that's a 12-tone piece” -- that did not... I don't know whether you remember Wuorinen's book *Simple Composition*...

DELLAIRA: Yes.

B EGLARIAN: One of the things he said was that you really want to use a lot of minor ninths and tritones in order to really embrace the style. My answer to that was what if I could take these conceptual ideas about structuring a piece of music and not give preference to minor 9ths because we like minor 9ths better than, say, 3rds. I was trying to merge what I was hearing in Steve Reich with those structural solidities I was getting from Babbitt and Wuorinen. The piece that most fully embodied that is on the *Overstepping* CD: the electronic piece *The Garden of Cyrus*. Each movement is, in a sense, an etude (I hate that word!) that is structurally sound from a 12-tone structural point of view, but I don't think when you listen to that piece you say yeah, gee, that's right in the tradition of Charles Wuorinen.

DELLAIRA: What you're saying is that there was still a gap between what you wanted to hear and the means by which ...

B EGLARIAN: I was attempting to achieve that.

DELLAIRA: Yes, you're saying that there is this middle ground that is too much work ...

B EGLARIAN: Right, but what was great about doing that was that working it into something I liked meant that I had something I was banging up against. I wasn't just improvising until I came up with something pretty. It gave me this technique so that *now* if I noodle at the keyboard I come up with something I can believe in. It also gave me tremendous confidence to have wrestled with this stuff long enough to actually achieve something I believed in. And that meant I didn't have to do that wrestling anymore. I could do anything I wanted and I felt it had the solidity of all that time and all that effort.

DELLAIRA: So you needed reassurance that the piece could hold up under analysis?

B EGLARIAN: I think that's a good question, yes. Having been in that academic environment where being able to come up with verbiage that explains the existence of every note in a piece and every choice that's made -- yes, to me it was very satisfying that I could point and grunt at every note and claim it as part of an unassailable framework. And once I had succeeded in doing that, it was no longer necessary. I could put that aside.

DELLAIRA: We're really not at that point yet.

B EGLARIAN: No, we're only in 1986.

DELLAIRA: So you've left ISCM, decided not to pursue a DMA, finished studying with Monod, working free-lance at CRI, so in a way you're a free agent at this point.

B EGLARIAN: Yeah, and at this point a New York performing ensemble commissioned a piece, and it also was a serial piece in some way. But I felt very strongly that it was step forward from *The Garden of Cyrus* and part of it was that it was much more emotionally available and I was able to struggle with the systems, not so much technically in terms of getting notes and harmonies and rhythms that I liked, but to give me the emotional resonance I was looking for. This piece was a really big deal for me – it took me 10 months to write it – and they premiered it, and they played it twice and that was the end of it for them. In fact many ensembles around the country took the piece on and performed it ...

DELLAIRA: What's the piece for?

B EGLARIAN: Pierrot ensemble plus percussion and tape, no voice. Standard new music ensemble. And it was so clear to me that other ensembles understood the piece so much better than these folks who had been my friends and colleagues at Princeton, that I felt really depressed. Really, really depressed.

DELLAIRA: Because? I mean isn't that the kind of normal life span of a piece?

B EGLARIAN: Yeah, I guess it is, but it was specifically the reaction of the people who had commissioned it. I felt that other people who took it on understood it better and were more excited by it. I felt I had written this really great piece for those people who I really wanted to please and impress and give them something they would love and they didn't love it, didn't get it. For them it was just another piece. Perhaps it was childish of me to get so hurt by that but it really wounded me. Because I thought of these people as my closest colleagues and I realized there was a huge gulf between us. They weren't my real colleagues and I didn't know who my real colleagues would be.

DELLAIRA: And the other groups that were more enthusiastic -- like the Dinosaur Annex I imagine -- would be considered less academic, for lack of a better word?

B EGLARIAN: No, not really. Harvey Sollberger really championed the piece, and he's certainly academic. It's that I pictured myself part of a community of values and somehow something I was looking for in affirmation of that didn't happen. It wasn't simply an uptown/downtown schism. I had written a piece for Daniel Druckman and Alan Feinberg called *Machaut in the Machine Age* and it was the first in a series of pieces that take off from Machaut, and it was a little piece, not an ambitious piece, but a big deal for me because it was the first that didn't use a system. And I remember playing it for someone, an academic, and he was like “what the fuck are you doing?” He was embarrassed by it, actually embarrassed for me.

DELLAIRA: That must have pointed out to you that a possible schism existed.

B EGLARIAN: Yes, and I realized where I was heading was away from the community I had built. That was a very hard transition. And pretty scary. I had thrown myself into a community and felt there was no way I could remain there and pursue what I needed to pursue in music. That was 1988, and I was 30. Because I really didn't know where I was going to go. I got lucky.

I went to the American Dance Festival -- they had a program where they paired a composer with a choreographer and made a piece in the six weeks you were in residence down there, and I did that with Ann Carlson and was suddenly introduced to the dance world and suddenly the preoccupations I had in terms of emotional expressiveness in music were totally desirable and they needed what I could do and wanted to do.

DELLAIRA: And pieces that could hold up under analysis were irrelevant.

B EGLARIAN: Made no difference and was completely unimportant. And so for about four years a big percentage of the music I wrote was for dance.

DELLAIRA: But you're not playing in these pieces?

B EGLARIAN: No, many were electronic. I got a sampler in 1989. *Overstepping* is from 1991 and is probably the strongest of those dance pieces and obviously incorporates sampling pretty heavily. So that was the transition and it really was this four-year bounded thing, because now I rarely do music for dance.

DELLAIRA: In retrospect it's an episode, but at the time it wasn't inevitable.

B EGLARIAN: I don't think I ever thought I'm going to become a dance music composer.

DELLAIRA: Did you know anything about dance?

B EGLARIAN: No, and I still don't. In a way I don't really understand dance. And the most interesting choreographer I know, Elizabeth Streb, said that music is the enemy of dance. And she's right. Music sets up a structure that dance is forced to respond to. And so she doesn't use music -- she amplifies the sounds of the dancers, and it's totally brilliant as sound as well as dance, and I feel like I do understand what Elizabeth is doing.

DELLAIRA: And next?

B EGLARIAN: In 1989 I moved to the village and I had this girlfriend -- Mary Rodriguez -- who insisted I join this band that she played bass in. It was a real rock band (all originals) and I was the keyboard player. The guitar player was the composer and we played bar gigs.

DELLAIRA: The name of the band?

B EGLARIAN: Que (pronounced "kay"). It was a real bar band. In fact adding a keyboard player was sort of a questionable thing. And that was my first experience as a performer. And it was a totally wonderful experience. I was out playing gigs every Saturday night for months as a keyboard player and it wasn't about great art, it was about being able to play in a bar band. And it taught me how to perform, because if you can have any kind of charisma as the keyboard player in a bar band then you've learned how to do something. So I did it really late: most people do that when they're 17 or in their 20's and I was 30. In a way allowed me to cross the line ...

DELLAIRA: That's the key element ...

B EGLARIAN: Yeah, and it was very useful that it was separated from being a composer somehow, because I could focus on performing rather than expressing myself as a composer and then figuring out ...

DELLAIRA: Was there any tension? Because you probably knew more about music than the others ...

B EGLARIAN: No, because I knew something different about music. And in fact it was fascinating sociologically. The bandleader, this guy named Rico, who's brilliant -- we'd get together and orchestrate what the keyboard part should be. And of course we had no shared terminology. None. So it was kind of like intercultural collaboration. For me to be able to figure out what he was looking for and what he wanted ...

DELLAIRA: What were you playing?

B EGLARIAN: I was playing synth -- a DX7 -- and had to figure out what sounds were cool and what weren't. I remember I put in an augmented triad somewhere and he was totally down with it -- saying "wow" -- because there aren't a whole lot of augmented triads in pop music. And the songs were good songs and he was a great guitar player.

DELLAIRA: How long did you do that?

B EGLARIAN: Maybe a year. Not long.

DELLAIRA: Were you thinking during that time of striking out on your own?

B EGLARIAN: Well in a sense it was its own thing in a corner. And I didn't immediately say "Yeah, I wanna do this," because of course I didn't want to have a bar band. But what happened, relatively soon after that, was that various people started calling me and saying "do you want to do this little show downtown" -- at CBGB's gallery, next door to CBGB -- or these little bars doing experimental music, and the financial and sociological aspects of that is that there's no money, or you get the door, or whatever. So it's hardly like I could call up players and say do you want to come down and do this gig?

DELLAIRA: But how did someone know to ask you that? You weren't writing pieces that featured yourself.

B EGLARIAN: Well, they were people I had met ... I was doing electronic music, and so I think the mindset was that it wasn't inconceivable I could present an evening of my work. And I had started doing pieces that incorporated spoken word in one way or another. Then I did this piece based on Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonate*. This was in '93. David First asked me to do a half evening -- a set -- and so I decided I was going to do an exploded version of the *Ursonate*.

DELLAIRA: With keyboard?

B EGLARIAN: With electronics, yeah. But mostly I was singing and speaking against electronics, and the electronics were mostly sampled stuff. And I had a commission at the time with the California EAR Unit, so I got two of the members of the EAR Unit to record some text stuff, and that became the raw material for the tape part of my performance. And I called it *YourSonata* instead of *Ursonate*. And I loved doing it and it was great fun. And then I went back to the EAR Unit and said instead of writing this other piece I'm thinking about writing for you, why don't we do this *YourSonata* as a collaborative ensemble piece for the whole band? And it turned into a thirty-five minute music-theater Dada text-sound wacky thing. None of them played their instruments. It wasn't about the EAR Unit doing their stuff. It was music-theater in the context of a new music concert. So that was the initiation of three trends that have ended up being huge in my life. That was performing, spoken word stuff, and collaborations with other composers.

DELLAIRA: The idea of composers collaborating is unusual.

B EGLARIAN: Yeah. It's one thing to collaborate with choreographers, it's another thing to figure out what to do with other composers. That piece, which was by then called *TypOpera*, we then were commissioned to make into an hour-long trio version, which was presented in Minneapolis and also here at Dance Theater Workshop. And that sort of launched me as a performer because there I was performing. And actually Kathy Supové saw that show and said let's do a duo. And that's how Twisted Tutu got started.

DELLAIRA: Who thought of the name?

B EGLARIAN: I did. I'm proud of that name. We did our first show, I think, in January '95.

DELLAIRA: Where?

B EGLARIAN: It was at Here, a theater down on Spring Street at 6th Avenue. That was the very first show and it sort of just took off. Every month we'd have a gig in New York, and then in subsequent seasons we actually booked it nationally and we performed on tour.

DELLAIRA: Do you still?

B EGLARIAN: We haven't been performing as Twisted Tutu in the last couple of years. Both of us ended up focussed on other projects and haven't gone back to it. But for a while, Twisted Tutu was my main expression as a performer, unless you count Hildegurls. We also commissioned and worked with other composers, so that was also the first time I was performing other people's work rather than my own work. Unless you count Que, the rock band.

DELLAIRA: That must have been an education.

BEGLARIAN: Yeah. You start performing other people's work and you really understand what it is to be a performer and what it means for a composer to be generous to a performer, and how your attitude to the composer shifts on the basis of little tiny things like whether they tweaked Finale to be readable or not...

DELLAIRA: Well your relationships with performers goes all the way back to childhood.

BEGLARIAN: Yes! I think I've always gotten along well with performers and have done pretty well with that relationship. Also, my day job, which is directing actors, gave me all sorts of skills for dealing with actors that I have then applied for dealing with musicians.

DELLAIRA: You should explain that.

BEGLARIAN: Right around the time I was producing records for CRI, a friend of mine was working at a company that was producing books on tape. And this was right at the beginning of the commercial blossoming of books on tape as a category. And they were looking for producers at that time and she said you're a producer, send in your resume, and I said, "Yeah, but I'm a producer of beep-klonk academic music! What do I know about producing *How To Meet and Marry a Rich Man?*, because the first ones were self-help cassettes and in fact they weren't scripted. You'd go in and interview the author and then splice it all together. I sent in my resume and they started hiring me as a producer. And that's how I got involved in that as my day job, which has been for 15 years a really, really great side gig.

DELLAIRA: You said you were working with actors?

BEGLARIAN: After about three years it stopped being about self-help. It was actually fiction, and an actor would be hired to read the book. Usually abridged, but now the ones I do tend to be unabridged. So basically there's no rehearsal, no preparation: I read the book, the actor reads the book, the actor shows up, we shake hands, sit down and start recording. My job as producer and director is to create an environment where the actor can do his or her best work. It's a directing job ...

DELLAIRA: ...from a studio booth ...

BEGLARIAN: Right, and it's not about movement. It's all about building a relationship.

DELLAIRA: And it's all about listening.

BEGLARIAN: Yes. And about figuring out what the actor needs to do a better job. And the way you talk to actors is very different from the norms of how you talk to musicians. You certainly don't say "can you pace this a little slower here?" That's just simply not the way you go about doing it, even if what you want is for them to pace it a little slower, you approach it from the conceptual point of view of what is it you're trying to achieve, and then they read it slower because they understand it differently. It's a totally enjoyable task and completely dependent on the inter-personal relationship that gets built in five minutes, because you don't have any time to get to know the person beforehand. But that way of working, to me, is a much more satisfying way of working with performers as well. Because I'm not really interested in saying to the bassoon player "can you give me a more incisive attack on the downbeat", you know, because it seems to me that if the performer understands why I would want a more incisive attack on the downbeat, he's going to do that in a way more interesting and compelling way. Plus, he may have methods of achieving what it is I'm really looking for I don't know anything about.

DELLAIRA: That's great. You touched briefly on Hildegurls, though that really isn't an ongoing thing. It was a frame around the other kinds of performing you were doing.

BEGLARIAN: Exactly, yes, it was at a whole different level. That was probably the most ambitious performing I've done. And also the intensity of the collaboration, with three different composers and the director.

DELLAIRA: It got a lot of nice attention. Can you give the reader who doesn't know what this was a sentence or two?

BEGLARIAN: Well it was based on the *Ordo Virtutum* of Hildegard, which in some sense can be seen as the first Western opera, because it's completely through-composed by Hildegard, and it has a dramatic trajectory.

So we decided to do a version for the millennium, where each of the four of us took a different section and created our own electronic support for the piece, and then we were the performers. The person who did the section played the protagonist – the soul – who is on this journey. And so it fragments the narrative because the protagonist changes from section to section and at different times those of us who aren't the soul play either the Virtues or the Devils. It's fun to do as a performer because you switch from being a Virtue to a Devil and then you're the Soul.

DELLAIRA: It was directed by Grethe Holby?

BEGLARIAN: Yes. Grethe turned it into a real production.

DELLAIRA: So now you're really well past the point where pieces holding up under analysis is significant, the academy is a fairly distant, and perhaps pleasant, memory. Do you feel that distance between, what is called in New York anyway, uptown (academic) and downtown?

BEGLARIAN: I think that the values that are assumed and embodied by current academic music are dangerous, for the following reasons: that world thinks of itself as the inheritance of the tradition of Western classical music. If you believe that the 12-tone system ensured the supremacy of German music for the next 100 years, and that when Boulez says that Schoenberg is dead that Boulez is now the king, and if you buy into that progressive notion of the development of art – that this builds on this builds on this – you're frozen into a relation to great masterworks and the whole complex of art-making that is inherently destructive to your ability to make work. Because that's just way too many big burdens to take on when you're trying to sit down and write a piece. Whereas being part of the downtown ethos does not lay those burdens to anywhere near the same intensity, and the burdens it lays are lightly carried. Which is, "yeah, we stand apart, our hero is Harry Partch the hobo." That's a pretty comfortable burden to take on, and in fact a rather romantic burden, because I don't notice myself riding the rails and living as outside the structure as he did. Or any of the rest of us for that matter. But I'm very much aware that something about the myth of this downtown music is extremely desirable, even to the heart of academe: I mean you've got the Sonic Boom Festival happening at The Knitting Factory, you've got Fred Sherry performing at The Cutting Room with Derek Bermel; the bastions for uptown can't wait to perform in some little club where they serve drinks. So I feel if I'm going to be ghettoized in any community, I might as well be ghettoized in the one that romanticizes oppositionalism.

DELLAIRA: Oppositionalism isn't the same as Overstepping, though they're often related. What boundaries are you looking to overstep now? Is there something out there, or in you, that you feel is limiting, holding you back, needs to be overstepped?

BEGLARIAN: ...I'm not articulate about this yet, but I feel like the idea of classical music is obviously in severe crisis, in terms of being able to imagine a category and a community and a branch of the arts. Not just new music, but all of classical music.

DELLAIRA: All music appears to be in crisis.

BEGLARIAN: Yes, commercial music is in a crisis as well, although for different reasons and I'm not sure the two crises are related. It's hard for me to know that right now. That's one of the things I'm really tentative about. And so I think the overstepping that needs to be done, not just by me but by everyone, is to rethink what the place of music is in our lives and in our culture. Because something is deeply not right.

DELLAIRA: I'm thinking of your *Book of Days*, both literally and metaphorically, as a way of introducing music into daily life.

BEGLARIAN: Yes, the idea for the *Book of Days* is that of a commonplace book, of a daily experience, of a daily centering experience. And I guess because I find that idea really pleasurable – I started making the book as an actual book about 15 years ago, not a music web site – and the idea of it being an Internet project was appealing. It might be the default page on your browser. I have a question about whether the Internet is the right way of presenting the project, simply because I know I myself tend not to be very patient with time-based artwork on the internet. There's something about sitting in front of your computer in your browser that makes you want to be the engine of time, rather than letting something else take control of that.

DELLAIRA: The idea is that each day there will be a QuickTime movie and music on a different piece of text?

B EGLARIAN: Ultimately there will be a movie for each day, so there will be a visual component as well as an audio one. Right now those things that are up are just audio. Each day has a piece and you can go and experience the piece for that day. It's under ten minutes long and it's a piece for mulling over – I hesitate to say meditation because there's nothing organized about that, it's not like it's based on any tradition of meditation in any way – but that in a sense gives you a particular perspective to help you make sense of the day.

DELLAIRA: It's a wonderful idea. It's difficult to conceive and realize pieces that are very much of the time, that seem free of historical baggage.

B EGLARIAN: Being in our time, I'm very much aware that there's a really spiritual component to the best music, whether it's overtly spiritual or not. And I guess that's what art is. To not run away from that or feel weird and icky about that seems to me a prime step in making sense of what place music is supposed to have in our lives.

DELLAIRA: I asked Francis Thorne what he's doing now that he wouldn't have imagined doing 20 years ago. He's going to be 80 this year, so the question had a different significance than if I asked you the same question. In your case it's fairly easy: nothing you're doing now could you have imagined 20 years ago! So I'll ask the question in reverse: looking back 20 years, is there anything that you were doing that shocks you now?

B EGLARIAN: Then?

DELLAIRA: Yes.

B EGLARIAN: That's a great question. Most of it, I suppose! If you look at what I'm doing now – you're the one that mentioned Cal Arts before – in some way I don't know why I didn't think of that myself. It's not like I didn't know what Cal Arts was – Morton Subotnick met with my father...(pauses) I'm not sure this is exactly an answer to your question, but one of the things I notice about myself – and maybe especially in the context of your overarching theme of Overstepping – is that I think of overstepping as a conscious act. One sets out to burst the boundaries, and in certain ways I'm realizing that I recognize in myself an odd kind of passivity that ends up engendering a kind of overstepping, but not because I put on my breast plate and my sword and set out to burst the boundaries, but more like I find myself in a particular situation and so I do my best to function in that situation. And when things that I'm doing extrude out beyond what the situation will permit, I find that I'm in some other situation.

DELLAIRA: You describe that in a strange way: as if you find yourself in situations, rather than putting yourself in them.

B EGLARIAN: True. I mean one does, but in fact ... for example: in the early 80's this guy called me up from a company called the New York Greek Drama Company, and what he wanted to do was reconstruct ancient Greek theater in as scholarly and authentic a way as he possibly could. He was a man with a mission. And so I became the composer for the New York Greek Drama Company and we did various productions that were various attempts to do that. And then he got the idea that Beijing Opera was the closest contemporary manifestation of the values that are also shared by ancient Greek theater. So he hired me to write the music for a production of *The Bacchae* done by the Beijing National Opera Company. And it was directed by Chen Shi Zheng. And so we all went to Beijing and we made this version of *The Bacchae*, which was a big deal in Beijing. What that did was introduce me to Chen Shi Zheng, and a whole world of music theater made working from traditional Asian music. And I ended up participating in various productions, residencies, and workshops --- so I've done lots of work now in Asian music and theater and working with traditional Asian music, theater and dance. And it's hardly like I woke up morning and said, "Chinese opera is the answer to my next aesthetic question." Not at all. It just landed in my lap. And I took the ball... No, it's more like: this is the task that has shown up and now I'm going to throw myself into this and learn everything and contribute in whatever way I can. And that's what I mean when I say I regard myself in some ways as sort of passive. Because if that chain of events hadn't happened I wouldn't be working with Asian music now.

DELLAIRA: Right. But what you haven't mentioned are probably the thousands of other situations you found yourself in, the thousands of other potential paths you never took. So you made choices.

B EGLARIAN: Yes. But it's sort of like ... I have this picture that other people wake up in the morning with a very clear set of goals of what they want to do. In some sense, I don't really have that. I want to do interesting things, and a lot of things are interesting. And if something shows up that's interesting I want to throw myself into that. And if it didn't show up, I don't know that I would seek it out, because enough interesting things are showing up that I just do what shows up. So right now I'm working with Mabou Mines on a really cool production. But Mabou Mines has been around for 30 years. Would I have ever gone to them and said, "here's my music, would you consider working with me?" I would never have done that. What I'm aware of is the sense of how fate is so central to how my life gets constructed. It's not a matter of asserting my vision of what I want to do and, as I say, donning the breastplate and the sword, and going off to capture it.

DELLAIRA: But it's not like if anybody showed up and said, "Would you like to do this?" You're going...

B EGLARIAN: ... to say yes to everything.

DELLAIRA: Right. There's something going on inside you that results in a "yes." The yes is a choice. The opportunity may be fate, but there are opportunities literally...

B EGLARIAN: ... at every juncture.

DELLAIRA: So you're not really like a leaf being blown by the wind. The leaf has no choice.

B EGLARIAN: You think I'm making up a crazy story here!?

DELLAIRA: No. In fact you've almost convinced me you're right. I notice an obsession these days with the term "cutting edge." I'm wondering whether that term has any meaning for you, how you'd define it, and whether you think overstepping has anything to do with cutting edge. "Overstepping," to me, seems like a personal thing -- one oversteps one's own personal boundaries or limitations. Whereas "cutting edge" deals with artworks, which may or may not have anything to do with one's own personal challenges.

B EGLARIAN: I have two things to say. One is a quotation in my *Book of Days*. It's from Joni Mitchell. She said you can't be concerned about being hip, because hip is a herd mentality. So the minute you're trying to be hip (and this is not directly her quote) you are, by definition, not hip. Because what is really hip is something uniquely personal and self-generated, and if you're concerned about being hip then you're part of a herd and can not, by any stretch of the imagination, be hip. And it reminds me of something I said -- which was kind of mean, but I felt it to be true -- someone was telling me about something they'd seen on MSNBC, and she said, "It was pretty cutting edge." And I said, "Once something is on television, it is by definition *not* cutting edge, as far as I'm concerned." Those things being said, I have never in my life thought that I had to do something new, or different, or cutting edge. I had a conducting teacher one summer, before I studied with Jacques Monod, who was an opera conductor in Los Angeles named Hans Beer, one of the many émigrés I was talking about earlier, and in my very first lesson with him he said the first thing I'm going to tell you is that you should never worry about being original. Ever. The last thing on your mind should be trying to come up with a new way of doing something. If you do it as fully as you can do it, it will be, by definition, original, because you, a unique individual, are doing it. And it was a really good lesson. But it relates to another issue: ambition. Something I really learned from working with Stephen King, the world's best-selling novelist.

DELLAIRA: You're writing an opera based on one of his stories. You know him, I assume, from producing his books on tape?

B EGLARIAN: Yes, for ten years. And I'm really grateful to him for giving me the rights for the opera. It is perfectly clear that Stephen King wakes up in the morning and addresses his own personal obsessions. And when he publishes his books and they sell billions of copies, it is not because he's consciously calibrated his mindset to the preoccupations of mass-culture, but simply that his preoccupations, passions and interests happen to speak to those billions of buyers. He would never have been successful if he'd woken up in the morning trying to address those people. And that's how I feel about what I do. I'm trying to express what's important to me, and my belief is that if I do that really well and really powerfully, it's likely to speak to others as well. It doesn't seem to me, based on my own history, that it's likely to speak to those same billions of record buyers.

But that's because my preoccupations, interests and compulsions happen not to line up with that many people, but maybe just thousands. It's not that I would object to having billions of listeners -- not in any way ever -- it's just that I'm fully convinced that there is no way I can court those billions, but only that I can do what's important to me. And that's my only hope as an artist. The minute you're concerned with making something successful you are doomed to failure. And the same is true about cutting edge. Cutting edge is a subset of that. The minute you're concerned about making something cutting edge you're going to make something stupid, as far as I'm concerned. You don't have the right relation -- to put it in Buddhist terms -- to your goal, so you're never going to achieve it.

DELLAIRA: Having the right relation to one's goal is, perhaps, difficult enough, but sticking with it, maintaining that relationship, can be really difficult, especially if times get tough. Which reminds me of a question I wanted to ask. You have a piece, *Preciosilla*, based on a Gertrude Stein text. Stein, as you may know, also was interested in studying the brain and even went to medical school. But she had a vision of her writing, a relation to her goal, and then stuck to it even when most everyone around her was telling her it was junk. I was wondering if Stein was in any way a model for you, since there are those parallels.

BEGLARIAN: I love the idea that you see a parallel, since I really look up to and respect not just her work but her life. It raises another issue, that of quote unquote gayness. In a funny way it's sort of like if that's the life you choose in your personal life it's perhaps easier to choose it in your professional life as well. Once you've made the decision to not worry about the norms too terribly much, then you can make that decision in all areas of your life, simultaneously, and it doesn't cost particularly more to do that. It goes back to your cutting edge question, since it's not so much a matter of putting on the breast plate and sword: being gay is not about politics, except insofar as how it's understood externally. Internally you're just doing what feels like the right thing to do; it's not like you woke up one morning and said, "I want to break down the barriers."

DELLAIRA: That amplifies your previous statements about making conscious attempts to be cutting edge rather than something that's internal, which is how I see Overstepping.

BEGLARIAN: Yes, and the full line of the Rilke is "and it is in overstepping that he obeys." That's the whole point. It's not like he's trying to disobey, he is obeying. I'm still being a straight-A student as best I can!

## Authors

MARK ALBURGER began playing the oboe and composing in association with Dorothy and James Freeman, George Crumb, and Richard Wernick. He studied with Karl Kohn at Pomona College; Joan Panetti and Gerald Levinson at Swarthmore College (B.A.); Jules Langert at Dominican College (M.A.); Roland Jackson at Claremont Graduate University (Ph.D.); and Terry Riley. An ASCAP composer, Alburger writes for *Commuter Times*, teaches at Diablo Valley College, and is published by New Music. He is Editor-Publisher of 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC, and has interviewed numerous composers, including Charles Amirkhanian, Henry Brant, Earle Brown, Philip Glass, Lou Harrison, Alan Hovhaness, Meredith Monk, Pauline Oliveros, Steve Reich, and Frederick Rzewski.

DAVID CLEARY's music has been played throughout the U.S. and abroad, including performances at Tanglewood and by Alea II and Dinosaur Annex. A member of Composers in Red Sneaker, he has won many awards and grants, including the Harvey Gaul Contest, an Ella Lyman Cabot Trust Grant, and a MacDowell residence. He is a staff critic for *The New Music Connoisseur* and 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC. His article on composing careers is published by Gale Research and he has contributed CD reviews to the latest *All Music Guide to Rock*. His music appears on the Centaur and Vienna Modern Masters labels, and his bio may be found in many *Who's Who* books.

MICHAEL DELLAIRA is a composer and lives in New York City. *Five*, a CD of his recent music has just been released by Albany Records, and Act I of his opera *Chéri* was recently given readings with both music-theater and opera casts under the auspices of The Center for Contemporary Opera at Lincoln Center. He is an associate editor of *New Music Connoisseur* and, since 1993, the Vice President of the American Composers Alliance, the oldest composer's service organization in the U.S.

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ANTON ROVNER was born in Moscow, Russia, in 1970 and has lived in the United States since 1974. He studied piano at the Manhattan School of Music, Preparatory Division, then, composition at the Juilliard School, Pre-College Division, with Andrew Thomas and the Juilliard School (undergraduate and graduate programs) with Milton Babbitt, graduating in 1993 with an MM. In 1998 he received a Ph.D. degree from Rutgers University, where he studied with Charles Wuorinen. Rovner received a BMI Award in 1989 and an IREX Grant in 1989-1990. He attended the Estherwood Music Festival studying composition with Eric Ewazen. He studied music theory at Columbia University with Joseph Dubiel for two years. Since 1992 he is the artistic director of the Bridge Contemporary Music Series. His music has been performed in New York, Moscow, Paris, Kiev, Lvov, Kazan, Nizhni-Novgorod, Chisinau, and Bucharest. He has participated and his music has been performed in such music concerts and festivals as the Composers' Concordance contemporary music series in New York, the Moscow Autumn Music Festival, the Alternativa festival in Moscow, the International Forum for Young Composers in Kiev, the Nicolai Roslavetz Music Festival in Bryansk, Russia, the 3rd International Contemporary Music Festival Europe-Asia in Kazan, Russia, the Contrasts festival in Lvov, and the Moscow Forum/Dutch-Russian Music Festival in Moscow. His theoretical articles, interviews with various composers and reviews of contemporary music concerts and festivals have been published in such music journals as *Myzykal'naya Akademiya* and 21ST-CENTURY MUSIC. He is a member of the American Music Center and the Composers' Guild of New Jersey.

# Concert Reviews

## Kazan (or Thereabouts) IV

### ANTON ROVNER

*Europe-Asia Festival*. April 17, 2000, Nizhekamsk, Russia.

The final concert of the festival took place not in Kazan but in a smaller city in Tatarstan, Nizhnekamsk, one of the centers of oil business of the Republic of Tatarstan. The concert in the evening of April 17 took place in the Concert Hall of the Nizhnekamsk Music College, and was led by esteemed musicologist Alexander Maklygin.

Zubarzhat Sadykova presented a selection from her opera *Tatar Kyzy* for soprano and piano, sung by soprano Indira Temirkhanova, with the composer at the piano. This was a Romantic, epic piece, with a moderately chromatic tonal harmonic language and a plaintive, lyrical mood and it showed the deep enrootedness of the composer in her native Tatar musical and literary traditions.

Charles Ives's *Three-Page Sonata*, was performed for a second time by Joshua Pierce, who took a somewhat more rational and cerebral approach to interpreting it this time, while maintaining all the brilliance of his technique.

*Sage*, by Dinu Ghezzu, was performed by violinist Asya Murtazina. The piece was not very typical of Ghezzu's style, since it was a modal, lyrical piece with a moderate amount of chromatic alterations. It was moderately virtuosic, and contained a reserved type of expressiveness, which manifested itself, among other ways, in a fair share of expressively sounding double-stops. The second part of the piece was pronouncedly livelier than the first, essentially presenting itself as an Allegro. The violinist brilliantly brought out the piece's expressive and virtuosic qualities.

A world premiere of the writer's *Johnny Spielt Auf* for solo bassoon, was performed by Johnny Reinhard. The piece, which contained a fair share of microtones and a few theatrical gestures, such as singing by the bassoonist, playing on the keys of the instruments, and doing a theatrical gesture of the performer's own choice, was masterfully performed by Reinhard, who met all the technical challenges of the piece and artistically brought out both the lyrical qualities and the theatrical gestures of the piece.

Next, Reinhard performed his own *Dune*, which, written on the theme of a science fiction novel by Frank Herbert, displayed an assortment of new techniques for the instruments and used these techniques in an expressive way, governed by a well-built form. The performance was just as brilliant as that of the previous piece and just as well-received by the audience.

Pianist Tomoko Mukaiyama, performed Toek Nyman's *Tuweel (Velvet)*, an energetic, virtuosic piece, which utilized greatly an assortment of heavily percussive rhythms and vibrant neo-classical textures. A great portion of the beginning of the piece involved a very percussive-type repetition of one chord, while the end of the piece was quieter and sparse.

Violinist Elena Ergiev and bayan player Ivan Ergiev performed another piece by Astor Piazzolla, called *Tango Dedicated to Mstislav Rostropovich*. Once again, this was a light music, pleasant and easy. It recalled sentimental movie music of older films from the 1950's, and contained some extensive musical development, adorned with some tonally complex modulations as well as some exquisite glissandi for the violin.

Anne Pajunen Lindmann and Evgeny Mikhailov performed *Two Songs for Soprano and Piano* by Arne Mellnaes, which were extremely soft and intricately delicate with gentle atonal harmonies. Rashid Kalimoullin's *Fantasy No. 2*, performed by clarinetist Philip Bashor, was a moderately lyrical, modal piece, starting with a distinct melodic segment of a folk-music type of contour, which was then sequentially repeated and then elaborately developed in a very harmonious manner. The frequent sequential repetitions brought a certain amount of dramatic intensity to the piece and helped sustain its overall lyrical mood.

Just as a few of the previous concerts, this concert ended with another performance by electric guitarist Enver Izmailov, who entertained with his brilliant performance of an assortment of ethnic and folk musics, bringing in elements of jazz, blues, and rock. His playing included some overtly extended techniques for the instruments including some virtuosic non-pitched percussive effects as well as a few distinctly comical effects, such as almost literal imitations of airplanes, cats, cows, sheep and pigs in one number called *The Kolkhoz (Collective Farm) named after Lenin*, both the title of which and the comical effects greatly amused the audience who cheered, yelled, whistled and raved after each number and demanded more music from him. His performance brought the concert and the whole festival to a triumphant conclusion.

*The 2000 Europe-Asia Festival* in Kazan and Nizhnekamsk was of great merit and very successful in bringing together a wide variety of highly qualified musicians from Europe, USA, and Japan.

## The Span of American Classicism

### DAVID CLEARY

Longitude presents *American Classicism: 20th-21st Centuries*. March 5, 2002, Pickman Hall, Longy School, Cambridge, MA.

A not uncommon generalization made about composers of the last hundred years or so is that they routinely turn their backs on traditional ways of constructing pieces. Like most truisms, however, one needn't search very far to find exceptions. Longitude's most recent concert devoted itself solely to selections that employ formats originating many centuries prior to our own; fugues, sonatas, variation sets, and song cycles were the rule here.

Major-name composers presented the two best offerings tonight. In addition to Gunther Schuller's fine *Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano* (1999), reviewed here numerous times before, the *Mirabai Songs* (1985) by John Harbison were heard. While one can ascertain Stravinsky's influence on this cycle—particularly in the work's relatively consonant harmonies and angular rhythmic bustle—no discriminating listener can miss Harbison's personal sense of characterization and dramatic flow. This is highly personable stuff of significant distinction, subtly lending an Eastern flavor to these Indian poems without overt references to that country's music. And despite the presence of a large ensemble employed in colorful, full-textured fashion, one always hears the vocalist clearly.

*Octet Variations* (2001) by Vartan Aghababian, sporting intricate program notes nearly as extensive as the work itself, shows its student composer eminently capable of writing felicitously for large chamber groups and providing an effective backdrop for dancers. With its heavy reliance on tonal idioms, particularly octatonic and whole tone configurations, the shadows of Debussy and early Stravinsky loom large here. Not that there's anything wrong with this, of course—though one might have preferred a less block like approach to the variation concept. Nevertheless, it suggests good things to come for this young tonemeister. John Crawford's *Prelude, Fugue, and Meditation* (1987) for string quartet proved less successful. Regrettably, its multifaceted harmonic language, evoking comparisons to such items as Webern's Opus 5 quartet and Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* as well as more triadic compositions, seems inconsistent rather than deftly handled. And the rhythms, textures, and melodic lines employed are for the most part square and predictable.



## Foss at 80

### DAVID CLEARY

Alea III presents *An American Master: Lukas Foss*. March 20, Tsai Performance Center, Boston University, Boston, MA.

"Do your own thing" is a now well-worn phrase that originated in the 1960s. The oeuvre of Lukas Foss began illustrating this singular principle many years prior to that decade and continues to do so today. Alea III's concert in celebration of this master tonemeister's 80th birthday drew upon numerous choice examples of the concept.

To all outward appearances, the *Oboe Concerto* (1948, rev. 1958) might seem to be an exception -- but the label sticks just as well here. Thoroughly neoclassic in approach, the work is fresh and personal, simultaneously exhibiting the well-spoken charm of Poulenc and the sturdy integrity of Hindemith while avoiding the former's frothiness and the latter's stodginess. It sounds like nothing else from that era and pleases greatly in the bargain. *Introductions and Good-Byes* (1959), a nine-minute opera that sets a libretto by Gian Carlo Menotti, is a delightful subversion of such light stage fare as Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti* and Menotti's *The Telephone*. Concerning itself with the brief depiction of a martini-guzzling cocktail party host, this work hijacks the expected pandiatonic sound world into pointillist and more clangorous realms. The result proves simultaneously effervescent and substantial.

Foss describes *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (1978) as "an odd combination of the tonal lyricism of my early music and experimental sonorities and procedures of my recent work." While subtle vestiges of mid century consonance are apparent, particularly in the vocal writing, the predominant impression left by this composition is one of avant-garde risk-taking. Liberal employment of indeterminate notation as well as extended techniques such as color fingerings and air whooshes in the flute, Aeolian harp effects and other inside-the-piano items in the keyboard, and spoken dialogue and echo effects in the voice show this worthy piece to be forward thinking indeed. And *Solo Observed* (1981), an energetic toccata for piano (given this evening in a version enhanced by cello, vibraphone, and small electric organ), dips its toes in the waters of serialism and process music without wholeheartedly swimming in either idiom.

Performances were for most part strong and convincing. One should enthusiastically cite oboist Peggy Pearson (who played with a huge tone, scintillating technique, and excellent sense of line in the *Concerto*) and baritone Mark Aliapoulos (whose substantial voice, solid diction, and jovial stage presence enlivened *Introductions*) for their excellent work. Soprano Sarah L. Davis, the on-stage soloist in *Blackbird*, seemed a bit more tentative in pitch and enunciation but generally proved acceptable. Theodore Antoniou's conducting was both clean and mindful of the music's subtleties. And Foss himself gave a fine accounting of the busy piano part in *Solo Observed*.

## Vernal Equinox

### GLENN GENTRY

*The Music of Mark Francis*. March 21, Municipal Art Gallery, Jackson, MS.

When one considers the works of a newly-encountered composer, one is tempted to say that they are reminiscent of some other. We will (with one exception) resist that temptation, because it makes thoughtful analysis too easy.

All the pieces on Mark Francis's recital of March 21 at the Municipal Art Gallery in Jackson (MS), were relatively short -- some very short indeed. This had the advantage of presenting the composer's ideas individually. One that stood out was the use of an ostinato-like figure in the low range, using fourths and fifths, with a melodic figure in the upper range. Another was the sequential contrast between dissonance and consonance.

Francis's music is tonal, and departures from familiar harmonies were followed by returns. Overall, his approach is generally economical, with very effective and interesting variations. Four pieces deserve special comment.

The second of the *Five Dialogues* (played by Ty and Julie Maisel) did recall Peter Schickele (a.k.a. P.D.Q. Bach) and could have been subtitled *For Two Unfriendly Instruments*. The Emily Dickinson song *Pursuing You* actually did have a relentless rhythm (provided by the guitar) appropriate to pursuit, and the setting of *Now I Lay Thee Down To Sleep* was very tender. The four-movement, *Serenade* (for flute, viola and cello), was on a larger scale, and left listeners wishing for even more.

A word about the performers -- Sandra Polanski (piano), Ty Maisel (violin and viola), Shawn Balentine (soprano), Andrew Yoder and Stephanie Garret (cello), Julie Maisel (flute), and Francis himself (guitar). Were I the composer, I think I would be very pleased!

## Rostropovich at 75

### DAVID CLEARY

Boston Symphony Orchestra *Celebrating Mstislav Rostropovich's 75th Birthday*. April 4, Symphony Hall, Boston, MA. Through April 6.

One sometimes encounters senior citizen virtuosi trotting themselves out on stage to give performances that reveal them to be well below their prime -- but fortunately, that is not the case with every old-timer. It is a pleasure to report here that the great cellist Mstislav Rostropovich appears to have lost very little indeed off his proverbial fastball, even at the age of 75. His appearance at the April 6 Boston Symphony concert, one of the few remaining such events to be led by outgoing music director Seiji Ozawa, was a triumph.

Rostropovich has had a long history of championing new works for his instrument in addition to presenting standard repertoire. Eric Tanguy's *Cello Concerto No. 2* (2000) is the latest in a long line of such recent compositions. One can understand those aspects of it that might appeal to a world-class cellist: the soloist's line is a busy one kept very much to the fore, challenging to play yet containing a certain level of aural appeal. And the harmonic language employed is essentially a tonal one, though dissonant enough in certain ways so as not to seem anachronistic. Your reviewer found the piece lacking in other ways, however. The cello part, while idiomatically written for the instrument, seems stuck in an expressively lyric rut that palls after three movements (the finale bringing a long overdue dose of zippy energy to the proceedings). Movement structure is not well delineated, melodic material tends to lack distinction, and the orchestration, while not usually covering the soloist, is rather pedestrian, generally proving wan and colorless. The performance, however, was excellent. Rostropovich's playing was splendid, exhibiting excellent bow control, a wide dynamic palette, secure left hand technique, and a juicy, beautiful tone quality. The orchestral backing, judiciously led by Ozawa, strove mightily to be supportive while staying under its distinguished guest—and succeeded nicely.

The other recent selection given this evening was one written specially for its illustrious conductor. John Williams's *for Seiji!* (1999) is an intriguing piece to come from this composer's pen, much more clangorous than his much vaunted film scores yet still grounded in a tonal ethos. Finding a viable midpoint between the concert overture and concerto-for-orchestra genres (being a rousing curtain raiser that spotlights numerous solo players and instrumental sections), it holds together quite well despite a somewhat nebulous sense of form.

And as one might expect, the scoring is showy and most effective. It's a solid outing well worth listening to more than once. Ozawa coaxed a highly demonstrative performance from the group

Congratulations go out to the Orchestra and Ozawa for their able playing. And bravos come from this corner to Rostropovich, whose virtuosity betrays little sign of encroaching years

# Tick-Talk

## THOMAS GOSS

Paul Dresher's *Sound Stage*. April 26, Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco, CA.

The contemporary-music reviewer must be more than just knowledgeable about music in order to provide commentary nowadays. Touches of scientist, architect, choreographer, cultural historian are necessary, and it doesn't hurt to have a degree in engineering, either. Composer Paul Dresher's latest collaboration with director Rinde Eckert proved the point. Generically titled *Sound Stage*, it combined elements of drama, motion, art installation, spatial inhabitation, and instrument-building in an unforgettable lecture-demonstration on basic acoustic principles.

This was more of a show about than of music, and it was a bit of a stretch. But a fun one. The 75-minute work was rife with episodes of inspired jamming which evolved seamlessly from the structure of the theatrics. The four members of Zeitgeist sawed on stray strings, massaged 70-foot wires with rosined gloves, tapped the floor (and each other) with long, resonant tubes, all alternating their action and focus of attention between two points. One was the rather bookish, sweetly geeky figure of Dresher outlining principles of sound phenomena on a chalkboard. The other was the awesome presence of the instrument, a 17-foot high behemoth with swinging pendula. This piece of instrument design challenged P.D.Q. Bach's *Hardart* (of his *Concerto for Horn and Hardart*) for the number of sounds it could produce. Strung like a zither across one face, festooned with percussive objects on the other, it proved an irresistible target for plunks, thwacks and bonks, all of which could be activated by the slow, stately swings of the rotating bars.

As the piece evolved, Dresher came down off of his podium to join Zeitgeist in the process of musical interaction. Each acoustic principle would be humorously explored, then realized as a moment of tonal ecstasy. The mechanics of sound moving down a tube would somehow end up as a long solo for Patrick O'Keefe on bass clarinet, eventually joined by other tubular instruments like a marimba. The vibration of a taut string was analyzed, then demonstrated by the fluid and evocative fiddling of Yuri Merzhevsky. The studies in periodicity and musical motion were spooky and energetic, with percussionist Heather Barringer doing a pas-de-trois with two flashlights. And the antics would always merge into heartfelt sessions with all five musicians exploring the conceptual themes through Dresher's compositions.

But the success of the demonstration hinged on its overall identity as a piece of music. The form was impeccable. There were preludes, codas, culminations, suspense, release. Developments of concept and musical theme caught my ear and held it with a tight if indulgent grip. The style seems to be simultaneously more casual and intense than Dresher's previous works, as if the composer is finding a way to combine the many directions to which his muse has been tempted into one esthetic with its own logical center of gravity. And yet it was also first-class fun, and educational to boot. At the close, the audience was invited to come down and have a try on all of the installed musical objects. It is then that the revelation of the power of this music to hypnotize and enchant became clear. Many of the audience were children, who had remained silent and attentive throughout the entire hour and a quarter. They lost no time in giving the instrument a try, and soon the application of musical fascination by adults and children filled the Yerba Buena Forum with a delightful cacophony. And I was quick to join in the fray.

## Dinosaur Voice and Vision

### DAVID CLEARY

*Voice and Vision*, with Dinosaur Annex Music Ensemble. April 28, First and Second Church, Boston, MA.

Of all orchestral members, arguably the most denigrated is the viola; large ensemble pieces from the prior three centuries commonly employ it to play dull filler material, and web sites abound brimming with jokes making fun of its players. This evening's concert, spotlighting Dinosaur Annex's resident violist Anne Black, effectively made a case for taking this much-maligned instrument very seriously, being a splendid listening experience that featured accomplished playing and much excellent music.

Best piece in show by a mouse's whisker was Elizabeth Maconchy's *Five Sketches* (1984) for solo viola. These are moderate length character pieces of immense appeal—well made, nicely paced, eloquently spoken, and loaded with variety while never unfocused in idea. Faint hints of ragtime, folk song, and blues perfume its predominantly dissonant sound world without seeming out of place. And the instrumental writing is simultaneously challenging and idiomatic. It's a first-class listen.

Husband-and-wife-composers Robert Cogan and Pozzi Escot also provided memorable program fare. The latter's gritty and compelling *Mirabilis* (1990) builds its second and third movements on the backs of their predecessors, each prior section being captured on tape and played back with live solo viola overlay. Structurally, the piece comes across as a set of variations, but Escot goes further here, wringing significant contrast from each movement—the opener is best described as legato pointillism, the middle movement adds in bravura chordal figures that impart feisty verve, and the finale interweaves a clever variant of canonic writing that results in a texture that is nervously busy but never clogged—while imposing a larger feel for structure. *From Two Williams Folios: Fierce Singleness/Events Dancing* (1995), like all of Cogan's mature work, consists of a collection of events that can be included, omitted, or reordered as the performers see fit. Scored for clarinet, viola, and piano, it's a felicitous and effective mating of West Coast sonic experimentation and clangorous East Coast harmony, much enjoyed.

Jeff Nichols was represented by two works, one listed in the program, the other presented as an encore. Reading the program notes on the solo viola entry *A Metaphysician in the Dark* (2002) might lead one to believe that a haphazardly constructed piece will be encountered, but Nichols is too fine a craftsman to allow this to occur. Despite a highly fractured sense of unfolding, the level of discourse is always cogent and likeable and the overall architecture is solidly grounded.

Setting a text by Frank O'Hara and scored for viola, clarinet, piano, and reciter, *I Am Not a Painter* (1990) comes across as an affectionate spoof of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, laden as it is with odd literary imagery and post-Expressionist musical gestures. It's delightful fun to experience. *Duo '97* for clarinet and viola by Ezra Sims is a reworking of an older piece for alto voice and cello by this composer. Based on rhythmic speech patterns heard in a reading of poetry by Gertrude Stein, it handles its microtonal pitch language in sinuous, oozing fashion. While sonically attractive, structurally it comes across as being somewhat diffuse, relying perhaps a bit too heavily on long-range vocal constructs that don't translate so well in musical terms. John Hawkins's introspective viola/piano duo *Urizen* (1983) is an odd entity, juxtaposing melodic material built from chromatic interlocking major and minor seconds against lush Debussy-like non-functional triads; somehow, even in this age when "anything goes," such a dichotomy seems tough to reconcile. But Paul Hindemith's *Sonata* (1937) for solo viola is a definite keeper from his hard-core later period neoclassic oeuvre. Here, the composer's stodgy, single-minded tendencies are neatly sublimated into a powerfully compelling manner of melodic expression and sturdy, yet fluid formal designs. This is a fine work that shows its sometimes stuffy composer to be on top of his proverbial game.

Black performed excellently, featuring well-grounded finger technique, a carefully controlled right hand (whether engaged in bowing or plucking the strings), confident stage presence, exquisite sensitivity to line and formal balance, and a big, juicy tone quality—clearly among the finest such playing Boston has to offer. Pianist Donald Berman, clarinetist Ian Greitzer, and reciter Greg Koeller assisted splendidly. "Viola power" indeed—this reviewer can be counted as a true believer.

# Calendar

August 1

San Francisco Symphony in Rodrigo's *Conceierto de Aranjuez* and Falla's *Three-Cornered Hat*. San Francisco, CA.

August 2

San Francisco Symphony in Williams's *Harry Potter Suite*, Bernstein's *On the Waterfront*, and Rodgers's *Oklahoma Overture* and *Carousel Waltz*. San Francisco, CA.

Mark Adamo's *Little Women*. Santa Cruz, CA. Through August 4.

August 4

*All About Rouse*. Santa Cruz, CA.

August 10

*Evelyn at the Civic*, with Evelyn Glennie. Michael Daugherty's *Route 66* and *UFO*, plus Steve Reich's *The Four Sections*. Santa Cruz, CA.

Harvard Summer School Orchestra in Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* and Willson's *Symphony No. 2*. Lowell Hall, Cambridge, MA.

# Chronicle

June 1

*Pauline Oliveros 70th-Birthday Festival*. Lorraine Hansberry Theater, San Francisco, CA. Through June 2.

Chen Yi's *Momentum*. Stanford University, CA. Through June 15, Passeur (Germany).

Present Music in Steve Reich's *City Life*, plus music of Jerome Kitzke and Tan Dun. Milwaukee, WI.

Relache in Erling Wold's *Close* and Eve Beglarian's *Machaut a Gogo* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Philadelphia, PA. Repeated June 2.

June 2

*Missing Persons Concert*. Rocco Di Pietro's *Lost*, Brian Casey's *Hymn for the Missing*, Mark Alburger's *San Rafael News*, *Business As Usual*, and *The Wind God* (Harriet March Page), Andrew Shapiro's *Missing Dancers (Piano Etudes)*, and a poem by J.J. Hollingsworth. Goat Hall, San Francisco, CA.

Charles Wuorinen's *Two Machine Portraits*, Jason Eckardt's *Performance*, Wayne Peterson's *Tympan Alley*, and Jo Kondo's *Lotus Dam*. Peter B. Lewis Theater, New York, NY. Repeated June 3. "Eckardt created intricate piano explosions (expertly rendered by Marilyn Nonken) to echo the virtuosic fireworks described in *Performance*" [The New York Times, 6/6/02].

June 3

David Milnes is named Music Director of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. San Francisco, CA.

June 4

Lewis's *Concerto for Six Players*, Simmerud's *Frameworks*, Schimmel's *Empty Worlds*, and Lifchitz's *Yellow Ribbons 37* performed by the North/South Chamber Orchestra. Christ and St. Stephen's Church, New York, NY. "*Empty World* comes from the old Supremes hit, 'My World Is Empty Without You,' but there are also references to Elton John's 'Sixty Years On' and broader allusions to the styles of Bach, Scarlatti and Brahms. . . . *Yellow Ribbons 37* . . . [is c]ast in four movements . . . . "Dance of Hope' is more of a Stravinskian exploration of rhythm than an optimistic celebration. . . . [T]he piece was skillfully composed and included some athletic brass writing" [Allan Kozinn, The New York Times, 6/10/02].

June 5

*The Works Marathon Festival*. Chen Yi's *Qi*. Minneapolis, MN.

June 6

Death of Holly Solomon, of complications from pneumonia, at 68. New York, NY. "In its heyday, the Holly Solomon Gallery represented an eclectic mix of talents, from the video artist Nam June Paik to William Wegman . . . . In 1969, before becoming dealers, Ms. Solomon and her husband, Horace, opened 98 Greene Street Loft, one of the first so-called alternative spaces in New York, where poetry readings, dance performances, concerts and art shows took place. It lasted three years and gave very early exposure to talents like Laurie Anderson [and] Robert Mapplethorpe [Grace Glueck, The New York Times, 6/10/02].

June 7

*Nevada City Composer's Alliance Music Festival*. Nancy Bloomer Deussen's *Piano Trio*. Nevada City, CA.

June 8

*The Works*. A 12-hour music marathon, including John Luther Adams's *roar* from *Mathematics of Resonant Bodies* and Chen Yi's *Qi*. Minneapolis, MN.

June 9

*Avant Garden Party*. Belinda Reynolds's *Coming Around* and Tom Heasley's *Secret Garden*. Pasatiempo Estates, Santa Cruz, CA.

June 10

Gavin Borchert on Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 5*. Seattle, WA.

June 11

Kurt Erickson's *Angels: Fallen and Otherwise*. San Francisco, CA.

June 13

Death of Ralph Shapey (b. Philadelphia, PA), of heart and kidney failure, at 81. Chicago, IL. "[He] combined the astringent angularity and structural rigor of Serialism with a Romantic passion for lush textures, grand gestures and lyrical melodies . . . . [H]e was so embittered by his inability to win a large following in the 1960's that for several years he discouraged performances of his works and claimed that he had abandoned composition. Actually, he continued to compose, and he did nothing to stop performers like the violinist Paul Zukofsky, who ignored the ban. . . . [H]e had works commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Chicago Symphony. Still, he was disappointed never to have won a Pulitzer Prize, for which he was a candidate several times. In 1992 the music jury voted to give him the prize for his hour-long *Concerto Fantastique*. But at the last minute, the Pulitzer board overruled its jury and awarded the prize to Wayne Peterson, another composer with atonal leanings. . . . Soon after he joined the University of Chicago in 1964, he founded the Contemporary Chamber

Ensemble . . . 'Look, I bluntly admit, I hate John Cage and company,' he said in 1981. 'I've conducted that music, but I hate it; I think it's monstrous; I despise it. I really don't love the 12-tone boys, either. They don't love me and I don't love them. But I've done Schoenberg and Babbitt and Carter.' . . . Typically, he would begin a work with a daunting patch of bleakness or angularity, which would gradually and inexorably melt into warm and sometimes tender lyricism. In that regard, Mr. Shapey's personality often seemed directly reflected in his work: beneath a gruff and craggy veneer lurked a Romanticist who would shine through when given the chance. . . . When he was 16 he began conducting the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra . . . . In 1945 he moved to New York to study composition with Stefan Wolpe, a student of Arnold Schoenberg . . . but was also indebted to everything from jazz and Jewish music to the sweeping Romanticism of the late 19th century. . . . [H]e supported himself by teaching at the Third Street Settlement and working as a file clerk. He . . . became friendly with artists like Willem de Kooning . . . . Shapey conducted the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the London Symphony and the London Sinfonietta" [New York Times, 6/14/02].

June 14

*San Francisco Symphony Russian Festival*. N. Tcherepnin's *Le Royaume enchanté* and Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA. Repeated June 15. "Debussy's faun spends his afternoons, if not in this exact locale [Le Yoyaume enchanté], then somewhere not too far off. . . . The contrast with Stravinsky's diamond-hard clarity could hardly have been more marked, and Thomas' vibrant and crisply delineated reading drove the point home" [San Francisco Chronicle, 6/17/02].

Pamela Z and Laetitia Sonami. Dominican College, San Rafael, CA.

June 15

Mick Jagger is knighted, to become Sir Michael Philip Jagger. Harold Pinter receives the prestigious companion of honor award. London, UK.

June 16

Tom Heasley's *On the Sensations of Tone*. Berkeley, CA.

Chen Yi awarded an honorary doctorate. Lawrence University, Appleton, WI.

June 19

*San Francisco Symphony Russian Festival*. Liadov's *Eight Russian Folk Songs* and Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 2*. San Francisco, CA.

June 20

*Electric Words*, with Kyle Gann. Venue 9, San Francisco, CA.

June 21

*NOW Music Festival*, including music of Patti Deuter, Nancy Bloomer Deussen, Melissa Smith, Laurie Amat, Brian Bice, D'Arcy Reynolds, Mark Alburger, Harriet March Page, Thomas Goss, Jim Fox, Stan McDaniel, Alexis Alrich, Tom Heasley, Ric Louchard, Brenda Schuman-Post, and Bruce Salvisberg. 400 Missouri, San Francisco, CA.

*Electric Words*, with Don Buchla. Venue 9, San Francisco, CA.

*San Francisco Symphony Russian Festival*. Shostakovich's *Two Pieces, From Jewish Folk Poetry*, and *Symphony No. 5*. San Francisco, CA.

June 22

*Electric Words*, with Kyle Gann, Laetitia Sonami, and Pamela Z. Venue 9, San Francisco, CA.

June 23

Dickman's *Gilgamesh*, with Thomas Buckner. La Mama, New York, NY.

June 25

Death of Nellie Monk (b. Nellie Smith, 1921, St. Petersburg, FL), of a cerebral hemorrhage, at 80. Lenox Hill Hospital, New York, NY. "[She was] the wife of . . . Thelonious Monk . . . [as] the prime supporter and muse of . . . [his] troubled genius" [The New York Times, 6/27/02].

June 27

*Electric Words*, with Charles Amirghanian. Venue 9, San Francisco, CA.

Death of John Alec Entwistle, apparently of a heart attack, at 57. Las Vegas, NV. "[He was] the bass player for the Who" [New York Times, 6/28/02].

June 28

Death of singer Rosemary Clooney, of lung cancer, at 74. Los Angeles, CA.

Tenney in Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*. Schindler House, Los Angeles, CA.

*Electric Words*, with Pamela Z. Venue 9, San Francisco, CA.

June 29

Nancy Bloomer Deussen's *Piano Trio*. Carl Cherry Center for the Arts, Carmel, CA. Repeated June 30, First United Methodist Church, Salinas.

June 30

Sonos Handbell Ensemble in *The Space Between the Notes*. Weismeyer's *Grace* and Meredith's *Sonics*. Old First Church, San Francisco, CA.

*Delaware Chamber Music Festival*. Chen Yi's *Fiddle Suite*. DE

## Comment

### By the Numbers.

Number in attendance at the rock concert honoring Queen Elizabeth's 50-year reign

12,000

Number in attendance at the classical concert honoring Queen Elizabeth's 50-year reign

12,000

Coverage in the New York Times of the rock concert honoring Queen Elizabeth's 50-year reign

Front-page photograph; half-page article and five pictures on page 10.

Coverage in the New York Times of the classical concert honoring Queen Elizabeth's 50-year reign

No coverage.