

STEFANIA DEKENESSEY ON THE DERRIERE GUARD, THE PAST AND PRESENT CENTURIES (AND A FEW PREDICTIONS THROWN IN FOR GOOD MEASURE.)

[Born in Budapest, Stefania deKenessey was educated at Yale and Princeton Universities, receiving her doctorate under the tutelage of Milton Babbitt. She is a leading figure in the current revival of contemporary classical music, and is the founder of *The Derriere Guard*, an alliance of traditionalist contemporary artists, architects, poets and composers. Operatic successes include *The Monster Bed*, a comedy, and *The Other Wise Man*, a holiday fable, presented to critical acclaim by the Mannes Opera in 1998. Recent commissions have included a concerto for trumpet, percussion and strings for Chris Gekker, a new work for the Turtle Creek Chorale which will be featured during the ensemble's European tour of 2002, and a dramatic cantata for soprano Marni Nixon.]

This interview took place at the Popover Café on Manhattan's Upper West Side on April 17th of this year.

MD: Can you begin by telling us a little about The Derriere Guard – what it is, its purpose and history?

SK: The Derriere Guard is an association of contemporary creative people in all the arts, in other words, painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, music.

MD: Dance?

SK: I don't actually have collaborators in the dance. In theory, it's meant to reach out to all the arts. In practice, it's been confined to the ones I just mentioned. And the common thread binding us all together is that we are all people who feel that we are working at the cutting edge by doing something quite new and quite innovative that is nonetheless unlike most 20th century painting, poetry and music: very firmly grounded in the past, in historically recognizable traditional techniques, sonorities, shapes, and so forth. So for painters that means there's a whole generation of younger painters who are using real oil techniques, real perspective, learning to paint from live models. The architects are doing neo-classical architecture with a sense of proportion, again derived from basically Renaissance and 18th century architecture and a using ornamentation. The composers are

trying to refashion a musical language which is thoroughly tonal – basically consonant, if you like, and not simply a pastiche or derivative of past styles, but really trying to move ahead. And of course how one moves ahead is a fairly complicated and cumbersome question. But that’s the common thread that binds us all together. And it’s all people who really see themselves, in some sense, as pushing the envelope.

MD: It might strike one as a little odd to use the term “pushing the envelope” to describe a movement which, in a sense, looks back in time.

SK: Yes, it’s funny to use those terms precisely because the kind of music we write is, on the surface, completely inoffensive: there are no pianos set on fire, there are no outlandish events at the music concerts, and there are no outlandish images in the paintings; and the poetry has rhyme and meter and narrative and all these “old-fashioned” things. But I don’t think in the context of what’s happened in the 20th century any of this is, in fact, old-fashioned.

MD: But the name “Derriere Guard” implies the opposite.

SK: The reason behind the name is quite simple: I feel the avant-garde has become the establishment in the last 50 years, so when you look at the major museums, the major musical institutions, the major poetic journals that publish poetry, they’re really and truly wedded to pushing and promoting modernist art, poetry, and music and have been doing so very forcefully and very effectively for the past 50 to 75 years, to the point where the so-called avant-garde has really become the status quo. So I actually think what I’m doing is avant-garde, but to use that term makes mush of the concept because it’s been misused or it’s acquired a completely different meaning. I tried to come up with something that would represent the connection to the avant-garde and would be memorable to people, and would have a sense of humor about it.

MD: When did you start it, and why?

SK: Well, I coined the term in 95 or 96. I was so sick of being turned away from programming and competitions because my music wasn’t avant-garde, and I wanted to find some term – and I thought it would be much more practical and powerful to band together not just composers – who are a pretty sorry lot – but also painters, etc. There’s real strength in numbers. I wanted to band up with people in

other fields to show a common spirit because I actually think of this as an historic shift – I don't just think it's my quirkiness, but an historic moment that's happening in all the arts. So in 1996 I started approaching people and went to the then-director of The Kitchen, Lauren Amazeen. I coined this logo, had a friend who made a line drawing, and went to her with all the materials. I thought it would be a two-minute meeting but she listened to me for a couple of minutes and said "you know, I see my job here at The Kitchen as fostering new ideas that I haven't heard from before. This sounds new and different to me. Whether you're right 50 years down the road or not, I haven't the faintest clue, but it seems to me this is exactly the kind of thing we should be fostering precisely because it's new and different." And she signed on right then and there.

MD: That doesn't happen every day.

SK: No, it doesn't, but then I actually had to put together a festival for her, which I did, and we had it in the spring of 1997. It was four days at the Kitchen; we sold out virtually every event. We had orchestral concerts, a big gallery exhibit of contemporary paintings, architectural drawings and sculpture, chamber music, panel discussions, poetry readings not just by poets but by actresses and actors, and I got Tom Wolfe to be my keynote speaker to cap the whole thing. And it was a huge success. We had no money, of course: the Kitchen funded most of it, and we had no advertising. I'm not kidding; we sold out virtually every event – we were double sold for the opening and closing nights.

MD: Were there any comments or criticisms of the festival which were particularly important or meaningful to you?

SK: The only critical comment I heard about the first Derriere Guard Festival is that, since it represented metro area artists, it was perhaps only a fluke, one of those far-out New York things, only possible in this crazy town. The question for people still remained: is this a genuinely broad, universal trend?

MD: And you had the answer, I suspect.

SK: My answer is and was an emphatic yes: the return to traditional conceptions of beauty and craft in the arts is a historic, fin-de-siecle event that can be found everywhere.

To demonstrate this, I held a festival in the spring of 1998 in Chicago (at the Graham Foundation) and the fall of 1999 in San Francisco (at the SomArts Center). The format was closely modeled

on the first festival: three days of various musical events, poetry readings, roundtable discussions, keynote speeches, art and architectural gallery exhibits. In each case, the festival focused on local (broadly defined) artists. In Chicago, this meant individuals from the Midwest and South; in San Francisco, artists up and down the West Coast.

Having held three highly successful public festivals, I now plan to host a series of salons in the New York area this season. As before, they will be a mixture of exhibits (both art and architecture), poetry readings, musical concerts and debates/talks. The idea is both to have a space for artists to share their experiences, to find kindred spirits -- and to begin to reach potential patrons and the intellectual elite, to heighten their awareness -- which is still quite low, in my estimation -- of this cutting-edge development. I should add that a PBS documentary is now in production: the topic is the return of classicism in the arts, and the final segment (in addition to the background music throughout the documentary) will be devoted to my work and to the activities of the *Derriere Guard*.

MD: I've noticed that you choose to describe yourself in program and liner notes as a composer of "contemporary classical music" when what you mean, I think, is a composer of "tonal music". Are you avoiding that term for some reason, or are you trying to express something more grand and all-encompassing?

SK: When people use the term "contemporary music" they often mean something quite dissonant or quite alternative, so I was trying to avoid both of those associations. It was just a catch-all phrase to let people know that contemporary music doesn't mean "popular" music, yet it's not contemporary music the way most people in the classical field think of it either because it's not dissonant, so I thought "contemporary classical music" somehow goes in the cracks, between those two normative definitions.

MD: But wouldn't you say that Milton Babbitt, for example, writes contemporary classical music?

SK: No, I'd say that most people would say he writes "contemporary music." In my experience, by and large, contemporary music either means 12-tone avant-garde art music, or it means heavily jazz-influenced pop-influenced pop music, and I do neither one of those things, so ...

MD: But I'm just wondering whether you're emphasizing the word "classical" because the Derriere Guard emphasizes classical forms ...

SK: Yes, absolutely, that certainly plays into it; I do see myself as continuing in that tradition. And, in all fairness, so does Milton Babbitt. The word "classical" is meant to evoke that entire legacy from, minimum, the 15th century onward, if you like.

MD: Do you think in terms of classical forms? In certain pieces of yours one can definitely hear sonata form, for example.

SK: I work that way, but I don't think about it. I never, ever sit down and say to myself "today I'm going write a piece in sonata form or in ABA form" or anything like that. I literally don't worry about the form prior to the act of composition: it just comes along with the territory. On the other hand, I also trained myself when I was a student to learn all of those forms, to do passable imitations in all of those structures, in all of those styles. In some sense they're really ingrained in me, so I do wind up using "sonata form", for example, fairly often, though not invariably.

MD: Are you aware while you're doing it that you're doing it ...

SK: Yes ...

MD: So you're thinking of secondary themes in contrasting keys, development and recapitulation ...

SK: I'm aware of it, yes, but not because I set out to write something in sonata form.

MD: So it just comes out that way.

SK: Yes.

MD: You work quickly. I think you once told me that.

SK: I can work quickly. In other words, I can spend quite a bit of time coming up with ideas that I think are both quite memorable on a first listening and are strong and sophisticated enough to sustain larger forms.

MD: OK. Sounds reasonable.

SK: And to find both of those in the same musical idea is not that easy to do. And that can take me quite a while. So I have lots of sketches, lots of sketchbooks, lots of notes. I fiddle around enormously. Once I feel I have an idea, or a theme, or a main concept, then I can kind of run with it, so to speak, then I can really write pretty fast. The best metaphor I can give for it is this: if I were a novelist and I finally figured out what my main character looks like, walks like, dresses like, talks like, I feel like I know that person. Then you know what that person is going to do within the novel that makes sense, and you still want the novel to have a certain narrative, a certain resolution, a certain shape and form to it, but it has to have its own internal logic, and that internal logic has to come from the character, some interior motivation of the character, and for me the same thing is true with themes. Once I've got a really good theme -- to some extent of course I carry all this baggage: sonata form and tonality, etc. -- I feel as if the whole piece were simply right in front of me.

(Popovers are served)

MD: Strange, but perhaps also brave, that you chose to study composition at Princeton. After all, you've said that you had no interest in 12-tone music, especially as a composer.

SK: I had no other place to go. It's not like there was any other institution dedicated to teaching serious tonal composition. I had an interview with Babbitt and told him what I was interested in, and he said that at Princeton composers spent as much time studying Mozart and Brahms as Schoenberg. He told me that he would support what I was doing and protect me. And he was true to his word.

MD: Ah. It just sounded a little disingenuous, about how you had no place to go. Certainly there were other institutions that would have been sympathetic to a composer writing tonal music.

SK: I didn't mean literally I had no place to go. I really thought that given the fact that there was no one with whom I had a genuine aesthetic sympathy or rapport, then the best thing I could do was be with the best representative of something that made sense. And for the 20th century, like it or not, 12-tone music is what makes sense. It has been the dominant form of writing music. And to my mind Milton Babbitt has been and is the premier practitioner. The notion that music is organized sound, which finds its inception in modernism and gets expressed in 12-tone music, is expressed absolutely brilliantly by Milton Babbitt. What he seeks out to do I think he does absolutely,

wonderfully well. And just to be with someone who does what they're doing really, really well is a genuine pleasure. And you're going to learn something unless you're a complete idiot. And he was interesting to be around. He has a brilliant mind, there's no question about it.

I'd say the problem for me with modernism is that I disagree with its fundamentals. I don't have any problem with Milton as a person or as a composer. I disagree with the idea that music is organized sound, pure and simple. And that's where we part company. And that's where I didn't find any alternative or different point of view in any other academy. So if you're going to work with people who believe that, at least go work with someone who's really brilliant at it.

MD: So what did you study there?

SK: I took every course that was offered. It's one of those wonderful places where there are no requirements. As a result, everybody takes everything, because you have no idea what you should be doing. I caused something of a furor because not only did I take all the classes offered to composers but I took a class offered by Lewis Lockwood on Mozart which I was not supposed to do. I didn't realize that. I was only a composer, and composers were not supposed to take courses in musicology.

MD: How did you get along with other students in composition seminars? I'm pretty sure there weren't too many others interested in what you were doing.

SK: I was always the odd duck. I was completely different from everybody else. Everyone was writing atonal music, almost everybody was writing 12-tone music, and for me to be writing this triadic stuff was just so far out in left field that I don't think anybody quite knew what to make of it. So people never said a word to me, basically. There was no reaction at all.

MD: So you spent three or four years in an environment where you were invisible?

SK: Yeah. Yeah. (Laughs)

MD: That must have been very difficult.

SK: Yeah, well, graduate school is not an ideal situation for many human beings. I did better than most, frankly. I kept my head down, I learned a lot, I had my lessons, I studied my scores, I wrote as much music as I possibly could, I did a lot of conducting so I got lots of hands-on experience as well ...

MD: Conducted where?

SK: The Princeton University Orchestra. We did a bunch of Mozart operas in addition to the regular repertoire and then I also founded the Princeton Chamber Orchestra – we did Bach, Haydn and Handel.

MD: And after?

SK: I started teaching at The New School. It was a very fledgling program, still is having growing pains, but it is now a four-year college. And I started teaching there long before I got my Ph.D. They've treated me very well and have been very nice to me. I can't complain. It has a number of advantages – pedagogically, they let me teach whatever courses I wish. I design all my own curricula, which is very nice. I'm also the only full-time music person on the faculty. I'm both senior faculty and junior faculty, so I have great meetings.

MD: You've been writing tonal music for more than 20 years, during which time the musical climate has changed. Do you find you're getting more performances – not because you've been around longer but because of a greater acceptance of tonal music?

SK: Yes, there's been an enormous difference, even from ten years ago. The receptivity to tonal music, and to tonal music of the sort that I write, has just exponentially increased. I'd like to think it's because I've become a better composer but I don't think that's why I'm getting lots and lots more performances. Ten years ago, I was treated like a true crazy. And five years ago I was a genuine eccentric, and now people don't bat an eyelash at the kind of stuff I do. In fact I'm starting to get some great reviews.

MD: I read that rave review of your new CD in Fanfare. Is that indicative, do you think, of a shift in musical values, or did you just get lucky?

SK: Well, obviously, it was luck to get a sympathetic reviewer. One doesn't always get a sympathetic reviewer even if there's an underlying aesthetic sympathy. On the other hand, there's no way I

could have gotten that review ten years ago. Absolutely no way. No way that the music would have been measured on its own terms, that the music is good enough to stand next to Mozart or Brahms. And nobody would have been willing to say that ten years ago.

MD: Which he said.

SK: Which he said. But in all honesty, ten years ago I got a note from a very eminent musician about that clarinet quintet which essentially said almost exactly the same thing as this reviewer, but concluded with the phrase: "but one cannot write music like this in the 20th century." And that's the difference. Ten years ago most all the critics said "her music has the kind of rhythmic and melodic interest OF", and then they will name either Brahms, Verdi, Fauré, Dvorak, Schubert ... BUT, and there's always the qualifier BUT, do we need another Brahms or Verdi, etc. It's always then made as a negative comparison, not because I don't stand up, but because one ought not to be doing that. I think the level of craftsmanship is always implicitly recognized, but the message is always that's irrelevant.

MD: I've read a fair number of reviews of other composers who are similarly compared to Boulez, Xenakis, Messiaen, or Berio.

SK: But then you're presumed to be part of a crowd.

MD: But it's no less demeaning.

SK: Yes, except when you're compared to Xenakis or Messiaen, unless the critic says it's a poor imitation of, it's meant to be praise. When you're seen as following in the footsteps of Brahms, almost always the context is negative. It's not like they're saying "if only the melodies were better", "if only the rhythms were better" – but they don't say that.

MD: They have a hard time getting past the surface.

SK: Absolutely. One of the reviewers of my CD said that the language and materials that I'm working with completely determine and inform the shape and surface of the work. He meant it as a negative, but I thought: what better definition of form is there?

MD: How much influence do you think minimalism has had on the ability of listeners to hear tonal music in new ways?

SK: I think it had an enormous influence. It reintroduced the triad, it reintroduced the idea that music could, at least on the surface, be fun, be pleasing. On the negative side, it de-emphasized the concept of Western music -- which I think is integral to its value -- that it is also intellectually sophisticated and narrative, with a different conception of time altogether. For my purposes, minimalism is finally not the kind of thing I'm interested in, because I like the drama of moving from point A to point B to point C --with a forward narrative. And minimalism, as I see it, is based on a non-Western, elliptical notion of music in which there's lots of repetition which brings one, if not full circle, then in a kind of spiral ... and it's fundamentally a kind of music which I think is meant to be meditative and hypnotic. Which explains why, perhaps, while it's lasted 40 years or so, it's lost its vitality.

MD: I recently attended six concerts at the national SCI conference in Syracuse, New York. The overwhelming majority of works were atonal. I was surprised.

SK: Yes, and this is going to sound extremely arrogant but most people follow, they don't lead. So yes, most universities are going to be full of people who are doing as their teachers have taught them to do. It doesn't mean they're bad composers, but actually the time-honored way of doing things -- which used to work -- is you learn from your teacher, and you imitate what your teacher did and hopefully you'll get a little bit better. I think the whole legacy is problematic and for me insufficient. I have to move beyond it, and never accepted it as a workable legacy. So I'm not at all surprised. I think the academy moves extremely slowly, and I think most people move extremely slowly, but on the other hand I think there's a handful of very talented people out there who are writing music that is tonal which is not just a rehash of the past and are doing really interesting work.

MD: What contemporary composers do you listen to?

SK: For pleasure, almost none. What I envision is a continuation of the unabashedly beautiful music of the past and I feel that as brilliant as Britten and Barber and Copland have been, I think they always deep down feel an indebtedness to the 20th century by way of infusing their music with a certain dissonance, a certain bite, a certain irony, a certain kind of sourness, which I just don't find personally pleasing nor intellectually refreshing or interesting. So for me wrong-note tonality is not really fascinating or fulfilling.

MD: What kind of music qualifies for the Derriere Guard?

SK: Music which is very well-crafted, using principles from the past, not as a pastiche of past techniques or styles, but as music which tries to forge a genuine voice in a new and distinctive voice. Which is a pretty tall order, right?

MD: Yes, pretty tall, though there are quite a few composers who wouldn't qualify because they're writing or using some pitch system and who still claim that their music "does" all the things music of the past did – that they're still clearly in the Western tradition.

SK: Well, you could say the same about modernism to some extent. That's why all the qualifiers about being rooted in the past and in offering something of genuine beauty – that's what I mean by the past. My definition of the past is anything prior to modernism, anything prior to the new definition of music which is understanding music as ordered sound, pure and simple. And if you think about the definition of music in prior centuries, as different as Renaissance music is from Medieval from Baroque from Romantic, you will get some fundamental understanding of music which is, of course, organized sound, but which is also beautiful and expresses something in addition to that. And it's that difference which is what I'm trying to bring back.

MD: But I'm sure you get lots of argument. Take even an early atonal piece like *Pierrot Lunaire*; it's highly expressive. One wouldn't say simply that it's "organized sound."

SK: No, it's disorganized sound. (Laughs.)

MD: So it's not beautiful, then, by your definition?

SK: No. I don't want to make a case for pabulum here, but I also don't believe music has to be dissonant, or difficult to comprehend on a first listening for it to have a meaning. And yes, sometimes *King Lear* is a profoundly, profoundly upsetting work for me, yet it also has ineffable beauty to it, and I can also understand it. I could understand it the first time, and I can understand it the 20th time. One tries to create a kind of art which is perfectly beautiful and draws the listener on the first instance, but has a kind of richness to it that is both emotional and intellectual so that the work needs to be revisited.

MD: But for you "perfectly beautiful" music will, on a theoretical level, be music which has a very strong sense of functional harmony. And I

say “functional”, because it’s not enough to be merely a succession of triads.

SK: That’s right. Not just a repetition

MD: ... or sequence

SK: Or sequence of triads. Right.

MD: Then isn’t an ordered sequence of triads, which is certainly an accurate, if loose, way of describing functional harmony, also a kind of organized sound?

SK: The only reason I balk at that is because I admire Renaissance music, which is not functional harmony in the way we think about it. But which still operates on the fundamental concept that music is beautiful sound which expresses something. And in that sense one could say that minimalism falls into that rubric – except for the fact that it has let go of a crucial piece of the puzzle, which is the notion of music as also an intellectually compelling and dramatically constructed narrative.

MD: What do you say to someone who’s just walked away from a performance of an atonal piece who tells you that it was a beautiful experience. I’m sure many readers could give at least one example.

SK: Chacun á son goût. What can I say? People have radically different tastes. One of the reasons why I’m willing to make these completely hyperbolic statements is because it’s a personal statement. What the hell ... I’m free to think and say what I like. Also, it’s remarkable to me the extent to which 20th century music has been historically and in a very real aesthetic sense a failure. It has failed to capture the imagination of its public. And not just for 50 or 75 years, but essentially for a century. It has lost that lively connection where it is expressing something to a contemporary audience.

MD: Unless you include rock.

SK: Unless you include popular music, yes. And popular music has never lost that connection ever. It wouldn’t dare.

MD: One could say jazz did.

SK: It did. When it became infected by all the principles of modernism.

MD: Which to you means ...?

SK: A belief that music is organized sound. And therefore questions of meaning or beauty do not enter into the equation. Post-modernism is not a coherent ideology, but is an understanding, somehow, that modernism doesn't work, and it's an attempt to use pieces of the past, along with modernism, in a very ironic way to construct new things, without an understanding of how one might move ahead.

MD: You haven't mentioned the interest in "world music", which replaces time with place, using not pieces of the past, but from other cultures in the present.

SK: Yes, but I think one of the reasons Western culture has thrived for the last 500 years is because it has been unabashed about cannibalizing, borrowing, stealing, absorbing whatever influences it can, from wherever it can. It doesn't always acknowledge it, but it finally does it and does it quite successfully. I think the situation today is a little bit different because I think the history of the 20th century is so different from other centuries that I don't think the parallels are quite genuine. So the influence of let's say Japanese music on Debussy is not quite the same as the interest in world musics, and I think the current interest suggests that the legacy of 20th century classical art music is so dry right now that it needs to turn to other sources for inspiration. For me personally, I have quite different reasons for being interested in it – and for me, it has to do with the fact although I call my music tonal, in fact it isn't, and never has been. It's always been modal, although modal with a very strongly functional tonality. The places where one finds modal music are a very odd conglomeration of places: medieval or pre-tonal music, popular 20th century American music that's blues-derived, and one finds it in "world music". That's a very, very interesting ingredient, and that's also partly why people are interested in these sounds because I think that classical major/minor tonality of the sort practiced from Bach to Wagner, is all played out. And that's partly why modernism was so successful. I think the modernists got that absolutely right. I don't think we can do anything genuinely new with that kind of chromatic understanding of tonality. What I do, however, think is interesting, which I hear in music of many of the contemporaries whom I admire, is based on the other kinds of modes which were

discarded at the beginning of the Baroque period and which thrive, or are thriving, in popular musics, and in the world musics that most people like. That's a technical way of looking at it, but it's the glue that binds all those things together.

MD: So you throw out Ionian and Aeolian, and you've got all these others to work with?

SK: Yes! And you can do really interesting stuff with that! There's a kind of freshness there. We have this linear vision of history, just looking at Western history, that everything that is progress is uniformly progress; in fact, progress is always three steps forward and two steps back. And the things that get shunted aside are sometimes historically quite interesting. And if you look at the Renaissance as an historical movement, the fact is the Renaissance happened by going back to the distant past, so I think there's ample precedent for what we're doing, which is to not look at the last 100 years, not even the last 200 years, frankly, but much beyond that and outside of that. And it's happened before, and I think it's going to happen again – I really see this new Renaissance in all the arts.

MD: You might be right.

SK: I will be right

MD: (laughs)

SK: No, really. I make very, very few predictions. This one's going to come true. I'm quite sure.

MD: So the western tradition will be leapfrogging how many centuries?

SK: Hard to say, but certainly Romanticism, where, as I see it, tonality begins to dissolve and becomes overripe. How people synthesize it, and exactly the nature and shape of it – that's for history to unfold, and that I'm not willing to predict.

MD: While I have you in a predicting mode, what about the future of opera?

SK: I think there's ample precedent for opera being one of the most important loci for important stylistic shifts to happen. And I think some of the most exciting work is being done in the realm of opera, or dramatic vocal music. I think music that is, if you like, a cinematic

experience, which has scenery and staging, and acting and story and words -- the whole panorama of sensibilities -- is, I think, for contemporary audiences much, much more interesting than simply sitting in a concert and trying to figure out what modalities is this composer using ...

MD: You just had an opera produced in Singapore?

SK: Yes. The Other Wise Man was just done in Singapore in December. A very nice performance. Bart Folse was the conductor. He's the Associate Conductor of the Singapore Symphony. For the principals they used young American singers who did a wonderful job.

MD: Do they live there?

SK: No, they live in the U.S. They were brought over for the production. It was a wonderful experience and it was wonderful to hear it with a full orchestra. The piece had already been done at Mannes with chamber orchestra

MD: .. along with The Monster Bed?

SK: Yes, with The Monster Bed. That was wonderful, but just not the same as hearing a full orchestra. The Singapore Symphony is, much to my delight and surprise, a crackerjack orchestra; they're really first-rate players. So I went in just for the last couple of rehearsals and they nailed everything. Really an absolutely professional orchestra.

MD: How many performances?

SK: Three. It was a blast. And it was great to get to go to Singapore. Slightly disappointing, since there's so little of historic Singapore left -- the rest is Starbucks and things of that sort. But I had someplace warm to go to in December, plus I got to hear great singers and a great orchestra.

MD: Any predictions for the symphony orchestra?

SK: I'm less sanguine about those. They're very large, cumbersome and expensive. I've been thinking about this and -- the other prediction I'm quite happy with -- this, I don't have a crystal ball for, but my hunch is that they're in deep trouble -- increasingly what composers will be writing are various arrangements of their music for flexible ensembles -- as in the Renaissance and early Baroque. I think

the day when you only write for triple wind orchestra with x number of percussionists and that's the only version or possibility of life for that piece – I think those days are numbered. That's not to say that symphony orchestras won't exist, but only as conservators of the past repertoire.

MD: And that's because of expense?

SK: Yes. Fees that soloists and conductors get. The whole thing has just gotten out of hand. There's no connection to the economic marketplace, and insofar as there's a complete disconnect between art and the marketplace, the arts sooner or later will suffer. You don't want an absolute and one-way connection to the marketplace, but it's the in-between that doesn't exist. Either there's the pop stuff that has to sell in the gazillions, or there's the contemporary music which will get performed regardless of economic reality. And I think increasingly the world of classical music will have to be beholden to an audience – not in the millions, but an audience nonetheless. And I think that's where cultural institutions like symphony orchestras, which have these enormous expenses and virtually no revenue – I don't see how they can survive long-term. I hope I'm wrong, but I'm fairly pessimistic.

MD: But you're not about opera, which is even more expensive.

SK: No, because there's a kind of interest and freshness to opera that I think the symphonic repertoire doesn't quite have. For example, I have friends who in their 30's and 40's; after listening to only rock and roll for years, they have started to gravitate to classical music – and they go to opera, and it's amazing to me that these people who have no training in classical music, are bored out of their minds at a symphony orchestra concert, go regularly to the opera. That really says something.

MD: Well, opera can be something of a spectacle, like a rock concert.

SK: But another thing I should mention is that I think many instrumentalists have been imbued with the idea that music is organized sound, with the result that they play with incredible rhythmic accuracy, right on target pitch, and not a great deal of anything else. Whereas opera singers have always assumed that they are communicating something through those pitches and rhythms – and are willing to sacrifice both pitch and rhythm sometimes – but the assumption is that there's something behind it. And I think that's a completely old-fashioned, completely Derriere Guard attitude to music

and I think people know it. And that's one of the reasons I love working with singers.

MD: When do you think there will be performances by the major musical institutions, if ever, of Derriere Guard music?

SK: The timeline for this is difficult to guess. Eventually, sure; in my lifetime, I don't know. But on the other hand, when I look back on the collapse of the Soviet Union, I could never have predicted it. I could have said, Oh, this is going to go on for another 75 years – just another slow dissolution of everything – and I can imagine that being true for post-modernism too; it just goes on and on until there's nothing left. On the other hand, I can imagine it turning around in three years. Boom! Something happens. Some critic, some donor. I don't know, but I could imagine it turning on a dime also.

MD: That's a good analogy.

SK: The thing I try to do with the Derriere Guard Festivals is to give history a little kick in the rear – to move it forward as much as I can.