



## TALKING ABOUT CREATIVITY

### Spotlight Conversation #1 Transcript

John Adams, composer  
Mason Bates, composer  
Mark Clague, associate professor of music, University of Michigan

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[Start of recorded material]

00:00:09                Mark Clague: Well, welcome. It's great to see so many people here. I have the privilege of being here with our two composers, who are having works premiered this week with the American Mavericks Series. So Mason Bates - he's here immediately on my right -- has the piece Mass Transmission that was done with a chorus and Paul Jacobs on organ just last night, and then you, of course, performing. And then John Adams on the piece Absolute Jest, which was also performed last night, and there will be one more concert tonight. So if you haven't heard them yet, I definitely encourage to you stick around this evening and check those out.

00:00:48                But if we're talking about creativity, a great place to start in the musical world is with the people we charge with the responsibility and the challenge of being creative, our composers. And I wondered maybe if each of you could talk a little bit about maybe a key moment in the creation of the work that we've heard this week where you felt a certain spark. How does the process of creating, of bringing something into being work? And how did it work in these pieces? Mason, do you want to start off? It's a small question.

00:01:20                Mason Bates: Well, it's funny, I mean being up here with John. We were in Toronto last year, about a year ago, and John was conducting a piece of mine. And John said, "What's the deal with this San Francisco Symphony piece?" And I said, "I don't know. I had this idea that it was going to be about a transmission of some sort, but I haven't found the text." And John said -- you can correct me if I'm wrong -- but it's something like, "Go far afield for this text. Really look out there in the world. Go online. Get away from maybe some of the first stops that composers might normally choose -- an e.e. cummings or something."

00:02:07           And obviously when you think about some of John's recent works involving text, absolutely that was a very inspiring suggestion. So I decided that instead of doing something relating to the mass -- which had been a first kind of errant thought -- I thought, "You know, maybe I could look for some example of some kind of transmission to an indigenous place or something." I thought that could be an interesting source of a dramatic idea.

00:02:38           And in fact, I ended up finding that with this beautiful story of a mother and daughter communicating between Holland and Java. So I mean really a lot of research had to be done to get to that point, but I really feel like it was John who gave me the courage to look far afield.

Mark Clague:       So one of the things that's interested me about this notion of the maverick, right? That in some ways you were challenged by another composer to do something unusual, to go further afield.

00:03:08           And John, with your piece, I mean in some ways the ultimate maverick, at least how we look at it in music -- Beethoven, right? You're sort of engaging with that legacy. We often talk about Brahms, you know, the shadow of Beethoven and this issue. But for you, it was quite inspiring to work with the string quartets.

00:03:26           John Adams: Yeah. I guess Beethoven was a maverick. The interesting thing about him was that when he got to Vienna after his youth and early period in Bonn, he was really focused on becoming the number one figure in

a very traditional situation. I don't think he thought of himself as a maverick. But he certainly exploded the comfortable tradition of that milieu.

00:04:07           And, of course, what happened in the 20th century is that it became required of an artist to always be breaking the mold, and always being original, until we got the point in high modernism where you have a painter like Jasper Johns or a composer like John Cage, where they actually make rules for themselves to ensure that everything in their work is supposedly new.

00:04:40           So the whole concept of what's maverick and what's tradition and what's mainstream is always shifting, and very often it's not a particularly helpful rubric. My piece, I actually cannot remember what gave me the idea of incorporating Beethoven.

00:05:08           The piece is about 23 minutes long, and it actually uses only a couple of fragments of Beethoven. I haven't counted them, but I don't think it's more than eight, maybe ten. And they say that when composers reach their late period, they get involved in counterpoint.

00:05:37           And so I guess I'm somewhere between Medicare and my late period. So yeah, I don't know what it is about counterpoint, but it really does seem to draw you in your dotage. And you know, of course, that the very, very old Franz Schubert, in the last year of his life, when he was, what, 29, actually sought out a counterpoint teacher.

00:06:11                   And Beethoven, at the end of his life, was absolutely obsessed with counterpoint, particularly in the Missa Solemnis, and the pieces that I drew from, the late quartets, particularly the Grosse Fuge. So that was very much on my mind. You know, I got the commission from the symphony, and it was the 100th anniversary.

00:06:37                   As they say in The Godfather, it was an offer I couldn't refuse because I've been living here for so long, and I have such a long and wonderful history with the San Francisco Symphony. I adore this orchestra. And I adore it more now than I did even in 1981 when they first played a piece of mine. They're just such an amazing group of players.

00:07:05                   And the thing was that I accepted the commission, but I had no idea what I was going to write. And as Mason will tell you, it's a terrible thing to sign onto something but not really have an idea. And I generally advise young composers not to accept commissions. You know, if you get a big cash offer waved in front of you, it's hard to say no. But first should come the idea for the piece.

00:07:32                   Well, fortunately I came to a concert. I don't know exactly when it was. It was probably spring of 2010 maybe. And I heard MTT do Stravinsky's Pulcinella, which I'm sure everybody here knows. A piece that Stravinsky based on some Neapolitan music.

Mark Clague:             Supposedly by Pergolesi.

00:08:00            John Adams: Not all of it by Pergolesi, apparently, but a lot of it. And I thought, "Well, that's actually a wonderful idea of one composer looking back over a period of 100 or 200 years, and internalizing the music." But when the idea of using the Beethoven -- of course, using Beethoven is just really suicidal, if you think about it. It's like trying to play whiffle ball with Barry Bonds.

00:08:30            But I did write this piece. And contrary to what you may read, I did not think of this as a comedy. And that's why I use the word jest, because jest I think implies something on a higher level of experience. It's a kind of Shakespearian term. I was not intending to make a laugh or a goofy piece where I'm poking you in the ribs of something.

00:09:01            I'm trying to do something that takes very, very highly recognizable musical signals -- and obviously there's a wink there, and there is some humor in it -- but weave them, incorporate them into my own musical language, and also give my own sort of spiritual identity to my experience with Beethoven.

00:09:30            Mark Clague: So Mason, you're obviously at the beginning of your career. You haven't had your late period quite yet. I'm just wondering, with this sort of idea of developing your musical language, I mean you're trying something very new here, working with a choir for the first time, as I understand it, organ maybe for the first time. And yet you're doing something you've done a little bit before, which is working in this gap between electronica, between the sort of dance club and the symphony orchestra, sort of trying to bring at least your own music making in both of these worlds together.

00:10:02                    That's I think one thing a maverick does. I mean if we look at John putting Beethoven together with his musical language, I mean it's sort of this collision of different things making something new. And your sort of maverick approach -- if you'll let me go that way -- uses a similar strategy. Can you talk about that collision a little bit?

Mason Bates:            Well, I want to mention a couple things. Actually, choral music was kind of baked into me because I grew up in a church school where I was doing a lot of choral singing.

00:10:31                    So in fact, I'm a sleeper cell choirboy that did not really write a lot of choral music until Chanticleer, our local superstar chorus, asked me to write a few pieces for them a couple years ago. And that's when Ragnar Bohlin, our chorus master, said, "Hey, we should do something." So in fact, the actual ensemble was not outside the box for me. I think, for me, what was a bit outside the box was trying to write a spare piece.

00:11:06                    For me, I feel like I have quite a bit of internal pressure to throw lots of things at the page. And I love that. I love setting hair on fire. A piece that was here a month ago, called Alternative Energy, has quite a lot of different stylistic areas that it goes into. I like to have a dynamic piece that really changes the rules of the game. This piece is different for me because it is much more in kind of one breath.

00:11:37            There's really not a whole lot to hide behind. I mean there a chorus, and there's an organ, and there's some electronics. But I felt like it was an intimate story that needed something different from the 80 people that we get in an orchestra. As much as I love the orchestral palate, I wanted something different.

00:11:58            And so it was a very direct emotional story that I came across, this incredible story of this mother and daughter speaking across these 1920s transmission lines between Holland and Java. And I felt like the story that that told would need to really have kind of a dark and mysterious angle to it, but also a very heartfelt side to it. And I have to say, you know, sometimes the thing that is hardest -- in fact, always the thing that is hardest is the simpler thing.

00:12:36            And it is always a challenge to go there. I think also that, for me, you know, it's great to be on this festival. I mean the maverick festival is incredible. You know, there's quite a bit of figuring out what does a maverick mean and all that. And sometimes, I think one might think about if you're looking at a painting, is it the amount of paint on the canvas?

00:13:06            I like to think about form, and I like to think about what the experience of a piece is. And I feel like sometimes the way that a piece can do something idiosyncratic or different is in the totality of the time that it lasts.

00:13:30            Not necessarily can you grab a sound bite of it, and can we do a spectral analysis on that, and does that have X number of dissonant notes at that time. I think also, for me, thinking about form is something that's very important. I



miss that sometimes in even some of the greatest composers that I really love who have fantastic and incredibly beautiful sounds or thrilling sounds.

00:14:01            I mean sometimes I feel like I want to have something starts from the outside. And that was always hard for me too because I started, like a lot of people, on the piano. And I was governed by my fingers, and I think that's okay. I think it's okay to be the vessel. You need to, I think, as a composer, feel what you're writing. It's always been a challenge to balance the needs of the form with the material that's living inside it.

00:14:29            And for this piece, I think that the challenge for me was trying to find this more spare language. That's something I hadn't done. Even though I had very deep feelings about choral music, I hadn't written for a SATB chorus since I was a kid. I mean writing for Chanticleer is one thing because there are 12 solo voices. And speaking of counterpoint, you can really divide by 12.

00:14:59            This is an incredible chorus, can do so many things, but you don't wrote for 140 voices the same way. So the challenges of both the ensemble, and also just some of the things that I set up for myself with the story of the piece, were, I think, new confrontations that I enjoyed dealing with.

00:15:25            Mark Clague: Well, I think for both of your pieces, you work with traditional elements. So in your piece, Mason, the choral sound -- this hum or haze, as you describe it -- I mean also has this just beautiful resonance that uses chords, right? I mean one way to be a maverick is to just offend your audience, right? To do something radically different, to have someone walk out and just sit in

front of a piano for four minutes and 33 seconds, and confuse everybody. But you both have embraced the audience in a certain way. I wonder, in this imperative to be creative, how do you conceive of your relationship to your listener?

00:16:00            Is that something you think about? Or when you compose and you have this emotional poetic idea to communicate, is that something that's really between you and the page, or do you imagine a listener fairly early on in the process? Either of you.

John Adams:        Well, of course. I can't even believe that people ask this question. You're not the first.

Mark Clague:        I'm a maverick.

00:16:28            John Adams: I think the fact that the question is out there shines an interesting light on the perception about contemporary music, or contemporary art in general. Do you think about your audience? Of course you think about your audience. Maybe we don't all have a highly focused concept of exactly who our audience is. But I think, generally, when I'm composing, I'm basically composing for people who essentially share my sensibilities.

00:17:10            I don't mean they have to share my entire knowledge of music, or even my preferences. But they're essentially sort of in the same zone that I am.

00:17:33            I just can't imagine not thinking about my audience. Because, to me, the act of making music is the act of bringing something out of yourself, and bouncing it off someone else. It's like a little kid coming home and saying, "Guess what happened today at school?" It's really no different than that.

00:18:03            You want to see how your feelings and your thoughts and your perceptions resonate with other people. Otherwise, it just would be such an empty experience, I couldn't even imagine doing it. I suppose I could envision some sort of personality for whom the act of creation was so solipsistic and so completely introverted that it was just a matter of problem solving or something like that.

00:18:38            But I think even chess masters and nuclear physicists, they want to get their ideas communicated.

Mark Clague:        I think in some ways, John Cage is the same idea as well, right? Four minutes, thirty-three seconds was a challenge to the audience. It was an attempt at communication, to get the audience to open up their ears to experience. In some ways, whenever we talk about music, we have to think about listeners.

00:19:10            John Adams: You know, Cage is always a great subject for talk, largely because Cage, his artistic impulse was extremely cerebral. And he viewed music really in a very cerebral way. And he said, on several occasions, that feelings made him uncomfortable.

00:19:38                    That he was not even comfortable with his own emotional or feeling life. And I think that's one of the problems with John Cage, with the understanding or the perception or the lack of that with his music, is because people don't experience feeling from it.

00:20:00                    And music is, above and beyond everything else, the art of feeling, much more than any other art form. I know a dramatist or a poet or a painter might come and want to take issue with me. But I really think that the reason when we hear a people, people get really extremely emotionally affected. They can get very angry if it's a very dissonant piece, or they can get incredibly excited, or all turned on by The Rite of Spring, or patriotic by Fidelio or whatever.

00:20:39                    But it's because music's getting to them on that fundamental level of feelings. And that's what we do, as composers. We really are in the business of communicating feeling.

Mark Clague:                Well, Michael Tilson Thomas mentioned that a little bit when he said he needed poetry to be a conductor, that he needed Walt Whitman. And I think it's that same sort of connection about feeling.

00:21:03                    I mean, Mason, in your piece, that moment when the two choristers break away, and one becomes the daughter, as a soloist, and one is the mother, I mean that's a very poignant moment. I don't know if you want to talk about the way in which that dramatizes that expressive emotion in the text.

Mason Bates: Well, that was the part of the piece that I was most concerned about because, you know, at least if you have the chorus and you have the organ, you have the chorus and the organ.

00:21:31 But when you suddenly break it down to two people, with just some light sounds behind it, it's hard. It's something that just basically works or not. And what was particularly challenging about this part of the piece -- in case some of you all haven't heard it, there's this first section that's this mother in the Dutch telegraph office, kind of trying to communicate with her daughter. The second section is from her daughter's perspective in Java. And the last part has a little bit of these transcripts from what went on between these people in 1920.

00:22:07 The actual transcript, on the surface of it, if you're just skating over the surface of reality, might be rather prosaic. Are you still there, mom? Yes, my child. That kind of thing. But I found that in that kind of prosaic, almost just sort of like everyday life -- you know, what's the weather like -- there was great poignancy in that.

00:22:32 You know, when we're Skyping, or talking on the phone to someone we love across a great divide, we're generally not saying things like, "I'm kissing the face of God," or, "I just read all of Kafka." You know, a lot of times you're just saying things like, "How's it going?" Whatever. "Did the baby poop?" Sorry, baby on the brain. You know, they're basically very prosaic things.

00:23:01 And when you get those things down into a situation where people are spread apart, they have great meaning. So I thought for that section I

would try to have two solo voices. And actually, spreading them apart was David's idea, the assistant chorus master. He said, "Do you mind having a little bit of theater?" And I said, "Absolutely. Let's try it out. Let's see if it works." And having them spread apart physically seemed to work with the piece.

0023:31                   And we were lucky to have two people in the chorus who really could drop in for all of one and a half minutes, and really deliver some kind of poignant, dramatic lines.

Mark Clague:            In the concert last night, when that first happened, I was like, "Is she okay?" Because she walked sort of out of the hall to the other side. I was like, "I hope everything's okay." Which I guess sort of validates the feeling that the audience was really connected to the players, as individual human beings.

00:24:04                   You know, we're here as part of the American Orchestra Forum. And one of the things I'm curious about is the orchestra seems, in some ways, like the ultimate challenge to be maverick, to deal with this intimacy of feelings, and yet to have a box of crayons with 100 plus colors in it, with the whole history of music at your disposal as far as things to work with, and still be challenged to do something different. Is it different?

00:24:30                   What is the challenge when you're writing for orchestra? Does that affect you in some way? Is there a particular excitement? Do you think of particular ensembles and conductors, or is it something more abstract? John, would you want to tackle that to start?

John Adams: Well, you know, the orchestra actually is a relatively new medium.

00:25:00 At least the history books tell you that it sort of established an identity -- the idea of multiple strings, and the woodwinds and brass, and originally just a timpani, if even that -- in the Mannheim period, which is roughly between the period of Bach and Haydn. And it sort of reached its elephantine apotheosis in this piece that is on the program tonight, called *Ameriques*.

00:25:38 Although there are larger, more distended pieces -- not many --

Mark Clague: *City Noir*.

00:25:51 John Adams: And, you know, I mean it is a strangely arbitrary thing that every orchestra in the western world has basically four flutes, four clarinets, six horns, whatever it is, 16 firsts, 14 seconds, etcetera. Because it's just basically been through trial and error that that's worked out to be a nice balance. But why not 20 oboes and four violas?

00:26:31 I mean there are acoustical issues, but there is a certain arbitrary thing about that. And we all, as composers, occasionally get very frustrated because we want a lot more of a certain kind of instrument, and we couldn't care less about having a section that we don't want. But as a composer, you learn to deal with that. And fortunately, in this day and age, players are so

amazing that you can ask a cellist to play up in the violin range and they're happy to do it.

00:27:08                   And also, the instruments themselves have developed so that they're very, very flexible. Because, you know, the French horn or the trumpet, or even the clarinet that Beethoven wrote for was a very, very limited instrument. And if you look at a score of a Beethoven symphony or a Mozart symphony, you'll see that the timpani is only playing two notes.

00:27:30                   And when the music modulates in the development section to a remote key, you'll notice that the timpani is not doing anything. And now -- like at the end of my piece, *Absolute Jest* -- if any of you come to hear it tonight, you'll notice that the timpani does literally a chromatic scale at the end because timpanists have become so incredibly virtuoso that they know how to use the pedal, and you can just literally write almost anything you want for them.

00:28:05                   But with all that said, the orchestra does have limits. And one interesting limit -- and I'd be curious to hear your response to this, Mason -- is it has an ironically cultural signal.

00:28:32                   I sort of sound like a two-bit Jacques Derriere here. Derrida, not Derriere. Stay away from French. What I mean by that is that when you hear the orchestra -- let's say you're in your car and you put your radio on scan. And it goes through 14 pop music stations, and then there's CNN.



00:29:04           And then suddenly there's the one classical station. And you know how when you hear that, it's suddenly, "Oh, it sounds like culture. It sounds like somebody with a British accent." And, of course, largely that's because the only music you hear on FM radio is very polite classical music from the 19th century that's put there so that it won't disturb anybody.

00:29:30           You don't hear Turangalila or Ameriques. If you did, there would be more traffic accidents. But the thing is, what I'm getting at is that the orchestra, even if it's the Rite of Spring, it has a certain cultural connection. So people are driven away by that, particularly young people. They hear it and they think, "That's not my world."

00:30:05           So as a composer, you're kind of having to say, "Well, I'm going to join that world. I'm going to try to make that fresh." And there are many ways of making it fresh. You can do what Varese did, which is to just turn it into this just wild, seething herd of buffalos and panting jungles, drums like you hear in an old Cecil B. Demille movie or something.

00:30:33           Or you can do what Ravel does and create some incredible gossamer, atmospheric, erotic scenario. You can do all these things. But still you're working within an acoustical continuum that is so highly defined on a certain cultural level that it does simply scare a lot of people away.

00:30:56           And I was amused -- I don't know how many of you people read this article in the New York Times, I guess it was in the magazine last week, about the Radiohead composer, Jonny Greenwood. He has millions and millions of

fans who follow him. And in his downtime, he's become an avant-garde classical composer, and he writes pieces that are inspired by Penderetsky and Bartok and things like that.

00:31:30                So he's actually found a way back into this world where we live all the time. You listen to his pieces and you think, "Oh yeah, that's Bartok music for strings and percussion and cellist." So it is interesting when a person from the outside world does kind of rediscover this world that we live in because it is a world of an amazing flexibility and enormous emotional range, which is why we do it.

00:32:00                It's why I'm not a rock musician, I'm an orchestral composer, because I just think that the orchestra is capable of such enormous expressive potential.

Mason Bates:            I mean it's true. People have this idea -- I remember somebody at UC Berkeley telling me, "I would never write for orchestra because it's so bourgeois."

00:32:28                You know, I was like, "Get real. I know what you're saying, but there's certainly a vibe to these spaces." John's exactly right. I mean there's definitely a cultural history here, and there's a cultural connotation. I think that there's an intimidation factor for a lot of folks that can be dealt with. And I think without really changing the substantive stuff that's happening on stage, getting information to people in different ways can really help.

00:33:00            I remember at the first Mavericks Festival a great example of this. There were these kind of video program notes during these massive set changes. In fact, San Francisco has done a lot to be on the forefront of this, be it in things like that, in the concert setting, or also on their Web site with keeping score, even little after hours events like we had last night, where the actually place becomes kind of a platform. The truth is, I mean the orchestra really is alive.

00:33:30            I mean it's changing, and it's not just changing in literal, you know, add instruments ways, such as add electronics, or John's been using electronic sounds for a long time, or the tuning that came into Absolute Jest. But even the new sounds that people will make out of 200-year-old instruments, it is changing, and there are new ways of thinking about it. You know, on the one hand, the orchestra has this connotation. On the other hand, some of the first music I heard that had an orchestra involved was like Pink Floyd, The Final Cut -- you know, psychedelic rock.

00:34:07            And there is a lot that the orchestra can do. The great pieces of music history sometimes, I think, take a little bit more of an acquired taste to truly appreciate. But if you're alive, you will be moved by this music. I mean people here, I imagine it's a pretty sympathetic crowd.

00:34:31            But for folks that feel like it's somehow culturally outside of their realm, I think there's a lot of mind-blowing music definitely beyond what's on FM radio. And certainly with festivals like this, it's a great way to remind people that that's the case. It's true. Something like an orchestra is an institution. It takes quite a lot of cooperation to make it happen.

00:34:59            I remember a visual artist friend said, "Man, you all have a level of communication, a level of cooperation in your field that is unheard of." And it's true. I mean just look at the amount of people that have to work together. It's incredible. There has to be an institution to support that. And it might not be able to change on a dime, but things are really changing. And I feel like particularly here, and particularly West Coast orchestras have been amazing at really adapting to the kind of 21st century audiences. So I think it can happen. I think it is happening.

00:35:36            Mark Clague: Well, in some ways I think the best answer to this question that both of you have already given happens on stage tonight, with the performances of Absolute Jest and Mass Transmission. I mean, for me, both of them really sort of answer the call of Charles Ives, of this maverick combination of old and new, of European tradition, or sort of your own thinking and vision, drawing from popular culture, drawing from classical culture.

00:36:00            So I think both of you reaching around those issues. And the fact that each of you has very different pieces performed on this stage that sort of bring that together in this synthetic way that really connected with certainly me, as an audience member, last night is a great testament to the potential of this orchestra, even at its 100th birthday, this sort of Maserati of an instrument to really carry that forward. So thank you so much, and thanks for this conversation.

[End of recorded material]