



**AMERICAN ORCHESTRA FORUM PODCASTS:
TALKING ABOUT ORCHESTRAS**

Chapter Five: Orchestral Creativity, on the Stage

Transcript

Moderator and Writer: Steven Winn

Producer: Polly Winograd Ikonen

Editor: Melodie Myers

Music: *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* by John Adams, recorded by the San Francisco Symphony, Michael Tilson Thomas conducting. Recording available on SFS Media. Recording © 2012 SFS Media. All rights reserved.

The American Orchestra Forum is a project of the San Francisco Symphony, generously supported by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

© 2012 San Francisco Symphony. All rights reserved.

Chapter Five: Orchestral Creativity, on the Stage

Welcome to this podcast of the American Orchestra Forum, a program of the San Francisco Symphony. In celebration of the Symphony's centennial, six leading American orchestras – from Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia – visited San Francisco during the 2011-2012 season.

In conjunction with these concerts, the American Orchestra Forum presented a series of wide-ranging conversations about the state of the orchestra, an institution with roots in the 19th century, now adapting to life in the fast-changing 21st. Musicians, scholars, composers, executives, critics and technologists gathered throughout the year to discuss three key topics: Community, Creativity, and Audiences. Each chapter in this podcast series presents highlights from public and behind-the-scenes conversations by these experts, and explores the themes that emerge.

I'm Steven Winn, American Orchestra Forum moderator, and your podcast host.

Where does the marvel of musical creativity come from and how does it work? What parts do muses and inspiration, intuition and the subconscious, hard work and happy accident play in the process? In this chapter, we'll examine the ways in which creativity can flourish, falter and forge new pathways in the symphony orchestra hall, where a storied past and challenging future meet. Stories from composers, the artists who summon music out of silence, are the clear place to start on this complex and endlessly fascinating topic.

In his book "Imagine: How Creativity Works," Jonah Lehrer recounts the origin of Bob Dylan's famous song *Like a Rolling Stone*. Burned out by touring, Dylan temporarily gave up writing songs. That's when his great hit arrived, unbidden. "It's like a ghost is writing the song," said Dylan. "It gives you the song and it goes away. You don't know what it means."

For composer John Adams, another kind of productively puzzling impulse led to the composition of his *Absolute Jest*, which was commissioned by the San

Francisco Symphony for its centennial season. Asked about the source and evolution of the work, Adams offers this frank and slyly puckish explanation:

I actually cannot remember what gave me the idea of incorporating Beethoven. 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. 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.

Like any creative artist, Adams is sensitively tuned to the world around him. Influences and inspiration can come from anywhere. The composer recalls a San Francisco Symphony concert that helped nurture and generate his initial idea, even as he quaked a little at the prospect.

I heard MTT do Stravinsky's Pulcinella, which I'm sure everybody here knows. A piece that Stravinsky based on some Neapolitan music, 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....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.

Here's an excerpt of the results in *Absolute Jest*, as performed by the San Francisco Symphony and the St. Lawrence String Quartet during the 2012 American Mavericks festival:

MUSICAL EXCERPT FROM ABSOLUTE JEST

Mason Bates came at the writing of his work *Mass Transmission* through an apparently more consciously plotted course. Armed with a San Francisco Symphony commission, the ex-choirboy first decided to write something for a large vocal ensemble and organ. Then he went in search of a text. His friend Adams, Bates recalls, had some advice:

"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." ... 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.

That wasn't the only new territory Bates set out to explore:

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... 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. ... 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.

By electing to tame his own hair-on-fire instincts and do the harder, simpler thing, Bates was enacting the kind of creative process Arthur Koestler describes as “the fusion of two previously unrelated frames of reference.” Bates puts it this way:

It's always been a challenge to balance the needs of the form with the material that's living inside it. ... 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.

Mass Transmission received its premiere at the 2012 American Mavericks Festival, in a performance by the San Francisco Symphony and San Francisco Symphony Chorus. Here’s an excerpt:

MUSICAL EXCERPT FROM MASS TRANSMISSION

An artist’s choice of medium – whether it’s oil paint or watercolor, a sonnet or free verse, an orchestra or a solo piano – is an integral component of creativity. Form and content, medium and the artistic message are intimately, inextricably joined. How does that work when a contemporary composer elects to write for a symphony orchestra, with its heavy mantle of history and cultural connotations? For John Adams, the inherent limitations are at once an obstacle, and, as they have been for composers from the past and will surely be for others in the future, a potential gateway to creativity.

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? 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. ... And there are many ways of making it fresh. You can do what Varèse 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. 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.

Mason Bates, who grew up in part on rock music and often weaves electronic sounds into the orchestral fabric, views creativity in a dynamic continuum across styles and time and musical associations. The orchestra, like the artists who are drawn to it and the audiences as well, must evolve together in an ongoing act of creative connection.

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. 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. ... The truth is, I mean, the orchestra really is alive.

Adams concurs:

It is a world of an amazing flexibility and enormous emotional range, which is why we do it. 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.

No one has made a greater case for the orchestra's vitality in the 21st century than Michael Tilson Thomas, music director of the San Francisco Symphony. A staunch champion (and composer) of new music, MTT has stretched the possibilities of the musical experience across the cultural spectrum, from his work with the YouTube Symphony to his use of projections and other concert enhancements with the New World Symphony in Miami to his vibrant *Keeping Score* videos. His fundamental creative work begins as a conductor, whenever he picks up a score and sets out to produce the deepest and richest performance possible. Tilson Thomas describes how he goes about it:

I try to work with the orchestra somewhere between the way a director would work with a great group of actors, the coach would work with a team. ... But what I think a good director does not do, a good director does not say to an actor, "Say the first three words slowly and loudly, then say the next two a little faster, then the next five sort of, whatever." Because the whole point of it is that the actors must become the character believably. In the same way that the musicians in the orchestra must be able to play this music, of whatever composer, of whatever repertoire, in a way that is believable, that you understand what the message of the composer is, but at the same time, that you understand the ardency that is coming from the life experience of those live musicians who are actually alive, and who are recognizing, in these pieces, their own lives, and vice versa, and therefore able to make comprehensible and meaningful through the

generosity of their spirits and what they share with the audience. And so my job is to try, in whatever ways, to make that happen.

Conscious craft is essential, for a composer, a conductor or a musician. “Creativity is a habit,” as the choreographer Twyla Tharp says, “and the best creativity is a result of good work habits.” But it must tap something deeper, a kind of endlessly flowing river that connects composer to performers, orchestra to audience, past to present. Michael Tilson Thomas:

The process of getting to know things about people through the creative work they do is fascinating, because I also think about the arts as being a kind of dialogue between instinct and intelligence, between faith and reason, between the head and the heart, whatever, there are different mixtures of this, different combinations of this in all the different works that are done, in the case of music by different composers, but also from different eras in time. There’s an enormous amount to be learned about what it means to be human, and profit from the richness of that in the growing of our souls. This is what I believe. Then, as far as working with lots of people to try and get the most out of their creativity, and get this all to come together, there is still a sort of, I’m not saying this in the religious sense, there is a kind of congregational aspect of our experience of the arts, whether that’s people coming to concerts, or to operas, or going to museums.

Not everything runs smoothly, of course. The creative flow can go dry, get dammed up, take unexpected twists and turns, and sometimes break through to open new pathways. Margo Drakos took an unforeseen route in the midst of her thriving career as a cellist with the Pittsburgh, Seattle and San Diego symphonies. She explains:

I loved playing with my colleagues, and trying to interpret the composer’s intentions with my own passions and experiences to communicate that, hopefully, in a powerful way to the audience. ... But what I found was that there was so much disruptive change happening, particularly I would say rather spectacularly in the performing arts field, largely by technology at the time. ... And there was a lot of doom and gloom in some of my work environment as a cellist, in the professional space. And I found it really depressing. ... I also thought there was a tremendous opportunity for experimenting with that redefinition and redistribution of what community meant, what the role of an artist in the 21st century is, and kind of going back to the roots of interpreting your past, and the past of our rich cultural heritage, and bringing that into the future today.

Drakos put her cello down to co-found InstantEncore, a technology company that wires classical music artists and ensembles into today’s audiences through Websites and mobile apps. The circuits InstantEncore offers may be digital, but they’re part of a much wider loop that creativity seeks. Music may begin in solitude, emerge with deep curiosity and hard work and take shape in collaboration with others. But it only comes alive when it’s performed for an

audience, when an artist's inspiration touches and somehow alters the listeners' consciousness. Margo Drakos:

At the end of the day you don't practice in your room for your whole life to just play for yourself, and four other people who share the same great detail about your appoggiatura or the oscillation speed of your vibrato. And ideally you work on those tools as a mechanism you be able to communicate with your community and be relevant.

[Adams:] I just can't imagine not thinking about an audience. Because, to me, the act of making music is the act of bringing something out of yourself and bouncing it off someone else.

That's John Adams, picking up the theme. Technique and tactics can only explain so much. A kind of primal innocence is creativity's essential, animating spark.

[Adams:] It's like a little kid coming home and saying, "Guess what happened today at school? It's really no different than that. 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. But I think even chess masters and nuclear physicists, they want to get their ideas communicated. ... And music is, above and beyond everything else, the art of feeling, much more than any other art form. ... 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. 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 feelings.

Michael Tilson Thomas' parting thoughts on the inexhaustible wonder of creativity turn to Beethoven and the powerful experience of communal transformation and renewal:

So even from a composer like Beethoven and the Eroica, it's great to know how the Eroica goes, but it's even more amazing to discover that the Eroica has one breathtakingly original message, which is just to observe that things happen to us: We start out in a certain place. Things happen to us. We get through those things, but we are never again going to be who we were before that happened. We may come back again to our sense of self, but all these occurrences, these moments of pain and turmoil, have had their effect, and that some extend have had a deepening and enriching effect, in our idea of ourselves and our own particular experience and purpose in life.

We invite you to join the conversation with American's leading orchestras, by visiting the American Orchestra Forum website at symphonyforum.org. There, you will find blog posts, videos, transcripts, and more. Please add your voice to the ongoing discussion.

The American Orchestra Forum is made possible by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The theme music is from John Adams' *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, performed by the San Francisco Symphony, and available from SFS Media, on CD or as a download. This podcast is copyrighted 2012 by the San Francisco Symphony.

I'm Steven Winn. Thanks for listening.

###