

On May 2nd the New England Philharmonic (NEP) will perform *How the Solar System Was Won*, the winning composition from their 30th annual Call for Scores competition.

Today, NEP's publicist, Dayla Arabella, sits down with the composer, Matthew Browne.

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Q1. Matt, we are all excited to present the Boston premiere of *How the Solar System Was Won* at our concert on May 2. The title alone is intriguing. Tell us about the piece.

I am a huge fan of Stanley Kubrick's films and wanted to write a piece inspired by his unique style of filmmaking. Through my research I came across the evocative title of my piece. It was actually an early working title of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, my favorite film. The title intrigued me even beyond Kubrick's use of it. The obvious reference to *How the West Was Won* gave it a bit of a playful and satirical tone, but to me it still felt deeply serious and grandiose. The word "won" as opposed to a word like "formed" asserts that the early years of the solar system consisted of a long, arduous period of collisions, orbital fluctuations and explosions that were extremely violent and chaotic, ultimately coalescing into the tentative balance we have now. It is poetic to me to think that the most beautiful objects we are privileged to see in the night sky (the moon, Saturn's rings, shooting stars, etc.) are direct results of this chaotic mess.

Musically, I tried to capture this chaos by structuring the work around a half-dozen or so "grooves." I think of grooves as a kind of continuous musical orbit. One by one, these grooves are violently thwarted, giving way to something new. The resulting grooves have a feeling that is both grounded in its repetition but uneasy due to the abrupt and fickle nature of the piece. The idea is to discover the beauty in the incessant change that is occurring throughout the universe.

Q2. Renowned Russian art critic and ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilvev issued the challenge, "Astonish me!" On your website you write that you strive to create music that meets that challenge. How does a 21st century composer "astonish"?

This is the question I struggle with and that always excites me. In a modern society where people can access music of any kind at the push of a button, it is exceedingly hard to present something the audience has never heard before. However, what is exciting about modern audiences is that when a composer evokes a breadth of styles and nuanced musical tropes, the audience can relate to them much more than they could a hundred years ago. A composer can use these styles, and an audience's expectations with regard to them, as compositional tools, much like melody and rhythm. With this, the composer can create a mixture of music that can evoke a strong and poignant narrative.



Q3. In just the past five years you've composed over two dozen works. What piece are you most proud of and why?

There are probably two pieces in the last five years that I am giddy about. The first is my recent orchestral work, *Barnstorming Season*. This piece is so fun and wacky. I really let loose with the campy stylistic borrowing. It's probably my most honest and irreverent piece. My first string quartet, subtitled *A Penumbral Eclipse*, is a piece I'm really proud of. I wrote it in my undergraduate days, and I still love it, particularly the third movement. I still don't know how I was able to write a movement so simple and effective. A recent performance of it by the Villiers Quartet from London just melted my heart.

Q.4 When did you start composing? What were your early passions and influences?

I started composing in high school, around 2005. I was a sax player and naturally latched on to band composers as my earliest influences. Eventually, I was introduced to works like the Mahler and Shostakovich symphonies, the *Rite of Spring*, Bartok's string quartets, and John Corigliano's Clarinet Concerto. The gestural and rhythmic authority of this music really excited me early on and still does now.

Q.5 The NEP's home is in Boston, a hotbed of budding composers. A conversation one regularly overhears around town centers around a composer's compositional challenges. What are yours?

In addition to the "astonishing the audience" challenge I constantly self-impose, my biggest challenge with each composition is simply *beginning* a new work. With every piece I write, it feels like for a week or so at the beginning I cannot put anything down on paper that satisfies me and excites me to keep chugging away. I generally start a piece six or seven times. It almost feels like I'm relearning how to compose with each new piece. Ultimately though, I begin to trust myself and climb out of this hole.

Q.6 You are nearly finished with your Doctoral of Musical Arts in Music Composition from the University of Michigan. What's next?

I currently have one year left at U of M and will primarily be writing my dissertation during that span. I expect to graduate in May of 2016, and after that we'll see where my music takes me! I am interested in trying the freelance life for a few years in a major hub like Boston or New York. Eventually, I would love to teach music at a college or university.

Q.7 Matt, we are all looking forward to having you in Boston for the premiere. Have you visited Boston before?

I've visited Boston just once, in March of 2014. I was visiting a friend from high school for a couple of days, and he took me all around the city. It was a whirlwind. I really enjoyed getting a beer at the bar from 'Cheers' in Beacon Hill, seeing the Bobby Orr statue at the TD Garden (I'm a huge hockey fan), and the map room at the Boston Public Library. What I really loved the most about my trip was getting to see the King's Chapel Burying Ground. I was so intrigued and enthralled by the stark juxtaposition of this old, eroding cemetery and the very modern downtown buildings that surround it. These kinds of incongruous juxtapositions invite my imagination to run wild, thinking about all the possible hidden connections. I can't wait to return!

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Intrigued? Catch the Boston premiere of Matthew Browne's *How the Solar System Was Won* by the New England Philharmonic on May 2 at Boston University's Tsai Performance Center. The performance will also include:

- The world premiere of an NEP commission from Andy Vores, *Drive* (Violin Concerto no. 2)
- NEP Composer Laureate Gunther Schullers' *Meditation*
- Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*

For tickets and more information, visit: www.NEPhilharmonic.org

For more information on Matthew Browne, visit: www.matthewbrownecomposer.com