

FINDING THE KEY

PROGRAM NOTES

October 29, 2016 | Tsai Performance Center | 8 p.m.

Andy Vores

Xylophonic (2016)

Xylophonic is a rambunctious thank-you in celebration of the New England Philharmonic, an orchestra and music director that I have benefitted from as a composer enormously over a good number of years.

It is called “Xylophonic” simply because it features the xylophone a lot—often with two players on the one instrument simultaneously—but also because it’s a punchy, driven, slightly unhinged little piece . . . rather like the character of the xylophone itself. It works by alternating little descending figures and then overlapping them closer and closer together. This is followed by “pulsing” music and by “funfair” wobbly waltz-music. This all happens twice, leading through a slower build-up to a more stately almost-ending, followed by a few last measures of punchiness . . . and more xylophone.

All of this happens pretty quickly—it’s a concert-opener and needs to get out of the way so the real program can begin!

—Andy Vores

Yehudi Wyner

Piano Concerto “*Chiavi in mano*” (2004)

The idea for a piano concerto for the Boston Symphony was instigated by Robert Levin, the great Mozart scholar and pianist. The idea was evidently embraced by BSO Artistic Administrator Tony Fogg and supported by Music Director James Levine.

Much of the concerto was composed during the summer of 2004 at the American Academy in Rome, in a secluded studio hidden within the Academy walls. While much of the composing took place far from home, the concerto comes out as a particularly “American” piece, shot through with vernacular elements. As in many of my compositions, simple, familiar musical ideas are the starting point. A shape, a melodic fragment, a rhythm, a chord, a texture, or a sonority may ignite the appetite for exploration. How such simple insignificant things can be altered, elaborated, extended, and combined becomes the exciting challenge of composition. I also want the finished work to breathe in a natural way, to progress spontaneously, organically, moving toward a transformation of the musical substance in ways unimaginable to me when I began the journey. Transformation is the goal, with the intention of achieving an altered state of perception and exposure that I am otherwise unable to achieve.

“*Chiavi in mano*”—the title of the piano concerto—is the mantra used by automobile salesmen and realtors in Italy: Buy the house or the car and the keys are yours. But the more pertinent reason for the title is the fact that the piano writing is designed to fall “under the hand” and no matter how difficult it may be, it remains physically comfortable and devoid of stress. In other words: “Keys in hand.”

—Yehudi Wyner, December 13, 2004

Carl Ruggles

Evocations (1937-56)

Carl Ruggles was born to a New England farming family and received his first musical instruction from his mother. He went on to study violin with Walter Spaulding and Felix Winternitz, theory with Josef Claus, and composition with the Harvard educator John Knowles Paine.

The four pieces assembled under the title *Evocations* were composed respectively during 1937, 1941, 1943, and 1940 for piano solo. These movements were also orchestrated by the composer from 1942 to the next few years, and continually revised through 1956. Kirkpatrick has noted that in the orchestrations, many musical phrases are “in earlier states than the final versions for piano.” The opening *Largo* introduces a motif that re-starts several times, each time extending its melodic range until it achieves large and passionate arcs. The music quickly descends again to the lower ranges with a still and quiet concluding chord covering a wide range. The second piece, marked *Andante sempre poco rubato* in the orchestral version and *Andante con fantasia* in the piano solo version, opens with a steady, wandering melody, which is made into a more angular version, and then varied in slow tempo, and intense double counterpoint that has two dramatic arching points and then subsides. The initial wandering idea returns for a brief statement and the music peacefully concludes. The third movement, a *Moderato appassionato*, is built of many short flowing melodic arcs and highly dramatic chordal statements. The final *Adagio sostenuto* is built on accumulations of arching gestures in irregular rhythms, often rushing forward, balanced midway by a tense bridge of ascending double counterpoint. The music then becomes exceedingly quiet but still maintains its dissonant, tense character before evaporating into silence.

—Adapted from the ARKiv Music website

Béla Bartók

Concerto for Orchestra (1943)

The Hungarian composer and musicologist Béla Bartók is now recognized as one of the masters of twentieth-century music, known for his integration of Balkan folk elements with modern Western European music to create a unique musical world. But he was less widely appreciated and in precarious physical and financial condition after fleeing war in Europe for New York. At the urging of two fellow Hungarian musicians, the conductor Fritz Reiner and the violinist Joseph Szigeti, Serge Koussevitzky—conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and a great champion of contemporary music—visited Bartók in the hospital to offer a commission for a new work. The composer doubted that he had the strength to fulfill it, but agreed in the end. His health improved enough for him to spend the summer and fall at Saranac Lake, in upstate New York, where he completed the *Concerto for Orchestra*.

The first performance was given by Koussevitzky and the BSO on December 1, 1944, to great acclaim, with the composer in attendance. In a program note for the occasion, Bartók wrote: “The general mood of the work represents, apart from the jesting second movement, a gradual transition from the sternness of the first movement and the lugubrious death-song of the third, to the life-assertion of the last one. . . . The title of this symphony-like orchestral work is explained by its tendency to treat the single orchestral instruments in a concertant or soloistic manner. The ‘virtuoso’ treatment appears, for

instance, in the fugato sections of the development of the first movement (brass instruments), or in the perpetuum mobile-like passage of the principal theme in the last movement (strings), and especially in the second movement, in which pairs of instruments consecutively appear with brilliant passages.”

The concerto consists of five movements, with an introduction and conclusion framing scherzo or intermezzo movements on either side of a central elegy. After a somber introduction, the first movement gives way to more good-humored music marked by folk rhythms. The second movement’s title translates as “game of couples,” and pairs of wind and brass instruments give playful chase, leading up to a spacious brass chorale. The elegy of the central movement offers a dark and mysterious atmosphere punctuated by keening descending scale figures.

The composer described the action of the following “interrupted intermezzo” this way: “The melody goes on its own quiet way when it’s suddenly interrupted by a brutal band-music, which is derided, ridiculed by the orchestra. After the band has gone away, the melody resumes its waltz—only a little bit more sadly than before.” The interrupting march is a quotation from Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony, whose use as a “war anthem” he found distasteful.

The work concludes with a brilliant whirlwind of fugal writing, highlighting the string sections, that builds to a finale that is indeed life-affirming—despite, or perhaps because of, the circumstances in which it was written.