

PROGRAM NOTES | March 6, 2011

By Robert Kirzinger

The Boston Modern Orchestra Project celebrates its continuing connection to the New England Conservatory with music of three members of the NEC community, and one esteemed visitor. In residence at the conservatory this week is the celebrated, Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer William Bolcom. Two of Bolcom's chamber-orchestra pieces from the 1970s, similarly scored but of contrasting character, welcome Bolcom to Boston. Also on the program are works by faculty members Michael Gandolfi and Kati Agócs. Completing the program is a recent work by NEC master's degree candidate Sojourner Hodges, winner of this year's BMOP/NEC concerto competition. NEC graduate student Bethany Worrell is soprano soloist in Hodges's *Full Fathom Five*.

William Bolcom (b. 1938)***Commedia* for (almost) 18th-century orchestra**

The scope of William Bolcom's compositional activities is vast: he has written everything from solo piano works to opera and symphony, and his style incorporates pop, ragtime, and cabaret, pastiche of classical styles, modernism, and what we might just want to call Bolcomism, the consistently present voice of the composer. Poetry, song, and theater have been a core concern from the beginning of his career. Having entered the University of Washington as a gifted eleven-year-old, he minored in English and took a course in poetry with the great Theodore Roethke. With his wife, the singer Joan Morris, Bolcom delved deeply into the history of 20th-century American popular song, performing and recording songs by Carrie Jacobs Bond, Eubie Blake, George M. Cohan, and dozens of now-obscure composers and lyricists; the duo has also performed many of Bolcom's own songs.

Bolcom's long and significant collaboration with lyricist Arnold Weinstein began in the early 1960s and lasted until Weinstein's death in 2005. Their first big project together was the musical theater work *Dynamite Tonite* in 1963; they cowrote numerous cabaret songs and worked together on the librettos for the musical theater opera *Casino Paradise* and those for Bolcom's three full-length operas *McTeague*, *A View from the Bridge*, and *A Wedding* (all three premiered at the Lyric Opera of Chicago). Along with many other poets of our age and earlier, his early interest in William Blake sustained a twenty-year project to set the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as a vast, fantastically eclectic song cycle, and more recently led to his Eighth Symphony for chorus and orchestra, setting portions of Blake's *Prophetic Books*. This big symphony was commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra for its 125th anniversary and premiered by the orchestra with the Tanglewood Festival Chorus in February 2008. Other recent premieres include the song cycle *The Hawthorne Tree* by mezzo-soprano Joyce Castle and the composer as pianist with the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble in October 2010, and his violin concerto *Romanza*, written for the New Century Chamber Orchestra and its music director, violinist Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, who was soloist in the first performance in May 2010. He remains active as a pianist, and has also written much chamber music and for a wide variety of ensemble types, large and small. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for his 12 New Etudes for solo piano.

Within Bolcom's symphonies, we find a range of approaches whose scope echoes in microcosm the variety of his interests and fondnesses. There are eight for symphonic orchestra; of these, No. 5 includes a solo vocal setting; No. 8, as mentioned, is for orchestra and chorus. A "ninth" is for concert band, written for a consortium of the Big Ten concert bands in 2008. (Bolcom was a longtime faculty member at the University of Michigan until his retirement in that same year.) Bolcom has consistently returned to the genre throughout his career. His Symphony No. 1 dates from 1957, when the composer was nineteen and

studying with Darius Milhaud at Aspen. The second, from 1964, was for the Seattle Symphony. The gap between nos. 2 and 3 was fifteen years, the longest such stretch. He returned to the form for his Symphony No. 3 for chamber orchestra, commissioned by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra; the group had, some years earlier, also commissioned a very different kind of piece, Bolcom's *Commedia*, a single-movement work "for (almost) 18th-century orchestra."

The "(almost)" here refers to the makeup of the then-very-new St. Paul ensemble, of which Bolcom's friend, the composer Sydney Hodkinson, was conductor, and to whom the score of *Commedia* is dedicated. Bolcom has written, "*Commedia* was written soon after my composition *Frescoes* and is its polar opposite in every way—except that both works were somewhat inspired (albeit distantly) by things Italian. In the case of *Commedia*, as the title suggests, the influence is the *commedia dell'arte*—the stock stage characters tossed against each other in a variety of situations, often comic but, as evidenced in the paintings of a Longhi or a Magnasco, not without a dark side. Much of the piece consists of a tarantella or saltarello in fast 6/8 time." Bolcom wrote *Commedia* in New York City in 1971 and it was premiered in May 1972.

Commedia is about ten minutes long. The opening measures announce the pastiche idea, the piano immediately quoting, apparently, the fundamental gesture of Papageno's *Magic Flute* aria "The birdcatcher, that's me," followed by its pregnant dominant chord. From there we're off on a surreal exchange of views, occasionally *Petrushka*-like in the angry disagreements among factions, and touching on quotes or quasi-quotes from Mozart to *Chopsticks*. The first part of the piece is a hodgepodge of events, leading to a quiet string passage—a red herring? The crux is the quick saltarello dominating the middle of the work, but a return to an unsettled mosaic lends a level of anxiety or dreamlike instability to the entertainment. (For a famous saltarello, hear the finale of Mendelssohn's *Italian Symphony*.)

Symphony No. 3 (Symphony for chamber orchestra)

The title on the score for Bolcom's Symphony No. 3 reads "Symphony for chamber orchestra," suggesting the composer hadn't originally intended it to hold a place with his earlier two, and later changed his mind. The designation "symphony" implies ambition, and the piece, in thirty minutes and four movements, delivers, if not precisely in a traditional way. Bolcom completed the third movement last, in July 1979, and the piece was premiered that September—pre-premiered on September 12, and officially premiered on September 15. Like *Commedia*, the orchestra is more-or-less Mozart-sized, with modern doublings (piccolo, alto flute, E-flat clarinet) plus electric piano, which adds a distinct sonic touch.

The composer appends the score with a quote from the Christian service for the burial of the dead, from the Book of Common Prayer: "Man, that is born of woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth (as it were) a shadow, and never continueth in one stay." The beginning and end of the piece, musically similar, represent a "collective consciousness" from which our individual spirits emerge and into which they return. The alto flute, English horn, and first bassoon are a "half-humorous visualization of three spirits who watch over the process of our birth and death...." Birth and death—"Alpha," the name of the first movement, and "Omega," the last.

Bolcom represents the collective consciousness with a miasma of string glissandi. Focus begins to come with a free solo for alto flute, joined by bassoon and English horn (the "three spirits"). It turns out the opening is a slow introduction to a proper Allegro—complete with exposition repeat—of rhythmic and contrapuntal energy. The second movement is a "Scherzo vitale" ("Lively scherzo," or literally "lively joke") alluding to a hymn chorale and having a lush fox trot as Trio. The combination of disparate musical urges recalls Ives. The third movement, "Chiaroscuro," (literally "lightdark") takes its title from the painting technique creating light, shadow, and a sense of volume, originating in the Renaissance. The title apparently refers to the alternation of woodwind and string colors. Here, too, is featured an almost verbatim repeat. Bolcom calls the movement an *entr'acte*, setting up the dark, substantial last movement.

Its main idea is an intense, wide-ranging melody beginning in unison muted violins. This single line lasts more than a third of the movement, to be interrupted by the tolling, evidently, of passing-bells. Eventually the texture divides into chorale, ending in a cadence of heavenly light that dissolves, full circle into the spirit-inhabited chaos of the first movement.

Sojourner Hodges (b. 1986)

Full Fathom Five

Sojourner Hodges, pianist and composer, is a master's degree candidate at NEC, studying composition with Kati Agócs; as a pianist and improviser, she has also worked with Anthony Coleman. Hodges was home-schooled until college, first attending Andrew College in Georgia, then earning her bachelor's degree at the University of Georgia, where she studied with Adrian Childs. The presence of Kati Agócs at NEC was a strong draw for her to attend the Conservatory. Hodges's accomplishments include her appearance on the prestigious NPR radio program "From the Top" in 2004 as both pianist and composer in the first public performance of any of her music. She has also participated in the Czech-American Summer Institute in Prague.

Before moving with her family as a teenager to a farm in Calvary, Georgia, Hodges grew up initially in Tallahassee, Florida. She is the daughter of a professor of philosophy at Florida State University, the late Donald C. Hodges, an eminent author and expert on Latin American revolutionary politics. She started playing piano after her mother, who had played a little when younger, bought an electronic keyboard. Although Sojourner was given lessons, like many future composers she preferred to invent her own keyboard music rather than concentrate on exercises. By her teens she was ready for formal compositional training, spending several very fruitful years working with the notable Czech-born composer Ladislav Kubik. (Kubik was a student of Lutosławski and Penderecki, but his music is notable for its range of influence rather than its connection with his teacher's styles.) Growing up, Hodges had had little exposure to recent classical music, but she relates that she listened a great deal to music of Philip Glass and Laurie Anderson. She also counts John Coolidge Adams among her musical interests.

As a pianist, Hodges performs frequently in improvising groups and in her own work; recently she has begun to incorporate the potential for improvisatory passages in her composed music with piano, such as in her *Fire Command Room* for piano and voice. Her harmonies are clear and based in tonality, and her music often features a rhythmic "groove." In *Full Fathom Five*, groove and harmony are present as a foundation in the string body for the highly lyrical, melismatic vocal setting of Shakespeare's text, one of Ariel's songs from *The Tempest*. The text is stretched and recombined, removing it almost entirely from its original verse form but, at the same time, infusing it with a yearning emotional intensity.

Full Fathom Five is one of two pieces Hodges wrote in response to her father's death in 2009, the other, related work being the solo piano *Sea Change* (the title of which is from this same text). Both are concerned with memory and nostalgia, poignant, bittersweet, but not regretful. Hodges has said her approach to the poem removes it from its place within the play. In a larger sense Ariel's whisper to Ferdinand about his father's death—deceptive though it is—is about distancing the transformations brought about by time.

This is the public premiere of the full ensemble version of *Full Fathom Five*, which has previously received an orchestral reading and a public performance with single strings on a part.

Michael Gandolfi (b. 1956)

The Garden of the Senses Suite, from The Garden of Cosmic Speculation

A few years ago Michael Gandolfi gave me a book called *Autumn in Peking*, introducing me to the French absurdist novelist (and jazz trumpeter) Boris Vian. The book introduces several characters in bizarre, apparently unconnected situations, and ingeniously brings together the threads into an often hilarious narrative condemning French imperialism. It's the kind of thing a cultural and intellectual omnivore like Gandolfi would like—off the beaten track, elliptical, fragmentary, funny, but ultimately meaningful, and

with the added coincidence of Vian's other career as a musician to seal the connection. It's also characteristic of Gandolfi's munificence and spirit of exploration that he shared his discovery. His music is full of fascinating twists and intricate patterns beneath its attractive, engaging surface.

The Boston Modern Orchestra Project and Gil Rose have performed a number of Gandolfi's scores, including *Points of Departure*, *Y2K Compliant*, and *Themes from a Midsummer Night*, which the orchestra recorded on its own label, as well as his concertos for trombone, saxophone, and bassoon, slated for a future release. Apart from BMOP, Gandolfi has established excellent relationships with other ensembles, especially the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. The BSO commissioned his *Impressions from The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* for the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra, and has performed that work and other movements from the complete *Garden of Cosmic Speculation*; the orchestra also commissioned his chamber piece *Plain Song, Fantastic Dances*, which was premiered and recorded for a recent CD by the Boston Symphony Chamber Players. In Atlanta, ASO music director Robert Spano has proven a consistent advocate for Gandolfi's music. The ASO commissioned further movements of the complete *Garden of Cosmic Speculation* and later recorded the 70-minute piece. Last June the ASO and Chorus under Robert Spano premiered and recorded another commissioned work, a large-scale piece for chorus and orchestra, *Q.E.D.: Engaging Richard Feynman*. (A CD of the recording was released last month.) A shorter work, *Pageant*, was commissioned by the ASO to celebrate Robert Spano's tenth season as music director.

Other recent works include *Of Angels and Neurons*, based on the science of sleep, for the University of North Carolina Symphony Orchestra, and three works for the Melrose (MA) Symphony Orchestra, including his most recent orchestral piece, a concerto for clarinet and bassoon for Boston Symphony Orchestra principal bassoon Richard Svoboda and his daughter, the clarinetist Erin Svoboda.

The Garden of Cosmic Speculation is virtually a catalog of compositional and orchestration techniques, based on Gandolfi's reactions to the disparate and variably complex stimuli of the Potlatch Garden designed by architect Charles Jencks, as the composer explains below.

The Garden of Cosmic Speculation, a thirty-acre private garden in the Borders area of Scotland created by architect and architectural critic Charles Jencks, is a joining of terrestrial nature with fundamental concepts of modern physics (quantum mechanics, super-string theory, complexity theory, etc.). In his recently published book The Garden of Cosmic Speculation, Jencks writes,

"When you design a garden, it raises basic questions. What is nature, how do we fit into it, and how should we shape it where we can, both physically and visually? Some of these questions are practical, others are philosophical, and the latter may not occur to us while laying out a garden, but they are implied. When in 1988 I started designing a garden with my wife Maggie Keswick, at her mother's house in Scotland, we were not concerned with the larger issues, but over the years, they came more and more to the fore. The result has been what I have called "The Garden of Cosmic Speculation." The reason for this unusual title is that we—Maggie, I, scientists, and then friends that we consulted—have used it as a spur to think about and celebrate some fundamental aspects of nature. Many of these are quite normal to a garden: planting suitable species which are both a pleasure to eat and easy to grow in a wet, temperate climate. And others are unusual: inventing new waveforms, linear twists, and a new grammar of landscape design to bring out the basic elements of nature that recent science has found to underlie the cosmos."

These "unusual" aspects of Jencks's garden were my motivation for musical composition. I have long been interested in modern physics and it seemed proper for music to participate in this magnificent joining of physics and architecture. I discovered The Garden of Cosmic Speculation in January of 2004 and after a month or so of sketching I composed four movements ("The Zeroroom," "Soliton Waves," "The Snail and the Poetics of going Slow," "The Nonsense"). That set, titled Impressions from The Garden of Cosmic Speculation, was premiered by Robert Spano and the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra in August 2004. In January of 2007, I resumed work on the piece, revised the initial four movements and composed the

remaining seven movements that comprise the seventy-minute whole, The Garden of Cosmic Speculation. It was always my intention that the piece be performed either in its entirety or in subsets, in which any number of movements in any order may be selected and performed. The decision as to which movements will comprise a given performance suite is to be made by a conductor, music director, or artistic administrator. In summary it is desired that different arrangements or pathways through the garden are explored.

The Garden of the Senses Suite is an interior movement in the larger work. It is arranged here for a smaller orchestra. It is a neo-Baroque suite of dance forms. The six pieces all contain quotations from the music of Bach, particularly the English and French suites for harpsichord, and are inspired by a series of manicured, geometrical plots, separated from the rest of the garden by stone walls and shrubs. Each plot has a sculptural object in the center dedicated to one of the senses. In the stately "Allemande (audition)", moments of Baroque orchestration are surrounded by sections treated in more modern chromatic language, piquing the sense of hearing with the contrasting sounds. "Courante (olfaction)" is based on a quick dance in triple time, originally suggestive of darting fish in the water. Sudden changes of tonality and instrumentation are intended to remind us of the abrupt changes of frame of mind caused by different smells as they waft to us. "Sarabande (gustation)" is slow and proper-sounding. Reharmonizing a melody from Bach, it makes the musical pun of comparing the sense of taste with aesthetic notions of good taste or judgment. Dedicated to the sense of touch, "Passepied (palpation)" draws the listener's attention to two solo violinists, touching their instruments with quick, light, Paganini-like pizzicato movements, accompanied lightly by strings. "Gigue (vision)" takes the sequence of a lively, triple-time Bach gigue, but treats the melody in contrapuntal imitation, inviting listeners to visually follow the entrances of the various instrumental voices. Following without pause is "Chorale (the sixth sense: intuition)," treating a faculty that is not one of the classic senses, in a Bach form that is not a feature of the harpsichord suites. Intuition is all about anticipation, tending to juxtapose past, present, and future. It is essentially a Bach chorale scored for strings, overlaid with faster music (the same chorale, in extremely high registration and running at a slightly higher rate of speed) for winds, percussion, and harp, achieving what I intended to be a magical sonority that variously anticipates and follows the string chorale. The cadences of the two musical elements do not coincide, of course, requiring the simultaneous perception of superimposed streams.

—Michael Gandolfi

Kati Agócs (b.1975)

...like treasure hidden in a field

Kati Agócs was born in Windsor, Canada, to American and Hungarian parents, who encouraged her artistic pursuits. She shares with her brother, a classics scholar, a broad interest in literature and culture, and she has also been a visual artist. She achieved her master's and doctoral degrees in composition from the Juilliard School, where her primary teacher was Milton Babbitt. She has also participated in the Tanglewood, Dartington, Norfolk Chamber Music, Aspen, Virginia Arts, and Great Lakes Chamber Music festivals. Fluent in both English and Hungarian, Agócs spent a year in Hungary as a recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship to study at the Liszt Academy in Budapest, and also organized a continuing exchange program between that institution and the Juilliard School. She has been recognized with a Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters as well as an inaugural Brother Thomas Fellowship from the Boston Foundation.

Kati Agócs joined the New England Conservatory composition faculty in 2008. She also maintains a very busy career as a composer, continually working to fulfill commissions from major ensembles, particularly in the U.S. and her native Canada. Orchestral music and large ensemble works have been her focus in recent years. Among larger recent works are her *Requiem Fragments*, premiered by the CBC Radio Orchestra in November 2008; *Elysium*, for amplified cello, ensemble, and tape, written for Cultural Olympiad of the Vancouver Winter Olympics and premiered in Vancouver in March 2010; and *Perpetual Summer*, commissioned for the 50th anniversary of the Canadian National Youth Symphony Orchestra, of which Agócs was composer-in-residence. *Perpetual Summer* was premiered last July at the National Arts

Centre in Ottawa; recently the piece was awarded special distinction in ASCAP's 2011 Rudolph Nissim Competition. Next month, the Hamilton (Ontario) Philharmonic will premiere her *Shenanigan*, a lively concert opener commissioned by the orchestra's music director, James Sommerville. She is completing a new work for the New York-based Metropolis Ensemble, commissioned by Meet the Composer and also premiering in April, at Symphony Space in Manhattan. Her solo and chamber works are frequently performed as well; among others, harpist Bridget Kibbey has incorporated Agócs's *Every Lover Is a Warrior* into her regular recital repertoire, and her violin and piano work *Supernatural Love* has toured the world. The new music ensemble eighth blackbird toured the U.S. with *Immutable Dreams*, which was written originally for the Da Capo Chamber Players. The Boston Modern Orchestra Project has previously performed Kati Agócs's *By the Streams of Babylon* for two sopranos and orchestra and *Requiem Fragments*. BMOP and the composer are preparing a future CD release of orchestral works. Agócs performs as a soprano in her own music as well; she has sung *By the Streams of Babylon* many times (including BMOP's performances, joined by Lisa Bielawa), in addition to her chamber work *Awakening Galatea*.

...like treasure hidden in a field is the final result of a piece Agócs wrote in 2008 on commission from the American Composers Orchestra. That piece, *Pearls*, was premiered by the ACO under conductor George Manahan in February 2009. Agócs rewrote the piece extensively in 2010, and under its new title it was premiered by the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra on a gala concert marking the 20th anniversary of the orchestra's New Music Festival. Alexander Michelthwate conducted. The title comes from a passage from *Matthew* 13:44–46:

Again the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hidden in a field, the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field. Again the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it." Agócs writes, "This work represents the desire to keep spiritual things close and present in everyday life, with recognition of just how challenging this goal can be at times: Music, acting as a vehicle, is perhaps (in some ways) the field mentioned in the parable; certain precious things require sacrifices to grow."

The piece is in five movements totaling about fifteen minutes. Its sound-world demonstrates the composer's characteristic ear for evocative instrumental timbres and combinations, as well as a sure sense of harmonic and narrative progression. The writing for percussion—sometimes very aggressive, sometimes delicate—and solo instruments within the ensemble is particularly detailed and intricate. Here is Agócs's brief description of the piece: "A series of saturated chords is cast antiphonally throughout the ensemble, and the otherworldly presence of unpitched, flat Chinese wind gongs sustains a rarified atmosphere over the works five-movement arc, culminating in a cacophony of bells."