



Virtuosity's Velocity | Program Notes

By Robert Kirzinger

The genre of the large chamber ensemble, or the small orchestra, can trace its roots easily enough to the Baroque era, to Bach's *Brandenburg* concertos. The chamber-orchestra work as a separate musical entity than, say, the symphony, can be found in the serenades of Mozart, then Brahms and Dvořák and other late Romantics, its separateness becoming more pronounced as the orchestra grew and diversified with the requirements of such composers as Mahler and Strauss. That requirement was determined by an approach to the orchestra demanding constant timbral change and new, magical orchestral effects from hitherto unexplored combinations of instrument and register. Every player, in these scenarios, was treated as a potential virtuoso. The privations of World War I worked in tandem with a more fundamental change in musical language to help establish the small, flexible orchestra of soloists as a standard alternative to the large-scale ensemble.

Arnold Schoenberg's 1907 Chamber Symphony, Opus 9, a twenty-minute, single-movement piece for an orchestra a third the size of Mahler's preferred complement, would help rejuvenate the possibilities of the small orchestra for the remainder of the century, although this effect was largely retrospective rather than immediate. More immediate was the effect of the yet-smaller mixed ensemble, the miniature of the miniature orchestra, for *Pierrot lunaire*, whose immediate successors included *L'Histoire du soldat*. Fast-forward a few decades and we find a string of established ensembles (Ensemble Intercontemporain, ASKO Ensemble, Group for Contemporary Music, the City of Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, etc.) founded for the very purpose of performing this range of mixed-ensemble repertoire and its progeny. In turn that progeny has thrived. Tonight's all-American "Virtuosity's Velocity" concert demonstrates both the modern take on the Mozartian serenade and the intensity of Schoenberg's Opus 9 while drawing on the individual virtuosity of the players of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project. (For the record, Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony, Opus 9, is scored for flute; two oboes [1 doubling English horn]; three clarinets [1 doubling E-flat and bass clarinet]; two bassoons [1 doubling contrabassoon]; two horns; and string quintet. The pieces on tonight's concert feature various ensembles of about this scope.)

JOHN ADAMS (b.1947)

Chamber Symphony and *Son of Chamber Symphony*

John Coolidge Adams, among the most successful American composers in history, has epitomized musical inclusiveness for most of his career. Although in his first celebrated works he was allied with the minimalist movement, Adams has made a practice of combining its recognizable textures and rhythms with gestures and structures of other styles. Although his music is a potpourri of types, and in spite of the evolution of his compositional voice in three-plus decades, Adams's voice is immediately recognizable as his own.

Adams has said that the standards of the classical repertoire remain the baseline for his sense of tradition. Growing up in New England, he played clarinet, traveling to Boston from New Hampshire to study with a Boston Symphony Orchestra clarinetist. He began performing with orchestras early on, and later played under Sarah Caldwell in her Opera Company of Boston. He was a well-rounded musician and a good enough conductor to lead student ensembles at Harvard, and Leonard Bernstein invited him to Tanglewood on a conducting fellowship. (He turned it down to stay in Cambridge to compose.) He continues to conduct a wide repertoire with major orchestras in the US and Europe.

After earning his master's degree at Harvard, Adams moved to the West Coast, where he embraced the "maverick" tradition (via John Cage), not so much as a pure aesthetic or approach but as a license to look beyond artificial constraints on style. He was also inspired by the examples of Steve Reich and Philip Glass, who like rock musicians formed their own ensembles to perform their works and whose ideas were ripe with the influence of rock, jazz, and world music. Adams's inclusiveness was a means to an end, a way of reconnecting with an audience estranged from serious concert music, but without abandoning centuries of tradition. He has been very prolific, producing a string of already-classic, internationally famous works in a variety of genres and with a variety of positions along the highbrow-to-lowbrow spectrum, sometimes within a single piece—Bernstein's example is especially relevant here. Inarguably the most prominent composer of operas in this country, if not the world, from *Nixon in China* to *Doctor Atomic*, Adams has composed concert works almost exclusively for large ensemble and symphony orchestra.

Adams's Chamber Symphony, written in 1992 on commission for the San Francisco Contemporary Chamber Players but premiered by the Schoenberg Ensemble in January 1993, demonstrates the breadth of the composer's cultural voracity. Schoenberg, for many the epitome of new-music exclusivity (a misconception), would be one of the last composers one might expect a modern-day populist to adopt as a model, but sure enough, Schoenberg's Opus 9 was a central inspiration, along with certain other works. Adams writes, "[B]efore I began [the] project I had another one of those strange interludes that often lead to a new piece. This one involved a brief moment of what Melville called 'the shock of recognition': I was sitting in my studio, studying the score to Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony, and as I was doing so I became aware that my seven-year-old son Sam was in the adjacent room watching cartoons (good cartoons, old ones from the '50s). The hyperactive, insistently aggressive and acrobatic scores for the cartoons mixed in my head with the Schoenberg music, itself hyperactive, acrobatic and not a little aggressive, and I realized suddenly how much these two traditions had in common."

Carl Stalling, the composer/arranger for decades of Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck cartoons, joined Schoenberg as a fellow traveler in Adams's piece, which he also acknowledges as having been touched by Milhaud's *La Création du Monde* and Stravinsky's Octet. When one considers the use of familiar classical nuggets and pastiche in such cartoons as "What's Opera, Doc" and "The Rabbit of Seville," parallels with Adams's career begin to emerge. A layering or stratification of independent musical threads suggests comparison not only to Schoenberg but also Elliott Carter. Scoring is roughly Schoenbergian, plus synthesizer, percussion, trumpet, and trombone. Adams underlines the work's comedic foundation in his movement title. "Mongrel Airs," the first movement, begins *in medias res*, in the middle of a small explosion. A folk-like

violin over cowbell and walking bass is the first layer of a gathering contrapuntal texture in waves of Ivesian episodes. "Aria with Walking Bass" is similarly stratified, with multiple concurrent tempos apparent in the sustained melodies. "Roadrunner," the finale, is yet faster than the first movement, its repetitions manic, unpredictable, and reminiscent of *L'Histoire* shot out of a defective ACME cannon. A solo violin cadenza adds a further level of surrealism. Schoenberg's iconic Opus 9 is quoted clearly in the closing measures in the brass.

Fifteen years later, Adams was commissioned by Stanford University, Carnegie Hall, and the San Francisco Ballet for another chamber-orchestra concert work that would also be choreographed by Mark Morris. There are many parallels between *Son of Chamber Symphony* and its predecessor, including the orchestration; the later work adds piano doubling celesta. Both pieces are about twenty-two minutes long. Other parallels include the telltale use of synthesizers and the overall three-movement form, along with the requirement of instrumental brilliance. Also a constant (virtually throughout all of Adams's work) is an audible foundational pulse rooted in classic minimalism, although in later works like *Son of*, straight sixteenth-notes are often as not replaced by fragmented and syncopated overlapping patterns, as we find in the first movement here. There is also greater variety of episodic contrast and density in the first movement. The second movement reverts to steady-state pulse, with a long-spun melody, passed among instruments, dominating. The finale features an ebb and flow of density via patterns of unequal length, and is apparently tied to the "News" episode from a much earlier work, *Nixon in China*. *Son of Chamber Symphony* was premiered as a concert work at Stanford University in November 2007 by the group Alarm Will Sound; *Joyride*, Mark Morris's choreography for the piece, was first performed by the San Francisco Ballet in April 2008.

Ross Lee Finney (1906-97)

Landscapes Remembered

Ross Lee Finney, a born and bred Midwesterner, was a consummately eclectic master of a variety of approaches to musical expression. He absorbed the musical character of the region in which he grew up, Iowa, Minnesota, Illinois, and North Dakota, and although his work as an adult took on abstract qualities, a sense of personalization and nostalgia (very evident in *Landscapes Remembered*, but also in many other works) allowed him to incorporate in sophisticated fashion a sense of his own, and his country's, musical memory.

Finney was born in Wells, Minnesota, and moved frequently as a child of a Methodist minister turned teacher. He and his brothers were musical; his brother Gus became a noted musicologist. Ross had piano and cello lessons as a kid and was exposed, in a limited way, to the classical repertoire in the hands of the Valley City, North Dakota, town orchestra. Moving to Minneapolis at age twelve expanded his horizons considerably. He came into contact with influential older musicians, playing cello in chamber music and the university orchestra and studying with a member of the Minneapolis Symphony. He worked with the composer Donald Ferguson, and after studies at the University of Minnesota and Carleton College was accepted as a student by Nadia Boulanger beginning in 1927. He also studied with Edward Burlingame Hill at Harvard and worked with Alban Berg and, later, Roger Sessions.

Beginning in 1929, at age twenty-two, Finney was a member of the faculty of Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, for nearly twenty years before joining the faculty of

the University of Michigan in 1949. He was a mainstay in Ann Arbor until 1973, frankly discussing in his memoir, *Profile of a Lifetime*, that teaching had by then become “oppressive.” In his early years at Smith he began to edit and publish underexposed works of older music and formed an orchestra to perform Baroque works. He also began to develop a significant reputation as a composer. His Violin Concerto (1933), although never popular, already incorporated folk music, which would become a major part of his voice in the 1940s and again at the end of the 1960s. Chamber music performances by major musicians began to occur with frequency; in 1941 Dmitri Mitropoulos conducted his *Slow Piece* with the Minneapolis Symphony, and in 1942 the Boston Pops performed his Concertino for piano and orchestra. He wrote his Piano Sonata No. 3 for John Kirkpatrick and the Fantasy in Two Movements for Solo Violin for the great Yehudi Menuhin. The first of his works in the twelve-tone style was his String Quartet No. 6 in E—the mention of a key suggests his anti-conformist notion of the method, which he used throughout the 1950s before developing the complementary-hexachordal idea whose flexibility would let it be applied even to works incorporating significant quotation of tonal music, such as *Landscapes Remembered*.

Finney’s significant orchestral works include his Symphony No. 3 for the Philadelphia Orchestra and Eugene Ormandy, who also championed his Symphony No. 2; his Symphony No. 4 for Sergiu Comissiona and the Baltimore Symphony, and his Violin Concerto No. 2 for the Dallas Symphony and soloist Robert Gerle. He also wrote several pieces for band, including *Summer in Valley City* and *Skating on the Sheyenne*, both of which explicitly quote folk songs alluding to Finney’s childhood.

Landscapes Remembered is a less outwardly exuberant exploration of musical memory for chamber orchestra (flute/alto/piccolo; clarinet; trumpet; trombone; percussion; harp; piano; strings) written in 1971. It was premiered under Karel Husa’s direction at the Cornell University Contemporary Music Festival on November 5, 1972. The single-movement work in several joined episodes is a kind of pastiche-collage with echoes of the dreamscape-transformations of Lukas Foss’s *Baroque Variations* or even the Bach chorale of Berg’s violin concerto. Fragments of tunes emerge, including a muted-trumpet intonation of *Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie* over tremolo strings. Whether or not the listener “remembers” these tunes doesn’t affect their place in the collective memory of American society, a theme that seems to run through each piece on this concert in some way, even across the diversity of style and approach from these four very different composers.

Arthur Berger (1912-2003)

Chamber Music for 13 Players (1956)

Arthur Berger was of a generation of composers many of whom were compelled more directly to confront Schoenberg and the implications of atonality and serialism. Born in Boston, he attended New York University and Harvard, concentrating on musicology. In 1937 he went to France to study with Boulanger, and later studied with Milhaud at Mills College in Oakland, California, where he also taught. His early style was solidly within the world of American neoclassicism and very much of its time; with Harold Shapero, Lukas Foss, and Irving Fine, he was grouped in a so-called “Boston School.” Their commonalities included elegant textures and a sharp-edged rhythmic language strongly influenced by Stravinsky. Later Berger began to

incorporate serialist techniques, but this should be considered, and can readily be heard as, an expansion of his essential style, rather than a completely new direction. Although he went through an extended fallow period, he wrote several major orchestral works, including *Ideas of Order* (1952), commissioned by Dimitri Mitropoulos for the New York Philharmonic. *Ideas of Order* was recorded by BMOP as part of their disc of Berger's complete orchestral music for New World.

Most of Berger's major works are for chamber combinations. He was close to the painter Robert Motherwell, and some of his music was directly related to visual arts, such as his late *Collage* series, in which an early work serves as the basis for later music. (The Boston Modern Orchestra Project performed *Collage III* in 2007.)

Berger was an astute commentator on music and a longtime reviewer, among other pursuits working with Virgil Thomson at the New York *Herald Tribune* and in the early 1960s co-founding the still-important *Perspectives of New Music*. He was an influential teacher as well, most importantly for many years as a professor at Brandeis University until his retirement from the school in 1980, and thereafter at New England Conservatory. He lived in Cambridge until his death in October 2003.

Berger wrote his Chamber Music for 13 Players in 1956 for New York City's Camera Concerts, run by the French émigré musician Jacques Monod, to whom the piece is dedicated. It is scored for single woodwinds, horn, trumpet, celesta, harp, two violins, viola, cello, and double bass. Berger, having flirted with the twelve-tone technique earlier in his compositional life before moving away from it again, was reconsidering serialism's potential, perhaps at least partly under the Leibowitz-trained Monod's influence. The clarity and pointillist-like rhythmic precision of 1950s serialism had its roots in Webern, but wasn't far afield from the pulse-based, jazz-tinged intricacy of American neoclassicism. In Chamber Music, we find the big melodic leaps and pungent intervals prevalent to the period in tandem with a tight, very audible motivic construction that was often obscured in the most abstract works of other composers.

The two-movement Chamber Music for 13 Players also makes use of classical standards of form. Its first movement is a series of variations, beginning with a wide-ranging Lento (slow) theme in the flute accompanied by muted double bass, an unusual combination. (In interval-class, but not rhythmic, terms, what the bass plays is a replica of the flute's line—a semi-tone up, whole-tone down, etc.) Bass clarinet replaces the bass for a few bars before the onset of the first variation, "String Quartet with Syncopated Motif." (The motif inverts the theme and transforms the character.) Four repeated pitches (E) in the oboe introduce the Bach-like canon of Variation II, for oboe, bassoon, horn, and trumpet. The next variations (all quite short, half a minute or so) are III. Antiphonal Chords, introducing the harp, in which the instrumental sections oppose one another; the skittering IV. Canons in Inversion at the Seventh and Ninth; V. Free Interlude with Figures in Celesta and Clarinet; VI. Residual Chorale with String Figuration (listen for the high woodwinds in homophony, that is, rhythmically together) and VII. Final Cadences and Reminiscence.

The second movement, Allegro moderato, brings a fast melody shared quickly among single instruments, with sharp chordal commentary. The intervallic motifs from the first movement (beginning with a semi-tone up, whole tone down, for example E F E-flat, or its inversion, E E-flat F)—although with registral changes (what was a semi-tone might be a minor ninth or major seventh) are present here; even if not strictly "heard" as such, they make for a

distinctive harmonic/melodic “sound” that ties this movement to the first. A tutti, forte series of chords introduces a new “Agitato” section about two-thirds of the way through the movement: the melody disappears, leaving ensemble texture for a brief, aggressive passage. A kind of recapitulation brings us to the final cadence.

Scott Wheeler (b.1952)

***City of Shadows* (2007)**

Scott Wheeler is probably best-known internationally for his musical theater works. *The Construction of Boston*, an oratorio on a libretto by Kenneth Koch, was released on CD in a recent performance by Boston Cecilia, and in 2006 he was one of several composers to receive a high-profile commission for a new work from the Metropolitan Opera and Lincoln Center Theatre. The Met had taken notice, perhaps, of the premiere of his full-length opera *Democracy, An American Comedy* by the Washington National Opera in 2005. For *Democracy* and the in-progress Met/Lincoln Center commission, his librettist was the poet Romulus Linney.

Musical theater works, and writing for voice, have been a major part of Wheeler’s compositional focus, and it makes sense when one learns the great American composer and critic Virgil Thomson was among his mentors. Wheeler is today a member of the board of directors of the Virgil Thomson Foundation, an advocacy organization. He has tried his hand at criticism and is an active performer as pianist and conductor. He is also a staunch advocate of the music of his colleagues, having premiered numerous contemporary works and recorded several. In the Boston area, Wheeler founded, with Rodney Lister and Ezra Sims in the mid-1970s, the venerated Dinosaur Annex Music Ensemble, which continues performing a broad swath of new music. Wheeler was its longtime director and remains involved as conductor and artistic advisor. He also teaches locally at Emerson College, where he co-directs the music theater program. The recent song cycle *Heaven and Earth*, settings of William Blake commissioned by the Marilyn Horne Foundation and premiered at Carnegie Hall’s Weill Hall in 2008, is one of several cycles featured on a new CD of Wheeler’s songs called “Wasting the Night.” The disc also includes *Sunday Songs*, Emily Dickinson settings (sung by Susanna Phillips) originally premiered by Renée Fleming in 2000. The Boston Modern Orchestra Project performed the composer’s vocal work *The Gold Standard*, based on a text by Kenneth Koch, at their Voice of America festival at Tufts University last year, and this past spring played his string orchestra piece *Crazy Weather* in Jordan Hall.

Given his involvement with one of the major small ensembles on the East Coast, chamber music has also been a big part of Scott Wheeler’s compositional life. Although he has written a number of mixed-ensemble works, standard genres like the string quartet and piano trio also figure in his output. His piano trio *The Granite Coast* was commissioned by the Rockport Chamber Music Festival for the opening of its acclaimed new concert hall, the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport, a concert that took place in June 2010. Current projects include songs for Boston Cecilia and the vocal trio Mirror Visions, as well as an ongoing collection of small, occasional “piano portraits.”

City of Shadows was commissioned as part of a Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin portrait concert of Wheeler’s work in 2007. What the composer calls “multiple images” in his comments about the piece are clearly audible gestures of distinct character occurring

simultaneously, sometimes with a mosaic-like effect but always moving forward in the first part of this fifteen-minute, single-movement work. A central section like an integrated slow movement takes away the inexorable pulse and features a long, expressive melody in the high woodwinds. After a crescendo and climax, a still passage (including the quote, in trumpet, of *Quiet City* mentioned below) leads to an ending with an unusual cadence suggesting a continuation rather than a completion. The composer has this to say about *City of Shadows*:

The title City of Shadows has been used in reference to cities in the US, England, Australia, and probably elsewhere. I saw a review of a 2006 suspense novel of this name that is set in 1922 Berlin, and it seemed an apt title for the chamber symphony I was beginning to write for a Berlin premiere. The city depicted in my piece might be Boston or New York as easily as Berlin. The music itself is full of shadows, secondary and tertiary images of primary musical ideas. The creation of such multiple images is a way of dealing with memory in music, and is a way of creating a modern analogue to the rich structures of counterpoint and harmony in the language of the classical repertoire.

*The shadow side of cities no doubt influenced the opening of this piece, which is marked "misterioso" and is dominated by low pizzicato and piano in a way that might call to mind the soundtrack to one of the shadowy cityscapes of film noir. Later in the work there are brief musical references to other works about cities: the overture of Kurt Weill's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, in which a Berlin-born composer creates a mythical American "city of nets," and Aaron Copland's *Quiet City*, a lonely nightscape for strings with solo trumpet. There is also a brief reference to the Bruckner *Sixth Symphony*, which was memorably recorded by Kent Nagano and *Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin*; this reference is not so much a musical shadow as a nod to these eminent performers and to the great German symphonic tradition.*

*City of Shadows was commissioned by *Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin*, with the generous assistance of the American Academy in Berlin. It is dedicated to conductor Kent Nagano.*

—Scott Wheeler

It's extraordinary that in any survey of a period of music, whether Renaissance or Romantic or contemporary, we find the presence of quotation and allusion. It's not a "postmodern" thing at all, but a recurring zeitgeist, a way of making it known that *this* piece and *this* composer are connected to the world, and maybe specific things in the world, a way of delimiting the listener's perception of the composer's and the work's personalities. In Wile E. Coyote and Schoenberg and "Bury Me Not" and Aaron Copland, and even in the abstract jazzy zing of Arthur Berger's otherwise quoteless (as far as I know) piece, we find art and entertainment coexisting on a rich and common ground.