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CLASSICAL MUSIC

## BMOP's World: Guts, Garlands, Gauntlets



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

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A few months ago, Gil Rose, the founder and artistic director of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, attended a party for an art opening. During a

conversation, he related during a recent interview, he told a guest that he was a musician. She replied that she and her husband were big fans of classical music — new music, in particular, was their passion. In response, Rose mentioned that he runs an institution called the Boston Modern Orchestra Project — kind of a big deal.

His interlocutor registered a blank. “She looked at me like I was speaking Turkish or something,” Rose said.

The incident was simultaneously inexplicable and predictable. BMOP, according to Rose, is the largest nonprofit performing ensemble in the United States dedicated to contemporary music, broadly defined. It has revived a huge number of buried treasures from the past century that would otherwise go unheard, with a catholicity of taste that rivals that of any other group. It has been the catalyst and midwife to a number of important new works.

BMOP/sound, the record label the ensemble formed in 2008 amid recording-industry upheaval, has released some 44 recordings, and is on target for an even 50 by the end of this season. The label’s releases have garnered five Grammy nominations.

“No other city has anything resembling BMOP — with that level of activity, with that sustained productivity,” said composer John Harbison in an interview. “It is unique. There’s really been no new-music organization with a wider range of inclusion.”

And yet, Rose said, “the people talking to me who claim to be new-music aficionados — love new music, living in Boston all their lives — had never heard of it.”

All of which has him asking a pertinent question as BMOP embarks upon its 20th-anniversary season: What does it take for his unique, transformative orchestra to succeed in this town? Not just to survive for two decades, which it

has accomplished, but rather what it takes to get BMOP the financial security, the turnout, and the profile to match its ambitions.

“The truth of the matter is that it’s an incredible institution that has been valued and recognized nationally as important,” Rose said. The latest validation of that claim came on Thursday, when Musical America, the venerable and internationally esteemed performing-arts directory and news website, named BMOP its 2016 Ensemble of the Year.

But, he added, “the Boston community has not been as quick to understand how important BMOP is as the national community.”

To hear Harbison tell it, the creation of BMOP was itself an act of wild idealism. “Jennifer Montbach [the founding director of operations] and Gil came over and said, ‘We’ve got this idea,’” he said. “It seemed just absolutely impossible, because they really didn’t have any idea how they were going to finance it. They just thought it was something that *should* happen, and people would realize it should happen. That it’s kept on going for 20 years is something I don’t think anyone understands.”

When I spoke to Rose last week, I was expecting him to run down a list of highlights from the decades, take a victory lap. He did call the anniversary “a real big milestone,” and said of some past events that “at the moment they happened, it seemed like we pushed a major rock over the hill.”

But he also expressed frustration that BMOP hasn’t gotten its due. An orchestra that regularly programs some of the city’s most ambitious concerts operates with a staff of just three full-time employees (including Rose) and one part-time, has neither an endowment nor a wealthy board to support it, and lives on the edge of uncertainty.

“How big do you have to get? How many ‘Ballet Mécaniques’? How many John Harbison ‘Ulysses’? How many ‘Midsummer Marriages’?” he asked, naming works that have been among BMOP’s notable achievements. He could also

have mentioned Lou Harrison's "La Koro Sutro," Steven Mackey's "Dreamhouse," and Lukas Foss's "Griffelkin," among others.

"How many giant things that are artfully impactful do you have to do in order to get even the people who live around the corner from you to know who you are? How many Grammy nominations? How many CDs do you have to release? What do you have to do?"

Asked what he thought was standing in the way of the organization's recognition, Rose said that "there are several large musical institutions in this town who have such giant marketing and development budgets that, though an organization may be excellent, be doing in many ways more important things than they're doing, certainly more unique things, it is impossible to get the bandwidth of the Boston public."

Rose pointed to BMOP/sound's recent two-disc set of Foss's complete symphonies, the first commercial recordings of any of the four works. "That was a huge gap in the literature, and BMOP filled it," he said. "I can tell you that the Foss symphony cycle is more important than the symphony cycle of some Russian composer who has had his complete symphonies recorded dozens of times," he added, without specifying any particular institution. (The Boston Symphony Orchestra is currently recording a series of Shostakovich symphonies.)

Granted, Rose admits, were he running one of those larger institutions, he, too, would be trying to get as much market share and attention as possible. "They're not doing anything evil, or wrong, or un-American," he said. "But the result may be something that may not be good for the psychology and the artistic diversity of a major metropolitan area."

The essential key to Rose's mission is contained in the last word of his orchestra's name: project. From the start, BMOP was meant to be an

experiment in the structure of an orchestra: flexible, nimble, not beholden to the subscription model to which most major orchestras adhere.

“Playing new music and advocating for things that were current in the society was just part of the role of an orchestra,” Rose elaborated. The concept, he notes, is not dissimilar to what applied during Beethoven’s era. “Composer writes piece, composer organizes players, composer puts on concert with funding from patron and ticket revenue, composer looks toward next concert,” he said. “And that cooked up a lot of good repertoire.”

Proof of the model’s efficacy is “Play,” an innovative 50-minute piece by the young American composer Andrew Norman, commissioned and premiered by BMOP. When the ensemble issued its recording of the piece last year, a debate ensued over whether “Play” was the most significant orchestral work so far in the 21st century.

“That piece is not possible without BMOP,” Rose declared. “It takes an organization that’s less constrained by certain financial models that they’ve created for themselves. When the richest orchestras in the country have the financial capacity to take risks, they almost never do.

“And that is why BMOP’s important, that’s why I get up in the morning and tilt at this windmill,” he went on. “Because if the model that’s been created by symphony orchestras over the last 60 years is unable to advocate for something like Andrew Norman’s ‘Play,’ then there has to be an antecedent for it. And quite frankly, it’s partially a matter of guts.”

The new BMOP season begins on Sunday with an Armenian-themed program presented in collaboration with the Friends of Armenian Culture, the latest in a series of local cultural partnerships. A family-friendly opera in November – Gunther Schuller’s “The Fisherman and His Wife” – follows on the success of last year’s presentation of Tobias Picker’s “Fantastic Mr. Fox.”

The capstone, in March, is a rare complete performance of David Del Tredici's "Child Alice." A 135-minute work completed in 1981, the piece was key in loosening serialism's grip on American music and giving rise to "New Romanticism." Rose called it a piece that changed the course of 20th-century music. "I don't know if anyone will come," he said. "But you know, I don't care."

Unsurprisingly, the question of how long BMOP can go on has no easy answer. Thanks to its lean organization and knack for squeezing funding out of every available source, the organization can adapt to tough times. Still, Rose says, "it's been hand to mouth for 20 years," and you get the sense that he not sure that he can go another 20 that way.

"The biggest lack of recognition is the inability of the community to come up with a salaried position for Gil," Harbison observes. "Just a stable base from which he operates, and where he has the time and the means to keep figuring all this out."

Rose admits that he gets "down about it. I get frustrated." Still, he added, "so many times, people approach me after concerts, and the thing that they say that jumps out at me is how thankful they are that I'm pursuing this agenda of repertoire. They realize that if I wasn't doing it, a lot of this wouldn't be done."

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