

PROGRAM NOTES

BY ROBERT KIRZINGER

Ah, the viola.

The viola doesn't sound like a violin; nor does it sound like a cello. And yet it can encroach on the territory of either, growling and powerful (perhaps not quite as growly-powerful) as the cello, or bright and piercing and high (albeit not quite as high, or bright, or piercing) as the violin. Comparisons, though, are unnecessary: the viola is the viola. The instrument has been around as long as the violin, having been developed (from about 1500) as the alto member of the four-part string chorus. The French name for this instrument is "alto"; the German name is "Bratsche," from the Italian "braccia," for arm, meaning a viol-like instrument played by holding it on one's arm, as opposed to the "viola da gamba," held between the knees. ("Viola da braccia" initially seems to have meant violin or viola interchangeably.)

The viola's unique sonic character is due to its resonating body being somewhat too small to project optimally the pitches of its range; hence it has a darker, mellower tone than the violin or the cello. Composers have long made that character a strength, particularly in ensemble music where the viola or a section of violas can support the harmony without overwhelming the melody, but also in passages that, more simply, call for the sound of the viola because it sounds like a viola. Except in comparison with those for the violin or keyboard, viola concertos aren't rare, ranging from the first fine ones by Telemann, Stamitz, and Rolla, through the Parnassus in the Romantic era, Berlioz's symphony-concerto-tone poem *Harold en Italie*, written for Paganini. In the first half of the twentieth century we have major works by Walton, Hindemith (himself a player), and Bartók (unfinished), and more recently a flood of excellent works for such world-class players as Yuri Bashmet (concertos by Schnittke, Gubaidulina, Kancheli, and Ruders), Kim Kashkashian (*Mansurian's Three Arias*, premiered by BMOP in 2008; Eötvös's *Replica*, Kurtág's Movement), Nobuko Imai, Tabea Zimmermann, Garth Knox, and Nadia Sirota, to name just a few. It's a golden age for the viola, right now. Let us bask.

GORDON JACOB (1895–1984) SUITE FOR EIGHT VIOLAS

Gordon Jacob was the very model of the working English composer, teacher, and all-around musician in the middle part of the twentieth century. Born and educated in London, he was a POW during World War I and enrolled in the Royal College of Music when it was over, studying with, among others, Stanford and Vaughan Williams. In 1926 he took up a position at the RCM, where he would remain for forty years. Among his own students were Imogen Holst and Elizabeth Maconchy. He wrote four music textbooks.

Jacob was a pragmatist but developed an attractive, well-crafted style that owed much to the English school of the previous generation, as well as to Debussy and Ravel. He wrote music for virtually every conceivable occasion and ensemble type, a catalog numbering more than 700 works: film scores, five symphonies, concertos for bassoon, horn, cello, double bass, trombone, bass trombone, organ, timpani, and two each for violin, oboe,



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Sarah Brady
Jessi Rosinski

OBOE

Jennifer Slowik
Barbara LaFitte

CLARINET

Amy Advocat
Rane Moore

BASSOON

Ronald Haroutunian
Margaret Phillips

SAXOPHONE

Philipp Staudlin

HORN

Whitacre Hill
Kevin Owen
Ken Pope
Alyssa Daly

TRUMPET

Terry Everson
Eric Berlin
Richard Watson

TROMBONE

Hans Bohn
Martin Wittenberg

PERCUSSION

Craig McNutt
Robert Schulz
Nick Tolle

PIANO

Linda Osborn

VIOLIN I

Gabriela Diaz
Megumi Stohs
Piotr Buczek
Jae Young Cosmos Lee
Miguel Perez-Espejo
Katherine Winterstein
Amy Sims
Omar Guey

VIOLIN II

Heidi Braun-Hill
Colleen Brannen

Lois Finkel

Julia Cash
Annegret Klaua
JiYun Jeong
Sasha Callahan
Rohan Gregory

VIOLA

Joan Ellersick
Noriko Hendon
David Feltner
Dimitar Petkov
Emily Rideout
Emily Rome

CELLO

Rafael Popper-Keizer
David Russell
Nicole Cariglia
Jing Li

BASS

Anthony D'Amico
Scot Fitzsimmons

viola, piano, and flute, as well as a concertino for accordion and orchestra, vocal works, and lots and lots of orchestral and mixed chamber pieces. He was well enough thought of to be the subject of an episode of Huw Wheldon's BBC television documentary series *Monitor* in 1959; the episode was directed by Ken Russell. Jacob was made a Commander of the British Empire in 1968.

In addition to his two viola concertos (two more than most composers write) and two sonatas for viola and piano, Jacob wrote numerous other viola-oriented pieces, of which his four-movement Suite for Eight Violas is the most viola-centric. He wrote the Suite as a memorial to one of the first internationally successful viola soloists, the Englishman Lionel Tertis (1876-1975), a neighbor and longtime colleague. Jacobs takes advantage of the viola's tonal variation between its high and low ranges to create strata of melody and accompaniment. The first movement, Dedication, is said to derive its theme from the letters of Tertis's name, although what that derivation might be is beyond my powers of cryptography. (The melody is E-B-A-G-E-E; F-E-D-F-B-E.) The texture is purely contrapuntal, with smooth lines balanced throughout the ensemble in Palestrina-like relationships. The second movement, Scherzo and Drone, features march-like, rather than the three-beat scherzo-like, music, with the Drone section, acting as a Trio episode, recasting the thematic idea over bare fifths and octaves, a Haydnesque passage. The primarily homophonic third movement, Chorale, is slow and mournful with a clear and simple melodic idea. The quick Tarantella finale, evokes the frenzied dance meant to stave off death by spider-bite. Stabbing, staccato notes contrast with a legato flow of melody and counterpoint, with a few brief, sustained passages allowing us to catch our breath.

GEORGE PERLE (1915–2009)

SERENADE NO. 1 FOR VIOLA AND CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer George Perle split his time in later years between New York City and the Berkshires in Western Massachusetts, where he was a frequent presence at Tanglewood. Having learned of Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique in the early 1930s—one of the first Americans to become interested in Schoenberg's work—he worked with Wesley La Violette and Ernst Krenek, eventually earning a doctorate at New York University. Perle developed his own approach to Schoenberg's ideas and became one of the leading theorists on and writers about the Second Viennese School repertoire. He wrote the definitive studies of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* and crusaded for the completion of the latter's third act. His other books include *Serial Composition and Atonality*, *The Listening Composer*, and *The Right Notes*. For many years he taught at Queens College, City University of New York. He also taught at Tanglewood, the University of Louisville, and the University of California–Davis.

Perle's early catalog of works is sparse, as he found his way toward facility with his elegant, sparkling style using the approach he called "twelve-tone tonality." Among his chamber music compositions are nine string quartets (several of which were withdrawn), works for solo piano, many works for solo strings or winds, and four wind quintets, the last of which won the 1986 Pulitzer Prize. He wrote his Piano Concerto No. 1 for Richard Goode on commission from the San Francisco Symphony, and the Piano Concerto No. 2 for the Utah Symphony and soloist Michael Boriskin. The New York Philharmonic commissioned

his *Transcendental Modulations*, and the Baltimore Symphony his Adagio. There are three serenades—the present one for viola and chamber orchestra, the Serenade No. 2 for eleven instruments, and the Serenade No. 3 for piano and chamber orchestra.

Perle frequently casts his works in short, highly contrasting sections, showing a preoccupation with, and ability to create, distinctive musical moods. The Serenade—meaning literally a "night piece"—was a popular, typically fairly light entertainment piece in Mozart's day, taken up later by Brahms, and is typically also a piece of several short movements of varying character. Perle's Serenade No. 1 for viola and chamber orchestra has five. The opening Rondo introduces the work's motivically rich, highly contrapuntal character. The viola's syncopated melody is a strong, clearly articulated theme, set in relief with clear, sharp counterpoint, almost pointillist, in the ensemble. It's not quite a Mozartean rondo; the theme returns clearly but always modified. The alternate sections are set off by tempo changes through metric modulation techniques. Saxophone and especially the double bass share the viola's spotlight. In the Ostinato second movement, the viola plays nothing but a repeated, muted D-sharp under a cloud of sustained chords. The Recitative is almost entirely unaccompanied, excepting brief passages doubled by the clarinet, and a few countering figures toward the end.

In the scherzo, much is made in setting 2/4 meter against 6/8, with other quarter-versus-dotted quarter meters encroaching. A hint at the Rondo theme connects this movement with the first. The Coda finale is in no way an afterthought, likely taking that title as a hint that the Serenade will not end with a bang. The flowing 9/8 (mostly) melody is supported by equally flowing, but slower-tempo, contrapuntal lines in the ensemble. The double bass gets a last word with a hemiola figure introduced earlier by the soloist.

Perle wrote Serenade No. 1 in 1964 for the great violist Walter Trampler, to whom the piece is dedicated.

CHINARY UNG (B. 1942)

SINGING INSIDE AURA (WORLD PREMIERE)

Chinary Ung was born in Takéo, Cambodia, in 1943, when the country was still a French protectorate; Cambodia declared its independence in 1953. Its status as a French colony brought awareness and some training of Western musical traditions. Ung studied E-flat clarinet at the National Music Conservatory in Phnom Penh, where he was a member of the school's first graduating class. He moved permanently to the U.S. in 1964 to continue his studies at the Manhattan School of Music as clarinetist and conductor, earning both bachelor's and master's degrees. Turning to composition, he entered Columbia University where he worked with the eminent Chinese composer Chou Wen-chung as well as Mario Davidovsky and was awarded his doctorate in 1974. He has taught at Northern Illinois University, the University of Pennsylvania, and since 1995 at the University of California–San Diego. He is deeply involved in organizations concerned with the preservation of Cambodian culture. Bridge Records is in the midst of a series of recordings of his music.

In some ways following in Chou Wen-chung's footsteps, Ung in his early works tried to arrive at a fusion of Webern-influenced modernism with Eastern music—although of course Chou's tradition was Chinese and Ung's Khmer. The continuing political unrest and violence in Cambodia led Ung to suspend his compositional activities almost completely for a decade; meanwhile he learned that many family members had died during the Khmer

Rouge's reign of terror. Ung immersed himself in study of the Khmer musical tradition as a folklorist and performer on Roneat Ek, the Cambodian xylophone. His return to composition, *Inner Voices*, was a commission from the Philadelphia Orchestra and won its composer the coveted Grawemeyer Award. This work and its reception brought Ung international recognition. It also represented a natural synthesis of Asian and Western sensibilities that has obtained in all his subsequent works. A pan-Asian philosophy has led him to investigate other Asian musical traditions, such as Indonesian gamelan (as in *Spiral II*) and Indian music (*Grand Alap*). His *Spiral* series of works (now in the teens) may show the influence of his teacher Davidovsky's *Synchronisms*, in that it's a series, although the *Spirals* encompass a number of different ensemble types.

For more than fifteen years, Ung has written works that involve instrumental performers as vocalists, singing or chanting a collage of incantatory, powerful words from various languages. Among the first of these works was *Grand Alap* (1996) for a duo of amplified cello and percussion, with both players being required to sing. His large-scale chamber work *Aura* (2005) for two sopranos and chamber ensemble requires all the instrumentalists, as well as the conductor, to vocalize. (Ung will lead a performance of *Aura* at Le Poisson Rouge in New York City this coming April as part of celebrations of his seventieth birthday year.)

Chinary Ung's wife, the violist Susan Ung, has performed in many of the composer's works as a singing violist, including *Aura*, *Spiral IX*, and a solo work written for her, *Spiral XI: Mother and Child*. Chinary Ung's teacher Chou Wen-chung likened the intense demands made on the performer of *Spiral XI* to the process of attaining enlightenment in Buddhist practice. The text in *Singing Inside Aura* is "a combination of phonemes, syllables, articulative percussive vocalization such as a pattern of drumming, plus a mixture of languages—predominantly Khmer, Pali, Sanskrit, written in phonetic spelling intended for speakers of American English." The title has no specific reference, but is shared with one of the movements of *Aura*; otherwise there is no direct relationship to the earlier piece.

Singing Inside Aura is a substantial single movement of about fifteen minutes' length. The notated tempo, forty-three beats per minute, suggests ritual or ceremony, when indeed a strict pulse is audible. The ensemble texture is gossamer, threads combining into fabric. A sonority with some instruments playing very high and some low, for the composer, represents "openness." (He used a similar texture in his piece *Rain of Tears*.) This is the "aura" within which the soloist sings. Ung also says the soloist's part represents "compassion."

The viola and voice parts are inextricable and largely heterophonic; that is, much of the time they're varied versions of the same melodic line. That line or double line—matched, on occasion, in some of the ensemble instruments as well—is complex in its detail but as a result flexible and organic, like speech or improvisation. Following the soloist's first long phrase, the orchestra builds a shimmering texture of small moments before the soloist returns. Gradually the music moves to a lighter but more discernibly metrical passage, marked "Singing Inside Aura." The next episode, marked "Space Between Heaven and Earth," is accompanied almost exclusively by sustained strings at first, but slowly filling out to a climactic moment. The voice/viola reaches its lowest range, then lifts to its highest as a new sound takes us into a new sphere.

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DONALD CROCKETT (B. 1951)
VIOLA CONCERTO (WORLD PREMIERE)

Like Chinariy Ung's *Singing Inside Aura*, Donald Crockett's Viola Concerto was written for the sound and sensibility of a performer the composer knows very well. The concerto, composed for violist Kate Vincent, is the further blossoming of an earlier work for viola and small ensemble, *to airy thinness beat* (2009). Crockett had written that work for Vincent and her Cambridge/Boston-based Firebird Ensemble, and, knowing his new concerto to be premiered by BMOP could and would feature some of that group's players, conceived concertante-like roles for their specific skills and personalities as well. The piece is dedicated simply "for Kate."

Like most composers, Crockett fundamentally prefers working with musicians he knows well, such as those of the Firebird Ensemble, or those of Xtet, the Los Angeles-based new music group he has conducted and written for for more than two decades. Crockett, a longtime faculty member of the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music, was born, raised, and educated in the L.A. environs. He attended USC for his bachelor's and master's degrees and got his doctorate up the coast at UC-Santa Barbara.

Having worked with Kate Vincent and the Firebird Ensemble in instrumental music, over the past couple of years Crockett has been involved even more deeply with the group. Last summer Crockett's innovative chamber opera *The Face*, written with librettist David St. John, was premiered in California, featuring musicians from Firebird and led by Gil Rose; Kate Vincent served as one of the producers of the project, much of the development of which had taken place in Boston. (Concert performances of the opera were presented in

Boston last September, following the premiere.) Also involved in the performances was L.A.-based guitarist Brian Head, with whom Crockett has worked for years, and for whom the composer has written some genuinely hefty solo works, including *Winter Variations* and the forty-minute *Falcon's Eye*.

Crockett's works have been commissioned by Boston's Collage New Music, the Kronos and Stanford string quartets, the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble (which he has also conducted), the Charlotte Symphony, the Hilliard Ensemble, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, among others. Although his scores are intricate they are also precise: their very precision makes them very playable, and other groups known for ensemble virtuosity, including the Arditti Quartet and eighth blackbird, have added his music to their repertoires. He has also written a number of large orchestral works and a number of vocal pieces. (As well as being a conductor, Crockett has also performed extensively as a singer in madrigal groups.)

The presence of *to airy thinness beat* as a kind of armature for Crockett's Viola Concerto (explained a bit further in the composer's comments on the piece, below) has its precedence throughout the standard repertoire, from various perspectives. We find, for example, that Bach radically repurposed and rescored whole movements; Beethoven's *Creatures of Prometheus/Eroica Variations/Symphony No. 3* connection is another case in point. More to the point may be Luciano Berio's expansion of his viola solo *Sequenza VI* to the ensemble works *Chemins II* and *III*, although in that case the expansion was largely vertical or textural, not durational. Here the original work grows from three movements to four, and gains half again its original length, as well as accruing the colors and textures of a full orchestra. In the process it also grows "bigger" not just physically but philosophically.

The Viola Concerto is in four movements, essentially in the shape: fast-slow, fast, various. It opens with a boisterous scherzo, its texture of overlapping figures forming shifting patterns characteristic of many of Crockett's pieces. The second movement, "Suspended," corresponds to the first movement of *to airy thinness*, with its miraculous, thin-beat textures and warm viola lyricism. The third and fourth movements of the new concerto correspond to the second and third of the earlier piece, taking advantage of the more massive, more colorful sound of the orchestra in getting across their more aggressive passages. The third, "Heavy and energetic," features two small cadenzas that mark the advent of new ideas. The last movement is kind of a complex rondo with several interleaved ideas—crunchy tremolos at the start, a lyrical, sustained idea, a syncopated, jazzy "big band" passage, and also a return to the airy thinness that dominates the second movement.

The composer's note on the piece follows.

My new Viola Concerto, commissioned by JFNMC for BMOP and completed in summer 2012, is closely related to another work of mine, for Kate Vincent and Firebird Ensemble, entitled to airy thinness beat for viola and six instruments. This earlier piece was co-commissioned by Firebird Ensemble and the Harvard Musical Association, first performed by Firebird in Boston and New York in 2009, and recorded on a recent New World CD, Night Scenes (2011).

The title comes from a poem by John Donne, "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," with this epigraph from the poem appearing on the title page of the score: "...endure not yet a breach, but an expansion, like gold to airy thinness beat." The conceit

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expressed in this fragment from Donne's poem remains in the Viola Concerto, and it is also quite literally "an expansion" of the original chamber work. What is a 17-minute piece in three movements for viola and six instruments has become a 28-minute, four-movement work for viola and orchestra.

In addition to musical relationships between viola and orchestra, the texture of the six-instrument chamber ensemble remains in the Viola Concerto. Beyond an expansion in duration from 17 to 28 minutes, and from three to four movements, new layers have been added to the original chamber work: the solo viola now interacts more extensively with violin and cello (solo string trio); with the ensemble of six instruments; and with classical-size orchestra (woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, one trombone, two percussion, piano, and strings).

The smaller chamber ensemble within the orchestra will feature members of Firebird Ensemble in principal roles similar to the earlier work, to airy thinness beat.

CHEN YI (B. 1953)

XIAN SHI

Chen Yi's viola concerto *Xian Shi*, composed in 1983, has been called "the first Chinese viola concerto." She composed this "tone poem" toward the end of her studies at the Beijing Central Conservatory. She was born in Guangzhou, where her parents were doctors who loved Western classical music. She became an accomplished violinist and pianist, and a teacher emphasized the need to come to grips with Chinese traditional music; it

was around this time she decided to become a composer. With the Cultural Revolution beginning in 1966, during which all formal educational institutions were suspended, the family was torn apart, its members sent to far-flung areas. Chen Yi managed to avoid immediate displacement but after two years was sent to work as a laborer. In 1970 she returned to Guangzhou, where she was concertmaster and her brother a section violinist in a Peking opera orchestra. After the Cultural Revolution ran its course, she was one of 200 out of a possible 18,000 applicants to be accepted to the Central Conservatory's class beginning in 1978, along with such other composers as Tan Dun and Bright Sheng. It was there she first met her future husband, the composer Zhou Long. Chen Yi's teachers included the Russia-trained Wu Zuqiang and the English composer Alexander Goehr; the latter had been consulted on developing the Conservatory's new curriculum.

In addition to *Xian Shi*, Chen Yi composed a number of significant works during her student years, including her String Quartet, which won a national competition, and the piano work *Duo Ye*, upon which she based several subsequent works. In 1986, Chen Yi was the first woman awarded a master's degree in music from the Conservatory, where a full concert of her music was presented in collaboration with Beijing's Central Philharmonic. Later that year she moved to New York to continue her studies at Columbia University, one of several Chinese composers drawn there by the presence of Chou Wen-chung. (Other Chou students included Bright Sheng, Tan Dun, and Zhou Long, as well as the Cambodian Chinary Ung.) In addition to Chou she also worked with Mario Davidovsky, earning her doctorate in 1993. She has taught at the Peabody Conservatory and the Juilliard School, and is a longtime faculty member of the University of Missouri–Kansas City Conservatory



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of Music. She also returned to the Beijing Central Conservatory as visiting professor in 2006 and is a visiting professor at the Tianjin Conservatory (2012–2015).

While she was still at Columbia Chen Yi already received a number of high-profile commissions. She wrote the mixed-ensemble work *Sparkle* for New York's New Music Consort and was commissioned by the Brooklyn Philharmonic to write her Piano Concerto, premiered in 1994. She has been composer-in-residence with the Women's Philharmonic Orchestra and the vocal ensemble Chanticleer and has written works on commission for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Koussevitzky Foundation, Carnegie Hall, the New York Philharmonic, the BBC, Emanuel Ax, and Yo-Yo Ma, among others. In 2004 she received the prestigious Roche Commission from the Lucerne Festival, Carnegie Hall, and the Cleveland Orchestra; that work, *Four Seasons*, was premiered in Lucerne in August 2005. In 2009 she composed, with Zhou Long, *Symphony "Hunan 1839"* for the Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra. More recent works include those for the Kansas City Symphony Orchestra, the Seattle Symphony, and eighth blackbird.

From her earliest pieces, Chen Yi has made full use of the modernist Western techniques she mastered during her formal training, though her experience performing Chinese music marks all her pieces, particularly those combining Chinese and Western instruments. Her works have a colorful instrumental and harmonic surface and sure sense of large-scale form, with melodic contours, inflections, and phrasing influenced by Chinese traditions.

Chen Yi's viola concerto tone-poem *Xian Shi* is a single-movement, fourteen-minute piece with several contrasting large-scale episodes. The soloist-to-orchestra balance is that of a typical Western concerto; the viola part is difficult, covering the entire range

of the instrument and calling for harmonics, multi-stops, and many different kinds of articulation. The mood is raucous, even aggressive at the beginning and end, with a few lyrical moments and some passages of real lightness toward the middle. A pizzicato cadenza has a pipa-like quality. Chen Yi employs progressive orchestral techniques—unsynchronized figures, indeterminate pitches, and graphic gestures meant to create a complex and constantly changing texture, growing less defined as the piece unfolds. The use of implied pentatonic and whole-tone scale fragments evokes Chinese melody, with a clear motivic consistency throughout. The concern for large-scale harmonic motion is essentially Western.

In comments prefacing the score to *Xian Shi* Chen Yi wrote "The compositional material, especially in melodic style and timbre of traditional instruments, are drawn from the Xian Shi, a kind of folk ensemble music from Chaozhou, a region in Guangdong province in southern China where I grew up. The traditional music sounds to me like my native language, from which I can feel some Chinese thoughts and spirit. I expressed this feeling in my viola concerto."

Xian Shi (which also exists in a version for viola, piano, and percussion) was premiered by the China Film Studio Symphony under Yao Guanrong's direction in 1983. Its U.S. premiere took place in 2012 in Chicago.

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