

by Simeon Rusnak Wednesday, Jun 01 2022, 12:20 PM Classic 107

The interview transcript has been excerpted and edited.

**So, this is a work that you specifically wrote for James Sommerville, the great French horn player, conductor, and like yourself, a Canadian who makes his home in Boston. You both work at the New England Conservatory. I'm curious: When did you first get to know each other? Was it when you came on faculty at New England, in 2008?**

Yeah, I believe it was around 2008. James was Music Director of the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra. He commissioned me to write a piece for them, and they performed my music a few times; the Boston Symphony Orchestra also commissioned me to write a work for the Fiftieth anniversary of the BSO Chamber Players. So we've collaborated a few times, on different kinds of works, with various orchestras.

**You mentioned the work that you wrote for the BSO Chamber players made up of principals of the Boston Symphony and, previous to that, working with the Hamilton Philharmonic. What is so special about James's playing?**

Well, he's got he's got an effortless high register and a very pure sound. He also has very beautiful natural phrasing. These are qualities that I showcase in this piece; each of the movements highlights different facets of horn playing. In many ways it's quite virtuosic, but there is a lot of lyrical playing in the part. As first horn in the BSO, he takes the parts that tend to lie higher, and that's the register that I worked with the most.

**You talk about his lyrical ability and his phrasing. Did you write for that lyrical quality in a special way, and if so, how?**

It resonates with me because I do have a vocal background; I was a church soprano for many years. My music often tends to have melody; that's one of the hallmarks of my style. When writing a piece like this, I think of the melodic lines as vocal impulses, and proceed from there, looking for a natural way to inflect and to ornament the lines.

**Let's chat a little bit more about that background, and how it materializes in the music. You mentioned being a church musician and singing as a soprano; you have a Hungarian background. You're down in the States. You're Juilliard educated; you studied with none other than Milton Babbitt, a trailblazing composer. There could be a lot of influences there! How do you characterize the music that you write?**

The music that I write tends to be quite emotionally direct and transparent. There are so many influences in general, for all of us; it's easy, at the present time, to have access to music from all over the globe. I do have a lot of a lot of international influences; my father left Hungary in the 1956 uprising, having worked as a journalist for the Hungarian Radio in Budapest, and went to Italy before moving to the States. My mom is American, but they moved to Canada. So, I was born in Canada. Perhaps rather than focusing on external influences, it's important to let the music speak directly from the heart... to be something that audiences of many different kinds can relate to. I've found that to be the case with this piece, so I'm excited to share it with audiences here and online. Even when people are hearing it for the first time, they've had a strong reaction.

**Can you tell us more about that reaction - - in what way?**

The language of this piece is one that many listeners can understand on a first hearing. I've had audience members be very moved by it. That's an honor for me, because when you're presenting a work for the first time, you don't know what the reaction's going to be. To have audiences connect with a new work right away is rewarding.

**This work is going to be played alongside Mozart's Horn Concerto n. 3. How does it related to this companion Mozart work?**

My Horn Concerto and Mozart's Horn Concerto in E-flat Major K447 have similar instrumentations. The Mozart work is scored for solo horn, two clarinets, two bassoons and strings. I took that instrumentation as a model, at Jamie's suggestion. That dark tone colour is already a unique starting point, but I also extended the range lower with the addition of bass clarinet and contrabassoon, introduced in the third movement. So it's that feeling of taking the Mozart sound world and extending it in terms of timbre.

In the first movement of my piece, I embed fanfare-like gestures that come from the hunting-horn tradition in non-functional harmony – chords that you might find in the Mozart piece, but that resolve differently. The lyrical, slow second movement has layers of almost Charles Ives-like gauzy textures over top of the variation structure. The third movement showcases the dark, low-register woodwind colors both as solos and in dialogue with the solo horn. I also use stopped horn, which produces a metallic sound when the horn player inserts either a hand (or a mute) into the bell. That buzzy, metallic sound is thinner, but it's also very resonant. But I also combine that with glissandi, which are slides across a range of pitches. Once picked up by the orchestra, these stopped glissando effects open up into my own sonic world. It's not just derivative of the Mozart—it's more. I'm interested in a musical relationship that establishes a dialogue with the earlier work.

**So there's a familial relationship there, but we're not talking about brothers and sisters. We're talking about second cousins...**

Yes, and we're bringing the pedigree down the family line.