

# Symphonic Statements



**Orchestras and composers are responding to world events with new scores. And in today's political climate, older works are sometimes taking on new resonance.**

by David Patrick Stearns

**S**ymphony orchestras aren't taught to be rugged, though that's what was required of the percussionists of the San Diego Symphony in January when they played along an area of the Mexico-U.S. border known as "No Man's Land" with no easy access.

The usual concert rules didn't apply. With American musicians and spectators on one side of the border and a group of Mexican percussionists and spectators on the other, John Luther Adams's 2009 *Inuksuit*, a piece intended to resonate with natural surroundings, had rather more significance. Nobody said it was any kind

The scene at the U.S.-Mexico border in southern California on January 27, when San Diego Symphony musicians gave a free, binational performance of John Luther Adams's *Inuksuit*, a percussion work intended to be played outdoors. Mexican musicians simultaneously performed the score—on the other side of the border wall.



San Diego Symphony

of a protest amid U.S. immigration policies that are an especially divisive issue in southern California. On the surface, the event was a free performance in the San Diego Symphony's month-long festival "It's About Time: A Festival of Rhythm. Sound. And Place," curated by composer Steven Schick. But with all the work required to create and hear the binational performance, significance was unavoidable.

"Just to get to the location, people had to walk a mile or more," says Greg Cohen, the San Diego Symphony's 38-year-old principal percussionist. "It had rained previously and some of the roads were washed out. We had two trucks loaded

with percussion on roads where there was no guard rail."

Orchestras didn't always get out so much. They tended to stay in their acoustically appropriate concert halls, speaking universal languages that originated in previous centuries. Now their evolving sense of social responsibility has them exploring terrains where their pop-music counterparts might hesitate to tread. Between concerts in glittering new theaters while touring China, Philadelphia Orchestra musicians play in schools for migrant workers. Newly written works that speak to current social issues are hardly unknown among orchestras—think of John Adams's 2000 oratorio *El Nino*, in which a Latino incarnation of the Holy Family is contrasted with a glowering police presence; the work has been championed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the San Francisco Symphony, among others.

Now, such works occupy a more central place at orchestras from New York to Tallahassee and beyond. But in contrast to opera companies—which have navigated political issues at least as far back as the time of Verdi, when the *Nabucco* chorus "Va, pensiero" became an unofficial anthem for Italian nationalism—orchestral music doesn't often have the benefit of words for statement-making. The lack of any clear route for symphonic social engagement, however, doesn't seem to keep anybody away from these uncharted waters.

"The art form is a potential avenue of connection. It can help bridge differences in some way. And it's almost the responsibility of the pre-eminent artistic institutions of whatever location to try to have people connect in those ways," says San Diego Symphony percussionist Cohen.

It goes beyond overtly political matters, says composer John Luther Adams, whose years living in Alaska prompted descriptive, perhaps neo-Impressionist works such as *Become Ocean*, *Become River*, and *Become Desert* that remind listeners on all sides of environmental issues what unspoiled natural phenomena might sound and feel like. "All thinking people are trying to figure out how to move forward in this mess we've created for ourselves," says Adams. "Certainly, Fascism is on the

rise all over the world, but I'm also talking about the unprecedented threat to our survival as a species. How could orchestras not engage in those big questions?"

Martin Luther King Jr. memorial concerts, annual traditions at some orchestras, have long been a forum for celebrating the wider humanitarian ideals that King stood for. Next spring, the New York Philharmonic and incoming Music Director Jaap van Zweden will devote three weeks to

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"Music of Conscience" concerts that include John Corigliano's 1990 Symphony No. 1 ("Of Rage and Remembrance"), which was a musical flashpoint during the early years of the AIDS epidemic. David

Composer John Luther Adams, whose works often evoke the natural environment.



Donald Lee

Lang's opera *prisoner of the state* will be performed alongside Beethoven's *Fidelio*: both pieces about political imprisonment, one set in the future, the other in the past. In addition to the "Music of Conscience"



Chris Lee

Above: The New York Philharmonic presented composer Julia Wolfe's *Anthracite Fields* at the NY Phil Biennial in 2014. Julian Wachner led musicians from the Bang on a Can All-Stars and the Choir of Trinity Wall Street in the work, which reflects on Pennsylvania's coal-mining culture around the turn of the twentieth century. *Anthracite Fields* won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Music.

concerts, the season's new-music commissions include Julia Wolfe's *Fire in my mouth*, about the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York that killed roughly 146 workers, the majority being immigrant women. The tragic results of

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the fire led to reforms in workplace safety regulations and influenced the rise of workers' unions.

“We want to be *in our city*,” says Deborah Borda, president and CEO of the New York Philharmonic. “A sense of context that is larger than the music is a way of getting people to think about the larger

importance of having a great symphony orchestra in their lives.”

Yes, context: creating greater meaning among already established works. New Yorkers can hear the Corigliano symphony as a case history in the fatal consequences of government discrimination and neglect. On the West Coast last year, Oregon Symphony patrons wouldn't miss the irony of Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*, which features Lincoln's own words about freedom and equality, being narrated by *Star Trek* star George Takei, whose Japanese-American parents were forced to live in a World War II-era internment camp the same year—1942—that the Copland piece was written.

In the wake of Hurricane Maria, which devastated Puerto Rico last fall, the Philadelphia Orchestra's long-scheduled concert performances of Bernstein's *West Side Story* were turned into fundraisers

for Puerto Rican victims of the natural disaster, raising \$34,000. Yet the produc-



Peter Seifling

Composer Julia Wolfe, whose recent works have focused on the personal and social impact of twentieth-century American industrialization.



Brandon Patoc

Above: Led by Music Director Ludovic Morlot, the Seattle Symphony performs the world premiere of John Luther Adams's *Become Desert* in March 2018. The work is for an ensemble of five orchestral and choral groups, which are placed throughout the concert hall. The Seattle Symphony commissioned *Become Desert* as well as Adams's *Become Ocean*, which won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize in Music.

tion took on unintended larger meanings as the federal government drew heat for its slow response to the island-wide tragedy. At other times, repertoire can seem beside the point. It almost didn't matter what the members of the Philadelphia Orchestra played when they took a break from previously arranged Far East tour concerts to visit schools for Chinese migrant workers. The point is that the musicians showed up.

### Contemporary Concerns

New works are arriving with increasing visibility. Joel Thompson's *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, employing the dying utterances of unarmed African-American men, premiered in 2015 as a choral work with a small group of instruments. Newly scored for chorus and orchestra, the work will rise again in March 2019 in performances by the Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra. Rahim Alhaj's *Letters from Iraq*—with texts describing the American occupation of that country—united Arab musicians with members of the Michigan

Philharmonic for performances in March 2017. In February 2018 at the Louisville Orchestra, Music Director Teddy Abrams unveiled a collaboration between composer and poet Sebastian Chang and Iraqi artist Vian Sora to create *Between Heaven and Earth*, a multimedia work reflecting life in war-torn Baghdad.

Often, these are occasions for community partnerships. The Michigan Philharmonic partnered with the Dearborn-based Arab American National Museum for *Letters from Iraq*. The coming New York Philharmonic season has the International Rescue Committee and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center as significant partners. If there's a stealth element for developing community involvement, it's the mere presence of choirs. In Tallahassee, it's Morehouse College Glee Club and Florida A&M Concert Choir. Amateur singers tend to draw friends and family that might not normally attend such concerts.

Viewed in retrospect, such events look easier than they are. Fact is, they truly



Jürgen Frank

New York Philharmonic President and CEO Deborah Borda

take the symphonic institutions out of their comfort zone. One obvious example is San Diego Symphony's weather-imperiled *Inuksuit*—"it almost didn't happen" due to the rains, says Cohen—and logistics weren't easily sandwiched be-



San Diego Symphony Principal Percussion Gregory Cohen, who participated in the symphony's 2018 performance of John Luther Adams's *Inuksuit* at the U.S.-Mexico border.

tween other festival events. Plans for the Philadelphia Orchestra's foray into Syrian migrant camps outside Vienna during its spring 2018 European tour were

called off when things simply didn't work out. But you never know when—between concerts—musicians will just hire transportation on their own and arrive in

distressed, music-starved locales, maybe even unannounced. Symbolic value aside, such events are, at their core, one-on-one communication. During one Far East tour, Philadelphia Orchestra violinist Philip Kates took his violin to an earthquake zone and helped establish a fundraising drive to rebuild schools.

Partisan political statements are avoided. But in a symphonic world where concerts are planned years in advance, sometimes performances can be ambushed by current, unforeseen events. A long-scheduled guest appearance by conductor Valery Gergiev with an orchestra might suddenly be picketed because of the conductor's connections to Vladimir Putin. This spring in Philadelphia, demonstrators angered by the treatment of Palestinians exiting Gaza protested the

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The Philadelphia Orchestra turned its long-planned concert performance of Bernstein's *West Side Story* last fall into a fundraiser for hurricane relief in Puerto Rico, which had recently suffered widespread destruction. In photo: Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin leads the Philadelphia Orchestra and cast. At the lyric "Nobody knows in America, Puerto Rico's in America" in the song "America," cast members held their hands over their hearts and took a long pause in honor of what had happened in Puerto Rico.



Jessica Griffin/Philadelphia Orchestra

Philadelphia Orchestra's long-planned 2018 tour to Israel. In such situations, orchestras generally focus on the big picture. "As soon as we engage in any political dialogue, we lose our purpose," says Ryan Fleur, interim co-president of the Philadelphia Orchestra. That purpose, he says, is cultural diplomacy.

With any luck, that approach also circumvents problems among board members with opposing political views. During the early 1990s, when the Corigliano symphony was presented by the New York

Philharmonic as part of an event involving display of the famous AIDS quilt, which memorialized those lost to the disease, Borda admits there was "some pushback" from the board. And now? "If we're a little controversial, I think we can take it. We've survived 176 years."

### Sound Interpretations

The central point—first, last, and always, says John Luther Adams—is music that comes from a deep artistic impetus. "Otherwise I risk composing bad propaganda," he says. "Music is a powerful, mysterious force, this magic thing that can transform

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Isabel Santiago, who played the role of Anita in the Philadelphia Orchestra's October 2017 performances of *West Side Story*, helped with fundraising for hurricane relief in Puerto Rico. The orchestra partnered with Puerto Rican aid organizations in the effort.

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individuals and entire cultures.”

But music is also pliable. Instrumental music, in particular, can be co-opted for a variety of purposes. Perhaps the most extreme example is that of Anton Bruckner, whose symphonies were claimed by Nazi ideology during World War II, despite their strictly religious original intentions. Adams was thrilled that *Inuksuit* made a statement at the U.S.-Mexico border, and trusts event curator Steven Schick, to whom the piece was originally dedicated. But does Adams think about how his music might be used elsewhere, when his back is turned? “Yes, I do. All the time,” he says.

Composer Julia Wolfe’s text-based works—*Steel Hammer* (2009) and *Anthra-*

*cite Fields* (2014), both of which are about American industrialization—would seem to be less vulnerable to alien interpretation. But even though Wolfe grew up near the Pennsylvania coal-mining culture that she portrays in *Anthracite Fields*, many of the people she so sympathetically interviewed on the research end of the piece no doubt voted differently from her in the last national election. Might her work be seen one day as championing causes she never intended? She may have a bit of insurance against that in the forthcoming *Fire in my mouth*, which draws on oral histories from immigrants—and then some. “I’m not saying that you need to think ‘this.’ I’m hoping to shed light on things, and say what



Composer Sebastian Chang and visual artist Vian Sora collaborated on *Between Heaven and Earth*, a new multimedia work reflecting on life in war-torn Baghdad. The Louisville Orchestra gave the world premiere of the work in February, on a program with other scores focusing on war and peace.

The Louisville Orchestra’s February 2018 concerts included “War + Peace,” which featured works by composers including Ives, Barber, Ravel, Schoenberg, and Vaughan Williams and the world premiere of Sebastian Chang’s *Between Heaven and Earth*, a piece inspired by and composed in collaboration with Iraqi visual artist Vian Sora. In photo: Music Director Teddy Abrams leads the new score as Sora’s artwork is displayed.



In March 2017, musicians from the Michigan Philharmonic joined oud player and composer Rahim AlHaj (center) to perform selections from his *Letters from Iraq*, which focuses on war—and its aftermath and consequences. The event took place at the Arab American Museum in Dearborn. AlHaj spoke before each of the work’s movements, relating the essence of the letter upon which the movement was based.

Houssam Mchaleh

happened,” says Wolfe. “But, I have to say, there are little messages embedded in it.”

*Fire in my mouth* is in many ways emblematic of a social-consciousness trend that was waiting to happen. Wolfe, 59, initially made her name with severe mini-

malist instrumental works as a founding member of Bang on a Can, the downtown Manhattan composer collective, often for unconventional ensembles—ones that she says “challenged the system” with, for example, scoring for multiple bagpipes. But

In 1992, when the New York Philharmonic gave the New York premiere of John Corigliano’s *Symphony No. 1*, which Corigliano described as a reaction to the AIDS crisis, AIDS quilts memorializing those lost to the disease were displayed in Avery Fisher Hall. Concertgoers were invited to share their feelings. The concerts were dedicated to those who had died of AIDS, those living with AIDS, and those who help and support them. The symphony was commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which gave its world premiere in 1990.



Chris Lee and the New York Philharmonic Archives

having spent formative years in the counterculture environs of the University of Michigan, she says that even those works had extra-musical subtext, if known only to her. “I’ve always had a feeling of, how politically active can I be or should I be? I think being an artist is a political act unto itself,” she says. “At a time when writing music often involves pleasing somebody else, commercially speaking, being an artist is a very independent expression.”

Wolfe’s move into text-based works gave her extra urgency. *Steel Hammer*, which evokes the African-American folk hero and railroad builder John Henry, was begun without a commission. Carnegie Hall came forward with a commission, though considering how untested her work was in mainstream concert venues, it’s no surprise that it was performed in Carnegie Hall’s smaller Zankel space. *Anthracite Fields*, which won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize in Music, began at the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, and was heard at New York Phil Biennial, a two-week festival devoted to new music.

But *Fire in my mouth*—whose subject haunted Wolfe as she frequently passed the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire when teaching at New York University—will be premiered by the New York Philharmonic in January 2019 on a regular subscription concert. Borda says she believes in “putting it organically into the middle of what we’re doing.” While composers say that even the most generous commissioning circumstances with major orchestras have limited rehearsal, Wolfe had three workshops for the new piece in various university settings where she tried out industrial noises, such as the roar of amassed sewing machines.

“It’s kind of shocking. And it’s great,” says Wolfe about the commission. “I have to say I’m probably an odd choice. I’m more of an outsider, so they’re actually taking a chance.” Wolfe would have written the piece anyway, and for less-exalted circumstances. But with classical music becoming a platform for socially conscious music, such risks can be taken. And they are. **S**

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