

The Best of All Possible Worlds: *Urban Reflections and Pastoral Visions*

Friday, May 11, 2007, 8:00 p.m.
Williams College Chapin Hall

I cannot re-read...Candide without thinking that I am hearing a music infinitely more spiritual, more skeptical and more diabolical than that of Offenbach or his like.

Paul Valéry, in *Essai sur Stendhal* (1927)

There is no transposing Voltaire's notorious music into English.

Theo Cuffe (translator/editor of Penguin edition, 2005)

Fortunately, Voltaire's *Candide* (written 1757, published anonymously 1758—five years before Rousseau published *Du Contrat social* and *Emile*) has found a successful translation in music: in Leonard Bernstein comic operetta masterpiece, *Candide* (1956). While Voltaire had many targets—most notably the Age of Enlightenment optimism of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Alexander Pope—Bernstein and his collaborators, including Lillian Hellman, instead seemed to be satirizing post-WWII optimism, anti-communist paranoia, and artistic censorship. (“I am easily assimilated,” performed last spring by the Symphonic Winds, is perhaps the most explicit political of the entire show, as the Old Lady sing such lines as: “Do like the natives do. These days you have to be in the majority.”) Between the overtly political prostelating and convoluted plot, *Candide* had only a brief run on Broadway; however, few, if any, ever questioned the merits of Bernstein’s engaging and engrossing music. This evening’s concert, then, attempts to further and “post-“ modernize Bernstein’s political and artistic dialogue with Voltaire through the integration of minimalist and post-minimalist music that can be heard as possibly critiquing, reflecting, or commenting on our present conceptions of the world in which we live.

The concert opens with the Westphalian villagers singing their cheerful, if naïve, welcome anthem (“**Westphalia Chorale**” from *Candide*)—

Fa Re Fa Si La Sol Fa Fa,
Be welcome in Westphalia!
A scene of sweet simplicity,
Teutonical rusticity:
All hail, Westphalia!

—which is immediately answered by an instrumental “welcome”: **David Maslanka’s *Mother Earth: A Fanfare***. Inspired by the words of St. Francis of Assisi—“Praised be You, for our sister, Mother Earth, who nourishes us and teaches us, bringing forth all kinds of fruits and colored flowers and herbs”—*Mother Earth* is a brief essay, not on the rustic simplicity or beauty of Earth (as in the “Westphalia Chorale”), but on our planet’s raw, life-supporting/giving power. At a pre-concert lecture in 1992 at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Maslanka reflecting on what he perceives to be music’s roots and purpose in human life and how it connects to our planet, said:

Music comes supposedly from the human heart and mind. These are but two of the vibratory receiving centers of the human organism. The human organism comes from Planet Earth. We say “from dust to dust.” Each body is built from the elements of Earth and is continually recycling elements from the Earth. We eat food every day. To what end? So that we have “energy”. To what end? To have feelings and ideas, to make music, and to make many other things. Bodies are fluid, recycling every seven years, so that each of us experiences a continual interaction with Mother Earth. The source of music then, would seem to be the Earth. We come from the Earth; if we are intelligent

and spiritual, then the Earth is intelligent and spiritual, and by extension, the universe is intelligent and spiritual. If the Earth is the seed, then all that we see around us is the flowering and unfolding of that seed. And all of it is in continuous, fluid, interactive motion.

Music is one voice of the Earth, and by extension, one voice of the universe. That voice rises up through this wonderful human body – a body made of cells, cells made of molecules, molecules made of atoms, atoms made of neutrons, protons, electrons, electrons made of pure energy. As you look closer and closer, matter literally disappears. It disappears into profound emptiness and silence, the “nothingness” which is not nothing, and out of which the universe has blossomed. This silence is the source of the music. So, what happens is this: Your “nothingness” receives my “nothingness;” the medium of transmission is vibrations in the air. Why do we make music? So that the creative power of the universe can rise up through us out of the “nothing.” The experience opens us so that we can listen to the voice of silence in ourselves, and be moved by it in the unfolding of our lives.

Returning to the logically askew optimism of the “Westphalia Chorale,” our musical introduction concludes with one of the most popular numbers from *Candide*, “**Best of All Possible Worlds.**” Here, we witness Dr. Pangloss (Voltaire’s satirical composite portrayal of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Alexander Pope)—a teacher of “**metaphysico-theologico-cosmo-nigology**”—expounding his philosophy of Optimism (even snakes and war are, ultimately good!) to his students—the beautiful daughter of the Baron **von Thunder-ten-tronckh**, Cunegonde; her self-assured (to the point of vanity!) brother Maximilian; the innocent, gentle, open-minded page (and bastard son of the Baron) Candide, and the buxom chambermaid Paquette—all of whom readily parrot their master’s teachings. A transparent parody of Leibniz—who wrote in his *Théodicée*, 1710: “Nothing ever happens without a cause or at least a sufficient reason”—Pangloss speaks (in Voltaire’s satire): “It is demonstrable that things cannot be other than they are: for, since everything is made to serve an end, everything is necessarily for the best of ends. Observe how noses were formed to support spectacles, therefore we have spectacles. Legs are clearly devised for the wearing of breeches, therefore we wear breeches.... And since pigs were made to be eaten, we eat pork all year round; consequently, those who have argued that all is well [a reduction of the philosophy of Spinoza, who was, in many ways the contemporary antithesis of Leibniz] have been talking nonsense: they should have said that all is for the best.” And so, in Pangloss’s philosophical system (as in Leibniz’s system), since a God must be omniscient, omni-potent, and omni-benevolent—not to mention *rational*—it follows logically that we must be living in the best of all possible worlds (how could a less-than-best world have been chosen?), and if that is the case, all—even evil—must be for the best. The rest of the satire and operetta, then, piles evil, illness, pain and suffering on Candide until he is finally prepared to reduce the simple optimism.

The second act of our concert opens with a different, intellectually-reasoned, interpretation of the concept of optimism, as the Symphonic Winds will be premiering the new wind ensemble version of *Today and Everyday* by Williams alumnus **Judd Greenstein '01**. As Judd writes about the piece:

The last time I lived in New York, I was just out of college, living for a while at home. It was a difficult time for a number of reasons, the most immediate of which was the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. While I have many memories from that period—including that of standing in Washington Square Park, watching the towers fall—my mind always comes back to the days immediately following the attacks, when it genuinely felt like a spirit of community and shared hope could prevail over the forces of vengeance and politics and greed that we knew, on some level, were threatening to take over. The years since then have only heightened the poignancy of those days, given that our fears were better placed than we could have imagined feeling that I often come

back to in my mind, both to wonder whether it was possible to have maintained that spirit any longer, and as a source of hope in times when it can be hard to find.

In high school, I used to ride the 4/5/6 subway line to and from school every day. At the Union Square station, one stop from my house, I'd often transfer from the express to the local; on the local side, moving platforms bridged the gap between the main platform and the train. A public service announcement ran on loop, cautioning passengers about the dangerous moving platforms, providing other advice, and ending with the memorable line, "thank you for riding with the New York City Transit Authority, today and everyday." To this day, nothing represents the City to me like the subway, with its perpetual mixed bag of people, moving in all possible directions for all possible reasons. More often than anywhere else in the City, I wind up having random interactions with people on the train; people ask directions, we exchange looks as something strange happens, a child facilitates communication (because she doesn't yet know that you're not "supposed" to talk to anyone else). I'm constantly reminded on the subway, as bleak as it often can seem, that as long as people are forced to live together and interact with one another, there's still hope that we'll find our way back to that better way of coexisting. All that any of us can do is keep struggling for what's right and what's good. New Yorkers know that as well as anyone, and that's what we're going to do, today and everyday.

Originally written for the New York Youth Symphony, conducted by Paul Haas, Judd created this new wind ensemble version especially for the Williams Symphonic Winds.

As we again re-enter the world of *Candide*, perhaps all is not for the best—we have happened upon what seems to be charming celebration, but is in fact a brutal parody of the Spanish Inquisition (“**Auto-da-fé**”). (In Bernstein’s *Candide*, this scene can be interpreted as a parody of Senator McCarthy’s anti-communist witchhunt in the 1950s. As the townspeople sing jauntily about the weather and their entertainment (“What a lovely day for a hanging.... What a lovely day for drinking and for watching people fry!”), Pangloss again tries to put the best possible spin on all worldly evils, first extolling the virtues of syphilis by tracing the genealogy of his (“For it shows us that we, one and all, are a small family!” In Voltaire’s original, Pangloss’s reasoning is even more banal: “It is an indispensable feature of the best of all possible worlds, a necessary ingredient: for if Columbus, on an island off the Americas, had not contracted this disease—which poisons the source of all procreation, and often even prevents procreation, contrary though this be to nature’s great plan—we would have neither chocolate nor cochineal...”) and then praising the existence of rope—the very rope by which he is soon hanged.

At this point in Voltaire’s story, with the help of the Old Lady, Candide is reunited with Cunegonde, who he had thought to be dead. Deciding to depart from Europe, Candide and Cunegonde discuss Pangloss’s philosophy:

Candide: We are going to another world. No doubt it must be there that all is well. For you have to admit, there is reason to blench at some of what goes on in our world, whether physically or morally.

Cunegonde: I love you with all my heart, but my mind is still reeling from what I have seen, from what I have suffered.

Candide: All will be well. The sea of this new world is already superior to our European seas; it is calmer, its trade winds more constant. No doubt about it, the New World is the best of all possible worlds.

Eventually Candide must abandon Cunegonde in Buenos Aires (since he is fleeing the authorities after killing three officials, including Maximilan). With his illiterate servant Cacombo (who takes the

position of Candide's new "tutor" [or Pangloss foil] since he believes Candide does not understand anything about the world: "It merely goes to show how people carry on when they haven't received a proper education.") finds and leaves Eldorado (a utopian vision of what must *really* be the best possible world!), and returns to Europe

In our concert, rather than offer musical analogues to his portion of the tale, we instead present **Louis Andriessen's** recent (2000) *Passeggiata in Tram in America e Ritorno* ("A Trolley Ride to America and Back"). The surrealist text of Dino Campana—written for the soprano Cristina Zavalloni, the violinist (amplified) Monica Germino, and a subset of the *Volharding* wind ensemble he formed in 1973—offers a provocative complement to Voltaire's snappy, sparse text. Here Campana creates disturbing, almost grotesque, images of pain, lost love, and physical and spiritual journeys (appropriate for Candide in this section of his tale). Andriessen, in turn, responds with a newfound, dramatically-poignant (although not sentimental) sensibility. After a brief "overture" for solo piano, Andriessen allows the soprano to weave the text into a harmonically complex, yet transparent, instrumental texture that both trembles with restless fear and relentless energy.

From the physical and spiritual pain of *Passeggiata*, we next encounter the emotional pain of the Manichean Martin who sings about the absurdity of life. Martin is a Dutch scholar (in Bernstein's *Candide*, he is a janitor) and the winner of a competition organized by Candide to take as his travel companion (replacing Cacombo) the person who is "the most unfortunate and most thoroughly disgusted with his condition in the whole province." In the end, Candide cannot tell who is the most wretched, so he selects the one who would be the most amusing, Martin: Contrary to Pangloss's teaching and to what, incredulously, Candide still believes, Martin espouses the sentiment that we are living in the worst of all possible worlds ("**Words, Words, Words**" from *Candide*). As he tells Candide: "When I look around at this globe, or rather this globule, I think that God had indeed abandoned it all to some malign being—all except your Eldorado, of course.... Even in those cities which appear to enjoy peace, and where the arts flourish, men are more devoured by envy, cares, and anxiety than all the tribulations visited upon a citadel under siege. Private griefs are crueler even than public miseries. In short, I have seen so much, and endured so much, that I am become a Manichean." And when Candide would reply: "And yet there is some good in the world," the bitter and bemusing Martin would simply retort: "That may be so, but I have not experienced it."

After observing the darker sides of life, we begin to move toward a more hopeful vision for life and the future—by peering into the unexpected darkness and looking for the light that was always there—with the premiere of *Forgotten Skies* by Williams College music and computer science double major **Benjamin Wood '08**. As Ben writes:

Forgotten Skies began with a suggestion by Steven Bodner in the fall of 2006 that I write a piece for the Williams Symphonic Winds based on Aaron Copland's *Quiet City*, a beautiful work for solo trumpet and English horn with string orchestra. Ironically, for me, *Quiet City* has always brought to mind a sense of wide open space far from cities. In fact, I have always disliked cities on many levels, so in the later stages of composing, I began searching for a way to tie my piece to the theme of this evening's concert, which did not include the element of "Pastoral Visions" at the time....

This search led me to accounts of the night sky during the Northeast blackout of August 2003. During the blackout, people in cities and suburbs from Brooklyn to Detroit were treated to a brilliant mosaic of stars that hadn't been visible from these places (save during previous blackouts) for many decades. Having grown up in a small town where light pollution still only lingers on the horizon, it is difficult for me to conceive of the experience of seeing the stars for the first time. The night sky is a thing of beauty, inspiration, and solace which no human invention can replace, yet a full two thirds of

the world's population cannot see stars in the night sky, according to a study by the University of Padua, Italy—light and air pollution obscure the stars from view and leave a fuzzy glow in their place.... Seeing the night sky full of stars for the first time is something I cannot remember, since it must have happened when I was an infant. I can only imagine the wonderment of such an experience at a later age. I leave it to the listener to decide how much this image, with the thoughts it provokes, and the music have influenced each other. Perhaps *Forgotten Skies* could be heard as a meditation on the possibility that someday, if we get our act together, the night sky will make a permanent and triumphant return to the cities of the world.

The music unfolds from a major second sounded by distant tolling chimes. The entire harmonic language of the piece is based on two stacked triads which grow out of the opening material and shift their way through various colors and textures. Reflecting the influence of *Quiet City*, the English horn takes a soloistic role in the piece, especially in the slower and more pensive moments. Those who are familiar with my interests in music will doubtlessly hear the influence of other composers in *Forgotten Skies*.

I extend my warmest thanks to the Williams Symphonic Winds and Steven Bodner for the uncommon opportunity to work closely with the ensemble and director throughout the compositional process, and to David Kechley for his guidance, insights, and encouragement. They have been instrumental in realizing *Forgotten Skies*. I am also grateful to all those who have encouraged me in music throughout my life.

The final act of the concert opens the same as the first: with an unaccompanied chorus (“**Universal Good**” from *Candide*), but this time with a tempered outlook on life (“Life is neither good nor bad. Life is life, and all we know. Good and bad and joy and woe are woven fine. All the travels we have made, all the evils we have known, even paradise itself, are nothing now.”)—and as a direct satire of Alexander Pope’s *The Essay of Man* (1734):

All Nature is but art, unknown to thee
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;
All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good.

Louis Andriessen’s rigorous, aggressive *Symphonies of the Netherlands* (1973) creates an ideal transition to the concluding work of both the operetta and tonight’s show. Embodying Andriessen’s compositional philosophy from the 70s—that the content of the music, its performative aspect, and its reception (or to use music semiotician Jean-Jacque Nattiez’s distinction: between music’s immanent, poietic, and ethesic levels) all be democratic—this is a musical critique—or *music about music*—which eschews such hierarchical distinctions of melody and accompaniment (all parts are of equal importance) and of tonal functional harmony. In fact, Andriessen is parodying band music which is often in the key of Bb-major: rather than writing a piece *in* B-flat major, he has written a piece *about* Bb-major, (much like Terry Riley’s *In C* is more *about* “C” than actually *in* C) making the actual theme of the piece the Bb major scale and using the Bb harmony in a variety of guises (although never with an authentic cadence in Bb—the piece even ends on an impish Bb-dominant!). In parodying the band tradition, however, Andriessen is not denigrating it; rather he is trying to uncover the meanings and potentialities of the tradition itself. Like his *Volharding* and *Worker’s Union*, this is a work that is explicitly about socialist democratic ideals. As Andriessen writes: “The unifying idea is hard work, the same kind of hard work as dragging a plough through the flat Dutch polder fields. Heavy work, and always the same. Sometimes a bit of relaxation, like the Charleston at the end, but we keep our clogs on. It’s a serious piece.”

Just as Andriessen's stubbornly layered ostinati and Bach-inspired chorale preludes dissolve into a cheeky Charleston (perhaps revealing the latent similarities between the disparate musical traditions?), so does the entire concert reach its apothotic ending: "**Make Our Garden Grow**" from *Candide*. Synthesizing and summarizing the narrative of the earlier works in the concert—from the pastoral complexity of Maslanka's *Mother Earth* and Andriessen's *Symphonies*, to the hopeful visions of Greenstein's *Today and Everyday* and Wood's *Forgotten Skies*, to the narrative dichotomies of the previous *Candide* selections—"Make Our Garden Grow" creates a compelling conclusion not just for the concert, but for the academic year—and for the undergraduate careers of our seniors. As Candide and Cunegonde finally reunite in blissful matrimony, they reflect with the entire company on what they have learned about life—that life, in the end, isn't just about logical deductions and axiomatic rationalizations (another of Voltaire's jabs at Leibniz), but rather that we must, as Candide says, "cultivate our garden:"

Candide: You've been a fool and so have I, but come and be my wife.
And let us try before we die to make some sense of life.

Refrain:

We're neither pure nor wise nor good; we'll do the best we know.

We'll build our house, and chop our woods, and make our garden grow.

Cunegonde: I thought the world was sugarcake, for so our master said;
But now I'll teach my hands to bake our loaf of daily bread.

(with Candide): *Refrain*

All soloists: Let dreamers dream what worlds they please; those Edens can't be found.
The sweetest flow'rs, the fairest trees, are grown in solid ground.

Company: *Refrain*

While the symbolism of the garden scene at the end of *Candide* has been much discussed by literary and musical commentators, perhaps in our post-*An Inconvenient Truth* terminology, "cultivate our garden" might be best interpreted as an admonition to live in an appropriate, sustainable manner—to use our philosophies and intellectual power to live the "best" lives we can while preserving our Mother Earth for future generations.