

WILLIAMS SYMPHONIC WINDS

Steven Dennis Bodner, director

WITH STRINGS (AND HANDS) ATTACHED

Saturday, May 3, 2003

Program Notes

Joan Tower: Celebration Fanfare from the ballet *Stepping Stones*

One of the best-known female American composers, Joan Tower was born in New Rochelle, New York in 1938, but spent her childhood in South America, where she developed interests in rhythm and percussion. She returned to the U.S. to study at Bennington College (1958–61) and Columbia University (MA 1965, DMA 1978). For 15 years she performed as a pianist with the Da Capo Chamber Players, an ensemble she founded in 1969 and which won a Naumburg Award in 1973. After her appointment to Bard College in 1972, she won a Guggenheim Fellowship (1977) and numerous commissions from the Koussevitsky, Fromm, Jerome and Naumburg foundations. At Leonard Slatkin's invitation she served as composer-in-residence with the St Louis Symphony Orchestra (1985–7). Other honors have included a 1990 Grawemeyer Award for *Silver Ladders* (1986), the Delaware Symphony Orchestra's DuPont Award for Distinguished American Composers (1998) and membership in the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1998). While her early works of the 1960s are serial, influenced by contemporaries such as Babbitt and Wuorinen, her more recent works, beginning with *Black Topaz* (1976) are influenced by the music of Messiaen, Crumb, and Copland and have been described as "accessible, rhythmic and full of colorful orchestral gestures."

Tower once remarked, "As a composer, I've always thought of myself as a closet choreographer. Texture, space, speed, direction, all the words that apply to dance also apply to music." *Stepping Stones*, commissioned and premiered by the Milwaukee Ballet in 1993 and choreographed by Kathryn Posin, is an examination of issues relating to the identity of women in today's American culture. The 18-person company (consisting of 6 women representing different stages of life, 6 additional women representing "inner-selves" and 6 men) appear only once on stage simultaneously — in the sixth and final movement of the ballet, the "Celebration Fanfare." Regarding the end of the ballet, Tom Strini, music reviewer of the Milwaukee Journal, wrote:

Stunning geometry, clever rhythms, inventive moves, striking shapes, athletic challenge.... The main thing is the way all of this ebbs and flows with Joan Tower's rhythmically and harmonically muscular score to a climax more transcendent than passionate.

"Celebration Fanfare" was arranged by Jack Stamp, a composition student of Tower and Director of Bands at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Warren Benson: Variations on a Handmade Theme

Warren Benson has distinguished himself in the world of contemporary music as a writer, lecturer and composer. Born in 1924, Benson became the principal timpanist of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in 1946 while still a student at the University of Michigan. He conducted and taught composition at Anatolia College (Greece), Mars Hill College, and Ithaca College (where he organized one of the first touring percussion ensembles in the United States) before becoming a Professor of Composition at the Eastman School of Music in 1967 where he was honored with an Alumni Citation for Excellence, the Kilbourn Professorship for distinguished teaching and was named University Mentor; upon his retirement from Eastman in 1993, he was appointed Professor

Emeritus. He was also active in the Contemporary Music Project (funded by the Ford Foundation) from its inception, developing its first pilot project. He has been commissioned by over 80 major artists and ensembles, including the United States Marine Band, the International Horn Society, the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Kronos Quartet. He has received numerous distinguished international awards, including the John Simon Guggenheim Composer Fellowship, three National Endowment for the Arts composer commissions, four Fulbright grants and the Diploma de Honor from the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Argentina.

Most noted for his song cycles and pioneering work in behalf of percussionists and wind ensembles, Benson writes music which has been described as "sinewy sparseness with a pervasive concern for lyricism in compositions that are varied, selective, and non-doctrinaire in their technique and style." Benson consistently finds new creative uses of percussion, including writing for a variety of specific, non-traditional sounds, such as "brushes on paper." In *Variations on a Handmade Theme*, Benson uses the human hands as percussion instruments. He creates a SATB ensemble (2 people per "voice") by instructing the clappers to produce sounds of varying pitches (i.e. a "cupped" clap yields a bass sound, while clapping with fingertips on the heel of the other hand provides a soprano sound). *Variations* demand rhythmic assurance of the ensemble members as intricate, subtle syncopations ornament the deceptively simple "hambone"-style theme as it is passed between the "voices."

Kurt Weill: Concerto for Violin and Wind Orchestra

One of the outstanding composers in the generation that came to maturity after World War I, Kurt Weill (1900-1950) was a key figure in the development of modern forms of musical theater. His successful and innovatory work for Broadway during the 1940s (he became an American citizen in 1943) was a development in more popular terms of the exploratory stage works that had made him the foremost avant-garde theatre composer of the Weimar Republic. Weill, though, initially showed no inclination toward writing for the theater; his early works such as *Symphony No. 1*, are "serious" and display the influence of Alban Berg, Igor Stravinsky, and Paul Hindemith on the young composer. Perhaps the greatest influences on Weill were not musicians, however, but two playwrights: the leading Expressionist Georg Kaiser and the vitriolic Bertolt Brecht. In Weill, The collaboration between Weill and Brecht produced in 1928, among others, a work which practically redefined music theater: *The Threepenny Opera*.

Although he had studied composition with Albert Bing (assistant conductor at the Hoftheater) and with Humperdinck (at the Berlin Musikhochschule) as a teenager, Weill's most important musical studies were with the composer Busoni in the early 1920s. Busoni had a special regard for Weill's musical gifts. Not only did Busoni provide the young Weill with rigorous training in counterpoint, but he also encouraged some of his earlier works, including the *Sinfonia sacra* op.6 and the *Divertimento* op.5, both by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in 1923.

The *Concerto for Violin and Wind Orchestra* which Weill composed in the early summer of 1924, shortly before Busoni's death, is the first large-scale work he wrote after his time with Busoni — and the first work in which he consciously declares his independence, if only in technical procedure and not in aesthetic principles, from his beloved teacher. The Concerto was written for the violinist Joseph Szigeti, but was premiered by Marcel Darieux at an ISCM (International Society for Contemporary Music) concert, conducted by Walter Straram in 1925. During the 1920s, it became one of his most widely performed instrumental works. The philosopher T.W. Adorno wrote the following regarding the Concerto:

In this piece, the lines of Weill's development intersect; the Busoni-esque lucidity is still there, playfully avoiding both dense polyphony and indeed the melodic plasticity which Weill was later to round out so strikingly.

There is a strong trace of Stravinsky to be found in the classical, masterly clarity of the sound and in much of the wind writing. The later Weill can be heard in the dramatic pungency which often enough contradicts the classical balance, but most remarkable of all is a Mahlerian quality, at once garishly expressive and painfully laughing, which calls everything playful and secure into question. Weill thus relinquishes objective realism in favor of the dangerous, surrealist realm he inhabits today. The piece stands isolated and alien: that is, in the right place.

This evening's performance will be of the final two movements of the Concerto. The three interlinking sections (perhaps owing a formal debt to Mahler) which make up the second movement are evocative of not only Mahler, but also Berg and Stravinsky. The external sections (the capricious Notturmo, which features extended duet passages for xylophone with the violin in punctuated dotted rhythms, and the Serenade which is dominated by a charming violin cantilena accompanied by a nervous triplet wind accompaniment) frame a virtuosic cadenza for the violin soloist. The energetic tarantella-finale creates "a sense of hunter and hunted" (David Drew) that irresistibly, restlessly drives to the end of the piece, as the violin and timpani are pitted against each other in a fashion reminiscent of Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*.

David Gillingham: Waking Angels

Dr. David Gillingham is currently Professor of Music Composition at the Central Michigan University School of Music. He earned Bachelor and Master Degrees in Music Education from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh in 1969 and 1977, and the Ph.D. in Music Theory and Composition from Michigan State University in 1980. His composition teachers include Roger Dennis, Jere Hutcheson, James Niblock and H. Owen Reed. Gillingham's compositions have been performed throughout the United States, Europe and Japan. He is the recipient of numerous awards including: First Prize in the International Barlow (1990) and DeMoulin Band (1981) and Third Prize in the Percussive Arts Society Composition Contests. A member of ASCAP, Society of Composers, Inc., and the College Music Society, Gillingham was the recipient of the Teaching Excellence Award at Central Michigan University

Dr. Gillingham has written the following about this work:

Waking Angels was inspired by the poem "Mercy" by Olga Broumas which is among a collection of poems on the subject of AIDS by various poets called Poems for Life. Broumas' poem makes reference to the "sea-smoke" rising from the ocean and how it is often referred to as the "breath of souls". The last stanza of the poem alludes to these lost souls that Broumas has been grieving for:

*they leave, like waking angels rising
on a hint of wind, visible or unseen, a print
a wrinkle of the water*

Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, AIDS has profoundly affected the world in which we live. Countless numbers of people have lost their lives to this merciless disease and a cure is not yet within reach. Through the imagery of music, *Waking Angels*, emanates the mysteriousness, the pain, and the ruthlessness of the disease. But, it also provides us with the warmth and comfort of hope and the peace of eternity. One may recognize fragments of the old hymn "Softly and Tenderly, Jesus is Calling" by Will Thompson which serves to unify the work. To me, this tune is nostalgic, having grown up among the ambience of Gospel hymns. I have found the melody and text comforting over the years. The hymn motive goes through a degenerative process in the work paralleling the nature of the disease. My purpose in using the hymn is not necessarily religious. It simply provides a source of reflection — to personally draw the listener into the music and toward a closer understanding of the pain and suffering of mankind.

Kevin Volans: Walking Song

When it comes to composers, only a few today could be called true originals, and Volans is one of them.

John Allison - *The Times*, London

Born in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa in 1949, Kevin Volans studied at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg before he went to study in Cologne with Karlheinz Stockhausen at the Hochschule für Musik from 1976 to 1979. While studying electronic music at the Hochschule, Volans made four journeys to South Africa to record diverse kinds of African music for WDR. In 1981 he returned to South Africa for an extended stay to teach composition at the University of Natal, Durban, where he received his doctorate in 1985. After residencies at the Queen's University, Belfast, and at Princeton University, Volans became an Irish citizen in 1995, now living in Dublin.

In the mid-70's Volans' work became associated with the "Neue Einfachheit" (New Simplicity) – the beginnings of a post-modernist movement in music. Following his field recording trips to Africa, he embarked on a series of pieces based on African compositional techniques which quickly established him as a distinctive voice on the European new music circuit. In the 1980s he embarked on a series of 'African paraphrases' (marked by a richly flexible sense of rhythm, melody and harmony) which allowed him to, as he put it, "compose my way back to Europe." As western European and American interest in 'world music' began to rise throughout the 1980s, Volans found himself increasingly popular as an 'African composer'; the Kronos Quartet's recording of *White Man Sleeps* (Nonesuch) was one of the best-selling classical recordings of 1990's. While many of his recent works owe little to direct quotation of African sources (and Volans has even begun to disavow the influence of African music on some of his earlier pieces), certain procedures of variation and permutation from his African-inspired works have continued to recur in some of his more recent works, as does a sense of melodic line and rhythmic complexity. As Christoph Schlüren writes, "[Volans] has transcended the African elements which influenced his work from the time he studied in Cologne. He doesn't quote from an existing source of folklore, rather he has recreated his own individual, cosmopolitan folklore."

Volans writes the following about *Walking Song*:

Walking Song for flute, harpsichord and four handclappers/fingerclickers was written at the request of Jill Anderson of the Durban Art Gallery for the opening of an exhibition. In the event, the chatter occasioned by the cheese and wine completely drowned out the piece. The opening material owes a debt to the music of the Ba-benzele pygmies, who alternately sing and blow notes on a panpipe made from the hollow stem of a papaya leaf.

Michael Torke: Bliss: Variations on an Unchanging Rhythm (2003)

The music of Michael Torke has been called "some of the most optimistic, joyful and thoroughly uplifting music to appear in recent years" (Gramophone). Hailed as a "vitaly inventive composer" (Financial Times) and "a master orchestrator whose shimmering timbral palette makes him the Ravel of his generation" (New York Times), Michael Torke has created a substantial body of works in virtually every genre, each with a characteristic personal stamp that combines restless rhythmic energy with ravishingly beautiful melodies.

Recent projects include a millennium symphony commission from Michael Eisner and the Walt Disney Company, performed by Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic; the *Central Park* trilogy, written with A.R. Gurney for Great Performances, Glimmerglass Opera, and New York City Opera; *The Contract*, an evening-length story ballet for James Kudelka and the National Ballet of Canada; and *Bliss: Variations on an Unchanging Rhythm*, commissioned by members of the College Band Directors' National Association and which will receive a premiere performance by the Williams College Symphonic Winds on May 9, 2003. Recently, he also served as Composer-in-Residence with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, which resulted in the recently released

Naxos CD of works, including *An American Abroad* and *Rapture: Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra*.

In two of his most performed works, *Ecstatic Orange* and *The Yellow Pages* (both written in 1985 while Torke was still a composition student at Yale), Torke practically defined post-minimalism, a music which utilizes the repetitive structures of a previous generation to incorporate musical techniques from both the classical tradition and the contemporary pop world. From these initial kinetic scores, Torke's music has developed toward larger, more expansive forms allowing for greater textural variation and longer, sweeping themes. Over the past decade Torke's music has strongly appealed to choreographers, including Ulysses Dove (Alvin Ailey, New York City Ballet), James Kudelka (San Francisco Ballet), Jiri Killian (Netherlands Dance Theater), Glenn Tetley (Royal Ballet, Covent Garden) and Peter Martins (New York City Ballet).

Premiered this evening, *Bliss: Variations on an Unchanging Rhythm* was commissioned by a consortium of 30 members of the College Band Directors National Association, including the Williams College Symphonic Winds. Torke writes the following about the piece:

A simple rhythm (4 eighth notes, rest, 1 eighth note, rest, 2 eighth notes, rest) is the underpinning that we hear throughout. What changes are the melodies assigned to these rhythmic values, and the harmonies that support them. With percussionists tapping out the rhythm (including clapping) the accumulation becomes an ever increasing celebration; a state of Bliss.

This piece has been composed not long after *Rapture, Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra*, (which has been subsequently arranged for band), and represents a kind of companion piece to it; both are music which expresses an unfettered, joyous state.