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SYMPHONY

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We'll publish the best next week in the Listeners' Box.

The Cosmic Compositional Comedy

By Jeff Dunn

You've just heard a magical classical music performance, and you leap to your feet, clapping enthusiastically, grateful to acknowledge the creators of this incomparable experience. The conductor, soloist, and musicians are there, but where is the originator of your joy — the composer?

Nine times out of 10, ashed out or in a coffin.

How many movie stars would there be if they could only get recognition after their deaths? Yet tens of thousands of composers labor despite the knowledge that they might obtain the distinction of permanent absence before they can bring pleasure to the masses.

Only a very few gain fame among the minority members of the public who enjoy new music. Right now, John Adams is the most performed American composer of classical works. But he, Elliott Carter, Phillip Glass, Steve Reich, John Williams, and other internationally known Americans represent just the tip of the iceberg, and of all of them, perhaps only Glass and Williams are known to the general public.

SYMPHONY

Grand Tribute

By Anna Carol Dudley

Philharmonia Baroque
Orchestra
Eric Hoepfich
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(3/4/06)

From time to time, *San Francisco Classical Voice* will delve into the lives of some of those others, the hundreds of struggling Bay Area composers, each unique, who are trying to add to the potential corpus of joy for future audiences. We begin this exploration with Mark Alburger because, in addition to engaging in dozens of activities on behalf of Bay Area music and musicians, he has organized an orchestra of composers in order to give them a chance to hear and conduct their music. The group, [San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra](#) (SFCCO), which Alburger founded in 2002, will be performing this Friday, March 10, at 8 p.m. under the auspices of [Old First Concerts](#). Furthermore, far from slaving away in some basement, accumulating manuscripts (although he has 130 opus numbers to his credit), Alburger is an outspoken, iconoclastic, and lighthearted advocate for contemporary music of all styles.

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Visiting Players, Local Music

By Aaron Einbond

Alarm Will Sound
(3/5/06)

Alburger's bio on the SFCCO Web site declares that he is an "eclectic American composer of postminimal, postpopular, and postcomedic sensibilities." In addition to his work as founder and music director of the SFCCO, he is music director of [Goat Hall Productions](#), editor and publisher of *21st-Century Music Journal*, an instructor in music theory and literature at Diablo Valley College, music critic for *Commuter Times*, and an author, musicologist, oboist, pianist, and recording artist. He studied composition and musicology for his undergraduate degree at Swarthmore College, and he holds a doctorate from the Claremont Graduate School.

CHAMBER MUSIC

Grace and Zing

By Michelle Dulak Thomson

Belcea Quartet
(3/5/06)

Alburger's spirit is filled with boundless energy. His peppery conversation shifts from topic to topic without warning. True to his large-scale compositional acumen, however, he somehow keeps track of every conversational thread, bringing each — eventually — home to conclusion. If there is anything that defines the man in person, it is his inimitable chuckle, which bursts forth in unexpected contexts. The following interview, rearranged somewhat for clarity, was conducted at my home on February 25, 2006.

SYMPHONY

Tuba or Not Tuba

By Jeff Dunn

San Francisco Symphony
Matthias Goerne
Ingo Metzmacher
(3/2/06)

It seems to me that you're the "bad boy" of Bay Area music, because you're like George Antheil — you've lots of joie de vivre in your music. You're a teaser, aren't you?

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Quartets, Turntables, Laptops — Oh My!

By Janos Gereben

Del Sol Quartet
Daniel Bernard Roumain
DJ Scientific
(3/6/06)

Well, sure! As a matter of fact, the initial publishing house that I founded was actually called Happy Music. It was an antidote to serious music. The only reason I changed it to New Music was because about half the composers I had in the company said, "Gee, Mark, we love being published by you — but *lose* the name. It sounds like we're publishing children's music!" And I thought, what an indictment of Western civilization, that happiness is *only* associated with childhood. Now we go to work. Now we get serious. Now, welcome to hell — here's your accordion. No, I didn't say that!

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

Many Faces

By Benjamin Frandzel

San Francisco
Contemporary

I went to Swarthmore College. It was a small enough place that I could do whatever I wanted. They were so happy to have music majors! And that's one of the reasons I didn't go to Berkeley when I was out here, because I got this take that it was very serious music over here. So I kept with small schools for my whole career, for better or for worse, and in that way I could always have some leeway to do what I wanted.

Obviously, I'm a great believer in fun and games in music, but at the same time, it is terrifically serious, the whole thing. One of the things I liked about Happy Music was that I was quite taken with the notion of publishing requiem masses under that moniker. It's

nothing less than what Mahler would have advised. Taking in the whole world, taking the joy as well as the tragedy. All work and no play makes no Jack at all!

EARLY MUSIC

What kinds of provocative things have you done in your music to be a “bad boy”?

A Mettlesome Display

By Rebekah Ahrendt

California Bach Society
(3/5/06)

I suppose it started right from my Op. 1. Growing up, I was a good little church boy. Maybe I'm just a more heavy-set church boy now, though not a traditional believer any more. I used a Biblical text but threw unexpected things in it, in terms of chance operations on the text and notes. I suppose at the time I thought that was funny. Another example is the Op. 8 suite for piano, *The Twelve Fingers*. It's an homage to Stravinsky and the “Five Fingers.” We don't have 12 fingers, but there are 12 movements. There are humorous titles in my works, too. [Alburger's pieces include such titles as *Nocturnes for Insomniacs*, *Another Cognitive Disorder*, and Symphony No. 6 (“Apathetic”).]

OPERA

Consummate Success

By James Keolker

Adler Fellows
Napa Valley Symphony
Napa Valley Chorus
Don Giovanni
(3/3/06)

And of course, it seems like I was always stealing ideas, even way back then ... I'm a terrible thief! *The Twelve Fingers* was a stolen idea from a professor, Jonathan Kramer of Yale University [who interviewed at Swarthmore but is now at Columbia University]. At Swarthmore, we asked him a stock question we were asking all faculty candidates: “How do you get students to start writing pieces if they have writer's block?” He said, “One of the things I do is say, “Write a piece with 12 sections, and in every section, introduce a new note.”

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I thought, what a great idea! So I upped the ante. The first section of my piece has one note and 12 measures, and the last section has 144 measures. Just to tweak it a little further, since this was the mid-1970s and I was expected to write a 12-tone piece, I wrote the 11th section, called 11-Tone Music, with a masked C on the tone row. So anytime a C appeared in a tone row, it was gone. It turns out that this, my only 12-tone piece, has only 11 tones in it!

Another thing I do is use nicknames, like the nickname of my first symphony. It's probably the world's longest nickname: “It wasn't classical, it was symphonic; it wasn't a symphony because it did not have a Sonata-Allegro.” As I was leaving the American premiere of the Górecki Third Symphony in Los Angeles, there was a woman holding forth to her friends with amazing *bons mots*, and this was one of them. So that's the reason it's the nickname. In the introduction to the first movement, there is a hopefully soulful string melody that is set to the first half of the nickname. And the jazzy first theme of the Sonata-Allegro movement does the second half.

I think those armed robbers who stole \$93 million last month in the U.K. weren't anywhere close to your level. Antheil only stole from Stravinsky, but you steal from everyone!

Perhaps I can say this, but also stand at a distance from it: I think it is a legacy of great composers. As Stravinsky said, “The great composer doesn't borrow; the great composer steals.” I teach this in music theory classes. Certainly in Western music, everyone steals from everyone else. Everyone appropriates. It's an act of homage, of rebellion. It's subversive, it's honorific.

I've had a bipartite compositional career. The first half I was collaging, using the Ives approach and taking little bits of this and little bits of that, then putting them together. There were a lot of quotes during that time. Now I'm doing the reverse: I'm swallowing *whole pieces*. There are still quotes sometimes, embedded on the surface, but the process is more thoroughgoing — I consider it troping or appropriating or transforming, rather than just quoting now.

How did the San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra get started?

You know as well as I do that trying to get an orchestral work performed is a total crapshoot. This was like *Field of Dreams*. The analogous phrase for this musical endeavor was, "If you schedule it, it will happen." And so I put out an e-mail to my huge "spam" list of composers for the "first performance of the San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra" at Goat Hall in San Francisco, with performance and rehearsal dates. I explained that we would be bringing in specific musicians, and I said, "Each participating composer/performer will donate their services at two concerts and six rehearsals, and in exchange *will be guaranteed* a performance of one of their works up to a duration of 15 minutes."

We also introduced the notion of a "composer endower," who couldn't play a needed instrument but was well off enough to hire a performer in their stead. That was a \$400 commitment for the first year. It's higher now.

Your upcoming concert has an intriguing lead on your press release: "Picture this. An orchestra comprised of composers creates compositions inspired by art and produces a program of premieres that delights both ear and eye. See and hear it for yourself as the world's only composer-run orchestra, the San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra, presents Sound for Picture, a program of new music by Bay Area composers inspired by visual art and artists."

Yeah, I wrote that.

And it says, "The program blasts off with Suite ("Solar") for Oboe, Piano, and Percussion by Mark Alburger, a 12-movement wander-fantasy that explores the solar system." But where's the picture?

The picture is in your mind! I hope you don't ask for your money back. We didn't actually have enough people with visuals to go with the pieces. Actually, we will have a couple of opera singers — pretty faces to look at.

The fact is, we're just desperate for titles. These days, everyone wants a hook. Otherwise, people say, "Who cares?" I'm a great believer in bells and whistles.

My piece is going to be a kick! It's a spiritual thing; it's a cosmological thing. There are 12 bodies: nine planets plus the sun, plus the asteroids, plus comets. The deal is, you start from the sun, go out, and then hitch a ride on the comets to come

back in. I'm not sure the percussionists will buy into my construct, but the piano will be toward the center, next the oboe, and then the percussionists are arrayed out in the solar system, in a circle around. The music goes from one instrument to another, all the way out to Pluto, and then the comets do the music in retrograde in one movement to come back.

When you talk to the average concertgoer about new music, they think first that it's going to be 12-tone and they're not going to like it —

Which is *crazy* after all these years!

— and next that it's written by obscure people in Europe. They don't realize that this is a thriving community of composers. I ask you, how many composers do you personally know in the Bay Area?

Lots! I would say hundreds! And you know, I keep thinking we ought to band together more. [Michael Cooke](#), who's on the SFCCO board, and a fine bassoonist and composer, says we need a demonstration. We need to get out there in front of Davies Hall and chant, "Bay Area composers, unite!" What would be the critical mass of people needed to finally say, "We're *tired* of hearing has-been, second-rate musicians from the 1960s as Muzak at Kinko's! We want to hear something new that's not in 4/4 and doesn't use only a handful of the same chords and the same few instruments and the same rhythms."

But can you really be a new-music composer today? The odds are minuscule that you could be as well known as John Adams.

We're all pretty heavily self-deluded, let's face it. We think we're just the dog's pajamas! We're each one tiny person among millions, but our reality is filtered. I know I'm totally self-deluded in thinking that anything I'm doing is anything deep at all, but maybe it doesn't matter, as long as we feel happy about what we're doing. Maybe this is an idiot-savant solipsism.

A friend once asked me, "Which would you rather be, uproariously happy in your life, but you and your music will be totally forgotten; or would you rather be famous, and have a miserable life?" I thought, if I had really wanted to be famous, I would have moved to New York. But then I thought, I wanted to be happy, so I moved to California and got away from the rain, cold, and gloomy weather, so I could have my creative juices resonate with the mountains, oceans, and deserts.

But my friend said, "Come on, Mark, be serious!" So I thought about it some more. If I know for sure that I will be totally forgotten, *I actually won't be happy!* I can't imagine having a happy life knowing absolutely for sure that I'll be totally forgotten. But this is an absurd thing, this idea that sometime five years after your death, somebody picks up your music and puts it on the piano and says, "Well, that's kind of OK — who was this clown?"

A fellow composer and friend of mine in graduate school once lamented — after a few too many brewskis — "You know, Mark, I'd be happy if I could just go down as a *footnote!*" And I see all my theory students, and they're hot to trot, and they love music.

They want to make it as a rapper or as a rocker, or in jazz or classical or as a folkie. So a little bit of the showing off, the theatrical thing — even if it doesn't make it to the next life — is right to do.

So my final answer was to my friend was "OK, lay on the suffering!"

No matter what we do in life, let's face it, we're a grain of sand. But I guess I'll try to contribute my grain of sand to this pile called music.

(Jeff Dunn is a freelance critic with a B.A. in music and a Ph.D. in geologic education. A composer of piano and vocal music, he is a member of NACUSA and president of Composers Inc. His e-mail address is jdunnpm@yahoo.com.)

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