

# Miller Theatre Program Notes

Composer Portraits: *Fred Lerdahl*

Friday, November 19, 8:00PM

You have to think yourself back (or imagine yourself back) to 1972, when very little new music was available on record, in order to comprehend how strange and wonderful it was to find an unknown piece by an unknown composer, one still in his 20s, on the flip side of a re-release of a recent classic, Milton Babbitt's *Philomel*. However, that introduction to the music of Fred Lerdahl—for his *Wake* of 1968 was the piece—turned out to have been very incomplete. A setting of *Joyce* (Finnegans being the *Wake*) for soprano and ensemble, the work had characteristic virtues of clarity and sure form, but its avantgarde language was already causing its composer misgivings. He felt the lack in this language, or in any of the innumerable alternatives emerging, of “the stamp of authority.” There must, he felt, be a sounder way of proceeding, and he looked for it in an unusual place: not in the history of music, the physics of sound or the mathematics of set relations but in the psychology of musical understanding. Noam Chomsky had suggested that infants become verbally adept rapidly because the brain is hard-wired for language. Could there be ways in which we are also hard-wired for music? If so, a composer might take those ways as the essential givens, and work with, around, and against them.

Lerdahl's work on this question, in collaboration with Ray Jackendoff, led to their classic book *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*, published in 1983 and in print ever since. Meanwhile, Lerdahl was, as he had hoped, reaping the creative fruits of his research, particularly in how it enlarged and reinvigorated the understanding of harmony and variation. Where the first was concerned, it opened the possibility for him to “write anything from a triad to a twelve-note chord in ways that would make aural sense...and to locate a home base so that a phrase or section could depart from it and return again.” At the same time, it suggested a notion of “expanding variation,” whereby a musical element would be elaborated within ever larger frames. Linking two names rarely found in the same sentence, Lerdahl found he could profit from his admiration for “the transformational motivic processes of late Sibelius and the simultaneous tempo unfoldings of Carter.” Important to him, too, was something he found in early Schoenberg, in Bartók, and in Stravinsky: the creation of audible progression through chords other than those of traditional tonality.

All these considerations came together ten years after *Wake* in his First String Quartet, commissioned by The Juilliard School. Most of his works since then have been in the sphere of chamber music, including two more string quartets, though he has also explored wider timbral resources in compositions for ensemble, chamber orchestra (*Waves, Spirals*), and full symphony orchestra (*Quiet Music*).

“In my dedication to systematic thinking and formal coherence,” he has said, “I am more modernist than postmodernist. Yet, if the occasion calls for it, I enjoy the challenge of incorporating allusions into my musical style in an organic way. Nor do I hide behind a hard mask and deny personal expression....I lose interest in music that lacks inwardness.”

(This and other quotations here are taken from Lerdahl's “Composing Notes” in the Fall 1999 issue of *Current Musicology*. More information may be found on his website. Among recordings available are two Bridge albums and, on New World CRI, a performance of the First String Quartet by The Juilliard String Quartet.)

The notes that follow are the composer's own.

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## Time after Time

I composed *Time after Time* in the summer and fall of 2000 for the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society (in New York City) and Collage (in Boston). It is in two movements and lasts about 19 minutes. The instrumentation, for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, percussion, and piano, is the same as that of an earlier piece of mine, *Fantasy Etudes*, in which sub-groupings of instruments interact in dialectical opposition. This time I have sought a more homogeneous treatment so that the bright sound of the total ensemble refracts in constantly shifting colors.

Both movements employ a spiral form in which a simple and stable musical idea proliferates, becoming longer and more complex with each cycle. As an idea expands, new ideas emerge at the interstices. Gradually

unity turns into multiplicity. This process is unbroken in the fast and often explosive first movement. In the more reflective second movement, the process unfolds in two streams: the piano generates a serene but inexorable eighth-note pattern, supported at times by the percussion, while the flute, clarinet, violin, and cello interject increasingly agitated gestures. The streams converge as the music sweeps downward in ever more powerful climactic curves. A short coda recollects in tranquility thematic fragments from both movements.

### **Third String Quartet**

The Third String Quartet (2008) was commissioned by Chamber Music America for the Daedalus Quartet, which premiered it in Cleveland in December 2009. The work is in one movement approximately 22 minutes long.

The string quartet is for me the most personal and psychological of musical media. The Third Quartet inhabits a world of abrupt mood changes, passionate urgings, quiet reveries, fantastical gestures, and sudden reminiscences. This turbulent world nonetheless has a discernible overall shape. After a fragmented introduction, the music settles into two long polyphonic cycles, each containing an agitated section followed by a lyrical sostenuto passage. A whirlwind presto interrupts the close of the second cycle and subsides into a passage of lyrical stasis, followed by a playful scherzando and finally a homophonic coda of soft, short chords.

From another perspective, the Third Quartet is the finale of a large-scale work that begins with the First Quartet and continues with the Second. The First Quartet takes the form of 15 geometrically expanding variations, starting with a simple chord and elaborating gradually into a variation six minutes long. Its sequel, the Second Quartet, continues the expansion with two more variations of nine and thirteen minutes. The Third Quartet constitutes in its entirety a last expanded variation. At the same time, it periodically interposes reminiscences from the two earlier quartets, progressing through the Second back to the First. The coda of Third Quartet comes full circle by stating in reverse order the brief opening variations of the First Quartet.

### **There and Back Again**

*There and Back Again* (2010), a four-minute work for solo cello, was composed as a surprise present for the extraordinary cellist Anssi Karttunen in honor of his 50th birthday. The composers invited to participate were asked to base their contributions on a 17-century cello piece, *Chiaccona* by Giuseppe Colombi.

My piece follows Colombi's four-bar chaconne form faithfully but with a twist: its pitch material takes a journey through three and a half centuries and back. The piece begins with bare octaves and elaborates the chaconne pattern until Colombi's original melody arrives in the fourth variation. The material becomes increasingly chromatic, alluding to 19th- and 20th-century usages, until it reaches 12-tone and finally microtonal variations. The reversal is comparatively short, leading to a climactic statement of Colombi's tune before subsiding to the opening octaves.

### **Arches**

*Arches* (2010), for solo cello and large chamber ensemble, was commissioned by the Fromm Music Foundation for the cellist Anssi Karttunen. The ensemble includes flute (doubling piccolo and alto flute), oboe, clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, percussion (two players), piano, harp, two violins, viola, and contrabass. The piece is in one movement lasting about 19 minutes.

*Arches* is not a traditional concerto but a dialogue for cello and ensemble. Its expressive character comes from my feeling of the sound of the cello itself. This, the most human of instruments, covers the range from bass to soprano and conveys deep melancholy in the midst of rhetorical force.

I found the form to harness these inchoate expressive impulses through Renaissance cantus firmus technique allied with my spiral methods of construction. An expanding and contracting melody of my devising appears throughout, both overtly and covertly in different instruments and registers, everywhere influencing the voice leading and harmony. The title refers not only to the characteristic rise and fall in melodic contour but more especially to the arcs of formal expansion and contraction. These cycles grow to the midpoint and recede quasi-symmetrically to the end, motivating palindromic patterns at multiple structural levels—arches within arches within arches.