

# Miller Theatre Program Notes

## Composer Portraits: Sebastian Currier

### Friday, March 5, 2010 at 8:00PM

Winner of the 2007 Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition, Sebastian Currier belongs among the most esteemed composers of his generation. He was born in 1959 in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, into a musical family; his mother, Marilyn Kind Currier, is a composer and former professor of music at Providence College, and his younger brother Nathan is also a professional composer.

Sebastian Currier studied at The Juilliard School to doctoral level and began to make his name in the mid-1980s, notably with the premiere of his *Second String Quartet* at Tanglewood, where he had additional guidance from George Perle. Reacting to a period of uncertainty in music (as in much else), he went on to explore several possible selves in such works as *Vocalissimus* for soprano and mixed sextet (1991), in which a Wallace Stevens poem is set 18 different ways, or *Entanglement* for violin and piano (1992), with movements written as if by two different composers, or *Theo's Sketchbook* for piano (also 1992), tracing the life's work of an imaginary composer. To some degree, this was a passing phase, but Currier's technical accomplishment has allowed him to go on producing music that seems to be posing possibilities, raising questions about itself even while it proceeds with such adroitness.

With the notable exceptions of *Microsymph* (1997), "a large-scale, five-movement symphony that has been squeezed into only ten minutes," and *Night Mass* for choir and orchestra (2003), he has generally preferred chamber forces or solo instruments. Performers for whom he has written repeatedly include the pianist Emma Tahmizian, the violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter (*After song*, 1993), and the Cassatt Quartet (*Quartetset*, 1995; *Quiet Time*, 2004).

His music has been heard before at Miller Theatre: the piece that won him the Grawemeyer, his quintet *Static*, had its first performance here in February 2005, and one of tonight's compositions, his *Piano Concerto*, started life in this theater three years ago. More recently, at Zankel Hall a few weeks back, his *Next Atlantis* for string orchestra and electronically transformed water sounds (2008-2009) was presented by the American Composers Orchestra, a musical vision of a New Orleans entirely submerged. There are recordings of his music on the New World and Koch labels, and substantial sound clips on his website [www.sebastiancurrier.com](http://www.sebastiancurrier.com).

### Night Time

- I. Dusk
- II. Sleepless
- III. Vespers
- IV. Nightwind
- V. Starlight

The theme of night has recurred in Currier's output, appearing first in this duo for violin and harp of 1998, then in his *Night Mass* for chorus and orchestra (2003), and again in *Nightmaze* for narrator, chamber ensemble, electronics, and video projections (2005). It seems peculiarly appropriate. Just as, when we enter a familiar room after dark, we find that a known space has become disorienting and known objects strange, so in Currier's music the kinds of sound, shape, pattern, and direction we encounter in older music become hauntingly different. Of *Night Time*, which plays for 14 minutes, he has written as follows:

"The five short movements share a sense of quietude, introversion, intimacy, and subdued restlessness. The instrumental ensemble itself, violin and harp, suggested to me right from the start a series of nocturnal moments, where a sense of isolation, distance, and quiet thoughtfulness would prevail throughout otherwise thematically contrasting movements. From the distant murmuring sounds in *Dusk* to the disquiet of the pizzicato ostinato and muted chords in *Sleepless*, from the contemplative lyricism of *Vespers* to the rushing passage work in *Nightwind*, and in the hypnotic figurations of *Starlight* there is an affinity with a phrase of a Wallace Stevens poem that I set in another work, *Vocalissimus*: "in the distances of sleep." The piece was written for Marie-Pierre Langlamet, harpist of the Berlin Philharmonic, and violinist Jean-Claude Velin. It was premiered at the Philharmonie in Berlin in 2000."

## Piano Concerto

- I. Fluid
- II. Edgy
- III. Soft

Commissioned as one of Miller's "Pocket Concertos," this piece was written in 2006 and is described by the composer thus:

"The three movements of the concerto create an obvious association with an 18th-century concerto, though the actual character and structure of the movements and their relationship to one another is quite different. With frequent crescendos and diminuendos, wave-like chords dominate the first movement. Even the two virtuosic passages for the piano solo are reminiscent of ocean waves—in these cases, intense, massive walls of water surging forward. The second movement, with its quick pace, sustained intensity, and unrelenting drive is something like an edgy retake of a movement from a Prokofiev piano concerto (whose concertos I admire for their wit and imaginative use of sonority). Like the extended middle of *The Winter's Tale* set in Bohemia, it functions not just as diversion but also to create a sense of time having elapsed between the first and third movements. Quietness and introversion predominate in the last movement. The piano plays a single melodic line throughout, which generally reverberates out into the orchestra, like waves rippling in a pond. Time has elapsed and now fragments of the first movement return as ethereal memories, through a series of pre-recorded samples. The last of these begins to reveal the source—not of the samples themselves, but of the material of the first movement—a recording of a single ocean wave, creating a circular relation between the outer movements: wave, music, memory, wave...."

## Bodymusic

- I. Doorways
- II. Gossip
- III. Sneeze
- IV. Humiliation
- V. Hiccups
- VI. Very Quiet
- VII. After Sex
- VIII. Phonemes
- IX. Running
- X. Babel
- XI. Crowds
- XII. Wordplay
- XIII. Sleep
- XIV. Solo Voice
- XV. Chorus
- XVI. Night Bath

Again, this new piece is best introduced by the composer himself:

"From the incessant chatter of teens, office workers, and instruments alike, to the laughter evoked by a trumpet exploring extended techniques, or the feeling of uneasy hypochondria caused by hearing one's own heartbeat in the dark, from the sneeze that spreads throughout an ensemble of instruments, to the articulation of language, or of pillow talk after sex, *Bodymusic* explores the intimate connection between our physical selves and the often ephemeral, disembodied world of music. Combining a large chamber ensemble with prerecorded samples of everything from hiccups to speech, from walking to singing, *Bodymusic* examines how music ultimately comes from the body, but also how the body can be coordinated, enlivened, calmed, and focused by music.

"The seed for the piece was planted when I was living in Berlin at the American Academy in 2005. I heard a performance of a work by Dieter Schnebel. The work, *Maulwerke*, was a full-evening piece for several singers who produced inhalations, exhalations, and phoneme-like sounds made by the tongue, throat, and breath: the component parts of language production, but never language itself. I was struck by how engaging this was, and now, some years later, decided to explore some parallel ideas in *Bodymusic*. My palette of sounds is wider than Schnebel's, incorporating internal body sounds such as a heartbeat, sounds of bodies in contact with other objects, as when we run or bathe, sounds stemming from emotional states such as yelling and laughing, and actual words and speech.

"Since my time in Berlin I've written several pieces that include pre-recorded samples based on

natural sounds. This interests me for two reasons: one, the aesthetic or musical appeal of the sound itself, for example, the beauty of the sound of water or the intensity of glass breaking; but also because all natural sounds carry with them meanings and associations that can interact with purely musical discourse. The outside world, with all its associations, meanings, emotions, implications, is brought into dialogue with the more abstract world of musical rhetoric. In *Bodymusic* this is not the whole wide world, but the more-close-to-home world of our own bodies. The instrumental material of the third movement of *Bodymusic* is one thing, but this same music following the sound of a sneeze, as it does, becomes something very different.

“In combining music with natural sounds, it would be hard not to evoke at times the sound design in cinema, and this is something that, rather than trying to avoid, I’m interested in engaging with. In film, more often than not, it is a marriage of convenience, where the emotional underpinning of the score must by necessity intersect with natural sounds of the narrative. I’m intrigued by the idea of taking such a ubiquitous, but typically subliminal interaction and shining a spotlight on it. Divorced from the narrative structure, one is free to explore the more aesthetic and sonority driven side of such relationships. The first and last movements of *Bodymusic*—some of the only sections that use sounds not specifically made by the body—are examples of the most overt references to such a filmic sensibility. In *Doorways*, we hear several times the sound of footsteps reaching a doorway, unlocking and opening it to reveal a different sound world in each—a sort of auditory *Bluebeard’s Castle*. In *Nightbath*, the last movement, the music unfolds surrounded entirely by gentle splashes of water, and the breath and single sigh of the person whose intimate world we enter briefly.

“The samples of *Bodymusic* are taken from diverse sources, mostly online, the majority from sites that offer royalty-free samples, used primarily for film. After that, there’s an assortment of other sources, from international internet radio to academic linguistic sites, several single notes from a Berio recording, a looped fragmented of a single note of Josquin, and the “text-to-speech” option on my Mac computer, where in movement 12, *Wordplay*, I found “her” inert-but-sexy voice just what I was looking for.

“*Bodymusic* is divided into 16 movements. In each movement the instrumental ensemble interacts with a different sample set as the movement titles generally suggest. The work was commissioned by Miller Theater and lasts approximately 39 minutes.

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