

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Composer Portraits: Arlene Sierra

Friday, March 13, 8:00PM

Born into an artistic family in Miami in 1970, Sierra grew up in Miami and New York and studied at Oberlin College, at Yale University (with Jacob Druckman and Martin Bresnick), and at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. She also won a fellowship to the American Conservatory at Fontainebleau, outside Paris, where she had lessons from Betsy Jolas and Dominique Troncin. According to the biography on her website (www.arlenesierra.com), this period in France was crucial, “honing her personal style with an international approach and a fascination with orchestration and sonority.” This evening's concert will certainly prove that sense of color and breadth of outlook.

She has continued to spend much of her time in Europe—in Berlin, where she lived for two years before completing her doctorate (in 1999), and latterly in Britain. Further fellowships brought her into contact with senior figures at Dartington (Judith Weir), Snape (Oliver Knussen, Colin Matthews, and Magnus Lindberg), and Tanglewood (Louis Andriessen). Her first score for large orchestra, *Aquilo*—already given a reading by the American Composers Orchestra in 1999—won the 2001 Takemitsu Prize and was performed by the Tokyo Philharmonic, with Susanna Mälkki conducting. Sierra dedicated the score to the British colleague she married, Ken Hesketh. In 2003-2004, she taught composition at Cambridge, England; since then she has been lecturer in composition at Cardiff University School of Music.

Her published catalog comprises about 30 works, nearly all written this century and including solo piano pieces (*Birds and Insects*, 2003-2007), chamber music, songs (*Hearing Things*, 2008), a particularly large number of scores for ensemble such as we hear tonight, and several orchestral pieces. In December, the New York Philharmonic will present a commissioned work for chamber orchestra, and a piano concerto is due for performance by Huw Watkins and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Sierra is also working on her first opera, *Faustine*.

Cicada Shell (2006) for seven players

I. Marziale

II. Misterioso, espressivo

Sierra writes here for a standard sextet—that of flute and clarinet, violin and cello, and piano and percussion—with the important addition of a horn. Very typically, the music moves through layerings of irregular repetition that combine to produce decisive forward motion, engaging or conflicting with a regular meter. Individual ideas are often simple—two pairs of chords with a firm rhythmic stamp, or perhaps a single rising interval, again rhythmically asserted, or even just a quick reiteration of one note—but the interlocking of these things on three, four, or five levels is intricate. Also, set against the offbeat striations, or else supporting them, there may be material that is less determinedly pulsed: sustained chords or slower, suppler melodic phrases. Often, of course, these will be drawn out of something in the more energetic layers, and will return. Often, too, there will be more than one process of increase or decrease, or of integration or disintegration, happening at once.

Characteristic, too, is the metaphor from warfare, which the composer elucidates in her own note:

Cicada Shell belongs to a series of pieces exploring principles of military strategy. *The Thirty-Six Strategies*, an ancient collection of Chinese battle tactics, provided impetus for this work. “Strategy 21: Slough off the cicada's shell” advises that false appearances mislead enemies. Transformation and illusion are key to avoiding capture and defeat.

The work is in two movements of equal length: the first is a series of *diminuendi* derived from a ritornello theme, while the second is a series of *crescendi* based on the same materials. Both movements feature a number of cyphers based on the title of the work as well as a central motif transcribed from the call of cicadas in nature.

Neruda Settings (2002-2005) for soprano and ten players

- I. Oda a la lagartija
- II. Oda a la alachofa
- III. Oda al plato
- IV. Oda a la mesa

At 22 minutes, this is one of Sierra's biggest pieces so far, a song cycle setting four of the many odes in which Pablo Neruda looked at everyday things with a combination of close observation, darting imagination, and fond memory. Sierra's choices give the sequence an order, from the wild (lizard) through the domesticated (artichoke) to the domestic (dish, table). Each of the objects gives rise to music with a particular aura, but Neruda's short lines and quick moves also make it possible for Sierra to write in the chain forms she favors, the music's strong basic impulses maintaining continuity through cuts and swerves from one character to another. At the same time, the poetry fits the brilliant, energetic, flecked instrumental textures typical of Sierra's music, while the flexible vocal writing, responsive to rhythm and imagery, is demanding all through in the interests of capturing the ecstatic luminosity of Neruda's vision. The ensemble comprises solo strings, piano doubling celesta, harp, percussion, and a homogeneous wind trio of flute, clarinet, and horn.

The first song responds to the heat and stillness of lizard life, with a patch of more flowing movement for the mention of water. A crescendo gesture, introduced early on, is massively amplified for the imagining of the lizard's attitude to a fly, and a short cello solo helps turn the thought toward personal reflection.

Neruda's characterization of the artichoke provides the cue for another of Sierra's war games, but one that turns pacific.

The ode to the dish features murmurous melodies in the strings' lowest registers in its first half; a horn solo then leads to the second.

Finally, the ode to the humble table is perhaps the most varied and startling of them all.

Colmena (2008) for fourteen players

Commissioned for this occasion, *Colmena* continues Sierra's exposure of the manifold colors and textures to be obtained from an ensemble of soloists without trumpet or trombone: *Ballistae* was for a similar grouping, and the same kind of formation appears also in *Tiffany Windows* of 2002. The imagery, though, is different here, as the composer has explained in her own note:

Colmena, which means "beehive" in Spanish, explores accumulation and change from micro to macro levels. Having read of the nature of beehives, and how their societies depend on a fine balance of outgoing and less enterprising individuals, my initial impetus for the piece was one of hidden changes bringing about a transformation of the whole.

Coloring this idea is a subtle nod to the stylized Franco-Iberian sound of early 20th-century scores, with simmering energy and sweeping gestures. Finally, the idea of a mass of twittering insects actually hibernating, as beehives do each year, brought about the music of the last section of the piece—an exploration of a sort of buzzing repose.

Surrounded Ground (2008) for six players

- I. Preamble
- II. Feigned Retreat
- III. Egress

In her note to this piece, Sierra says a little more about her concern in her music with images of war, accentuated here by the emphatic march rhythm of the opening movement and the insistent repetitions of the finale:

Surrounded Ground was originally conceived as a companion to Aaron Copland's *Sextet* of 1933-1937. Copland has remained an important figure in American music since his death in 1990; he taught many composers of succeeding generations including my own teacher Jacob Druckman.

Copland's nationalist style of the 1930s may still represent the best of American ideals, but present-day American militarism and its consequences for the world are another artistic challenge entirely. *Surrounded Ground* is an attempt to address these issues in my own work.

The title *Surrounded Ground* is from the ancient Chinese treatise by Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*. In this seminal book of military strategy, surrounded ground is described as “where the entrance is narrow, the exit circuitous, allowing the enemy to attack his few to our many.” This and other excerpts from the text are used to determine the musical interactions of instruments throughout the three-movement sextet.

I. Preamble. The ensemble is divided into several opposing forces, often a disparate minority against a homogeneous majority whose drive to prevail is overwhelming at first but later begins to disintegrate. The mass seems to lose its will to dominate for a time, but no resolution is offered as the threat of further conflict remains.

II. Feigned Retreat. The two violins are pitted against the remaining instruments, and their virtuosic interaction with the ensemble hints at the Sun Tzu quotation: “Do not follow a feigned retreat. Do not attack crack troops.”

III. Egress. The precision, aggression, and great speed demanded from the ensemble in this movement were suggested by Sun Tzu's advice that: “A surrounded army must be given a way out,” and the commentary: “Surround them on three sides, leaving one side open, to show them a way to life.” Different pairs of instruments struggle through a frenetic, syncopated texture, melodically asserting a way forward until finally, after a last statement from the first violin, the ensemble makes a sudden, surreptitious escape.

Ballistae (2000) for thirteen players

This earliest piece on the program shows Sierra's musical means already well developed and functioning: vital motifs, only a measure long, or half a measure, or less, are reiterated on several levels to create dynamic sensations of growth and change—or, occasionally, retracted to leave passages of tense stillness.

The composer's own note goes as follows:

In a classical treatise, *The Ten Books of Architecture* by Vitruvius, the Roman architect/engineer provides detailed instructions for building many ancient machines of warfare, for both attack and defense. The Roman *ballista* was a double-armed artillery machine; essentially a large, mounted crossbow whose cord of twisted sinew or hair was pulled back by a winch. It could hurl heavy rocks with great force and for considerable distances.

The circumstances, construction and operation of *ballistae* shape all aspects of this work. The aggression and fear necessary for waging war, the organization and effort required of soldiers who built such machines, and the preparations of the distant enemy are all ideas that contribute to the piece. In a more concrete manifestation of a *ballista*, 12 instruments of the ensemble are divided to constitute each “arm” of the machine while the largest and heaviest instrument (in effect, the stone) is moved into its central place with considerable effort. The strings provide the appropriate sinews, which are tightened and tuned, finally achieving sufficient tension to launch the heavy missile. After following the journey of the missile, the work concludes with its sudden and violent impact.

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Miller Theatre has commissioned writer and music critic Paul Griffiths to write the program notes for its 20th anniversary season of events.