



by Melinda Bargreen

Measure



Dave and Chris Brubeck



James Primosch (with poet Susan Stewart)



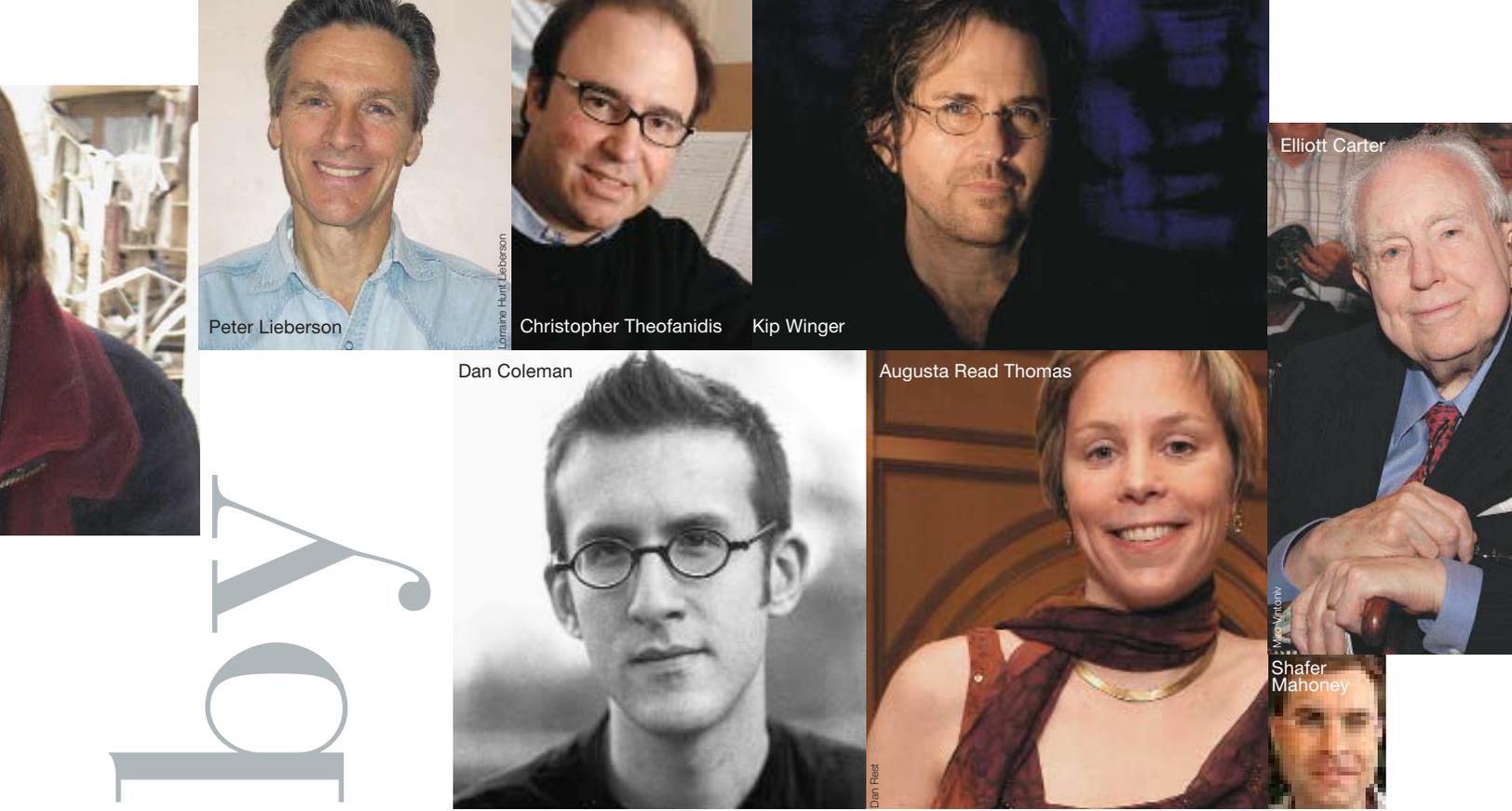
John Harbison

Pictured on this spread: a sampling of composers who have new works scheduled for world premieres by American orchestras during the 2009-10 season.



James MacMillan

We may be in the middle of a worldwide economic crisis, but it's boom time for brave new works: orchestra commissions are flourishing. Over the past few decades of changing tastes and the introduction of more listener-friendly works, symphony audiences have learned that it's not only safe to go back into the concert hall for a premiere, but that it just might be the most exciting event of the season. And seldom has there been a greater array of possibilities for the emergence of new symphonic works, from foundations to commissioning clubs and—increasingly—a growing cadre of enlightened individuals who want to leave behind a unique creative legacy.



Commissioning new orchestral works is an art form in itself. A glimpse of the upcoming season provides some examples.

Measure

Sometimes a commission is more than a piece of music: it's a boost for a whole community. That was the case this past April, when California's Stockton Symphony Orchestra presented the world premiere of *Ansel Adams: America*, a new multimedia work by Dave Brubeck and his son, Chris, commemorating the 25th anniversary of the death of renowned California nature photographer Adams, whose images are projected on a screen in the performances.

The Stockton premiere performances sold out and exceeded all budget expectations. But more important than financial success was the enormous boost in civic pride for Stockton. "Stockton has been just battered by this economy," explains Jane Kenworthy, the orchestra's executive director since 2008. "We have 15.8 percent unemployment; we're one of the leading communities in foreclosures. To have this

wonderful project at this time, by two artists from this area with huge reputations," says Kenworthy, "was a perfect example of great music building community and civic pride." Numerous other co-commissioning orchestras signed on to perform *Ansel Adams: America* in 2009 and 2010: the Sacramento Philharmonic Orchestra (April 11, 2009), Fresno Philharmonic Orchestra (September 26, 2009), Monterey Symphony (October 17, 2009), Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (February 11, 2010), Temple University Symphony Orchestra (March 21, 2010), and Abilene Philharmonic Orchestra (May 1, 2010).

The genesis of *Ansel Adams: America* was a chance meeting between two powerhouse women—Susan Carson and Jennifer Basye Sander—at an April 2006 reception for Meet The Composer, a nonprofit organization that supports the creation of new

musical works. Both Carson, a Northern California businesswoman and philanthropist, and Sander, a publishing executive and best-selling author who is on the board of the Sacramento Philharmonic, had been involved in previous commissions. Sander initiated a work by André Previn for the Sacramento Philharmonic, and Carson commissioned a work for Midori by Krzysztof Penderecki. Together, they developed a multi-orchestra consortium project for the Brubeck work with advisory help and matching funds from Meet The Composer. Jane Hill, who was then retiring as the Sacramento Philharmonic's executive director, served as project coordinator.

Carson notes that the process had its challenges: "It was a very hard project to make happen," she says. Among other factors, "Dave Brubeck was very cool to the idea at first; he was 86 then, and hesitant



The Boston Symphony Orchestra will premiere John Williams's *On Willows and Birches* on September 23, as a tribute to retiring BSO harpist Ann Hobson Pilot (at left, with Music Director James Levine).

from music lovers Drs. John and Helen Schaefer for a new piece based on poems of Dylan Thomas. The result was Paulus's new three-part work, *Dylan Thomas Songs*, which premieres on October 29, 2009. The project is also a good illustration of the degree to which the composer—and the commissioner—may tinker with the direction of the new piece and its soloist.

“George and I worked together when he was assistant conductor at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and I was the composer in residence,” explains Paulus, a Minnesota-based composer of more than 350 works in many genres. “This was from 1988 to 1992. The Dylan Thomas text idea came from the commissioning party, Helen Schaefer. She chose two poems of his, ‘Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night’ and ‘And Death Shall Have No Dominion.’ I wanted three poems that spoke about a common subject or theme, so I chose the one entitled ‘This Side of the Truth.’ All three poems deal with an aspect of death.”

Composers who marry words and music, as Paulus often does—his best-known work may be the 1982 opera *The Postman Always Rings Twice*—are lucky when they have a poet collaborator to call upon. For *Dylan Thomas Songs*, Paulus called on his friend Michael Dennis Browne, a poet with whom he has worked for 30 years. “Michael has always been my ‘living poetical source’ and a vast treasure trove of knowledge,” says Paulus.

Paulus also took the rather unusual step of suggesting the soloist for the new Dylan Thomas pieces, soprano Elizabeth Futral. She was one of the soloists on the 2009 BIS recording of Paulus's Holocaust memorial oratorio, *To Be Certain of the Dawn* (with Osmo Vänskä conducting the Minnesota Orchestra).

Commissioning new work, in short, can often involve interlocking, long-standing relationships in a number of directions. Prior to commissioning the Paulus work for Tucson, Helen Schaefer had also commissioned numerous pieces for other Arizona ensembles, including one by Paulus; that track record assured her of the quality she would get in the new *Dylan Thomas*

to take on new projects.” On the plus side, Carson says, “We’ve gotten to know the Ansel Adams family and were able to bring them together with the Brubecks, whom I already knew.” The *Ansel Adams: America* commission was funded through \$12,000 contributions from each of the partner orchestras, plus a single \$15,000 matching grant from Meet The Composer. Brubeck took about a year to compose the 22-minute work first as a piano piece, working closely with Chris, who then did the orchestration.

Carson says the project was designed to appeal to a large segment of people—Brubeck fans, Ansel Adams fans—who normally don’t attend orchestra concerts. “We saw so many people in our auditorium who had never come to the symphony before,” Carson says. “The concept”—putting together Brubeck, Adams, and the consortium of orchestras—“was so right that we never gave up on it.”

Charles and Benita Staadecker at the first rehearsal of Samuel Jones's Trombone Concerto, which had its world premiere at the Seattle Symphony in April 2009. The work was commissioned for the orchestra as a birthday present from Charles to Benita.

Personal Connections

What’s the single biggest common denominator in determining which composer an orchestra will choose for a commission? Prior acquaintance with the composer and his/her music—a factor that came up again and again while researching this story.

It was just such a prior acquaintance that led Tucson Symphony Orchestra Music Director George Hanson to composer Stephen Paulus, following a request



Courtesy Seattle Symphony

Songs. Schaefer explains, “I like these Dylan Thomas texts in particular because they have meant something to me at the deaths of close relatives.”

New Voices

Dylan Thomas Songs is one of three big, imaginative commissions scheduled for the Tucson Symphony’s 2009-10 season. The eyebrow-raiser of the group is *Ghosts*, a piece by rocker Kip Winger scheduled for its world premiere on November 14, 2009. Winger doesn’t fit the typical profile of the symphonic composer; he’s founder and front man of the band Winger (1987-94, reformed in 2006), who also was lead singer of the Alan Parsons Project and,



“I’m increasingly interested in orchestral music because of the vast landscape of emotion I can create,” says rock musician/dancer/composer Kip Winger.

earlier, a bass player in Alice Cooper’s band. But then, there’s not much about Winger that is typical. He has performed as a dancer, and says he originally wrote *Ghosts* as a work for ballet, “specifically for the choreographer Christopher Wheeldon, formerly of New York City Ballet and currently the director of his own company, Morphoses.” (The world premiere of the ballet version of *Ghosts* is set for February 9, 2010 at the San Francisco Ballet.)

Meanwhile, Winger explains, the Tucson Symphony’s composer-in-residence, Dan Coleman, had gotten a copy of the *Ghosts* score and showed it to Music Director George Hanson, who liked it and scheduled the 2009 world premiere.

Because Winger has performed as a dancer, that kinetic experience led him to “imagine dance” as he was writing the music. And although he’s most famous as a rock musician, he says this new work isn’t really a departure for him. “I’ve been working in this direction for many years,” says Winger. “Given my professional background in pop music, I never had the time to go to school for composition. My approach was to study privately with various composers throughout the years, similar to the way it was done before the institution of music conservatories. I believe that different styles of music can coexist—one can actually inspire another. I’m increasingly interested in orchestral music because of the vast landscape of emotion I can create.”

For Tucson’s third 2009-10 commission, it was Coleman, the composer in residence, who served as catalyst. His collaborative approach to creating new scores resulted in *Celebration*, a work by a group of composers called Composers 11. According to Sue DeBenedette, the Tucson Symphony’s director of marketing and public relations, the piece, to be premiered April 8, 2010, is “a celebration of contemporary compositional talent that started as a musical chain letter in 2006.”

Coleman asked each of eleven composers to submit “about ten bars, more or less” of music; he then chose the order and put the pieces together. The “Composers 11” name was chosen as a shorthand for the

contributors, who in addition to Coleman include Kenji Bunch, Anthony Cheung, Roshanne Etezady, Jefferson Todd Frazier, Laura Karpman, Shafer Mahoney, Rob Mounsey, Kevin Puts, Elena Ruehr, and Christopher Theofanidis.

Old Friends, Reunited

The “previous relationships” theme surfaces again in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, whose longstanding relationship with cellist Yo-Yo Ma led to the commissioning of a new concerto for the 2009-10 season. In 2006, Ma and his celebrated Silk Road Project established a residency in Chicago that was remarkable for its depth of community involvement as well as artistic achievement. A legacy of the Silk Road Project will be a new cello concerto by Uzbek composer and Silk Road Ensemble member Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky, to be premiered in May 2010 with Ma as soloist and Carlos Miguel Prieto conducting. CSO audiences responded enthusiastically to Yanov-Yanovsky’s *Night Music: Voice in the Leaves* during the orchestra’s opening-night concert in 2006. As Chicago Symphony President Deborah Rutter puts it, “We have lots of connections to both the composer and the instrumentalist. Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky’s music is both spiritual and beautiful; his musical landscape is quite different from those of many younger American composers today.”

After the Silk Road Ensemble concert in Chicago that year, Ma talked to the com-

First Timers

First performances of works can galvanize orchestras, composers, and audiences alike. Having surveyed orchestras of every size across the country, *Symphony* has compiled its annual list of world, U.S., and Canadian premieres. The complete list for 2009-10—at press time, 176 world premieres, 27 U.S. premieres, and 10 Canadian premieres—can be found at americanorchestras.org; click on *Symphony Magazine* and look for Premieres Listings. The listings include not only the coming season but also the six previous seasons. Searchable both by composer and orchestra name, *Symphony*’s Premieres Listings offer an invaluable resource season after season.

poser about a possible new cello concerto.

How does it feel to get such a big commission? “Really, it is not easy,” Yanov-Yanovsky says. “It is a great honor, but at the same time this is a great responsibility. When I start to think how much music Yo-Yo has performed during his career

Yo-Yo Ma will be soloist in Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky’s new cello concerto this season with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.



Todd Rosenberg

and how many works were written for and performed by the CSO, it is really quite intimidating. But this is an impetus to move forward." Yanov-Yanovsky is testing some new ideas with the piece, which he says won't be a traditional concerto with three contrasting movements.

No matter whether the composer is relatively inexperienced or well seasoned, a premiere is always a big deal, bringing with it a special kind of opening-night stress: is the work ready for prime time? At the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the process of the commission sometimes involves an intermediate step: a workshop with the CSO's training orchestra, the Civic Orchestra of Chicago. Rutter says that when a new piece is workshopped by the Civic Orchestra, "it gives a real sense of a work, and lets us see if any changes need to be made." Last March the Civic Orchestra performed portions of James Primosch's work-in-progress, *Songs for Adam*, which the CSO will premiere under Andrew Davis on October 29.

Chicago is unusually lucky in that it has five specific funds in its endowment for commissioning: the Louise and Wal-

lace Landau Fund, the Mrs. Harold C. Smith Fund for New Music, the Edward F. Schmidt Family Commissioning Fund, the Louise Durham Mead Fund, and the Irving Harris Foundation. Even with a secure source of funding, however, Rutter describes the process of commissioning as "an incredible Rubik's Cube, connecting the composer, the conductor, the instrumentalist, and the scheduling. It's never easy, but it is extremely worthwhile."

Fruits of Collaboration

A collaborative approach can be particularly fruitful for orchestras, as well as for composers. At the Boston Symphony Orchestra, three of this season's six major premieres are co-commissions with other orchestras, which Artistic Administrator Anthony Fogg calls "a very healthy situation. It's a helpful practice these days to be able to share the costs of commissions with other orchestras in the U.S. and beyond. It also makes our premiere part of a bigger experience."

Three of the BSO's 2009-10 world premieres are co-commissions: works by Augusta Read Thomas (*Helios Choros II*, a co-commission with the London Symphony Orchestra, October 15, 2009); James MacMillan (*St. John Passion*, also co-commissioned by the London Symphony Orchestra, January 21, 2010); and Elliott Carter (Flute Concerto, a co-commission with the Berlin Philharmonic and the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Ensemble, February 4, 2010). Three exclusive commissions are John Williams's *On Willows and Birches*, composed as a tribute to retiring BSO harpist Ann Hobson Pilot (September 23, 2009); Peter Lieberon's *Farewell Songs* with Canadian bass-baritone Gerald Finley (March 24, 2010); and John Harbison's Double Concerto for Violin and Cello, with Mira Wang and Jan Vogler (April 8, 2010).

These commissions, Fogg explains, are "never just created in the abstract, so to speak. There is always a reason. For example, the MacMillan work celebrates Sir Colin Davis's 80th birthday. Sir Colin has a long history with the BSO, an important and deep relationship. The idea for the co-commission came to us from Sir Colin, regarding a composer he himself believes in strongly. This all falls neatly into the relationships we've had with composers and dedicatees."

Behind every BSO commission, there's

a story. The Lieberon *Farewell Songs*, for instance, are a sequel to his earlier *Neruda Songs*, commissioned by the orchestra and composed for Lieberon's wife—the mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberon, who performed the work with the BSO on tour, and whose Boston performances of that work took place only months before her death in July 2006. "Peter felt he wanted to write something as a response to the *Neruda Songs*, setting more Neruda songs but from a male perspective, as part of his response to her passing," Fogg says.

The BSO's long-standing relationship with composer John Harbison led to the new Double Concerto for Violin and Cello via a connection to Friends of Dresden Music, an American nonprofit supporting Dresden's Mortizburg Festival. That festival's artistic director is Jan Vogler, and its composer-in-residence this year is John Harbison. Friends of Music approached the BSO with their wish to honor the Boston-based violinist/teacher Roman Totenberg by commissioning a new work. The result was that Music Director James Levine chose Harbison—whose many works for the BSO include his Symphony No. 5 and Cello Concerto—to compose the new piece for violinist Wang and cellist Vogler, who are a husband-and-wife team.

Paying the Piper

The relationship between the commissioner and the composer can take many forms, from the very distant to the "up close and personal." But seldom do you see a donor so involved with a piece as in the case of Seattle's Charles Staadecker, a music lover and Seattle Symphony fan who approached that orchestra's music director, Gerard Schwarz, about his wish to underwrite a new work honoring the birthday of Staadecker's wife, Benita.

Schwarz pointed Staadecker toward the orchestra's composer in residence, Samuel Jones, who had already written successful brass concerti for French horn and for tuba (the latter represented in a new Naxos recording with Schwarz conducting the Seattle Symphony and tuba soloist Christopher Olka). When Schwarz suggested a third brass concerto, this one for trombone, Staadecker at first demurred, recalling that this instrument was "not in the forefront of my mind." After talking with Jones, however, and hearing about the many possibilities



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Helen Ripken

At the Stockton Symphony's April 2009 world premiere of *Ansel Adams: America* (left to right): Mike Whelan, president of the board; Executive Director Jane Kenworthy; co-composer Chris Brubeck and his wife, Tish Brubeck; and Leslie Sherman, former board president

of the trombone as solo instrument, Staadecker grew enthusiastic about the project. He asked Jones if it would be possible to write a concerto that was a tribute to his own student days at Cornell University, and requested music that was “beautiful and inspirational,” rather than “atonal and avant-garde.” The work received its world premiere on April 2, 2009.

Jones, who reports that he’s “never done a commission where there was so much input from the donor,” rose to the occasion with a highly programmatic three-movement concerto. Subtitled “Vita Accademica,” it’s a work in which the voice of a virtuoso trombone—played by Seattle Symphony Principal Trombone Ko-ichiro Yamamoto—represents the student in his progress through college. The thematic material included a musical hint of Cornell’s

famous alma mater, a campus carillon, a “Fight Song” in 5/4 time, and even a college drinking bout in which the solo trombonist’s slides and swoops indicate that the student may have imbibed a little too much. Providing a steadying voice is the orchestra’s tuba, which emerges from the orchestral background to show the way and get the trombonist/student back in line.

Was it a bit corny? Maybe, at times—but it was also a beautifully crafted, well-played piece that Schwarz calls “the most joyous of the more than 150 premieres I’ve conducted.” The audience responded with an ovation, and Jones is happy with the result.

Since the April world premiere of the Trombone Concerto, Staadecker has become filled with an almost missionary zeal, determined to persuade friends, acquaintances, and associates to set aside funds for future commissions of their own—as individuals, or as a “commissioning club” that pools their resources.

“This is the best return on any investment I’ve made in my life,” a beaming Staadecker says of the Trombone Concerto. “No question about it.” **S**

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