

John Harbison on his Symphonies:
Introduction to a Cycle

The Boston Symphony Orchestra's cycle of John Harbison's symphonies, which began in fall 2010 with performances of his symphonies 1, 2, and 3 and continued this past fall with Nos. 4 and 5, concludes this week with the world premiere performances of his BSO-commissioned Symphony No. 6.

I have never been one of those who felt the Symphony was played out. So many wonderful symphonies appeared during my early years as a composer. I remember especially recordings of pieces by Tippett, Piston, Lutosławski, and Henze, as well as live performances here in Boston of great symphonies by Dutilleul, Sessions, and Hindemith.

I had first to respond to another task—to absorb the very different musical proposals of our two Hollywood émigré composers, Schoenberg and Stravinsky. I needed at least the experience of writing a large orchestral tone poem, *Diótima*; concertos for piano and violin, an hour-long song cycle *Mottetti di Montale*, and two operas, *Winter's Tale* and *Full Moon in March*, to line things up.

Eventually I felt convinced by the title "Symphony." I couldn't see why our big orchestral pieces needed to be called things like *Consternations* or *Entropies I* (the 1960s) or *Rimmed by a Veiled Vision* (the '70s) if they were symphonic in ambition and scale.

The twentieth century brought a lot to this genre, beginning with the great joust between Mahler and Sibelius (with Nielsen providing yet another even more eccentric route). Mahler proposed The Symphony as published autobiography, Sibelius as the free association of a private diary. New formal ideas came from these extreme positions, new kinds of grandeur and intimacy.

The hardest thing to win back for the big genres of symphony and string quartet is some kind of naturalness, some escape from the self-consciousness of our artistic time. By setting down Symphony on our title page we accept requirements, expectations, but cannot let them in while we work. It is not a test, it is a freely offered proof, or deed. We will need tunes, harmonies that define form, development that is also play, many tones of voice, movements and sections of varied length and weight.

We will need much of what we usually need, plus the conviction of not having done it this way before. At least these are some of the things I remembered to say to myself as I embarked—aware that if I found just one beginning it could be the net or foil that gets more phrases, eventually a piece. And once there is one piece, another comes from the determination to do something different. And another, to work away from the first two. I am grateful to James Levine for offering a chance to weight them individually, to see how they add up, to see—at distances of thirty years to a few months—if they contain their year of origin and still pertain to our present. To see if they are symphonies.

John Harbison, October 2010

John Harbison
Symphony No. 6 (2011)

JOHN HARBISON was born in Orange, New Jersey, on December 20, 1938, and lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Token Creek, Wisconsin. His Symphony No. 6 was commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra at the request of its then music director James Levine; the premiere this week comes as intended, as the culmination of a two-season complete survey of Harbison's symphonies. Harbison composed the symphony in Cambridge, Token Creek, and Lenox, Massachusetts, beginning in June 2009 and completing the full score in October 2011. The piece is dedicated "to James Levine in friendship and gratitude." These are the first performances.

THE SCORE OF HARBISON'S SYMPHONY NO. 6 calls for mezzo-soprano soloist (in the first movement only), three flutes (third doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn, three clarinets (third doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, percussion (vibraphone, glockenspiel, congas, bongo, large and small tam-tams, small and large gongs, marimba, side drum, bass drum, flexatone, tubular bells, cymbals, metal chain), timpani, cimbalom, and strings. Nicholas Tolle is the cimbalom player in these performances (see the composer's own note beginning on page 50). For cimbalom-poor cities, Harbison provides the option of replacing that instrument with prepared piano. The duration of the symphony is about twenty-five minutes.

In John Harbison's note for his Sixth Symphony, the line "These two sentences are far from formalities" laconically hints at the significance of the boilerplate-like commissioning credit referring to James Levine. In conversations about the piece, Harbison underlines the fact that the piece is in a way a portrait of Levine, reflecting the artistic resilience and dedication that have been hallmarks of his career. Levine is, famously, a champion for the music he believes in, from Mozart and Beethoven (hardly in need of further champions, but always in need of great performances) to Schoenberg, Berg, and contemporary composers. His special interest in living American composers has resulted in dozens of commissions, in recent years spread among the Metropolitan Opera and its two ensembles, the Met Orchestra and the Met Chamber Ensemble, plus, of course, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, where Levine was music director from 2004 until September 2011. Unfortunately, because of Levine's recent health woes, some of the works he was meant to premiere have had to be designated to other conductors. This is the case for the Sixth Symphony, led here by another longtime collaborator of Harbison's, David Zinman; it was the case for the October 2011 premiere by the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra of Harbison's Alice Munro settings, *Closer to My Own Life* for mezzo-soprano and orchestra, which was led by Fabio Luisi. But these situations take little away from the music's origins in the strong working friendship between Levine and Harbison.

Harbison has described Levine as being the biggest influence in his later musical life, both directly in his own music and in conversation about music more generally. "Discussions about all kinds of music, from Bach to Haydn to Wagner and Verdi and all kinds of recent music have been lively and revealing and indelible....His Socratic rehearsal method is endlessly fascinating and his ability to internalize the discourse of a piece is matchless. I often learned possibilities in my pieces by listening and not intervening." Harbison and Levine first met when both presented papers at the Salzburg Seminar on opera in summer 1984, just after the composer led that summer's Boston Symphony performance of his first BSO commission, his Symphony No. 1, at Tanglewood. A few years later, Levine was to have been the pianist for Harbison's song cycle *Simple Daylight*, which was commissioned for Dawn Upshaw by Lincoln Center. For the cycle, Harbison composed what he describes as the hardest piano music he has ever written, and in the event Levine was too busy to learn the part in time.

The relationship continued on a much higher and more involved level when the Metropolitan Opera commissioned Harbison's full-scale opera *The Great Gatsby* to mark Levine's 25th anniversary with the company. Levine led the premiere of the opera in December 1999 and its revival at the Met in 2002. His first concert with the Boston Symphony Orchestra as music director designate, in January 2003, featured Harbison's Third Symphony, and for his first season (2004-05) as the orchestra's music director the BSO commissioned the composer's *Darkbloom, Overture for an imagined opera* at his request.

Although the BSO has performed John Harbison's music since 1977, its recent performances of Harbison's scores, particularly the new ones, have benefitted from the players' increasing and sustained familiarity with his style, a familiarity Levine made a point of nurturing. As every performer knows, nothing results in great performances more reliably than the spontaneity made possible by a thoroughgoing comfort with the material. During his tenure at the BSO, James Levine extended the relationship. After *Darkbloom: Overture for an imagined opera*, the BSO commissioned Harbison's Fifth and Sixth symphonies for Levine and was a co-commissioner of the composer's Concerto for Bass Viol, as well as giving the premiere of his Double Concerto for violin, cello, and orchestra (commissioned by Friends of Dresden Music Foundation). Levine conceived the present

two-season survey of the composer's complete symphonies, which put Harbison in the rarified company of other composers treated to surveys during Levine's tenure, including Beethoven, Schoenberg, Mahler, Mozart, Brahms, and Schumann.

Not coincidentally, most of those names—plus Sibelius and Stravinsky—are the composers most often invoked by John Harbison in speaking of his symphony cycle. It's a context that has inevitably enriched his own ideas about the symphonic genre and its potential, even as he has made a point of making each new symphony different from the last. Levine had a more direct hand in Harbison's most radical departure from his symphonies past when he recommended the composer add a voice part to his already in-process Fifth Symphony, which transformed the work from an entirely instrumental score to one in which settings for baritone and mezzo-soprano nearly dominate. The addition of the opening vocal movement in the Sixth Symphony was a late decision and also linked to Levine, albeit more abstractly. Although it required major, retroactive revisions to the three instrumental movements already in place, its text brings the theme of artistic constancy into explicit focus.

The Sixth Symphony, then, is another special case in Harbison's symphonic output. Although it has four movements like the First, Second, and all-vocal Fifth (the Third and Fourth both have five movements), the four are arrived at via one-plus-three, with the first movement standing apart from the well-defined three-movement arc of the instrumental movements.

That first movement, which calls for a much smaller orchestral body in addition to mezzo-soprano, might seem at first introductory, but the setting of James Wright's poem is substantial and emotionally active.* The vocal setting moves from lyricism to declamation almost imperceptibly, a balance between feeling and fact. This matches the poem's drift from the cultural contemplation of its start to the immediacy of ancient imagery: "surely the young women of Gaul glanced back thoughtfully over their bare shoulders." With a richly contrapuntal ensemble accompaniment to the voice, echoing and expanding the soloist's melodic figures and adding rhythmic figures, the movement grows increasingly active and dramatic through "I pray for the stone-eyed legions of the rain to put off their armor." At "And the rain still mounts its guard," we first hear the unexpected, strange sound of the cimbalom, the hammered concert dulcimer found prevalently in Hungary.

The opening melodic gesture of the voice, with its characteristic contour of an octave leap and falling major second (whole tone), is an important motivic signpost for the three instrumental movements; one may hear many such small melodic correspondences between this setting and what comes later. More generally, the layered contrapuntal texture of the vocal movement foreshadows the intricate melodic and metrical polyphony that follows. The three orchestral movements are extended meditations and intensifications of that first movement.

In the second movement, following a short opening passage, the violins introduce a long, searching, intense melody with several built-in tempo shifts. The melody suggests a tonal center but chromatic elements within it amplify the expressivity and parallel the tempo ambiguity. One prominent feature is the recurring large leap—an octave or near-octave (ninth or seventh), which is a link to that distinctive gesture in the vocal melody. Although the first violins begin alone, lines are added gradually in other sections to create a dense and intricate network. The process repeats with a new melodic figure, building to a higher level of intensity before dispersing. The movement's last measures are transparent, timbres alternating between winds and strings.

For the third movement, Harbison turns to the established idea of, but not actually the standard template for, the orchestral scherzo. Marked "Vivo, ruvido" ("Lively, rough"), the movement is in a defined but syncopated 12/8 meter. Two short, contrasting ideas are presented—violins, then horns—both ideas becoming a part of the ensuing texture. This developing material is interrupted by the return of the cimbalom's magical sound (a very brief hint closed the second movement) in combination with the thin, dry sound of violins, *ponticello* (near the bridge) and *col legno battuto* (tapping with the wood of the bow), ushering in a quiet finish to the movement.

The finale revisits the metrical ambiguity of the second movement, beginning with what turns out *not*

to be a waltz and continuing with a buildup of contrapuntal activity. The tune itself is self-confident and clear, in spite of its metrical instability. In the midst of the movement the violins haltingly try out a new melody, which, it will become apparent, is a succinct version of the mezzo's first-movement setting. A brief suggestion of return to the scherzo reintroduces the cimbalom, a harbinger of the closing minutes, beautiful, dissolute, strange.

Robert Kirzinger

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The Composer on his Symphony No. 6

Symphony No. 6 was commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, James Levine, Music Director. It is dedicated to James Levine in friendship and gratitude.

These two sentences are far from formalities.

The piece begins with a setting of a poem by James Wright, for high voice and chamber orchestra. In the succeeding movements the singer is no longer heard, the orchestra is significantly larger. Certain passages from the poem maintain a presence through what follows. "As long as this evening lasts," "I hope to pay my reverence." "This evening, in winter, I pray for the stone-eyed legions of the rain To put off their armor." The concluding lines of the poem are rendered in terms which define much of the rest of the piece.

The first idea I wrote down was a detailed fragment which seemed very promising. This sketch was lost for over six weeks, during which I tried to reproduce it. These resulted in paraphrases and derivations—whatever I could remember of the lost material. When it was found I understood that these recollections could all find place in the piece, the original sketch would not.

Much later I was haunted by a missing sonority, a granulated, silvery sound, mysterious, even ominous, a punctuation for the end of large paragraphs. Arriving late for a class given by percussionist Nick Tolle for the Tanglewood Composition Fellows, I heard that sound. It turned out to be a Cimbalom, which plays a brief but important part of the narrative.

I am fortunate that David Zinman, who has conducted splendid performances of so many of my pieces, leads the first performances of this symphony.

John Harbison, October 2011