

Split for Piano and Orchestra

Andrew Norman

Although he studied piano and viola before attending the University of Southern California and Yale University, Andrew Norman always held a parallel interest in architecture. His music accordingly draws inspiration from forms and textures encountered in the visual world, filtered through an eclectic mixture of instrumental sounds. In fact, the Scharoun Ensemble of the Berlin Philharmonic presented a portrait-concert of his music in 2010 titled “Melting Architecture.” The intersection of the musical and the visual also finds an outlet through his interest in musical notation, both its history and how it can be adapted to find new modes of expression. He reports that he “loves collaborating with performers to explore the act of interpreting notation” and that he is “fascinated by the translation of written symbols into physical gesture and sound.”

Norman’s works have been warmly embraced by leading orchestras, with commissions and high-profile performances coming from the Los Angeles and Royal Liverpool Philharmonics, and the Philadelphia, Minnesota, Orpheus Chamber, and Zurich Tonhalle orchestras, among other ensembles. His chamber compositions have been featured at The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Bang on a Can Marathon, Ojai Festival, Wordless Music Series, MATA Festival, Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary Music, Green Umbrella series of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Juilliard Focus Festival, and Aspen Music Festival. His work *Try* was given its New York Premiere by the Philharmonic on the *CONTACT!* new-music series in December 2012.

Recognition for his work has included the 2006 Rome Prize and 2008 Berlin Prize. He joined the roster of Young Concert Artists as composer-in-residence in 2008; held the position of Komponist für Heidelberg during the 2010–11 season; was composer-in-residence for the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (2011–13);

and is currently composer-in-residence with both the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and Opera Philadelphia. In 2012 his 30-minute string trio *The Companion Guide to Rome* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Music. He currently teaches at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music and directs the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s Composer Fellowship Program for high-school composers. His upcoming projects include a percussion concerto for Colin Currie, a symphony for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and collaborations with the Berlin Philharmonic, Calder Quartet, the chamber sextet eighth blackbird, pianist Jeremy Denk, and violinist Jennifer Koh.

He wrote a piano concerto, titled *Suspend*, for Emanuel Ax, who premiered it in 2014 with Gustavo Dudamel conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic. *Split* is therefore his second concerto-like work featuring piano, although he refers to it more informally as a “fantasy for piano and orchestra.” It reflects something of what Norman’s website describes as his interest in storytelling, “and specifically in the ways

IN SHORT

Born: October 31, 1979, in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Resides: in Los Angeles, California

Work composed: 2015 (completed on October 26), commissioned for Jeffrey Kahane by the New York Philharmonic, Alan Gilbert, Music Director, funded by a generous gift from Linda and Stuart Nelson; dedicated “With admiration to Jeffrey Kahane, and also to Linda and Stuart Nelson for their generous support”

World premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 25 minutes

non-linear, narrative-scrambling techniques from cinema, television, and video games might intersect with traditional symphonic forms.” Here three percussionists, playing an impressive variety of instruments (including such items as tin cans and flower pots), inject sounds that set off sudden changes of course on the part of the pianist or the other orchestral musicians. Sometimes these are pre-planned, sometimes not entirely, sometimes not at all. The players may depart considerably from the orthodoxy of orchestral practice: wind players occasionally produce sounds by blowing air through the instruments without achieving the controlled vibration required to make defined pitches; in the string parts, individual players within the sections may intone notes in rapid succession, as if they were batting about a musical volleyball. Gamesmanship plays an important role in the realization of this composition.

Norman wrote the piece specifically to feature Jeffrey Kahane. The composer observes:

I took much inspiration from the wit, vitality, and expressive character of his playing. I started with the idea of casting Jeffrey as a mercurial trickster, wreaking havoc in and among the various sections of the orchestra, but as the piece progressed he became less the prankster and more the pranked, an unwitting protagonist trapped in a Rube Goldbergian labyrinth of causes and effects who tries, with ever greater desperation, to find his way out of the madness and on to some higher plane.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, three oboes, three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, kick drums, slapsticks, guiro, temple blocks, opera gongs, triangle, flower pot, washboard, wood blocks, brake drum, bongos, splash cymbal, vibraphone, ratchet, log drum, tin cans, spring coil, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

In the Composer's Words

In one sense the piece could be read as the spirited inner dialogue of a pianist with many conflicting personalities. Each of these personalities is associated with and amplified by a different group of instruments in the orchestra. In another sense, the piece is an epic battle between the pianist, who has many different stories to tell, and the percussionists, who are constantly interrupting these stories and switching the music to different channels entirely. Each percussion instrument acts as a very specific trigger in this game of channel-changing jump cuts: the pop of a bongo drum starts a minimalist perpetual-motion machine, the metallic zing of a spring coil unleashes a florid and effusive Romanticism, and the scrape of a washboard sends everyone down a relentless spiral of asymmetric suspensions (and the list of actions / reactions could go on and on). This is a universe with a lot of rules, and for the most part I abide by them all.

In yet another sense, the title references my thinking about the orchestra and its dual nature as both organism and machine. Talk to any player in a symphony orchestra and they will describe their role as a cog in a well-oiled clockwork. Indeed, part of the thrill of watching an orchestra is to behold the mechanistic precision of its members. On the other hand, what makes the orchestra unique and indispensable (especially in this age when almost all the sounds in the music around us are made, in one way or another, by a computer) is the unmatched and unfiltered human energy and collective human expression of its constituent musicians. *Split* seeks to explore this dialectic of clockwork versus organism, to celebrate the outer reaches of both precise synchronicity and complete freedom, to chart and traverse the distance between people being machines and people being people.



— Andrew Norman