

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator
The Leni and Peter May Chair

Trombone Concerto

William Bolcom

The American composer, pianist, and educator William Bolcom is appreciated for his deep respect for our musical past, his ability to revivify it through his performances, and his inventiveness in building on American popular and classical traditions to create new works of decisive character. Many honors have been bestowed on him, including the Pulitzer Prize (in 1988, for his *12 New Etudes for Piano*), the National Medal of Arts (2006), the Composer of the Year designation from *Musical America* (2007), and induction into the American Academy of Arts and Letters (in 1992; in 1966, he received its Marc Blitzstein Award for his “actor’s opera” *Dynamite Tonite*). A Naxos recording of his oratorio setting of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* won four Grammy Awards in 2006.

As a student, Bolcom worked with Darius Milhaud at Mills College and with Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen in Paris, and he was the first person to receive a doctor of music degree from Stanford University. He joined the faculty of the University of Michigan School of Music in 1973, was named the Ross Lee Finney Distinguished University Professor of Composition in 1994, and retired in 2008 after 35 years of service. He experimented with the many techniques available to a young composer coming of age in the 1950s and early ’60s: serial music, collage, classical-popular crossover, microtonality and electronic music. He has delved deeply into the repertoire of American popular music — particularly of ragtime — both as a solo pianist and in tandem with his wife, the mezzo-soprano Joan Morris, with whom he recorded

an impressive discography of American song, from the Civil War period through the vaudeville era to the Great American Songbook of the 1920s and ’30s, and even early rock and roll.

Bolcom has won wide acclaim for his dramatic stage works, which include three operas (*McTeague*, *A View from the Bridge*, and *A Wedding*), three “theater-operas,” and a zarzuela (based on a Spanish musical theater form). He is among the most notable of modern song composers, and many pieces from his four collections of *Cabaret Songs* are by now firmly ensconced in vocal recital repertoire. As a composer of concert music, he has produced an impressive catalogue that includes eight symphonies (plus a symphony for band) and an array of chamber music that includes four violin sonatas, two piano quartets, two piano quintets, 11 string quartets, and a brass quintet.

IN SHORT

Born: May 26, 1938, in Seattle, Washington

Resides: in Ann Arbor, Michigan

Work composed: 2015, on commission from the New York Philharmonic, Alan Gilbert, Music Director, with the generous support of Edward Stanford and Barbara Scheulen; and the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, Long Yu, Music Director

World premiere: this performance

Estimated duration: ca. 21 minutes

The Trombone Concerto is Bolcom's latest contribution to the literature for solo instruments with orchestra. He has previously composed concertos featuring piano (premiered in 1976, with the composer as soloist), violin (1984, for Sergiu Luca), clarinet (commissioned for the New York Philharmonic's 150th anniversary, and premiered in 1992 with Stanley Drucker, the New York Philharmonic's then Principal Clarinet, as soloist), and flute (his 1993 *Lyric Concerto*, for James Galway). In addition to his *Gaea* for Two Pianos Left-Hand (premiered in 1996 by Gary Graffman and Leon Fleisher, a work fashioned so it can be played by either soloist individually or both together), he composed a Concert-Suite for Alto Saxophone and Band (1999, for his University of Michigan colleague Douglas Sinta) and a Concerto Grosso for Saxophone Quartet and Band (2011, for the PRISM Quartet).

"When I was informed that Joseph Alessi wanted a concerto from me I was delighted," Bolcom said, adding:

His recorded performance of Christopher Rouse's powerful contribution to the form has mightily impressed me, and other recordings have shown a consummate musician

with perfect intonation, wide stylistic sense, lyrical phrasing, and dazzling technique. I always want to meet the performer I'm writing for, and our recent meeting gave me a focus; I hope and intend that Joe's warmth and geniality will find their way into this concerto, along with his interpretative breadth.

Bolcom's new work explores the trombone's diverse capabilities through an opening movement (*Quasi una fantasia*) that interweaves episodes of mysticism and vivacity; a slow movement (*Blues*) with a relaxed rhythm-and-blues swing; and a finale (*Charade*) in which the soloist's rhythmically liberated phrases earn forceful responses from the orchestra.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet) and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, marimba, tom-toms, cymbals, Chinese cymbal, tam-tam, trap set, bass drum, snare drum, piccolo snare drum, triangle, harp, piano (doubling celeste), and strings, in addition to the solo trombone.

From Albrechtsberger to Zwilich

Essential as the voice of the trombone is to orchestral sound, it was rarely tapped for a solo part in the 18th century, the most familiar exception being its obbligato role in the "Tuba mirum" movement of Mozart's Requiem of 1791. By that time, however, trombonists had been featured in a few concertos, most prominently in one by Leopold Mozart (written in 1756, the year of his son Wolfgang's birth) and others by (or attributed to) 18th-century composers Michael Haydn, Georg Christoph Wagenseil, and Johann Georg Albrechtsberger. Among 19th-century composers of trombone concertos were Ferdinand David (the violinist who premiered Mendelssohn's famous Violin Concerto) and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (with accompaniment of military band), but the instrument really came into its own as a concerto soloist in the 20th century. Joseph Alessi and the New York Philharmonic have previously performed 20th- and 21st-century concerted works for trombone by William Grant Still, Paul Creston, Kazimierz Serocki, Christopher Rouse, James Pugh, and Melinda Wagner. Among other notable composers of modern works for trombone and orchestra are Luciano Berio, Ernest Bloch, Carlos Chávez, Jennifer Higdon, Frank Martin, Darius Milhaud (Bolcom's teacher), Wolfgang Rihm, Nino Rota, Alfred Schnittke, Gunther Schuller, Toru Takemitsu, Augusta Read Thomas, Henri Tomasi, George Walker, Iannis Xenakis, and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich.



Joseph Alessi in a solo performance with the Philharmonic in 2013