

The Blind Banister: Concerto for Piano and Chamber Orchestra

Timo Andres

Born in California but raised in rural Connecticut, Timo Andres graduated from the Pre-College Division of The Juilliard School and earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Yale University. He is an accomplished pianist, giving performances that characteristically inspire comments about their thoughtfulness and insight, but it is as a composer that he is gaining his widest fame. Andres finds that the disciplines of performer and composer are mutually enriching. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, he said:

They really sort of inform each other. Being a composer is no good on its own. You need this sort of other person or other skill to be able to give life to the music. I feel like the separation of those things is just this really weird disconnect that exists in the classical music world. But I feel as of late we're sort of seeing that reversing. A lot more of my peers and people of my generation are doing both.

His breakthrough piece was *Nightjar*, a work for chamber orchestra commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and premiered by that ensemble under the direction of John Adams in 2009. As it turned out, Andres is often compared to Adams, and also to Charles Ives, the idea being that the three reflect a maverick spirit of American music-making that can embrace complexity, aspire to breadth of scale, and prove interesting to persons beyond the new-music in-crowd. Andres told the *Los Angeles Times*:

I write music that I, myself, would want to listen to. The pieces that I don't like, I don't tell anyone about. I keep them in a folder that's buried deep in my computer's hard drive.

He has fielded commissions from such notable organizations as Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall (in London), the Concertgebouw (in Amsterdam), the Gilmore Foundation, and the Library of Congress, and has produced an impressive stream of works in many genres, including numerous orchestral pieces, and chamber works (among them, *Early to Rise*, which appeared on the New York Philharmonic's *CONTACT!* new-music series in New York in 2014, and London, in 2015). *The Blind Banister* is his third concerto for piano and chamber orchestra, having been preceded by *Home Stretch* in 2008 and *Old Keys* in 2011. He draws inspiration from many sources both classical and popular, and has gained attention for his transmogrification titled *Mozart Coronation Concerto re-composition*, from 2010.

The Blind Banister was written as an installment in a project, overseen by pianist

IN SHORT

Born: October 10, 1985, in Palo Alto, California

Resides: in Brooklyn, New York

Work composed: 2015 (completed on September 6 of that year, in Brooklyn) on commission from The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts, and Orchestra of St. Luke's; dedicated to Jonathan Biss

World premiere: November 27, 2015, at the Ordway Center for the Arts in Saint Paul, Minnesota, by The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Mischa Santora, conductor, Jonathan Biss, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 23 minutes

Jonathan Biss and The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, through which modern composers create piano concertos inspired by or in reaction to Beethoven's five piano concertos. (The other composers writing concertos are Sally Beamish, Salvatore Sciarrino, Caroline Shaw, and Brett Dean.) Andres's piece is paired with Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2. He explains:

I'm fascinated by composers who feel compelled to revise their work years, or decades, after the fact. ... Beethoven gave his early second piano concerto ... a kind of renovation in the form of a new cadenza, 20 years down the line (around the time he was working on the *Emperor* concerto). It's wonderfully jarring in that he makes no concessions to his earlier style;

The Work at a Glance

In reference to the title, *The Blind Banister*, Timo Andres offers a quote from the poem *Schubertiana* by Tomas Tranströmer: "Like when the light goes out on the stairs and the hand follows — with confidence — the blind banister that finds its way in the darkness." Andres walks listeners through his work's score:

Solo piano introduces the main theme of the piece — one of those slowly descending scales. It's actually two scales, one the melody and the other (lagging behind) the accompaniment, creating little rubbing major-second suspensions against each other with every move. This idea is later splayed out and reversed in a rising sequence of loping, two-note phrases. This *Sliding Scale* is presented over and over, forming the basis for movement of continuous variations, constantly revising themselves. Orchestral layers pile up around the scale, building dissonant towers out of those major seconds. One last, long downward scale gathers enough momentum to launch the second movement scherzo, *Ringling Weights*.

Here, the downward scale is transformed into a propulsive motor in solo strings, driving bright cascades of chromatic chords in the solo part. This movement is also made from varying modules, each increasingly elaborate — though this time, each successive module descends a step, the scale theme subverting the structure of the piece, trying to push it inexorably downwards.

The piano works hard to reverse this process in a trio section, trading a stumbling, step-wise melody with gentle orchestral echoes of the ringing chords from the scherzo. As the piano music lurches to its feet, it grows progressively more boisterous, and the steps move faster, whirling themselves into a return of the scherzo material, this time with full orchestra and pounding timpani.

Orchestra suddenly falls away, leaving the pianist to wrestle with the two basic elements of the piece — rising and falling. Arpeggios leap up and over each other, unbound to any meter, vaulting through the harmonic atmosphere before plunging down to the lowest E. As the arpeggios begin to trace more regular patterns, the orchestra drifts back in with another long scale, descending step by step, introducing a richly harmonized Coda, really a super-compressed recapitulation of the first movement, the piano finally rushing off into an ambiguous future.

Timo Andres



for a couple of minutes, we're plucked from a world of conventional gestures into a future-world of obsessive fugues and spiraling modulations. Like any good cadenza, it's made from those same simple gestures — an arpeggiated triad, a sequence of downward scales — but uses them as the basis for a miniature fantasia.

My third piano concerto, *The Blind Banister*, is a whole piece built over this fault line in Beethoven's second, trying to peer into the gap. I tried as much as possible to start with those same extremely simple elements Beethoven uses; however, my piece is not a pastiche or an exercise in palimpsest. It doesn't even directly quote Beethoven. There are some surface simi-

larities to his concerto (a three-movement structure, a B-flat tonal center) but these are mostly red herrings. The best way I can describe my approach to writing the piece is: I started writing my own cadenza to Beethoven's concerto, and ended up devouring it from the inside out.

Instrumentation: flute (doubling piccolo), two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, two horns, trumpet (doubling piccolo trumpet), timpani, vibraphone, xylophone, orchestra bells, crotales, simantra (mounted wooden plank), splash cymbal, snare drum, bass drum, large tam-tam, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

In the Artist's Words

In a guest post on composer Timo Andres's web site, Jonathan Biss commented on the genesis of his *Beethoven/5* project, in which *The Blind Banister* was the first commission premiered. The pianist noted that his desire was for everyone involved "to think of old and new music as existing on the same continuum." He added:

And why Beethoven specifically? Because composers have been using him as inspiration, source material, and lightning rod since his death nearly 200 years ago ... I want the composers to take the Beethoven concerti as a starting point, and in their first airings, at least, I want them to be heard in that context. But beyond that, I've specified nothing — I haven't asked for the works to contain a quotation, or resemble the Beethoven in length, or form, or any other particular. And I greatly look forward to the day on which I sit in the audience and listen to *The Blind Banister* played by another pianist, in the context of a completely different program. The specifics of the commission will no longer matter; the work will have joined several hundred years of concerto repertoire. And if a composer is in that audience as well, perhaps *The Blind Banister* will itself provide the germ for a new piece of music. To me, that isn't inertia, but artistic regeneration: a key component of my ideal world.

— The Editors

Jonathan Biss performing another Beethoven concerto, No. 3, with the New York Philharmonic in 2011

