

# Notes on the Program

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

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## ***Boundless (Homage to L.B.)***

### **Joey Roukens**

“We live in a time that is completely dominated by pop music,” observed the composer Joey Roukens in an article published by the New Association of Dutch Composers, *Nieuw Geneco*. “You cannot escape that ... It would be healthy if there was more interaction with popular culture.”

Roukens is not the first composer to grapple with the divide between classical and popular styles, and in *Boundless* he pays tribute to an earlier figure who could be found straddling that dividing line: Leonard Bernstein. Roukens is a longtime admirer of Bernstein, an affinity that is no doubt enhanced by that composer’s towering presence in the lore of orchestras. Roukens said:

The orchestra is one of my favorite mediums to compose for. The enormous abundance of colors, possibilities, and emotional scope cannot be found anywhere else.

His first compositions to gain attention were, in fact, orchestral works: *Titaantjes* (1999) and *Symphony* (2000), both of which were performed by the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra in 2001, when he was still a teenager. He was then pursuing degrees in composition at the Rotterdam Conservatory and in psychology at Leiden University. His early works adhered to a modernist vocabulary, but he soon adopted a more tonal and traditionally expressive approach. “In most of his works,” states his website,

Roukens seeks to organically integrate elements from highly diverse influences

and aesthetics — including the orchestral colors of early Stravinsky, the late Romanticism of Mahler and Sibelius, the ethereal qualities of Ravel and Takemitsu, the pulsating rhythms of American composers like Reich and Adams, but also certain kinds of pop music and jazz. Not because Roukens cannot choose, but because he feels they are all part of the musical air he breathes.

During the first decade of the century Roukens created a number of colorful orchestral works, including a playful *Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra* (2008) and, in 2010, the symphonic movement *Out of Control*, which was premiered by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra with David Robertson conducting. He also produced a quantity of music for chamber ensembles, including his *Fast Movement and Epilogue* (2009) for the Tokyo Sinfonietta and *Earnest and Game*

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## **IN SHORT**

**Born:** March 28, 1982, in Schiedam, the Netherlands

**Resides:** Amsterdam, the Netherlands

**Work composed:** 2016 (completed August 8, in Amsterdam), on commission from the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

**World premiere:** February 8, 2017, in Amsterdam, by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Alan Gilbert, conductor

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances, which mark the U.S. Premiere

**Estimated duration:** ca. 15 minutes

(2007), which was the first in a series of compositions he created for the Netherlands-based Rubens Quartet. Since then, his compositions have included the chamber concerto *Scenes from an old memory box* (2010) and the violin concerto *Roads to Everywhere* (2015), both of which were written for ASKO / Schönberg ensemble; a four-movement Percussion Concerto (2011), for the British percussionist Colin Currie; the *Concerto Hypnagogique*, for piano and orchestra (premiered at the 2012 NTR ZaterdagMatinee series at the Concertgebouw); the 2013 “family opera” *Mr. Finney, de Opera*; and the chamber work *Lost in a Surreal Trip* (2014), for the Britten Sinfonia’s At Lunch se-

ries. In 2016 he unveiled *Morphic Waves*, a symphony in one movement written as part of his composer-in-residence position with the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra during the 2015–16 season.

*Boundless (Homage to L.B.)* was composed as a companion piece to Bernstein’s *Serenade* (after Plato’s *Symposium*), requiring similar forces of string orchestra, harp, and percussion. Roukens has his percussionists play a larger array of instruments, and he adds a keyboard player, but does not use the solo violin spotlighted in Bernstein’s piece. In the second of his three connected movements, Roukens alludes to the *Adagietto* of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony

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## In the Composer’s Words

*Boundless* was commissioned by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, which requested an homage to Leonard Bernstein (anticipating the centennial of the great composer-conductor’s birth) that could be programmed alongside L.B.’s *Serenade* for solo violin, strings, harp and percussion. As I have always admired L.B., ever since I watched the film *West Side Story* when I was 9 or so, I agreed to write this piece.

The work is a kind of mini-symphony in three short movements (fast, slow, fast) played *attacca* (i.e., without breaks). It directly references material from two pieces by L.B.: Nos. 5 and 13 from his last (1988) cycle of *Anniversaries* — little piano pieces L.B. wrote throughout his life and which he would often pick up and expand in other, larger works, most notably in his *Serenade*. In my piece, however, the music often moves quite far from the source material, so that most of the time, it is no longer recognizable.

The first movement (*Manically*) is ceaselessly energetic, exuberant, and explosive and should be performed with an over-the-top kind of energy, almost as if the music sounds “too fast” at times. The second movement (*Glacially*) is a small *Adagio*, chorale-like, with slowly morphing harmonies; much of its material is derived from No. 13, a slow, little waltz, even though the waltz cannot be recognized until the end of the movement, when it appears as a fleeting reminiscence, sounding as if played by a little music box. The last movement (*Propulsively*) is fast and motoric, with pulsating, syncopated rhythms which should be performed as tightly as possible. There are strong hints of popular music (rock, techno, jazz) in this movement — one thing I’ve always admired about Bernstein’s music is the naturalness with which he incorporated elements of popular music in his concert works — and it eventually builds up to a relentless, frenzied ending.

Leonard Bernstein was a man of boundless energy and boundless musical interests. I have tried to write a piece that captures some of that “boundlessness” (in a good way, I hope).

— Joey Roukens



(with which Bernstein was famously associated), and he also draws on two of Bernstein's *Thirteen Anniversaries* (1988), short piano pieces written in honor of people in that composer's circle — in this case, the Anniversaries No. 5 (for composer Leo Smit) and No. 13 (for Bernstein's friend Ellen Goetz, in memoriam).

**Instrumentation:** timpani, marimba, orchestra bells, three temple blocks, whip,

vibraphone (also bowed vibraphone), xylophone, three suspended cymbals (including ride cymbal), triangle, roto-tom, chimes, three wood blocks, agogo bells (high and low), suspended cymbal, brake drum, cowbells, bongos, bass drum and pedal bass drum, hi-hat, rain stick, Almglocken, small Chinese cymbal, snare drum, tenor drum, three tom-toms, tam-tam, harp, synthesizer (doubling celeste), and strings.

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## Sources and Inspirations

For *Boundless (Homage to L.B.)*, Joey Roukens drew inspiration from Bernstein's own way of paying homage to friends, family, and influencers in *Thirteen Anniversaries*. Bernstein wrote numerous short piano tributes over the years and published four sets: *Seven Anniversaries* (1943), *Four Anniversaries* (1948), and *Five Anniversaries* (1951). *Thirteen Anniversaries* was the last published set, comprising the following musical tributes written between 1965 and 1988:

1. **For Shirley Gabis Rhoades Perle** [longtime friend]
2. **In Memoriam: William Kapell** [pianist who died at age 30 in a plane crash]
3. **For Stephan Sondheim** [composer and *West Side Story* lyricist]
4. **For Craig Urquhart** [composer / pianist who headed the Bernstein Office]
5. **For Leo Smit** [composer and friend]
6. **For My Daughter, Nina** [Bernstein's youngest child, born in 1962]
7. **In Memoriam: Helen Coates** [Bernstein's piano teacher and personal secretary, who died in 1970]
8. **In Memoriam: Goddard Lieberson** [president of Columbia Records when this "memorial" was penned in 1964, while the subject was still quite alive]
9. **For Jessica Fleishmann** [young daughter of then London Symphony Orchestra administrator Ernest Fleishmann]
10. **In Memoriam: Constance Hope** [noted artist representative, who died in 1977]
11. **For Felicia, on our 28th Birthday (and her 52nd)** [Bernstein met his wife on her birthday in 1946]
12. **For Aaron Stern** [friend and dean of the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago during the 1980s]
13. **In Memoriam: Ellen Goetz** [the fan who became a friend, who died in 1986]

— The Editors

*Bernstein and his wife Felicia, to whom he dedicated a Thirteen Anniversaries tribute, on tour with the New York Philharmonic in 1958*

