Notes on the Program
by Nadia Sirota, The Marie-Josée Kravis Creative Partner

When it comes to expression, music occupies a weird, slippery space; it’s not exactly a language, but it is communicative. Much of music is abstract, it points toward emotions without naming them, transmits thoughts obliquely, and sketches circles around concepts otherwise inexpressible. But when music is deployed programmatically, in response to something specific, it has the ability to pull the listener into a super-verbal realm, a place where the object of a work can be illustrated in many glittering dimensions at once.

Today we’ll hear from five composers who have used music to reframe social, political, and personal events. As this New York Philharmonic season culminates with Music of Conscience, “three weeks of unforgettable music created in response to historical events, political unrest, and societal turmoil,” we contemplate how this type of writing can shine in classical music’s most intimate theater: chamber music.

Composer, violinist, and vocalist Caroline Shaw draws on five centuries of musical idiom to create moving works that feel half-remembered, and utterly new. In 2013, at age 30, she became the youngest recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Music for her Partita for Eight Voices, a piece composed for the Grammy-winning vocal ensemble, Roomful of Teeth, of which she is a member. Soon afterward she began working with rapper Kanye West on some recordings, and joined him as a performer and writer for his Life of Pablo album and tour in 2016. Vaulted into the spotlight by these events, Shaw has retained a clear, honest, and musician-friendly approach to writing and performing. Of First Essay: Nimrod, she writes:

It began as a simple exercise in translating the lilt and rhythm of one of my favorite authors, Marilynne Robinson, into music. She writes beautifully and bravely on notions of the human soul, weaving delicately in and out various subjects (politics, religion, science) in each of her rich, methodical essays. Usually my music is inspired by visual art, or food, or some odd physics quirk, but this time I wanted to lunge into language, with all its complex splintering and welding of units and patterns! The piece begins with a gentle lilt, like Robinson herself speaking, but soon begins to fray as the familiar harmony unravels into tumbling fragments and unexpected repetitive

First Essay: Nimrod

Caroline Shaw

Born: August 1, 1982, in Greenville, North Carolina
Resides: in New York City
Work composed: 2016
World premiere: November 6, 2016, at SOKA Performing Arts Center in Aliso Viejo, California, by the Calidore String Quartet
tunnels. These unexpected musical trap doors lead to various worlds that are built from the materials of the beginning, like the odd way dreams can transform one thing into another. The title refers to the legendary biblical figure Nimrod, who oversaw the construction of the Tower of Babel — a city designed to be tall enough to reach heaven but which resulted in confusion and scattering of language. This image of chaos and fragmentation, but also of extraordinary creative energy, may serve as a framework for listening to this musical essay.

David Lang’s economical, moving writing can take a simple idea and spin it into gold — his pieces often achieve an almost devotional alchemy, revealing landscapes of previously unimaginable beauty. Lang is a prolific composer who can adapt style to context, but his music never loses its characteristic dramatic efficiency.

While still a student at Yale he co-founded the artist collective Bang on a Can with fellow composers Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe. Lang began memory pieces in 1992, in response to the passing of friends and loved ones. The selections performed here were inspired by the composers and performers Frank Wigglesworth (1918–96) and Yvar Mikhashoff (1941–93). He writes:

One of the horrifying things about growing older is that your friends don’t all grow older with you. People grow sick and then they die. You watch, you try to comfort them, and then you try to comfort yourself. The true horror is that after a while your memories begin to fade. How long can you hold on to the sound of a voice, the memory of a strange event, a bittersweet feeling, a silly story?

I was friends with all the dedicatees of the enclosed set of pieces — some were

wiggle (in memory of frank wigglesworth) and spartan arcs (in memory of yvar mikhashoff), from memory pieces

David Lang

Born: January 8, 1957, in Los Angeles, California
Resides: in New York City
Works composed: 1992
World premieres: wiggle, in 2000, by Andrew Zolinsky; spartan arcs, in 1995, by Anthony de Mare
Music of Conscience

The New York Philharmonic concludes the 2018–19 subscription season with *Music of Conscience*, three weeks of concerts and events exploring the ways in which composers have used music to respond to the social and political issues of their times. Music Director Jaap van Zweden conducts all three orchestral programs: the World Premiere of David Lang’s opera *prisoner of the state*, a retelling of Beethoven’s *Fidelio*; John Corigliano’s Symphony No. 1, his “personal response to the AIDS crisis”; and Shostakovich’s Chamber Symphony, about his struggles under Stalin, alongside Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony, dedicated to Napoleon until the composer angrily redacted the inscription.

*Music of Conscience* also features two new-music programs, an archival exhibit, panels from The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt on display, and free public discussions and performances. Partners include The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center, the International Rescue Committee, and Stonewall 50 Consortium.

Performances of John Corigliano’s Symphony No. 1 were complemented by the final Kravis Nightcap Series program of the season, June 1, at the Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse. Curated by the composer, and hosted by The Marie-Josée Kravis Creative Partner Nadia Sirota, the program featured music by composers whose lives were cut short by AIDS. Contemporary music of conscience takes center stage in this afternoon’s GRoW @ Annenberg Sound ON series program.

*Music of Conscience* will conclude with the fully staged World Premiere of David Lang’s opera *prisoner of the state* (co-commissioned by the Philharmonic in collaboration with Rotterdam’s de Doelen and London’s Barbican, Barcelona’s l’Auditori, Bochum Symphony Orchestra, and Bruges’s Concertgebouw). With a libretto by the composer that self-consciously refers to Beethoven’s opera, *Fidelio, prisoner of the state* tells the story of a woman who disguises herself as a prison guard to rescue her husband from unjust political imprisonment.

For information about *Music of Conscience* performances and related events, visit nyphil.org/conscience.

— The Editors