

Notes on the Program

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

Symphony No. 2, *Kenotaph*

Thomas Larcher

At Vienna's University of Music and Performing Arts, Thomas Larcher studied piano with Heinz Medjimorec and Elisabeth Leonskaja and composition with Erich Urbanner (who also taught other new-music notables, such as Olga Neuwirth, Miguel del Águila, and Lukas Ligeti). Jazz also influenced his development, with the advanced harmonic and rhythmic practices of such figures as Ornette Coleman and Gil Evans leading him to a musical language that did not correspond to either traditional classical music or to readily identifiable schools of the avant-garde. At the outset of his career, Larcher was especially active as a pianist in contemporary repertoire, working with composers including Neuwirth and Heinz Holliger. He has been closely involved with two contemporary music festivals in Austria's Tyrol region: he founded the Sound Traces / Klangspuren festival in Schwaz, which he directed from 1994 to 2003, and he formed the Musik im Riesen (Music in the Giant) festival in Wattens, which he has overseen since 2004.

Today Larcher divides his time between performing and composing. His first published works, beginning with *Klavierstück 1986*, were for solo piano. In the 1990s his ambitions expanded to encompass a variety of chamber works, including four string quartets, written from 1990 to 2015. When his attention turned to symphonic composition, he initially emphasized works for a spotlighted instrument along with a modest-sized orchestra: *Still*, for viola (2002); *Hier, heute (Here, Today)*, for cello (2005); *Böse Zellen*, for piano (2006 / 07); Concerto for Violin (2008–09);

Concerto for Violin and Cello (2011); and *Ouroboros*, for cello (2015).

Larcher's first full-scale piece for large symphony orchestra was *Red and Green* (2010), introduced in 2011 by the San Francisco Symphony. That work requires a large orchestra indeed, in places divided into 102 parts, with one player assigned to each line. His first symphony, *Alle Tage (Every Day)* for baritone and orchestra, was composed from 2010 to 2015. It was premiered in 2015 by Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, conducted by Jaap van Zweden, with baritone Matthias Goerne as soloist. Larcher's Symphony No. 2, *Kenotaph*, followed on its heels, in 2015–16, and in 2018 it was honored with the Ernst Krenek Prize of the City of Vienna and Le Prix de Composition Musicale of the Fondation Prince Pierre (Monaco). Last summer the composer unveiled his first opera,

In Short

Born: September 16, 1963, in Innsbruck, Austria

Resides: in the Tyrol region of western Austria

Work composed: 2015–16, on commission from the Austrian National Bank for its 200th anniversary; dedicated to Semyon Bychkov

World premiere: June 3, 2016, at Vienna's Musikverein, by the Vienna Philharmonic, Semyon Bychkov, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances, which mark the US Premiere

Estimated duration: ca. 37 minutes

Das Jagdgewehr (*The Hunting Gun*), at the Bregenz Festival, and he is currently at work on another symphony.

His music seems often to be fueled by dramatic confrontations and juxtapositions of melodic gestures and dynamics, and its spirit can vacillate between the meditative and the frenetic. The notation of *Kenotaph* is extraordinarily detailed. Larcher provides precise directions about how the instrumentalists are to shade their notes (sundry sorts of mutes may be employed simultaneously by different players in the trumpet section, for example), and the dynamic indications range from *ppppp* to *fffff*, with the marking *sfz* (a loud and violent accent) being a favorite. His harmonies are generally dissonant,

although passages of surprising consonance can also coalesce within a piece. Dissonant harmonies at the beginning of *Kenotaph* find their way to tonal cadences on A minor, the second movement ends in harmonies reminiscent of Richard Strauss, and the finale opens by stating a circle of fifths (suggesting an entirely classical harmonic progression) and moves on through passages that evoke a Baroque-style chorale (in a modernist elaboration) and, later, an innocent sounding *Ländler* (an Austrian dance).

The score includes some instruments not often encountered in the classic symphony orchestra — accordion, slide whistles, a prepared piano rigged up to emit non-standard sonorities. The five percussionists share a

In the Composer's Words



Thomas Larcher

Kenotaph is the German word for cenotaph, meaning a monument commemorating a person (or a group of people) buried elsewhere — a tomblike memorial separated from the remains of the deceased. Although he stresses that his Symphony No. 2 is not a programmatic or descriptive composition, Thomas Larcher relates that he composed it with the European immigration crisis in mind:

Thousands upon thousands of people drowned in the Mediterranean while all of Europe stood on the sidelines idly observing this tragedy or even looking away. [The symphony] is a symbol for what has been going on and is still going on in the middle of Europe.

If Larcher drew inspiration for this symphony from a social or political source, he also viewed it as a confrontation with musical tradition. He writes:

I want to explore the forms of our musical past under the light of the (musical and human) developments we have been part of during our lifetime. How can we find tonality that speaks in our time? And how can the old forms speak to us? These are questions I often ask myself. This piece is very much about different forms of energy: bundled, scattered, smooth, kinetic, or furious.

vast array of instruments. Some are relatively standard members of the percussion section, but even triangles, for example, are represented in a variety of sizes (medium, small, and very small) calibrated for specific timbral effects. Others are unusual but nonetheless occasionally encountered, including thunder sheets, metal coils, and steel pans, while a few qualify as certifiably exotic, such as oil barrels and mixing bowls.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling alto flute and one doubling piccolo), three oboes, three clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet and one doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets (one doubling piccolo trumpet), three

trombones, tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, xylophone, marimba, tam-tams (small and large), oil barrels, snare drums, flexatone, temple blocks (small, medium, and large), whips, sandblocks (small and medium), light paper, triangles (small and medium), bongos, boo bams (tuned bongos), metal coils, mixing bowls, vibraphone, large bright cymbal, Indian drums, castanets, thunder sheets (light and dark sounds), crotales (bowed), tubular bells, steel pans, clash cymbals, bright sizzle cymbal, Chinese cymbal, tenor drum, bass drum, biscuit tin, vibraslap, cymbals (large and small), accordion, celesta, prepared piano, harp, and strings; the oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and basses also double on slide whistles, variously large or small.

Sources and Inspirations

Larcher's *Symphony No. 2, Kenotaph*, offers a musical response to the immigration crisis that burst into public view in 2015 with refugees — fleeing civil war, oppression, and economic strife in several Middle Eastern and African nations — attempting to escape across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe in overcrowded and makeshift boats. An estimated 22,000 died at sea from 2000 to 2014.

The tide of refugees and asylum seekers has not abated since the premiere of Larcher's symphony in 2016. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported earlier this year that six people on average die at sea every day, and that the journey is becoming even more dangerous as rescue missions are curtailed. A backlash in some countries as to how the burden of rescuing, sheltering, and offering asylum should be shared prompted the European Union to announce in March that it would halt sea rescues by its Operation Sophia, established in 2015.

— The Editors

Syrian and Iraqi immigrants arriving at the Greek island of Lesbos, 2015

