

Eric Nathan

*Concerto for Orchestra (2019)*

ERIC NATHAN was born in New York City on December 8, 1983, and currently lives in Providence, Rhode Island. He wrote the Concerto for Orchestra in 2019 on commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Andris Nelsons, Music Director. The score is dedicated to the composer's parents, Amy and Carl Nathan, "and to S.-D.S. in memoriam"—that is, the composer Sven-David Sandström. These are the world premiere performances.

THE SCORE OF THE CONCERTO FOR ORCHESTRA calls for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets (first doubling B-flat piccolo trumpet), two trombones and bass trombone, tuba, timpani, percussion (four players: I. low, medium, and high suspended cymbals, sizzle cymbal, china cymbal, clash cymbals, small and large triangles, almglocken; II. medium wind gong, vibraphone, bass drum; III. seven nipple gongs, large tam-tam, small and large triangles, bass drum; IV. marimba, chimes, clash cymbals, almglocken, glockenspiel), harp, and strings. The duration of the piece is about eighteen minutes.

Eric Nathan's Concerto for Orchestra is the composer's second orchestral work commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra; the first was *the space of a door*, premiered by the BSO under Andris Nelsons' direction in November 2016. The apparently generic title of the new work points to a number of specific connections important to its origins, involving the BSO's history and legacy; Nathan's own history with the BSO as audience member, student, and, more recently, professional composer; and, further, the composer's personal musical relationships over the years. The Concerto for Orchestra is a celebration of these connections and of the expressive personalities that emerge from the artistic collective that is the symphony orchestra.

Although there are plenty of precedents for the idea of instrumental section-based, symphonic virtuosity—Hector Berlioz and Richard Strauss come to mind—it was probably Paul Hindemith who first coined the title "Concerto for Orchestra" ("Konzert für Orchester" in German) for his Opus 38, completed in 1925. That piece is a neoclassical update of the early 18th-century Baroque *concerto grosso*, setting a group of virtuoso soloists within the orchestral texture. Whatever its origins, Hindemith's idea started a trend: the "concerto for orchestra" designation was soon taken up in the 1920s and '30s by such composers as Vagn Holmboe, Gian Francesco Malipiero, Walter Piston, Alfredo Casella, Goffredo Petrassi (in spades—he ultimately wrote eight pieces by that title), and Zoltán Kodály before the most famous Concerto for Orchestra of all, Béla Bartók's, which was the result in 1944 of a commission from Serge Koussevitzky, music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Koussevitzky led the first performances of Bartók's piece at Symphony Hall in early December 1944, repeating it—with the revised ending we know today—at the end of the month, and taking it to New York City's Carnegie Hall in January 1945. Now the best-known of the Koussevitzky/BSO commissions (edging Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*), Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra arguably “made” the genre. Later composers taking up the concerto-for-orchestra challenge—among them Elliott Carter, Oliver Knussen, and Jennifer Higdon—needed to reckon with Bartók's precedent. Two of Eric Nathan's venerable predecessors, Roger Sessions and Milton Babbitt, also responded to BSO commissions by writing concertos for orchestra. Babbitt's piece—a characteristically sly deviation in the title rendering it *Concerti for Orchestra*—was premiered in January 2005 under James Levine's direction. The Sessions work, composed for the BSO's centennial and premiered in 1981 under Seiji Ozawa, won the Pulitzer Prize. In his own comments on his piece, Sessions wrote, “This piece represents, first of all, an expression of gratitude for all that the Boston Symphony Orchestra has meant to me since I first heard it almost exactly seventy years ago.” Take away the “seventy” and replace it with “twenty-five” or so, and you have something akin to Eric Nathan's BSO associations.

Those associations extend back to the composer's childhood, when his family made the easily manageable trip to Tanglewood from Larchmont, New York, just north of New York City. (A further strong early impression was seeing Wynton Marsalis and his band play at Lincoln Center.) As a kid Nathan studied both piano and trumpet and became a good enough trumpet player to attend the Boston University Tanglewood Institute. He participated in BUTI performances and witnessed concerts by the Tanglewood Music Center Fellows and the BSO. It was in part this experience that cemented his decision to make his career as a musician, and over the course of a few years he began to prefer spending his time composing rather than practicing. As with most composers, though, his experience as a performer indelibly affected his approach to composition. He'd written his first piece, for trumpet, because he wanted such a piece for himself to play. To this day Nathan's music exhibits a concern for idiomatic instrumental character that is clearly rooted in his own experience as a player—which partly explains why many of his pieces, especially the solo works, are very difficult, reveling in the joyful challenge of virtuosity.

After BUTI Nathan went on to study at Yale, Indiana, and Cornell universities; it was at Indiana that he studied with Sven-David Sandström. At Cornell he worked with the Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer Steven Stucky, one of his most important mentors and the dedicatee in memoriam of Nathan's *the space of a door*. Stucky (1949-2016), one of the most respected orchestral composers in the country and an immeasurably influential teacher at Cornell, the Aspen Festival, and elsewhere, himself wrote two pieces he named Concerto for Orchestra, lending yet more weight to Nathan's choice for his new BSO work. Nathan is establishing his own legacy as a teacher. He had a one-year position at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts; has been in residence at Vermont's Yellow Barn Young Artists Program and the

New York Philharmonic's Composer's Bridge Program; and since fall 2015 has been an assistant professor at Brown University.

Nathan's training also included the Aspen Festival and the Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme at the Aldeburgh Festival; in 2010 he was a Composition Fellow of the Tanglewood Music Center. The TMC commissioned his brass piece *Timbered Bells*, which was premiered at Tanglewood in 2011; in 2014 his solo trumpet piece *Toying* was performed as part of that summer's Festival of Contemporary Music. In 2013-14 he lived in Italy as a recipient of the prestigious Rome Prize of the American Academy. When, in April 2014, the BSO offered him a commission for the Boston Symphony Chamber Players, he used his Rome experience as the basis for *Why Old Places Matter*, which was premiered by the Chamber Players in January 2015 at Jordan Hall in Boston and repeated that summer at Tanglewood. As mentioned above, his *the space of a door* was commissioned by the BSO and first performed in 2016; a recording taken from those concerts will be released on a Naxos CD in November, along with BSO-commissioned works by George Tsontakis, Sean Shepherd, and Timo Andres.

In addition to the Rome Prize, Eric Nathan was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship as well as commissions from, among others, the Yale Symphony Orchestra for its 50th anniversary season, the Aspen Music Festival, and the New York Philharmonic for its biennial. In 2015 a CD of his music, "Multitude, Solitude," was released by Albany Records. In 2018 Boston Musica Viva premiered his *Missing Words IV*, written for the group's 50th anniversary. This fall Nathan is composer-in-residence with the New England Philharmonic, which will perform his recent Double Concerto for violin, clarinet, and orchestra in spring 2020, and for which he will write a new orchestral work for the 2020-21 season. Other upcoming projects include pieces for Indiana University's New Music Ensemble and for the Stony Brook Contemporary Chamber Players.

Living in Providence, Eric Nathan has been able to attend BSO concerts frequently in the past few years, and in writing his Concerto for Orchestra was inspired by the experience of an orchestral concert. The simultaneous, contrasting "clamorous" and quiet music at the start of the piece metaphorically suggest the dichotomy between the tumult of the outside world and the sense of community and focus within the concert hall. Nathan also thought about the presence of his piece on the BSO's season-opening concerts, in which the orchestra and its Symphony Hall constituency reconvene after a season apart.

From its initial confrontation and tension, the music gradually becomes more focused. This process comes into even sharper relief later in the piece, the orchestra arriving together at an "imperfect" unison, a gesture Nathan has found himself returning to in several pieces, like a painter exploring a particular bit of iconography. The idea of an ongoing conversation with himself relates, too, to the interplay of ideas, variably explicit and variably intentional, from other composers' work, such as a nod to Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra. It's a practice Nathan

borrowed from Steven Stucky, and one used to great effect in *the space of a door*; here, such references are oblique to the point of obscurity, but their hidden presence is enriching.

The raucousness of the opening music includes asking the brass for sounds “like a car horn” as well as tuning some notes microtonally flat, a sonority that will return much later in the piece. The trombones initiate faster music, which is interrupted by a gap of two bars—pianissimo high first violins and low cellos and double basses evoking silence. These two extremes emphasize the two simultaneous characters the composer mentions in his own comments on the piece (see page 54). Bassoons are added to the frenetic trombones before the gesture is ceded to clarinets. This fades out, to be replaced with a simple figure of a short note leaping upwards to a long, sustained note, first stated by a single oboe, then spreading throughout the woodwinds, staggered at first, growing more active, and culminating in a unison statement.

The focus then shifts to strings. The first violins play a melody marked “Sacred; intimately; grieving,” over sparse accompaniment; light chords in almglocken, vibraphone, and harp add an ethereal aura. Nathan sees this first violin passage additionally as a “solo for conductor”—the assignment of the melody to the first violins as a group demands the conductor’s intervention to shape and mediate the melody as a solo violinist might. Intensity increases and results in a passage of unsynchronized, “teeming” activity in the woodwinds. (The aleatoric texture here and elsewhere is one standardized by the Polish composer Witold Lutosławski. Nathan cites a thrilling 2018 performance of Lutosławski’s Third Symphony by the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra and Thomas Adès as having directly influenced his Concerto for Orchestra.) Brass in a kind of broken chorale dominate the end of this first part.

At the center of the piece is a deliberately contrasting, aggressive episode featuring perpetual-motion strings with sharp punctuation from the other sections. The strings’ sixteenth-notes are taken up by winds, and the timbres alternate, eventually transforming into an insistent foundation of repeated chords in triplets. These persist as the music dovetails into a sustained, shimmering moment that dissolves as the aggressive music returns. Coming as something of a shock, a grand pause—complete orchestral silence—signals a recapitulation of sorts of the opening, but with some of the other musical ideas recurring in combination and the latent sense of sorrow reemerging in the final minutes. With only brief reminders of instrumental section highlights, these last glowing pages recast the full orchestra into a blended, multihued whole.

Robert Kirzinger

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