

String Crossroads

Chris Thile plays everything from Bach to bluegrass, has been touring since he was a pre-teen, and in 2012 won a MacArthur “genius” grant—all for playing the mandolin. Thile is Carnegie Hall’s 2018–19 Richard and Barbara Debs Composer’s Chair, and this March Carnegie Hall hosted an episode of his National Public Radio *Live from Here* show featuring American folk music and music from the British Isles, as part of Carnegie’s “Migrations: The Making of America” festival. He’s a musical omnivore with a deep love of classical music who has hosted chamber ensembles like The Knights and yMusic on the radio show, and has toured and recorded Bach with cellist Yo-Yo Ma and bassist Edgar Meyer. He brought the mandolin to the orchestra world with a 2009 concerto he wrote and performed with eight U.S. orchestras.

Here, Thile talks about his many musical obsessions, composing and performing, and learning about music from a board game.

I’m sure I’ve been hearing orchestral music since I was conceived. I grew up in a public radio family—it was always on. My dad is a piano technician, and on my mom’s side there were piano teachers all over the place. I think it was my stepgrandma, Sal, who gave us this wonderful board game called Music Maestro. You would listen to these musical excerpts on a tape, and you were meant to put a card on a board that was the orchestra. I would listen to this tape over and over again, and follow along with the cards. I was transfixed. It would be another year before I started playing the mandolin. But at that point we had already become regular attendees of a bluegrass night at a pizza place every Saturday night. I was just pummeled by music, and so happy about it.

The radio program I host is a musical variety show where anything that can be heard is fair game. We often air the show from the Twin Cities, and we haven’t had the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra or the Minnesota Orchestra on the show yet, but I really hope that happens. We do



Chris Thile at Carnegie Hall’s Zankel Hall with vocalist Sarah Jarosz, drummer Josh Dion, and bassist Alan Hampton, October 23, 2018.

have a show with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra on May 25 that I am really excited about. They’re such a cool American orchestra. I am a massive fan of theirs.

I have so many favorite composers, I don’t even know where to begin. Bach is the way we all shake hands, basically. One of the very first full-orchestra pieces that grabbed my ears and never let it go is Beethoven’s Seventh. I went through a big Brahms period. A huge lightbulb moment for me early on was Barber’s *School for Scandal* overture, in part because he wrote it when he was so young. I found



Josh Goleman

that really inspiring as a young musician. Andrew Norman’s *Play* is a huge one for me. I am desperate to hear his new piece, *Sustain*, that he wrote for the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2018.

The mandolin concerto I wrote in 2009—parts of it I am happy with. I am not ruling out writing for orchestra in the future, but it is not in my wheelhouse the way the string band is. As musicians we’re inclined to fetishize things that come to us with difficulty. We put a ton of gas in a tank that doesn’t really drive our engine. And I want to make sure that while never coasting on things that come easy to me, I am putting the proper amount of gas into the tank that makes my car go.

One thing that scares me about writing orchestral music is there simply is not enough rehearsal time for my taste. I am a rehearser. I love to practice, and the music gets better and better and better. People like Tom Adès, Andrew Norman, and Caroline Shaw are not writing music that is more difficult for orchestras to play than Stravinsky and Bartók were. Somehow we have to build an appropriate amount of rehearsal into the new music that we are going to play. There are 80, 100 years of Stravinsky and Bartók being in people’s inner ear—

that stuff is under the musicians’ fingers. Invariably one of those pieces that people have been playing since they were little kids sounds more natural, conversational, and vernacular.

With the radio show, I am a kid in a candy store, week in and week out. I am enthusiastic about things by nature. And I am always seeking the company of people who are also enthusiastic. If I can do that for other people, if I can point them toward things that might breed enthusiasm in their lives, that would be a joy for me. **S**