

The Composer's Voice

Since the League's founding in 1942, a vast range of new works has been created, commissioned, rehearsed, performed. What orchestral pieces written since 1942 do today's composers value and esteem? Contemporary composers share their thoughts.

Compiled by
Lucy Caplan

1. What do you consider the most important orchestral work written during the past 75 years? Why?

2. What orchestral work written during the past 75 years is most meaningful to you? Why?

TIMO ANDRES *

I don't think I like "important" attached to "most"—luckily we needn't choose. It feeds into the old-fashioned conception of repertoire pyramid with Beethoven at the top and everyone else forever slugging it out underneath. It is of great concern to me that orchestral administrators learn to stop thinking this way. Audiences don't love music because of its "importance."

There have been so many pieces of orchestral music "important" to me in one way or another. Off the top of my head: Berio's *Sinfonia*, Kurtág's *Stele*, Ligeti's violin concerto, Barber's *Knoxville Summer of 1915*, Feldman's *Madame Press*, John Adams's *Harmonium* and *Harmonielehre*, Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, Adès's *Tevot*. All of these were "important" to me in terms of aesthetic wayfinding, but that's not (only) why I love them. Maybe some of them changed the course of music history; others have yet to do so. Certainly pieces older than 75 are just now revealing their full "importance" to composers work-



ing today—Sibelius's late symphonies and tone poems, Janáček, Ives.

KATHERINE BALCH §

1. The first piece that pops into my head is Ligeti's *Atmosphères* (1961). For me, its singular focus on texture as a means for musical drama demonstrates the orchestral ensemble's unique capacity to create a fathomless, all-encompassing sense of sonic space. In terms of writing for orchestra, it also demonstrates that extreme, bold dreams can be realized with pragmatic and clear notation.

2. It is difficult to answer just one. The pieces that make me excited to compose for orchestra and have shaped my own inclinations are Unsuk Chin's *Rocaná* (2008) and Thomas Adès's *Polaris* (2010). This year, I discovered Ashley Fure's *Bound to the Bow* (2016) and Zosha Di Castri's *Lineage* (2013), which I've been listening to on repeat! All of these works have an immediate sense of identity and a deeply engaging form that invites me into their respective musical worlds.



LEMBIT BEECHER * §

1. Importance is difficult for me to judge, but I hear in so many of my peers' music echoes of Berio's *Sinfonia*, with its combination of stylistic collage and a dramatic sense of form. It's a piece that uses a dizzying array of extended techniques but in an incredibly expressive way, and it rewards listening on many different levels.

2. It's hard to choose one! Ligeti's Chamber Concerto, Andrew Norman's *Play*, John Luther Adams's *Become Ocean*, and Veljo Tormis's *Eesti Ballaadid* are all pieces that have been inspiring and thought-provoking to me, prompting strong, emotional reactions. I think in all of these pieces there is an organic yet unexpected relationship between the immediate technical language of the music, and the way the piece unfolds on the large scale that I find particularly meaningful.



MICHAEL DAUGHERTY *

1. No response.

2. Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story* has special meaning to me. When I was finding my way as a composition fellow at Tanglewood in the summer of 1980, it was Bernstein himself who encouraged me to incorporate my love of American rock, jazz, and popular culture into my own music.



* Current or former participant in Music Alive, a national composer-orchestra residency program of the League of American Orchestras and New Music USA

‡ Current or former participant in the League of American Orchestras' Women Composers Readings and Commissions program, administered by the American Composers Orchestra and EarShot and supported by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation

§ Current or former participant in EarShot, a partnership program among the League of American Orchestras, American Composers Orchestra, American Composers Forum, and New Music USA

MELODY EÖTVÖS § ‡

1. There are so many possible answers to this question, depending on what you personally think is a singularly important point in the orchestral literature of the past 75 years. I can't choose such a single point and proclaim it the greatest of all, so instead I will suggest an orchestral work that was a turning point for me as a composer and how I listened to the world. For this I am going to have to choose Ligeti's *Atmosphères* (1961). Even though *Apparitions* was Ligeti's first work that exploited his exploration of dense sound textures (coined micropolyphony) rather than melody and rhythm, it was in *Atmosphères* that Ligeti truly mastered the structural unfolding of his timbral sound masses. This piece is a turning point/marker in the orchestral literature and holds its own among the other canonical/innovative works of the past 75 years.

2. Brett Dean's *Viola Concerto* (2005). I know I've chosen a concerto and, while it employs a soloist, the connection and communication between the orchestra and soloist is astoundingly unified. The energy and life behind the musical language, use of rhythm, and intuitive development of motives throughout the three movements to this day still makes this work one of my absolute favorites, both to study and to simply listen to and enjoy. There is also a great deal to appreciate about the composer himself (a wonderful human being!), and I feel knowing and being able to talk to the living creator of a favorite work is a huge part of how I perceive that work and its importance to my musical perspective.

STEPHEN HARTKE

One of the problems in coming up with an answer to this question is defining what constitutes "important" and to whom. If "important" means a piece that has made it into the repertoire, then among the most obvious choices would be Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*, Bernstein's *Symphonic Dances* from *West Side Story*, some of the later Shostakovich symphonies, perhaps, and maybe a latter-day favorite such as Adams's *The Chairman Dances*. If "important" means pieces



that seem to have helped propel significant aesthetic shifts, then I might come up with Berio's *Sinfonia*, Ades's *Asyla*, but, above all, Stravinsky's *Agon*. There are other great pieces that I might be inclined to consider, just from sheer personal affection, among them Britten's *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* and Lutoslawski's *Symphony No. 3*, but I will stick with *Agon* because it represents yet another wondrous Stravinskian self-reinvention, completely out of the blue, with its almost postmodern stylistic pluralism that has informed so many other composers, myself among them, in the decades following its premiere.

JENNIFER HIGDON *

1. This is a hard question, but I'd have to say Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* (ironically from 1942), because it has come to represent the sound of "America," throughout the world. Its majesty and poise are striking (I also think it's probably one of the few pieces that even folks who don't listen to classical music recognize).

2. Christopher Theofanidis's *Symphony No. 1* (from 2009), which is incredibly brilliant, bold, and emotional. This is a piece that is well written while balancing real emotional heft. It is a work that I return to repeatedly, not only for the craft and skillful orchestration, but also for the pure enjoyment of its wall of sound.

JONATHAN BAILEY HOLLAND * §

1. This is a nearly impossible question to answer. There are many works that I like for various reasons, but I am not sure that I can pick one work that is superior to the others. Berio's *Sinfonia* (1968/69) certainly sent much of the musical world spinning, from its title, which consciously alludes to and simultaneously avoids the word *symphony*, to its inclusion of an eight-part vocal ensemble utilizing all manner of vocal utterances, to its use of collage and quotation from hundreds of years of music.

2. One of the most meaningful orchestral works for me is John Corigliano's *First Symphony* (1988). Corigliano was inspired to write the work as a response to



Anthony Barich



Robert Torres

the AIDS epidemic and the devastating affect it had on many around him during much of the 1980s. He uses musical quotation, indeterminacy, as well as masterful orchestration and manipulation of time (particularly in the second movement, which musically illustrates the effects of dementia) to capture many facets of his emotional journey in dealing with loss.

CHEN-HUI JEN §

1. *Four Pieces for Orchestra* (*Quattro Pezzi per orchestra*), published around 1960, by Giacinto Scelsi. The reason I consider this piece being important is, primarily, it is built purely upon timbre and texture, which can't be reduced into a piano score. During the past, we composers all learned how to write a piano reduction of an orchestral work, or how to orchestrate a musical work from a piano score. In other words, voices, including harmony and counterpoint and their extended meaning such as vertical/horizontal relations, consonance/dissonance, motifs/figures, and layers, have led a great role in orchestral repertoire. Although in the 20th century colors became dominant, this work (built upon single note) by Scelsi forced us to listen to other musical elements besides pitches.

2. The most meaningful works to me usually have certain inspiration and association to certain periods in my life. I hardly decided which exact one I could pick. I love *Anahit* (violin solo and eighteen players, kind of like or smaller than a chamber orchestra) by Scelsi because it's one of the earliest works I listened to in my younger age that changed my perception of time. I studied the orchestration of this work for my qualifying research for a doctoral degree, and I was fascinated by its flowing drone-based texture, which I sometimes indicate as "monotonic tone-color-melody" when the harmony flows much slower than musical texture.

The other piece I'd like to mention would be *Become Ocean* by John Luther Adams. I fell in love with it the first time listening to it on a road trip driving in twilight in an empty desert in north Arizona. I'm very impressed by its endless layers of sound, imagination, and orchestration that made me lose my time and totally forget



about any compositional techniques such as minimalistic repetitions. And surely I can't forget the image of moonrise over the empty high desert that will be always triggered to my brain when I hear it.

WANG JIE §

1. I don't know about the most important. Can anyone truly say? I can tell you that the most important orchestral work I've experienced was commissioned by the Colorado Springs Philharmonic. During the 2016 election season, they wanted a new opener that featured the patriotic song "America, the Beautiful." They commissioned me. They didn't care I was not white, not male, not their safe choice. I've been going to concerts all my life. But it was not until the premiere of my own *Symphonic Overture "America, the Beautiful"* that I witnessed audiences in tears, and a seven-year-old boy shouting "We love your piece!" Music didn't care about the skin and gender of the composer. Of all the composers Colorado Springs Philharmonic could have picked, they took a chance with me: an American. And that was beautiful.



2. *One Sweet Morning*, by John Corigliano. As a New Yorker who witnessed horror on the morning of September 11th, 2001, I find this piece to be beyond meaningful. I knew I was never to forget this piece, along with the New York Philharmonic's and Stephanie Blythe's stunning performance as I tumbled out of Avery Fisher Hall, unable to speak for the rest of the night.

HANNAH LASH §

This is a difficult question to answer, because there have been many wonderful pieces for orchestra written in the last 75 years. But one which I keep going back to is Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra, which is from 1943. For me that is the most important orchestra piece from the last 75 years, and also the most meaningful. And the reason for that is the colorful and gorgeous orchestration and extraordinarily firmly built formal architecture, both of which are so characteristic of Bartók. Just one example of a unique and incredible color (one



of my favorite moments) is in the third movement, "Elegia," where the flute, clarinet, and harp are all doing this wonderful rippling effect, which is cradled within a tremolo/trill texture in the strings, while the oboe has the melodic material. The overall effect of this is wonderfully miasmic and shimmering at the same time.

I also find the structure of this piece to be of enormous interest; it is clearly tied to the traditional sonata-allegro form, particularly in its outer movements, and throughout the piece the material is developed and continually reimagined so that the structure of the whole is tied together most ingeniously. Although many other composers have written concertos for orchestra, this one is for me the most monumental and also the most successful in what that means. In this piece, *solis* emerge (and duets in the second movement) in such a way that the idea of a solo against an accompaniment is always present, but also the idea of a concerto as a formal means of contrast is important in the way we can understand this piece.

I can think of no other pieces written in the past 75 years that exemplify both structural elegance and innovation and sheer gorgeousness of orchestral color quite to the degree that this one does. Interestingly, the sense of formal innovation is so robust partly because of the piece's explicit relationship to formal practices from earlier repertoire—the explicitness of this relationship allows Bartók to define his own framework with particular boldness, which has an enormous impact on the piece's aural surface.

For all these reasons, it is this piece that I find to be the most important piece for orchestra written in the past 75 years, as well as the most meaningful to me.

STEVE MACKEY

1. I think John Adams's *Harmonielehre* marked a turning point in orchestra music. It was a piece that retained beloved virtues of the orchestra from the turn of the century—power, immersiveness, sensuality, harmonic resonance, and expressive range—while not being at all reactionary or neo-. It was the beginning of a new era where orchestras and audiences actually began to enjoy



progressive, new works.

2. I heard *Windows* by Jacob Druckman the mid-1970s when I was a rock guitar player just dipping my toe into classical music. It sounded as though everyone in the orchestra had an effect pedal and the music seemed to travel through cosmic worm holes to other dimensions which I had only thought possible in a lavishly produced rock concept album. It was the most psychedelic music I had heard. I needed to know how the same orchestra that played Brahms made these sounds and I credit *Windows* with drawing me to peruse the scores in the music library which in turn led to a cornucopia of other exotic adventures from Berio to Xenakis.

MISSY MAZZOLI *

1. I find this question almost impossible to answer! 1942-2017 is a long span of time that includes within it the birth of Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra, Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, John Luther Adams's *Become Ocean*, Berio's *Sinfonia*, Messiaen's *Turangalila*, Anna Clyne's *Prince of Clouds*, and John Adams's *Harmonielehre*. All brilliant, all very different from each other and ultimately meaningless to compare. I also have questions about the exact definition of "orchestral" and even bigger, nagging questions about the word "important" and the more I think about it the less I feel that anything in my answer will be what this magazine is really looking for.



2. Messiaen's *Turangalila* and Berio's *Sinfonia* occupy large parts of my heart, mostly because I first discovered those works as a teenager and have come back to them again and again throughout my life. These works proposed new ways of approaching composition but also new ways of listening. Hearing these pieces was, for me, like seeing in color for the first time.

CINDY McTEE *

1. György Ligeti: *Atmosphères* (1961). Ligeti's *Atmosphères* redefined practically all of music's parameters with its focus on dense, micro-polyphonic textures, the sublimation of traditional approaches to harmony and melody, and



most importantly for me, a new way to experience time, both active and suspended within a given moment.

2. Krzysztof Penderecki: Violin Concerto No. 1 (1976). During my three years as a student of Krzysztof Penderecki in the 1970s, I listened to recordings of all of his early works and heard many played live. But it was a performance of his newly minted Violin Concerto No. 1 in 1978 at Carnegie Hall that caused my head to spin. At first, I was shocked to hear a return to neo-romantic sounds and structures, but soon, the work opened up my young heart and mind to the very liberating idea that a composer's vocabulary can borrow from all forms of musical expression, past and present!

ANDREIA PINTO-CORREIA * § ‡

I find myself interested in certain pieces at different phases of my compositional life. Thus, I am not a believer in any type of lists or ratings in musical works. But, here is an effort, a list of composers and titles of orchestral works that have influenced my writing process in the past (not in any particular order):



- Olivier Messiaen, *Des canyons aux étoiles*
- György Ligeti, *Atmosphères*
- Elliott Carter, Concerto for Orchestra
- Georg Friedrich Haas, *Natures mortes*
- Henri Dutilleux, *Tout un monde lointain*
- Harrison Birtwistle, *The Triumph of Time*

DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN

1. *The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed* by Joel Thompson. It honors the lives of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, Kenneth Chamberlain, and Amadou Diallo. I saw it premiere in Detroit, Michigan with the Sphinx Orchestra, and I kept thinking, every American orchestra should *want* to do this work, and most won't, and the reality is, our American orchestras have never and never will represent our American experience—unless they want to change.



2. *Records from A Vanishing City* by Jessie Montgomery, commissioned by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, premiered in Carnegie Hall in October 2016. If you

don't know this work, we all should, and Jessie Montgomery is a talented violinist who happens to be a woman of color who creates complex, vibrant, and vital orchestral music. Check her out!

JOSEPH SCHWANTNER

Throughout the twentieth century (including the last 75 years), the orchestra has been the instrumental medium of choice favored by composers world-wide for their most serious work.



Composers such as Shostakovich, Lutoslawski, Takemitsu, Pettersson as well as the Americans, Harris, Piston, Schuman, Barber, and Glass, have all created a significant body of orchestral music. Personally, Bartók's ever-popular Concerto for Orchestra, written in 1943, the same year I was born, remains an expressive and dramatic powerhouse that continues to reveal new sonic and formal riches with each fresh encounter.

1. Ligeti: *Atmosphères*. It is a paradigmatic example of the back-shift towards melting orchestra sound after neo-Baroque and dodecaphonic times. It furthermore includes spatial elements, typical for the past decades. Additionally, it gained wide popularity on account of Stanley Kubrick's film [*2001: A Space Odyssey*].

2. Benedict Mason: "*felt / thus / ebb / array...*" (2004, Donaueschingen Festival). Not well known but it was an exceptional experience of sound—apart from melody and any technique.

JEROD IMPICHCHAACHAHA TATE *

1. *Ritual Observances* by Donald Erb

2. *Ritual Observances* by Donald Erb



Donald Erb's career, in general, was a much-needed answer to the question "What's next in classical composition?" He had an unwavering impact on roping in composition back to what its purpose is: to genuinely and deeply connect with the listener. And he had unapologetic fun with it, always doing exactly what he needed to achieve this goal. In addition, his impact on the current explosion of neo-modern film scores is clear and stunning.

Ritual Observances represents an apex in this compositional path of Erb—in meaning, orchestration, intelligence, and architecture. He worked very, very hard to get there, and I believe he did. Experiencing his music and presence completely changed my musicianship for the better and gave me absolute permission to open up my creative floodgates.

AUGUSTA READ THOMAS *

Because there are many creative, passionate, exemplary composers whose artistry and works infuse the world with inspiring, nimble-minded, effervescent, and open-spirited vitality, it is impossible for me to pick only one work. Music's eternal quality is its capacity for change, transformation, and renewal. No one composer, musical style, school of thought and practice, or historical period can claim a monopoly on music's truths.



Anthony Barlich

I am attracted to a variety of irresistible, sparkling, and excellent works by a vast collection of composers. Composers and musicians are all working to further music's flexible, diverse capacity and innate power. The history of civilization is written in art, whose creation and appreciation is universal across continents, cultures, languages, and, at the same time, is intensely personal.

JOAN TOWER *

1. No response.

2. I am having trouble deciding between John Corigliano's Symphony No. 1 and John Adams's *Harmonielehre*—two fantastically orchestrated pieces with a depth and range of vision that are quite extraordinary. (I think Corigliano probably takes more risks in the end with a sense of deep passion, but Adams certainly maintains a very high level of interest in the pacing and variety of orchestrations of the repetitions involved.) **S**



LUCY CAPLAN received the 2016 Rubin Prize for Music Criticism. A *magna cum laude* graduate of Harvard College, she is currently a doctoral candidate at Yale University, where she is writing a dissertation on opera and African American culture in the early twentieth century.