

Zhang Conducts Mozart's 'Jupiter'

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Nokuthula Ngwenyama *Primal Message*

One would think a piece called *Primal Message* might be rough, unfinished, perhaps grating. One would be wrong, especially with respect to Nokuthula Ngwenyama's *Primal Message*. Her title is an homage to the Arecibo message, referring to the Arecibo Observatory's interstellar radio message carrying basic information about humanity and earth, sent to a star cluster in 1974. Ngwenyama describes her piece as "[inviting] examination of our collective evolution through a drive to express, tying us in concert with universal celebration." Meditative and reverent, this lovely movement is thought-provoking in its contemplation of the universe and our place in it.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Symphony No. 41 in C Major, K. 551, "Jupiter"

The Roman god Jupiter is associated with nobility, subtlety, grandeur and power. The nickname "Jupiter" was given to Mozart's final symphony after his death in 1791. (It may have come from the entrepreneur and violinist Johann Peter Salomon.) The symphony is a miracle of melody, structure and breadth. C major was the Viennese key of sunlight, and Mozart's temperament is appropriately sunny for nearly all the symphony. The finale's double fugue is one of Western music's greatest achievements. Short motives in the finale lend themselves to elaborate counterpoint and a triumphant conclusion.

Christopher Rouse Bassoon Concerto (East Coast Premiere, New Jersey Symphony Co-Commission)

When he died in 2019 at age 70, Christopher Rouse was one of the deans of American composition. His bassoon concerto, a New Jersey Symphony co-commission, completed Rouse's cycle of concertos for the four major woodwind instruments. Principal Bassoon Robert Wagner describes it as "jaunty, with a lightness about it that is not so earthbound." The concerto's three movements are played without pause.

Gioachino Rossini Overture to *Guillaume Tell* (*William Tell*)

Cue “The Lone Ranger” music! Actually, that famous theme is only one of four independent sections in Rossini’s *William Tell* Overture. Preceding it are a sextet of cellos and one of music’s most exciting thunderstorms. A bucolic English horn solo leads to the galloping finale, which is guaranteed to raise your heart rate while putting a smile on your face.

Nokuthula Ngwenyama: *Primal Message*

Nokuthula Ngwenyama

Born: June 16, 1976, in Los Angeles, California

Composed: 2017–18

World Premiere: November 5, 2020. Xian Zhang led the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 2020–21 season. The Symphony gave the work’s East Coast premiere in *TRANSCEND: An NJSO Concert Film*; Xian Zhang conducted.

Duration: 8 minutes

Instrumentation: harp, percussion and strings.

Nokuthula Ngwenyama’s parents are from Zimbabwe and Japan; she is a California girl with an international resume. She studied theory and counterpoint at Los Angeles’ Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences and the Colburn School, before moving to the East Coast to continue her formal education at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. Her principal composition teachers at Curtis were Edward Aldwell, Jennifer Higdon and David Loeb. Ngwenyama was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to attend the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse in Paris. She subsequently earned a Master of Theological Studies at Harvard. She is the Phoenix Chamber Music Society’s first composer-in-residence and has served as visiting professor at Notre Dame and Indiana’s Jacobs School of Music.

Ngwenyama’s principal instrument is viola. She has directed the Primrose International Viola Competition and is a past president of the American Viola Society. She performs on a 1597 Amati viola from the Biggs Collection and has composed extensively for her instrument. Ngwenyama soloed with the New Jersey Symphony in Handel’s *Viola Concerto in B Minor* in the 1995–96 season and in Hindemith’s *Der Schwanendreher* in 1998–99 season.)

Primal Message originated as a viola quintet (string quartet with a second viola) in 2018. Ngwenyama subsequently arranged it for string orchestra and for harp, percussion and strings, as we hear it. She describes it as an homage to the Arecibo message, referring to the interstellar radio message carrying basic information about humanity and earth, sent to a star cluster in 1974. (Arecibo is the site of the American Observatory and radio telescope on the north coast of Puerto Rico.) Ngwenyama sets the stage in her composer's note:

It's 1974. What should we put in humanity's first message in a bottle sent 25,000 light years away? Astronomers Francis Drake (Drake equation), Carl Sagan (Contact), and others created the historic Arecibo message, in which 186 seconds of interstellar radio waves sent a friendly map, our then-understood DNA structure, and transmitting technology in binary anthropomorphic organization to globular M13 in our galaxy's Hercules cluster.

The ideas conveyed by Steven Johnson's *New York Times Magazine* article "Greetings E. T. (Please Don't Murder Us.)" from June 28, 2017, encouragement from the Phoenix Chamber Music Society and Chamber Music Northwest, and early days with partner John Clements awakened imaginings about what a "primal message" might sound like. This assumes other possible life forms hear and feel sound like we do. Opening off-world communication through transverse waves explores existential conveyance under a frayed veil of decorum through form, melody, and numbers.

Primal Message is a fantasia that relies upon primal relationships—duo vs. trio textures, modulations through the ii with conventional homage to the V, one voice as the outlier in primal 2 vs. 3 vs. 5 rhythmic layering, melodic structure descending in seconds and thirds, centering around the fifth, then leaps and the occasional septuplet. It invites examination of our collective evolution through a drive to express, tying us in concert with universal celebration.

As befits such a background, Ngwenyama's piece has elements of reverie and meditation. She has described it as "based on the idea of communicating the things we learn to communicate with each other: our intelligence, our emotions, our goodness." The music is soothing, melodious and atmospheric. Strings shimmer as a near constant, as if we are observing a flock of hummingbirds, weightless in space. The ensemble of strings alternates between background to a melody, and assuming the foreground melody themselves. Harmonies are lush and inviting; textures rich and varied. The repetitive bass line gives *Primal Message* the feeling of a passacaglia, the Baroque form of sequential variations; however, Ngwenyama has a gift for introducing new themes that reorient our ears in different directions. The occasional instrumental solo emerges like a slow-

moving shooting star, spotlighted against the near-constant string shimmer and subtle countermelodies. Ngwenyama's message is benevolent and serene.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Symphony No. 41 in C Major, K. 551, "Jupiter"

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: summer 1788; completed on 10 August 1788

World Premiere: Undocumented. We do not know whether Mozart ever heard the symphony performed.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1932–33 season. Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 31 minutes

Instrumentation: flute; oboes, bassoons, horns and trumpets in pairs; timpani and strings.

Jupiter was the sovereign god of the Romans. He held supreme rank and ultimate authority over the other deities. Throughout modern history, his name has been associated with power and might, both in natural phenomena (storms, lightning) and in political supremacy.

In music, the name Jupiter brings two works to mind: the fourth movement of Gustav Holst's orchestral suite *The Planets* and Mozart's final symphony. The former is clearly an astronomical reference, though Holst's music does suggest the character of each god who inspired those seven planetary names. The case of the Mozart is more abstract, linked to the late 18th-century aesthetic of the sublime: the ultimate in artistic achievement, music of an exalted greatness beyond compare.

For many years the origins of the nickname "Jupiter" for Mozart's last symphony were unknown. An arrangement of the symphony for one piano, four hands was published in England around 1820 with the sobriquet, but with no explanation. Mozart's symphony is mentioned in the diaries of Vincent and Mary Novello, a nineteenth-century English couple who traveled widely and interviewed the composer's widow Constanze in 1829. According to them, the name was bestowed by Johann Peter Salomon, the entrepreneur responsible for Haydn's two visits to London in the 1790s.

No doubt Salomon was struck, as we must be, by the ceremonial and grand effects of Mozart's C-major symphony. Assertive and forthright from its opening, it is music of majesty and sweep, convincingly bringing to mind the king of the ancient Roman gods. The slow movement is a standout. Biographer Ivor Keys calls it "the apotheosis of the ornate song which bewitched Mozart since his Italian days. To the beauty of sound of the muted violins is added the woodwind counterpoint featured in so many concertos, but added to this is a new rhythmic dimension sometimes highlighted by unexpected harmony." Mozart's syncopations and unexpected accents add to the effect.

The "Jupiter" is justly celebrated for its finale. Mozart had developed an interest in the music of Bach and Handel, which manifested itself in the magnificent contrapuntal fabric of this splendid conclusion. While the finale is not, strictly speaking, a double fugue, it incorporates virtually every aspect of contrapuntal technique into a sonata movement: canon, fugato, stretto, invertible counterpoint, even cancrizans, in which a theme is played backwards! The greatest miracle of all is that Mozart makes all this formidable intricacy sound perfectly wonderful. His extraordinary complexity and superb craft reach their peak in the magnificent coda, where all five principal themes are interwoven in one of music's greatest triumphs.

Mozart's final three symphonies (No.39 in E flat, the "Great" G minor and the "Jupiter") date from summer 1788. The three autograph scores barely span six weeks. What an astonishing level of productivity, even for Mozart! Ironically, there is no record of any of them being performed during his lifetime.

Christopher Rouse: Bassoon Concerto (East Coast Premiere, New Jersey Symphony Co-Commission)

Born: February 15, 1949, in Baltimore, Maryland

Died: September 21, 2019, in Baltimore

Composed: 2018

World Premiere: November 16, 2018, in St. Louis. Andrew Cuneo was the soloist; Cristian Măcelaru conducted the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: These performances are the East Coast and New Jersey Symphony premieres.

Duration: 20 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds and horns in pairs, timpani, percussion, harp, solo bassoon and strings.

Christopher Rouse was already one of America's most frequently performed composers when he won the Pulitzer Prize in music for his Trombone Concerto in 1993. Before his untimely death in 2019, he was one of the deans of American composition. *Musical America* named him Composer of the Year in 2009, and he numbered many significant younger composers among his former pupils. His own undergraduate education took place at Oberlin. He then studied privately with George Crumb for two years, before matriculating at Cornell for his doctorate in composition, working with Karel Husa and Robert Palmer. Rouse taught for many years at the Eastman School of Music. From 2002 until his death, he was full time faculty at The Juilliard School.

In earlier works, Rouse favored atavistic motor rhythms and grinding dissonance, qualities that are evident in *The Infernal Machine*, *Bump* and *Phaethon*. In the early 1990s, he moved away from sustained allegro movements toward the soulful and metaphysical—and often very dark, as in his first two symphonies. He then began a series of more optimistic and positive works, but his style remained elusive, not fitting consistently into any one category.

One aspect has been consistent: his determination to compose a concerto for every major instrument in the orchestra. With the 2017 Bassoon Concerto, jointly commissioned by the New Jersey Symphony, St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, Sydney Symphony and Lausanne Chamber Orchestra, he completed that cycle in the woodwind section, as his composer's note (reprinted here with permission) explains.

With my Bassoon Concerto I was able to complete my cycle of concerti for each of the principal four woodwinds. While my Flute and Oboe concerti are of a more serious nature, those for clarinet and bassoon are lighter in mood. As the bassoon's voice is a comparatively modest one, I pared down the orchestra to a group of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons (in order to provide the occasional potential for building a sort of "mega-bassoon"), two horns, harp, timpani, percussion (one player), and strings.

The concerto is cast in the traditional three movement (fast-slow-fast) form and is meant in large part simply to provide pleasure. I realize that such an intent is now looked upon with suspicion in some quarters, but I have never felt that every work of art is required to plumb the depths and secrets of human existence. Sometimes twenty minutes spent in the company of, I hope, a genial companion can

be the most meaningful way of passing time. I did, however, try to resist making too much of the bassoon's oft-heralded role as the "clown" of the orchestra. While there are occasional forays into the more "comical" lower range of the instrument, more time is spent in the middle and upper tessituras of the bassoon, and melodic lines often tend toward the lyrical. Overall, there is a collegial relationship between soloist and orchestra, unlike the common "soloist against the orchestra" paradigm of many romantic era concerti.

Soloist Robert Wagner, the Symphony's principal bassoonist, observes that his biggest challenge is playing nearly constantly. "He doesn't give the soloist much time off!" The lighter instrumentation gives him the opportunity to explore the bassoon's softer side. "The concerto has enough technical demands, but also wonderful lyric moments," Wagner says.

IN THE SOLOIST'S WORDS

This weekend's concerts feature the East Coast premiere of a New Jersey Symphony co-commission: Christopher Rouse's Bassoon Concerto. Program Annotator Laurie Shulman spoke with New Jersey Symphony Principal Bassoon Robert Wagner about the piece.

Laurie Shulman: Rouse's music shifted dramatically over the years, by his own admission, and his late works were often multi- or polystylistic. Did you go into this commission with any expectations?

Robert Wagner: His style definitely changed! From the Led Zeppelin-influenced early pieces to the darkness of his writing in the 1990s. I had played a little of his music, and thought he wrote very well for the bassoon. Also, I'd heard some of his later pieces, including the Flute Concerto, so I had a pretty good idea of where he was when he composed the Bassoon Concerto.

LS: In his composer's note, he mentions "trying to resist making too much of the bassoon's oft-heralded role as the 'clown' of the orchestra." Did he succeed?

RW: I find the concerto jaunty rather than comical. I like the flavor of the piece: quirky and unusual. He captures the spontaneous, lighthearted character of the bassoon. Rouse's concerto has a lightness about it that is not so earthbound. He is appropriately demanding of a concerto soloist, and I think the piece will be exciting to listen to.

LS: How idiomatic is his bassoon writing?

RW: His bassoon writing is good. There are very few places that I find borderline unplayable. The bassoon can jump wide intervals, and he obviously recognizes that—but when there's an extended passage with wide leaps, it can be difficult! There's a spot like that right before the end that is arguably the hardest few measures in the entire concerto. We principal players tend to focus in the bassoon's tenor and high range. Rouse uses the full range of the instrument really well, which means I need a great reed, because I'm less accustomed to playing in the low register. That's where second bassoonists specialize.

LS: What are the biggest challenges for you in this concerto?

RW: The biggest challenge is that I don't get much time off! The bassoon plays almost constantly, with few rests. There is a repeated low staccato that recurs frequently that is difficult; here again, that's more second bassoon turf.

LS: Bassoon is a notoriously difficult instrument to pair in chamber music (apart from wind quintet) and with orchestra. Rouse seems to have taken great pains to keep the texture transparent and the orchestra relatively light so that you may be heard at all times.

RW: The lighter instrumentation is very helpful, because it allows me the chance to explore the bassoon's softer side. It's always great to invite the audience closer to the stage, figuratively, rather than blaring out. This is especially true in his second movement.

LS: Yes, the mood is decidedly darker in the central slow movement, yet magical in its intimacy.

RW: I agree. The music has a mournful, wailing quality. It's as if the bassoon were searching, trying to find its way. In Chris' music, I feel that I can become emotionally invested. I enjoy making music most when a piece reaches me emotionally.

LS: Apart from Vivaldi (among Baroque composers) and Mozart, your instrument can't compete in the solo concerto realm with piano, violin and cello. Of course there *are* other contemporary works, but how important do you think the Rouse to the bassoon's concerted repertoire?

RW: Well, yes, even with Rouse's woodwind series, we were the fourth of four to get a concerto. But we're glad to have it, and I look forward to teaching it. It has enough challenge technically, and some wonderful lyric moments.

Gioachino Rossini: Overture to *Guillaume Tell* (*William Tell*)

Gioachino Rossini

Born: February 29, 1792, in Pesaro, Italy

Died: November 13, 1868, in Passy, near Paris, France

Composed: 1829

World Premiere: August 3, 1829, at the Paris Opéra.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1963–64 season. Kenneth Schermerhorn conducted.

Duration: 12 minutes

Instrumentation: piccolo, flute, two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, bass drum, cymbals and strings.

Rossini's overture to *William Tell* might well be the most popular classical work in the entire literature. Thanks to the old radio and television show "The Lone Ranger," whose theme music adapted the overture's final segment, generations of American children identified Rossini's music with Wild West heroism.

William Tell is Rossini's finest opera overture—which is saying a lot. Unlike his sprightly and familiar Italian overtures, the one for *Tell* does not adhere to modified sonata form, nor does it derive its momentum from a signature "Rossini crescendo." It consists of four distinct segments. Six cellos open quietly, evoking the lovely Swiss countryside. They paint an aural picture of calm before storm. That awe-inspiring thunderstorm ensues, a masterly musical canvas of nature's dramatic summertime wrath. Next is a pastoral, featuring one of the most coveted English horn solos in the orchestral literature. Finally, the overture concludes with the martial and patriotic galloping section so well-known from the television show.