



Program 2 Notes

November 6 & 8, 2011

by Jon Kochavi



Kenji Bunch
(b. 1973)

Piano Concerto (2010-11)

Kenji Bunch, still only in his 30's, has composed an impressive array of chamber and orchestral music. Born in Portland, OR, Bunch studied viola and composition at Juilliard in

the 1990's, and currently serves on the faculty of the pre-college program there. His works have been commissioned and performed by ensembles around the world, including the English Chamber Orchestra, the St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble, and violinist Midori. His compositions have been performed at venues including Alice Tully Hall, Weill Recital Hall, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, London's Barbican Hall, Tel Aviv's Rubin Academy, and Tanglewood. Bunch is also known for his collaborations with the dynamic Ahn Trio, which has recorded a number of Bunch's works, including his genre-defying *Swing Shift*. Recently, his viola concerto, *The Devil's Box*, was premiered at Carnegie Hall where he performed the solo part. Bunch's compositional style is eminently accessible, drawing inspiration from rhythms and harmonies of pop, jazz, and world musics.

Bunch's Piano Concerto was commissioned through the second phase of Kathryn Gould's Magnum Opus initiative. Marin Symphony audiences may recall Bunch's 2004 *Lichtenstein Triptych*—one of the first pieces to emerge from the project that has produced 14 new works to date—performed by Marin as well as the Santa Rosa and Oakland East Bay Symphony in 2004-5. Gould herself described that the thrilling experience of hearing that work as feeling “like I was

sitting in that fast car with the wind in my face and my hair flying—taking in every note at 100 mph!” Bunch's Piano Concerto, written specifically for his wife Monica Ohuchi, was premiered by the Jeffery Kahane and the Colorado Symphony this past May. The piece is closely connected to his piano work *Monica's Notebook*, a series of twelve eclectic etudes written for his wife. The final movement of the concerto is an orchestrated version of the seventh etude in that set. The composer reflected on the compositional process for his concerto in the notes he provided for the work's premiere:

Along with symphonies and string quartets, the piano concerto has long been one of the classic milestones in a composer's trajectory — a yardstick that has inspired and intimidated me for years. I often wondered how I would approach this undertaking, how I could alter some aspect of the instrumentation, timing or other parameter in order to subvert the conventions and offer a fresh take on this storied genre. When I was fortunate enough to receive this opportunity to not only write a concerto, but to write specifically for my wife, Monica Ohuchi, as the soloist, I decided to fully embrace the tradition to which I was humbly contributing, and designed this work as a classic, three-movement, full-length concerto with full orchestra, in the spirit of the iconic concertos I grew up admiring. To this end, I present the three movements as the traditional components of dramatic opening to establish the relationship between soloist and orchestra, slow, lyrical middle movement to serve as the work's emotional center, and virtuosic perpetual motion to provide a bravura finale.

Due to a multitude of logistical reasons, the premiere of this work was postponed for over a year — which turned out to be a great blessing in disguise. During the interim, Monica and I pursued another collaboration when I wrote a set of performance etudes for solo piano for her, which she has since recorded. This experience not only taught me a vast amount about writing for the

piano, and specifically for her hands, but it also allowed the two of us to really develop a musical vocabulary together. I ended up discarding much of what I had written previously— especially for the solo part. This new incarnation of the concerto features a strong influence from my set of etudes, and is truly a genuine collaboration in which the soloist's input has been invaluable. 🎧

Symphony No. 1 in D Major (1884-1888, rev. 1889-1898)

Langsam. *Schleppend wie ein Naturlaut*
(*Slowly. Drawn out like a sound of nature*)
Kräftig bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell
(*Agitated, but not too fast*)
Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen
(*Solemn and measured, without dragging*)
Stürmisch bewegt
(*Stormily agitated*)



Gustave Mahler
(1860 – 1911)

In March 1888, Mahler wrote about the creative momentum that carried him through the final stages of composition of his first symphony: “It became so overpowering, as it flowed out of me like a mountain river.... For six weeks, I had nothing but my desk in front of me.” But although the bulk of the work on the symphony was done in the first few months of 1888, the piece went through a lengthy gestation and an even longer period of revision before it was finally published in 1899. Mahler had a very busy conducting schedule, so it was rare for him to be able to find time for sustained composition outside of the summers. He spent a number of productive summers at a retreat in a sparse Steinbach inn where he passed each day in absolute quiet, engrossed in musical ideas. He kept the sole manuscript copies of his first and second symphonies in a suitcase that the inn workers were instructed to rescue first in case of fire.

Perhaps the primary cause for the long period of revision of the piece was Mahler's struggle to define the aesthetic underpinnings for not only this work, but for all of his music. Born a generation after Brahms and Wagner, Mahler came of age in the midst of the contentious debate which pitted “absolute” music, characterized by its allegiance to abstract form and sound structure, against “program” music, depicting a specific narrative or emotional journey. Mahler seemed to have one foot in each camp. He adhered to formal models for his music, although he modified them to suit his own expressive needs. The very fact that he chose to write symphonies and not operas seems to place him squarely in the “absolutist” camp. At the same time, he admitted extra-musical influences for many of his symphonies, and, of course, his magnificent song cycles were programmatic by definition. In fact, he expressed the opinion that “no modern music, beginning with Beethoven, exists without having its inner program.” Still, he was unsure whether it was necessary or appropriate to reveal this program explicitly to the audience.

When the *Symphony No. 1* was premiered in its original form in Budapest in 1889, Mahler opted against including any reference to the program of the piece, which was originally entitled *Symphonic Poem in Two Parts*, as if to hedge the association with pure, absolute music. The first part consisted of three movements, the first two of the symphony that we know today, plus a third movement (which Mahler later withdrew) inserted in between. The second part consisted of what are now the last two movements. The work received a lackluster reception, perhaps prompting Mahler to include a description of the program for its next performance in Hamburg in 1893, which read:

- Part I. From the days of youth: Flowers, Fruit, and Thorns
1. Spring without end. The introduction depicts the awakening of nature at dawn from a long winter's slumber.
 2. A chapter of flowers.
 3. Under full-sail (Scherzo)

Part II. *Commedia umana*.

4. Stranded: A funeral march in the manner of Callot. The following may serve as an explanation for this movement, if necessary. The author received an overt suggestion for it from *A Hunter's Funeral Procession*, a pictorial parody that is well-known to all South German children and is taken from an old book of children's fairy tales. The animals of the forest escort the coffin of a deceased hunter to a gravesite. Rabbits carrying a flag follow a band of village musicians accompanied by music-making cats, toads, crows, etc.; stags, does, foxes, and other four-legged and feathered animals of the forest follow the procession in amusing poses. The movement in some ways expresses an ironic, humorous mood and in other ways expresses an eerie brooding mood. This is immediately followed up by –

5. *Dall'Inferno al Paradiso (allegro furioso)*, a sudden outburst of despair from a deeply sounded heart.

In addition, he called the work the "Titan" Symphony, named for a novel by the German Romantic Jean Paul Richter, and reworked the orchestration. The inclusion of the program did not measurably improve audience response, however, which remained resolutely mixed, as reported by Mahler after an 1894 performance in Weimar:

My symphony was received partly with furious opposition and partly with unbounded admiration. Opinions have clashed violently in the streets and drawing rooms in the nicest possible way! 'As long as the dogs bark, we know that we are galloping.' . . . In the end, the orchestra was very pleased with the symphony and full understanding towards my conducting technique, thanks to a barrel of beer.

What really disturbed Mahler about these early performances was the audiences' too, too literal interpretation of the program. By the 1896 performance of

the symphony in Berlin, Mahler had withdrawn the programmatic description and the title (as well as the extra movement), later writing, "No music is of any value if its pre-musical experiences first have to be reported to the listener, thus determining his own reactions.... Perish all programs! A residual mystery always remains – even for the creator himself!" In the end, it is up to each individual listener to determine the symphony's narrative; it is this personalized communication that makes music so inexplicable and powerful.

Beginning with an ethereal eight-octave orchestral A, the serene introduction unfolds slowly, with distant brass fanfares and bird calls over a sustained A pedal throughout. The main theme is a motto in falling fourths that will return throughout the piece. A clarinet birdcall suddenly leads into the main section of the movement with its jaunty, carefree theme in the low strings (drawn from an earlier Mahler song). The movement builds intensity, intermingling hunting horn calls and one of the most eerie harp lines in the literature, and reaching a furious climax. The frenetic ending is punctuated by timpani beats and a number of unexpected silences.

The second movement is a scherzo that begins with a peasant waltz that lilts to evoke the Austrian Ländler. Introduced by a solo horn, the middle section is less heavily accented, projecting a gentler waltz. The horn leads us back into the original theme.

The third movement is a macabre funeral march that created much controversy when first performed. The march is based on the minor key version of *Frère Jacques* (known to German audiences as *Bruder Martin*) played in a round with a solo bass, bassoon, cello, and tuba as other instruments gradually enter, including the oboe with a prominent counter-melody. The march is broken up by two contrasting episodes: the first is a klezmer-like dance with prominent roles for the winds, and the second is a gentle, lyrical melody in the violins and flutes accompanied by steady harp arpeggios.

The last movement opens dramatically as if depicting a raging storm, and introduces a sweeping theme in the brass that is heroic, furious, and terrifying. After an episode of calm, the storm returns but gives way to a triumphant brass fanfare that provides a heroic take on the falling fourths from the first movement. As if to solidify the connection, Mahler brings back the first movement material before the brass chorale ushers the movement to an exultant close. 🎹

Guest Artist



Monica Ohuchi,
piano

Japanese-American pianist **Monica Ohuchi** has performed to wide acclaim across the United States, Canada, Japan, and Europe as both a soloist and chamber musician performing in prestigious venues such as Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall, Juilliard's Peter Jay Sharp

Theater, Brooklyn's Bargemusic, Meany Hall of Seattle, and the Canadian Opera Company's Richard Bradshaw Amphitheater.

Monica has been featured in live radio and television broadcasts on New York's WQXR, Seattle's KING FM, *Delaware Today* (a television broadcast of rising stars) and the *WE* Network.

She made her orchestral debut at age ten with the Wilmington Symphony Orchestra performing Beethoven's First Piano Concerto. Now, in her mid-twenties, Monica is a seasoned performer, having been invited to guest soloist with such orchestras as the Rain City Symphony, the New Millennium Symphony Orchestra of Gijon, Spain, Orchestra Seattle, and Seattle Junior Symphony Orchestra.

Her awards include top prizes in national and international piano competitions: a first at the Chinese International Piano Competition at the age of five; first

at the 2006 William Garrison International Piano Competition, first at Wayne Nadeau International Piano Competition and winner of the Dorothy A. Anderson International Piano Competition. Monica is the only two-time national champion of the Music Teacher's National Association Piano Competition and a four-time grand prize winner of the WIAA Washington State Piano Competition. She was also named a New York Steinway Hall Recital Award Recipient.

As a chamber musician, Monica frequently performs with acclaimed violist-composer Kenji Bunch and collaborates with pianist Sarah Rhee in duo-piano repertoire – the two serving as Artist-in-Residence at Banff Centre, Canada. 🎹

In Her Words . . .

This piano concerto was a personal project for the both of us because we're married. People are interested in knowing how we work as husband and wife. For this composition, Kenji was asked to name a soloist to write for, and he suggested me. I was floored. I felt quite a bit of pressure—I didn't want to let him down. He felt a different kind of pressure from me, but I tried not to pester him. I trusted he would deliver his best work in time. Once he started writing, each page felt like an awesome discovery. I would wonder where it was going—it was like reading a book. He would introduce these beautiful themes and the tune would come back again later, but it had become something else. It is interesting to hear how it evolves. I'm excited about bringing it to Marin. I genuinely love Kenji's music. It brings me joy to practice his music hours on end. 🎹