

## Contemporary Youth Orchestra, Part 3: A conversation with composer Stefan Podell

By Mike Telin



We continue our preview of the Contemporary Youth Orchestra's concert on Sunday, December 7 at 7:00 pm in Waetjen Auditorium at Cleveland State University, with a conversation with Stefan Podell, whose *Concerto for Two Violas and Orchestra*, will receive its premiere that evening with Lynne Ramsey and Jeffrey Irvine as soloists.

[Stefan Podell](#) has been arranging music for CYO since 2009. He has created works for artists such as Jon Anderson of YES, Jefferson Starship, Evelyn Glennie, and Sean Beasson. As a songwriter and musician, he has won awards from the likes of Billboard Magazine and VH-1. He has shared the stage with performers such as Cheap Trick, Barenaked Ladies, and Dishwalla. *The Concerto for Two Violas* is Podell's second CYO concerto commission: his *Concerto for Double Bass and*

*Orchestra* was premiered by CYO and Cleveland Orchestra Principal Bass Maximilian Dimoff in the fall of 2012.

Stefan and I got together for lunch following Saturday's CYO rehearsal. We talked about the important role CYO has played in the development of his career and how the music of Jon Anderson and the band YES helped inspire him to pursue classical music.

I began by asking him about the challenges of writing a concerto for two violas?

Stefan Podell: I didn't find writing for the viola as difficult as writing for the bass. Writing for one viola was not a challenge, it was writing for two.

*Mike Telin: Say more.*

SP: There were two parts to that challenge. First was keeping the two solo lines separated enough so they don't blend into each other. The second was making sure that Lynne had her places to shine and Jeff had his. I didn't want them just trading eight bar phrases back and forth. I wanted their lines to come together and then move apart.

*MT: CYO is a very big orchestra. What is the orchestration?*

SP: It is a very big orchestra, but I learned with the bass concerto how to deal with that. This time I am very specific in the score. For example I only want two stands of first violins here and so forth.

I like to orchestrate interesting accompaniments with lots of textures, but I needed to be sure the two solo lines aren't covered by the orchestra, while also making sure it didn't become three-part counterpoint. There's a little of that, but not too much. If you have too many voices going on at the same time it can become fatiguing for listeners.

*MT: How much discussion did you have with Lynne and Jeff while you were writing the concerto?*

SP: I did need to figure out who they were as players and where their comfort zones were. We didn't have a lot of discussion, but we exchanged e-mails which answered questions like who their favorite composers were and what their favorite concertos are. A viola concerto I like is the Walton, but they also told me about the Miklós Rózsa concerto. Occasionally I would run something by them — can you play this at this tempo? — but that was all.

*MT: Did the fact that they are husband and wife influence you in any way?*

SP: Early on I thought the piece needed to be about something, not in the programmatic vein, but for emotional context. So I thought OK, it's about a relationship between a husband and a wife. Originally I thought there would be a dramatic curve to it, maybe almost melodramatic. At some point I let go of that, but it's still about a relationship.

There are a lot of stories in any long-lasting relationship but what really makes a relationship worthwhile are all of the little moments. Some of those moments are only five minutes long, and some are five months or five years long. So the concerto became almost a series of vignettes — scenes from a relationship. The first movement is sort of the beginning — two people impressing one another. The second movement is a little darker and sort of represents the difficult challenges that relationships are faced with. The third is brighter and more playful, which I guess is where we all want our relationships to end up. So that's the emotional framework of the piece although I don't know if anyone else will hear it that way.

*MT: I'd like to talk a little bit about your career. I understand that Jon Anderson of the band YES and Liza Grossman have played an important role.*

SP: I didn't get into orchestral music until ten years ago at the age of 34. But I've been so fortunate, first meeting Jon and then ultimately Liza.

*MT: How did you meet Liza?*

SP: Jon and I were working on a piece that I had written a new introduction for, and he wanted to use it as the opening of his CYO Rock the Orchestra concert. At that point it only existed in MIDI so he needed it to be orchestrated quickly. So I did and sent it to Liza, and she loved it. It was the first thing I had written that was going to be performed by real people. The concert also included other music I had worked on with Jon, so I thought, I've got to come to this concert. I took the redeye from California and arrived the morning of the concert. I met Liza for about 5 seconds. But she was so nice and told me how happy she was to meet me. The next day I went back to California.

She and I became Facebook friends. When she started talking about the Jefferson Starship concert, I sent her a note saying that the idea sounded awesome — and have a great time. That same day she wrote back asking me to orchestrate some of the songs. I also came out for those rehearsals and the concert. I then worked on the Blame Sally concert, which has been my biggest Rock the Orchestra concert in terms of number of tunes I arranged and orchestrated — over half of that show. But the bass concerto was my first big composition and this is my second.

*MT: How did you make your way from playing in a rock band to classical music?*

SP: I started playing horn at the age of 8, but then became interested in rock, so I started playing guitar. My dad was a Dixieland musician by night and a psychology professor by day. He also played oboe in a baroque quartet, so there were a lot of different musical colors in my head growing up. I studied classical and jazz guitar, but was always drawn to progressive rock, like the bands YES and Jethro Tull.

YES has a lot of classical influences in their music and when I met Jon we started talking about music. Both of our favorite classical composers are Stravinsky and Sibelius. Jon grew up listening to these composers, but I didn't know them until I was 35 or 36. It's funny because Jon heard their music and put his own filter on it with YES, and I grew up listening to YES and when I found my way to classical music I ended up liking Stravinsky and Sibelius.

*MT: How did you go from being in a rock band to composing and arranging for orchestras?*

SP: It wasn't until my wife and I began to have children that I decided to leave the rock band life. I was tired of playing in bars and getting home very late. So I got into IT work.

I have a friend who became interested in getting a virtual orchestra sample library, so I helped him choose the software, but his computer couldn't handle it, so he downloaded it onto my computer. I started playing with it and, I fell in love – it was exactly what my brain had wanted to do for a long time.

I eventually bought a better version of the software and I bought a score to *The Planets* and began to study how everything fits together. I also began to take private lessons in composition and arranging using the [Equal Interval System](#) that was developed by Spud Murphy in Los Angeles. It was just what I was looking for, very modern and in a way, kind of mathematical.

I eventually found a private teacher and studied harmony and orchestration at a level of detail that I had never done before. You see, a lot of my education in the field is very recent.

*MT: When did the moment of decision to follow the classical music path occur?*

SP: When I started writing for virtual instruments, which led me to want to write for real instruments. I imagined myself being able to write and arrange music without having to move around a lot. Being able to work from a home studio was an important thing. But at that point I wasn't thinking about writing for orchestra, but rather for movies, TV or games.

*MT: So did you pursue that path?*

SP: I went to a computer game development conference and decided that that world was not for me. The Hollywood thing was not for me either. At the same time I began to publish some of my compositions for my on-line discussion groups. I got a lot of good feedback, and soon people started asking me to orchestrate their music for them, sometimes with virtual instruments and sometimes for real performers.

One of the first people I met online was a guy by the name of Sean Beasson. He was only 19 at the time, but we became pretty good friends. Sean was writing a concerto for snare drum and orchestra for Evelyn Glennie and he asked me to orchestrate it. It was then that I realized how much I enjoyed writing concert music and that was the final part of my evolution into classical music.

*MT: Final question. How did you end up meeting Jon Anderson?*

SP: I love telling this story if you have the time.

*MT: Please go ahead.*

SP: The California Orchestra based in the town of Walnut Creek were performing a guitar concerto written by Jon Anderson and I thought that maybe he would be there. So a friend of mine and I went to the concert — this was in 2006. I remember listening and thinking that I could have done a better job of orchestrating the piece.

In May of that same year, my wife and I decided to move to Oceano, a little town halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. One day we were meeting some of the neighbors and one of them happened to be a big YES fan and he told me that Jon Anderson lived in the next town. The guy also said that he worked at Trader Joe's and Jon often came in to shop.

So I came up with a plan – I would bring my guitar and a big sheet of score paper and sit in front of Trader Joe's until Jon came up, introduced himself and asked me what I was doing. But I never had the chance because three weeks after we moved in, Jon posted a message on his website saying that he was looking for orchestrators, and applicants should send an e-mail and they'd get back to you.

This was in September, but it wasn't until December that I heard back from Jon's webmaster, who asked me to send a one minute demo and said that if Jon was interested he'd contact me. So I put together a one-minute demo of four different pieces and sent them.

The next day I was getting the kids ready for dinner when the phone rang. My wife answered it and told me it was for me. I was annoyed because someone was calling at dinnertime so I told her to find out who it was. She said Stefan, it's Jon Anderson. I grabbed the phone and ran upstairs. He asked me if I could come to his studio the next day – I said yes. And that's how we met.

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