

Preview

“California Masterworks” at Cleveland Museum of Art: a conversation with James Feddeck, Tom Welch and the Calder Quartet's Andrew Bulbrook

by Mike Telin



On Wednesday, May 1st and Friday, May 3rd in Gartner Auditorium, The Cleveland Orchestra and the Cleveland Museum of Art will come together for their second collaboration, *California Masterworks*.

How did the two organization come to the idea? “That’s a good question,” says Cleveland Orchestra Assistant Conductor James Feddeck. “After the enormous success of our

first ever collaboration in 2011 we all began to talk about what the next collaboration would look like so I think the question is why California? That is what we are hoping to uncover during the week.”

So why California? Following a number of discussions, the two organizations determined that they should do something that embraced American music and the American spirit, but it wasn’t until Feddeck and Tom Welsh, the museum’s Director of City Stages, began to think about the composers they wanted to highlight that they discovered a common thread between them. “We found this interesting connection in that they were all influenced by their West Coast inspiration. I’m not sure that we are presenting a conclusion with these two concerts but what we are doing is presenting the music, the story and this common thread.”

Wednesday’s concert fittingly begins with Henry Cowell’s *Sinfonietta*. “It’s funny— while researching these composers and the pieces I kept coming back to the same theme which was that Henry Cowell saw the future,” says Tom Welch. “He mapped it out in his writings and his music, and he knew what the limitations of his time were but he thought that someday composers would come along and embrace things like non-Western music. Then indeed composers like Lou Harrison and Terry Riley came along.”

The concert also features the posthumous world premiere of Dane Rudhyar’s *Out of the Darkness* and Lou Harrison’s *Suite for Violin and String Orchestra* featuring Stephen

Rose. Henry Adams will present a pre-concert talk, *The Quest for Nirvana and the Birth of Modern Art* beginning at 6:00

Friday's concert includes James Tenney's *Clang*, John Adams' *Shaker Loops*, and Terry Riley's *The Sands* featuring the Calder Quartet and begins with a pre-concert talk at 6:00 by Henry Adams titled *The Funkiness of California Art in the 20th Century*.

Beginning at 9:00 pm in the Museum's Atrium there will be a special performance of John Cage's *HPSCHD* (1969), "an immersive sound and visual environment piece for multiple amplified harpsichords, electric sounds and projections". Musicians include Peter Bennett, Jonathan Moyer, Andrew Rosenblum, Qin Ying Tan, Luwen Chen, Li Zuo, Chun Li and special guests, with sound design by Rick Galbraith.

There was a time when the music of composers like Cowell, Harrison, Adams, Riley and Cage was considered avant-garde or cutting edge but the compositional elements these composers championed — such as the use of non-western scales and rhythms and minimalism — have gradually found their way into the mainstream musical language. "This has been an interesting process for me," says James Feddeck. "People have made comments about whether or not this music will survive, and do I think history will regard it well? My sentiment is that when you hear this music, by and large it actually is pretty accessible to our ears. Whereas on paper, if one has not heard the pieces it could appear to be avant-garde. It's not Haydn or Mozart but it has somehow already assimilated itself into our musical language."

Tom Welsh agrees, "I really hesitate when people ask why we are presenting such avant-garde music. Well maybe it was years and years ago but I think that many of the things these composers did, like Cowell and Harrison have been fully absorbed in the classical tradition if they're not at the dead center of it all. It's all there in part because these guys did all of this work from the 1930's onward. It's all quite listenable as well. I think I would be very reluctant to say that this is the avant-garde because it's not. It's just new trends in classical music that have taken root or still will take root."

Feddeck also notes that the seven composers each have a unique musical voice. "What I've enjoyed most is seeing the variety of musical styles. Yes we have talked about the common threads, but there are some very distinct musical voices. In a themed mini-festival such as this you can go very big-picture. But at the same time to be able to experience the level of detail that I have during my own preparation — to see the markers of distinction within each composer — has been very enjoyable."

Additionally, the music of these composers has had a profound effect on today's young musicians like the Calder Quartet, as Tom Welsh points out. "The Calders are the perfect embodiment of what these composers set down decades ago, which was this omnivorous attitude toward music. Yes, they learned the traditions and have nailed down the center of the chamber music repertoire but never at the expense of other things, like working with living composers or non-classical musics.

Formed at the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music, the Calder Quartet continued their studies at the Colburn Conservatory of Music and at the Juilliard

School. Already the choice of many leading composers to perform their works including Christopher Rouse, Terry Riley and Thomas Adès, and known for the discovery, commissioning, recording and mentoring of some of today's best emerging composers, the group continues to work and collaborate with artists across musical genres, spanning the ranges of the classical and contemporary music world, as well as rock, dance, and visual arts, and in venues ranging from art galleries and rock clubs to Carnegie and Walt Disney concert halls. We spoke to violinist Andrew Bulbrook by telephone and began by asking him when the group first met composer Terry Riley.



Andrew Bulbrook: We met Terry at the LA Phil's *Minimalist Jukebox Festival* back in 2006 when we had the chance to play his first string quartet and his string trio, which was actually his masters thesis, I believe, at UC Berkeley. It's cool because they are both early works written before his famous *In C*.

Mike Telin: What a great opportunity!

AB: It was a very special thing both for him and for us because he had not heard these works in decades. For example, I don't think he had heard the *Trio* performed in fifty years. We were in our mid twenties and it was a powerful experience to play works that he wrote. Also to see that somebody like Terry could be so moved by hearing these old friends. So that sort of kicked off our relationship.

MT: Where did you go from there?

AB: After that we started learning more of his quartets like *Cadenza on the night plane*, which is one that we have studied with him, and *The Wheel & Mystic Birds Waltz*, a companion piece to *Cadenza*, was another piece that we studied with him.

MT: The quartet has also recorded his music.

AB: We have recorded the early string quartet and trio, and over the years have shared a few more programs with him like the *Big Ears Festival* in Knoxville, TN and the *Blum and Poe Gallery* in LA, so we have had this incredible good fortune to be working on his music with him for a while. When this concert was being perceived I think everyone involved was excited to program *The Sands*.

MT: When did you first encounter the piece?

AB: We've known about it for a while and we've been trying to figure out a way to perform it, then this opportunity came along. To do it with one of the world's greatest orchestras is kind of an amazing way to start it off.

MT: There does not seem to be a lot written about the piece.

AB: We have had a recording of a live performance of it for a few years by The Kronos and The American Composers Orchestra. But other than that we don't really know a lot. It's about a half hour long. But what is interesting it is that the quartet is integrated into the orchestra which is exciting for us because the Cleveland Orchestra is so fantastic and the orchestra part is so important.

This could be part of why it is not played as much because it is demanding in terms of the collaboration as opposed to a more standard concerto where the orchestral parts are supportive. It's equally hard all around. The level of rhythmic collaboration that permeates the work is deep.

MT: But Riley is one of the first minimalist composers.

AB: He started out as a jazz pianist and became known for *In C* which is considered to be one of if not the first minimalist work. But he went in so many different directions studying Indian classical music and experimenting with longer forms and the vocalization techniques from that music.

In this piece there is a piano that sounds a little bit like a jazz piano bar. There are also some solos that sound a little like ragtime. What Terry is writing a lot of the time these days is not straight minimalism, his music is more of a hybrid of a few different styles.

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