

Preview

BW Focus Festival to feature the music of Christopher Theofanidis

by Daniel Hathaway



Baldwin Wallace University is in the middle of a busy week celebrating and performing the music of one of our century's most popular composers. Christopher Theofanidis, whose best-known work, *Rainbow Body*, has been performed by more than a hundred symphony orchestras, is the subject of the University's most recent "Focus Festival," an immersive experience recently revived by its new composition professor Clint Needham, himself a BW graduate.

"It's the first thing we talked about after I arrived," Needham said in a phone conversation. "We hope to do a Focus Festival every two years." How did BW arrive at its choice of composer this time? "Chris immediately came to mind. I've known his music for a long time and he mentored me with an Orpheus Chamber Music Commission. We wanted someone who could communicate and make new music engaging and interesting

for undergraduates. Chris has taught at Juilliard, Peabody and Yale. It was almost a no-brainer."

Theofanidis will find BW to be a hotbed of young composers. "I have twenty-one composition students!" Needham exclaimed. "We auditioned last year and I thought that half of the people we invited would accept, but they all came. That's a good problem to have!"

We reached Theofanidis in Virginia where he was shepherding his new version of Hildegard von Bingen's *Ordo Virtutum* through the rehearsal process with the Fairfax Symphony. We asked how he felt about the week-long tribute at BW. "I don't think anybody's ever been feted like this before! It's most unusual to have so many pieces featured in the same week. People at BW have been sending me rehearsal recordings and it seems like the performances are going to be stellar. It's a pretty impressive roster of rehearsals and that's a real credit to the students. Some of the hours are ridiculous — rehearsals beginning at 10:15 pm. Those people are really dedicated!"

Theofanidis will spend the week meeting with senior composition students and faculty and attending rehearsals for the three performances that will sum up the week's activities and give Cleveland audiences an overview of his work. On Friday evening, November 1 at 8 pm, student chamber ensembles will play four pieces: *The World is Aflame*, *Nether-*

land, Statues & Raga I. Large ensembles take over on Saturday, November 2 at 8 pm, when the Motet Choir, Symphonic Wind Ensemble & Symphony Orchestra, Dirk Garner & Dwight Oltman conducting, perform Theofanidis's *Messages to Myself, Etenraku, Marimba Concerto, Muse* and *Rainbow Body*. The festival concludes with faculty chamber groups on Sunday afternoon at 2 pm performing *Summer Verses, Flow My Tears, O Vis Aeternitatis, All Dreams Begin with the Horizon* and *Visions and Miracles*. All performances will be in Gamble Auditorium at the BW Conservatory.

The variety of titles suggests the many of streams of inspiration on which Theofanidis draws when approaching a new work. "You have to take the launching pads where you find them," he tells me after discussing music inspired by the kinetic potential of statues, Japanese court music, poetry that reflects his outlook on life, and the universal struggle between two forces which he has symbolized in a duet for violin and cello.

As much as he looks forward to concerts of his music, Theofanidis says he almost enjoys rehearsals more. "That's the most stimulating part — getting to interact with musicians is going to be the great joy of the festival." In that regard, both Theofanidis and Needham had great fun rehearsing with the conductorless Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, which had commissioned each composer for a piece in its New Brandenburg Project.

"That was a dream," Needham said. "All the musicians had copies of the score and really communicated with each other — the fifth chair viola made suggestions to the oboe. It was truly democratic." "It was really neat," Theofanidis recalled. "A process where the whole group gets involved in lively conversation during rehearsal." Apparently lots of similar fun is to be had at BW this week.

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