

The Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation with composer Sarah Kirkland Snider

by Mike Telin



“I’m thrilled to be able to make it out for the performance of *Something for the Dark*,” Sarah Kirkland Snider said during a recent interview. “And to have it played by The Cleveland Orchestra with David Robertson conducting, I mean, that’s just the best kind of performance a composer could ask for.”

On Saturday, August 5 at 7:00 pm at Blossom Music Center, Robertson will lead Snider’s work along with John Adams’ *Century Rolls* featuring pianist Conrad Tao as soloist, and Sibelius’ *Symphony No. 1*. At 6:00 pm, Daniel Reith will lead the Kent Blossom Chamber Orchestra in Beethoven’s Overture to *The*

Creatures of Prometheus, Gabriel Fauré’s *Pavane*, and Sergei Prokofiev’s *Symphony No. 1* “Classical.” Tickets are available [online](#).

I reached the composer by phone at her home in Princeton, New Jersey and began by asking her if she ever thought *Something for the Dark* would acquire the legs that it has.

Sarah Kirkland Snider: No, of course not — many new pieces get performed once or twice, and then that’s it. That’s sort of the fate of most orchestral music being written these days, because orchestras feel a tremendous pressure to cater to the pieces that audiences know.

It's understandable. But as a young composer — especially when I was entering this field after graduate school — there wasn't a lot of contemporary music being programmed by orchestras. So back in 2014 when I was writing it, I thought, "Okay, this will get its premiere, and then if I get one more performance I'll be thrilled."

But since then, things have opened up a bit — there's been more cultural discussion about expanding the repertoire, and also diversifying who is represented on stage and trying to make it a field that invites people from all different backgrounds to see themselves in the music. And that means programming women and people of color, and little by little this music started to have more of a life, and it's been wonderful and thrilling for me to see.

Mike Telin: I'm curious, is there something you have grown to really like about the piece? I mean, these are like your children.

SKS: You make a good point, it does feel like your child. And as your child grows up, individual performances make the piece sound very different to my ears, depending on the hall, the conductor, and the orchestra playing it.

Every time I hear this piece, I hear it in a different way because I have changed as a composer. I'm an intensely self-critical composer, so any time I hear a piece of my music, I'm like, "Oh, I wish I had done this differently, or I wish I had done this better." And that leads me to revise a lot. I've revised this piece three or four times.

But to answer your question, I find that I'm much more interested in the second half of the piece than the first half. I wrote the piece thinking about endurance and optimism, and the journey from innocence to experience. So I needed to have that sunniness at the beginning. I genuinely have an affection for joyful music, but I think, at least in this piece, I'm more interested in the darker music that comes in the second half.

MT: I listened to it again this morning just to refresh my memory, and I'm still captivated by it.

SKS: Thank you. I want the music that I write to leave you with a feeling of, "Yeah, I could hear that again."

MT: Another thing that's interesting is that you orchestrated it very well — you don't need 200 people on stage to play it.

SKS: That is something I think about a lot. When I was younger, I used to write for sort of wilder instrumentation and those pieces don't get performed.

MT: Back to the topic of diversity, it's nice that it is beginning to happen. And it's about time.

SKS: There's a lot of us who have been struggling on the sidelines and not let into the club for a long time. I also think there's a strong argument to be made that not seeing yourself at the top keeps people from joining the field. So once we just do the simple act of playing music by women and people of color, then it attracts so many more of those composers to the field.

It's fantastic that The Cleveland Orchestra has gotten Allison Loggins-Hull to be the composer-in-residence. She's dynamic and really knows how to appeal to young kids and young people, and get them interested in talking about the orchestra. She's been a friend of mine for a while, so I'm very happy for her.

MT: You've had an interesting road to becoming a composer. Reading about you, it seems that music was always inside you — what kept you from jumping in headfirst for so many years?

SKS: I think it was just a whole lot of fear. I'm 49, but I tend to get locked in with a younger group of composers because I went to school later, and graduated with this group who were seven to eight years younger than me.

Some of them had grown up with just enough of the internet that they knew about female composers. But when I was coming of age, it was pre-internet and I didn't know of any. I guess I could have gone to the library and done some research. But, the walls of my elementary school classroom were lined only with pictures of white men. And then, I went to Wesleyan University where there was very experimental music being made by Anthony Braxton and Alvin Lucier.

My music was somewhere between early Debussy and Joni Mitchell. It was expressive, impressionistic, and melodic — and I just thought I would be laughed out of the room if I showed it to any of those guys. So I didn't think about it, and in fact, I decided not to major in music because the only field that I really could see myself in as a composer was film scoring. I moved to New York thinking I was going to be a lawyer, a therapist, or a social worker. And it wasn't until I started writing music for theater that I began to feel like myself. I had a lot of fun doing that, but I was feeling limited by my technique.

One day I realized that I was leaning more towards music than law, and the reason why I wasn't pursuing music full hog was because of fear and anxiety — how am I going to make money, and what does a career in this field look like? Finally, I just said screw it. I

don't know the answer to these questions but I'll put one foot in front of the other. I'll try to get a Masters in music, and hopefully during the process I'll learn more about how to make a living.

It took four years for me to cobble together a Bachelors in music in order to even apply for the Masters, and I needed to write a bunch of music that I thought would be strong enough to get me into those programs.

I didn't get to grad school until I was 30, and my peers were mostly coming straight out of Bachelor programs — Missy Mazzoli, Judd Greenstein, Nico Muhly, and Mason Bates. They were at Juilliard when I was at Yale, but those were the peers that I had.

MT: Speaking of Yale, you studied with David Lang.

SKS: I did for a semester, and he was one of my favorite teachers. At one point he said, "You know, music doesn't have to always be about the greatest day of your life or the worst day of your life. It can just be about a very average cup of coffee. So make music about a very average cup of coffee, and it could be a great piece of music." I thought that was great and it got me to think about music and composing in a different way. He was just full of these wonderful metaphors and sort of droll observations.

MT: Before we sign off I'd like to circle back to the concert — it's a very interesting program.

SKS: I'm super excited, Conrad is amazing and I like John Adams as well. I love Sibelius — he's been a big influence for me, although he had kind of a dual reputation when I was at Yale. Half the composers thought he was old-fashioned, and half of them thought that he was the proto-minimalist.

John Adams' best friend, Ingram Marshall, famously taught several classes on Sibelius — they were amazing, and got me to fall in love with his music. So, I think there's actually a lot of Sibelius in *Something for the Dark*.

Sibelius taught me how to think about narrative — immersing yourself in an atmosphere. David Lang used to say that Sibelius is not just about a highlight reel. He's about the boring stuff between the highlights, and he makes the boring stuff interesting. And that changes your definition of what's interesting. That observation stuck with me, because as composers, we often feel the need to be rushing towards the next big moment, and Sibelius was wonderful in just luxuriating in an open field for a while.

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