

Marriage, Monk and Mozart hold sway in recent Harbison works

By David Weinger GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 07, 2016



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Composer John Harbison.

A few years ago, John Harbison began writing a pair of sonatas for violin and piano. Still prolific at 77, the longtime Boston composer is almost always at work on

commissions from performers here and elsewhere. Indeed, the first sonata he completed was written for violinist Cho-Liang Lin of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. That piece, Harbison said during a recent conversation, had “some of that sort of public address, back-of-the-hall quality” to it.

The other, which became his Second Violin Sonata, turned out quite differently. Rather than a creation for someone else, it’s what Harbison called “a volunteer piece” — something he composed to play himself with his wife, violinist Rose Mary Harbison. He wrote it, partly, out of his conviction that “composers should play [their own works],” but admitted with a laugh that “sometimes it takes more courage than I seem to want to summon.”

More seriously, the Second Violin Sonata was born out of a period of “some private troubles with illnesses, just some personal difficulties,” as he put it. “We really needed something to work on with each other.” That explains the more inwardly directed tone of the piece, “and then it was just fun writing both of them together, feeling quite strongly that one kind of material was pulling me into one and a very different kind into another.”

The Second Sonata will have its Boston premiere on a Sunday afternoon recital at MIT, where Harbison has been on the faculty since 1969. The concert, which celebrates Harbison receiving the school’s György Kepes Fellowship Prize, gives an especially inclusive picture of his musical activity, containing on its first half not just Harbison’s

music but works by Bach and Mozart. The second half will be given over to the jazz band Strength in Numbers, which is essentially Harbison on piano and some of his MIT colleagues, along with Rose Mary on violin and vocalist Liz Tobias. They'll do songs by Jimmy Van Heusen and by Harbison himself, including one he wrote in honor of Clarise Snyder, MIT's longtime concert manager.

"I tried to get a lyricist for it," Harbison said, "but they told me there were not enough rhymes for 'Clarise.' So I had to take it on myself — it was the only out."

Jazz is a crucially important element of Harbison's artistic persona. He formed his first jazz ensemble when he was 11, and remembers hearing Thelonious Monk at the Five Spot in New York when he was in college. "That was a huge part of what my ears were engaged with all the way through college. So something kicks back in, a certain kind of instinct. If it's material I don't know I have to get it into my head. But it does feel like riding the bicycle.

"In some way, I need it," he added of playing jazz. "It's a particular kind of high which I've never found, even in a revved-up Bach cantata. There's nothing quite as high-ozone as that. That's really why I've stuck around it.

There are more new works on the horizon, among them "The Nine Rasas," a trio for clarinet, viola, and piano that Radius Ensemble will premiere at its May 7 concert. It was composed for clarinetist Eran Egozy, who was Harbison's chamber-music student, and is now one of his newest MIT

colleagues.

And there's still more to be heard. Boston Chamber Music Society's May 15 program includes the belated first Boston performance of Harbison's 2013 String Trio. Unlike most of his works, the trio was modeled on the great repertoire work of its genre: Mozart's Divertimento in E-flat (K. 563), a piece Harbison has held in high regard since he was a teenager.

A bit of that early attempt, perhaps half a dozen notes, worked its way into the finished piece, enough so that Harbison refers to the trio as having taken "four or five decades" to write. "Because it seemed like it'd always been bothering me, to write a string trio." Among the challenges of taking off from Mozart's model was capturing "some of that Mozartean ambiguity of mood: the sense that you accept one character, but you might be haunted by another."

A less conventional source of inspiration was the soccer player Lionel Messi, whose name provided Harbison with the shape of some of the trio's melodies. "I associated him with Mozart," the composer explained, "with this extreme level of natural ability, this kind of uncanny talent level. Which is not the terms in which I see, by any means, composers in general."

JOHN HARBISON: György Kepes Fellowship Prize

Concert

At Killian Hall, MIT, Cambridge, April 10 at 4 p.m. Free admission; mta.mit.edu/events/harbisons-kepes-prize-concert

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