



A Conversation with Paul Haas

ClassicalDomain.com

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Classical Domain: How did your interest in New Music start?

Paul Haas: It started because I was a composer myself. In high school, I composed in, and played, all different styles: rock, jazz, classical and vocal... I didn't know that I wanted to be a conductor until I went to college [Yale University 1989 — 1993], where I took a conducting class. It turned out that everything I could do was what you needed to do to be a conductor.

So while in college, I decided to start my own orchestra, which I led for about three years. To pursue conducting after college, I went to Dresden and studied orchestral conducting for two years, after which I entered Juilliard's Masters program in orchestral conducting. I "lucked" into my current position at the New York Youth Symphony (NYYS), which has this amazing program, First Music, through which they commission a new work of music for every single concert they give.

They've been commissioning new music for over twenty years. In the four years I've been with the NYYS, I've met some fantastic composers. In fact, two of the composers whose pieces I premiered through NYYS, Judd Greenstein and Joshua Penman (and one composer whose work I knew but who I'd never worked with before, Joel Morales), have provided their compositional talents for REWIND.

I'd been coming up with concert ideas for years, and when the plans for REWIND started coming together, Judd, Josh and Joel were my natural first choices.

At a traditional concert, it might take ten minutes to get from the end of one piece to the next piece, and what are you supposed to do with that time in between? If there is an actual narrative or theme to the concert, if there is any moment or goodwill built up during the playing, all that is lost during those ten minutes.

CD: What sort of concert ideas did you have, what was the impetus for finding a context, like REWIND, for new and established music?

PH: Too often when I go to a concert I feel that I'm not as engaged as I could have been. So instead of simply complaining about it, I asked myself, what would make this experience

better? I've got this list of hundreds and hundreds of ideas that I'd like to try out, and I took the most salient features of that list and decided to try them out.

At one of the NYYS concerts this past season, we played Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. But before starting the Stravinsky, we did a little two-minute snippet of Monteverdi's Vespers of the Virgin Mary, a section taken from his Magnificat. The most unusual aspect of this, though, was that I turned off all of the house lights in Carnegie Hall. I then took down the musician's lights to about one quarter, so that they could barely read the music. I positioned two violin and two oboe soloists at the foot of the stage. In the back of the hall we had an eight member tenor chorus. We also had, in the back of the hall on upper levels, violin and oboe soloists to echo the soloists on stage.

CD: Purely for the wonderful effect of sound, an aesthetic effect.

PH: Absolutely. I mean the orchestra played the Stravinsky unbelievably well, but everyone was blown away by the Monteverdi.

CD: What are some of the aspects of the traditional concert that you would like to deal with?

PH: At a traditional concert, it might take ten minutes to get from the end of one piece to the next piece, and what are you supposed to do with that time in between? If there is an actual narrative or theme to the concert, if there is any momentum or goodwill built up during the playing, all that is lost during those ten minutes. "Totally lost" may be hyperbole, but let's just say the program is not as coherent as it might be if you were led by momentum into the next work.

CD: In a traditional symphony in the pre-recorded era, the composer assumed that the breaks between movements would interrupt the flow. Our idea of a work flowing is a modern concept, is this something you're bringing into the concert hall through ideas like REWIND?

PH: I deliberately chose pieces that don't have breaks (i.e. movements), and there are a couple of instances where we are doing movements of works instead of whole pieces. If we were doing multi-movement works than we might have to figure something else out. For instance, do you need "connective tissue" between those movements? But that's an idea for another day.

Concerts have too much dead time. The idea of an intermission has its place, but I don't think it's always necessary. When's the last time you went to a movie with an intermission? One of the first questions I asked as I started out was, how long can you sustain the attention of an audience member, given that we are presenting constant stimuli?

Another idea that goes along with this theme of continuity came to me when I was thinking about medieval tropes — pieces that were composed to be performed between sections of the Catholic Mass. Tropes were designed to comment on the part of the Mass you had just heard and, in some cases, lead you into the next part of the Mass. I figured, why not try something like that again?

CD: Is that the way you presented the idea to the composers, let's do it like they did in the 10th century?

PH: It was very easy approaching them. They were very interested in the idea, which is basically an entire evening as once piece of music. We have a vast expanse of music history, from the pres-

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ent, going back centuries; we are including works, for instance, by Purcell, Mozart and Schnittke, but we are looking at that expanse through a modern lens. Josh, Judd and Joel have composed connective tissue between the works that also incorporate and simultaneously comment, in much the same way that medieval tropes do, on the pieces they connect.

CD: You seem to be creating a context for “pure listening” in a sense.

PH: The evening is about music, it is about sound, and it is about the way sound makes you feel, makes you think. But we are not stopping there. We have also brought in lighting, theatrical positioning of performers and visual art, which we commissioned from Kate Raudenbush that fits into the concept of the evening.

We have all of these different “perks“ thrown in there, but in the end it really is about some great music; a large array of different kinds of music guided by the REWIND commissioned works that represent our perspective today.

CD: It’s a case where people can register an impression without necessarily knowing how the works fit outside of the context of the flow of the concert, the connections presented are enough.

PH: It’s interesting: for the non-initiated concertgoer, there is a built-in problem with the traditional concert situation. He walks in thinking of himself as an underdog, thinking that he doesn’t know enough about what is being performed, and what we know about the human mind is that what you tell your mind becomes the truth. If you feel that you don’t know enough, or that all the people around you know more, then you are going to feel alienated. The whole point of REWIND is to let you know there is nothing you need to know. From the moment you enter the performance space, you’ll be wholly engrossed in a situation that you will relate to.

CD: You’ve talked about the connections between pieces — can you give me some thoughts?

PH: As I mentioned, Josh, Judd and Joel will be composing pieces that connect the pre-existing works. So, for example, I needed a connecting piece to get from Mozart to Marini, and wanted to get something in the Concerto Grosso style — to mirror the Schnittke work in the first half. Judd Greenstein and I sat down, and we chose Corelli’s Concerto Grosso Op.6, No.3.

What he did was take the listener from the Mozart, with a little meditation on the Mozart, directly into the Corelli, verbatim from the score. Then all of a sudden it’s Greenstein, but he does it in such a way so that the listener doesn’t know it’s happening. All of a sudden, there are these shifting rhythmic patterns, and the soloists are going twice as fast as the orchestra — so something is obviously going on. This builds, and — at the climactic point — all the woodwinds (who are off in a different section

of the performance space) enter the work with cascading “belltones”. The capper is this: at that exact moment there is a reprise of the Schnittke, totally transformed.

CD: Are all the REWIND works are being performed live? I want to make the distinction because there are events where there is music all the time, where one is encouraged to go in and out of paying attention. A sort of “take what ever you want” approach.

PH: Right, all the works are live. All of the works are related, with the contemporary “REWIND” pieces connecting and commenting on the surrounding works in the concert. It’s not a case of some new music filling the time between the more well-known, older pieces of music — the whole evening is one extended piece of music.

CD: I hope you let people know...

PH: We should make an announcement: go to the bathroom and turn off your cell phones. Maybe when they get the tickets at the door?

CD: On the more traditional side, REWIND has soloists and chamber orchestra involved. Can you tell me about some of the key players?

We have some really phenomenal artists working with us on this. Anne Akiko Meyers, of course, is an amazing violinist and musician who’s worked with every orchestra and conductor under the sun. I got a chance to play with her at Carnegie Hall about a year ago, and we’ve become great friends and collaborators in the meantime. Colin Jacobsen is a real musician’s musician — everyone in the classical scene knows this guy and wants to perform with him. I was studying conducting at Juilliard when he was studying violin, so I guess that’s how we met. Many people reading this might know him from his recent concert with the New York Philharmonic — he played the Brahms Double Concerto with Yo-Yo Ma.

Colin and his brother Eric have this chamber orchestra they started up called the Knights. I heard them about a year ago — and immediately I knew they were the band for REWIND.

Kate Raudenbush, a phenomenal talent, is creating visual artworks for the concert — she’s someone who’s great at everything: installations, photography, design, sculpture, painting — you name it, she incorporates it into her prodigious output. We’ve been friends for years — actually, it was at her wedding a year and half ago that I first saw the Angel Orensanz Center!

CD: One more thing, the composers are accepting a major challenge, it must be difficult to go and create a context with many of the works on the program, say, Schönberg's Verklärte Nacht?

PH: Absolutely, but I wouldn't ask anyone who I did not think was really incredible. For instance, I take a work by Josh Penman — Songs that Plants Taught Us — wherever I go with orchestras, because it's such a phenomenal piece. These guys are hot. When you hear their music juxtaposed with five centuries of pre-existing pieces, it will definitely make you listen to the older stuff with new ears.

CD: The first embedded classical music performance... thanks, Paul.

REWIND

Angel Orensanz Center

Thursday June 8th, at 8:00 pm

The Knights, Paul Haas, Conductor

Anne Akiko Meyers, Violin • Colin Jacobsen, Violin

A continuous visual and sonic experience

Morales/Penman: Soundspace 1

Alfred Schnittke: Concerto Grosso for 2 violins, harpsichord, and strings

Joel Morales: REWIND 1

Alexander Raskatov: 5 Minuten aus dem Leben WAM

Joshua Penman REWIND 2

James MacMillan: "T.S. Eliot" from As Others See Us

Joshua Penman: REWIND 3

Igor Stravinsky: Suite from Pulcinella

Joshua Penman: REWIND 4

Héitor Villa-Lobos: Bachianas Brasileiras no. 4

Igor Stravinsky: Suite for Small Orchestra no. 2

Morales/Penman: REWIND 5

Arnold Schönberg: Verklärte Nacht

Judd Greenstein: REWIND 6

W.A. Mozart: Divertimento for Strings K 136

Judd Greenstein: REWIND 7

Corelli/Greenstein: Concerto Grosso in C Minor, Op.6, No.3/REWIND 8

Biagio Marini: Passacaglio

Joel Morales: REWIND 9

Henry Purcell: "A Bird's Prelude" from A Faerie Queen

Morales/Penman: Soundspace 2

(continued on next page)

Artistic Director Paul Haas is currently in his fourth season as music director of the New York Youth Symphony. In addition to appearances as the assistant conductor of the Brooklyn Philharmonic, Mr. Haas' conducting engagements have included performances with the San Antonio Symphony, the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. Following a recent performance with the National Symphony Orchestra and Itzhak Perlman, the Washington Post proclaimed: "The young conductor Paul Haas was all about fresh thinking and visceral engagement. His music making...revealed a keen musical mind and an impressive feeling for the natural pulse and trajectory of a score... Haas's sensitivity to rhythmic and dynamic gradation and his ability to marry heartfelt expression with disciplined playing from the NSO...would have been impressive in a conductor three times his age. If Thursday's concert was an accurate barometer of his talents, Haas is headed for a significant podium career."

Violinist Anne Akiko Meyers has performed with the world's leading orchestras including Boston, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, and Royal Concertgebouw, among others. She has given master classes and been an adjudicator in competitions around the world. Ms. Meyers is a recipient of the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant, and has recorded for the RCA and RPO labels.

Violinist Colin Jacobsen, also a recipient of the Avery Fisher Career Grant, first played to critical acclaim at age fourteen as a soloist with the New York Philharmonic under Kurt Masur and returns to the Philharmonic this spring in a performance of the Brahms Double Concerto with Yo-Yo Ma. He tours regularly with Mr. Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble, and is a member of Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's program for young artists, CMS Two.

Composer Judd Greenstein began his compositional life by writing hip-hop beats as a teenager. After turning to classical music, he studied with Martin Bresnick, David Kechley, Aaron Jay Kernis, and Ezra Laderman. Mr. Greenstein was chosen as an Emerging Composer in last season's ZOOM: Composers Close Up series at Merkin Hall. His music has most recently been performed by the Seattle Chamber Players and by the University of Texas at Austin New Music Ensemble. Mr. Greenstein, who is co-Artistic Director of NOW Ensemble, is currently writing hip hop beats for a forthcoming animated short film about New York City bicycle messengers.

Composer Joshua Penman is a concert composer, film composer, ambient artist, record producer, consciousness researcher, and teacher. As a concert composer, he has worked with the American Composers Orchestra, Gamelan Galak-Tika, as well as trance star Kenji Williams. He has received commissions from the Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, the Prism Saxophone Quartet, Arraymusic, the Foundation for Universal Sacred Music, and the New York Youth Symphony. His recent projects include the score for the art film Caravan of Light, an ambient remix.

Composer Joel Morales is perhaps best known as a musician, playing bass guitar with such artists as Television's Richard Lloyd, but he is also a live sound engineer and hard at work honing his skills in the recording studio. He graduated from The Institute of Audio Research in New York and has been involved in many independent projects as a musician and producer. His interest in electronic music and creating soundscapes has led him to REWIND and an exploration of the sonic possibilities that classical music provides.

Visual Designer Kate Raudenbush is an interactive installation sculptor and photographer. Her latest work, Stadium of the Self, was awarded a Theme Art Grant from the 2005 Burning Man Festival. She has had solo exhibits of her fine art series Construction/ Deconstruction and her urban landscape series Evidence/Observed, as well as participating in numerous group shows in New York City.