

## From the Conductor

We started with time and now we have clocks.

Earliest humans were confronted with time as a dark river that flowed uncharted through their lives, coursing through a landscape of crop cycles, tide levels, and eclipses. Large and small, these temporal structures shaped every aspect of our existence. Human beings, even of relatively recent historical periods, never dreamed that *they* might actually shape time.

But now we have clocks. Everywhere. Wristwatches, iPhones, time stamps on checks. And now we think we can control time. Now our view of time is mechanical and personal. Even in the larger temporal increments of 24-hour news cycles, weekends off, and retirement looming, we honestly believe we can control time.

It's kind of cute.

I am not pointing my aging Luddite finger at the younger generation. I also am a denizen of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I also am glued to my iPhone and structure my schedule in 15-minute increments. My farmer great-grandparents probably didn't think much further ahead than the next planting or harvest; I can tell you where I will be on pretty much every day of August of 2021. How did we get here?

Among the rewards of having just curated a region-wide festival called "It's About Time," of which these concerts are the culminating moments, has been the possibility to explore in detail various of our contemporary views of time. I've read a lot about time. There is the quotation, falsely attributed to Albert Einstein, that, "time is what keeps everything from happening at once." (Early 20th century pulp science-fiction writer Ray Cummings wrote that one.) The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus believed that time was like a child playing checkers (or whatever the pre-Socratic version of that game was): it was simultaneously insistent and meandering; firm and fickle.

But nowhere in any commentary is there as much illumination of the notions of time as there is in any piece of music. To music, time is like plasma, that substance in which every idea and impulse is suspended and nourished. Listen to what you think of as the simplest song in the world, and, whatever else is going for it, it will have an extraordinarily sophisticated relationship with time.

When one then takes a truly sophisticated piece, like the Mahler *Fourth Symphony*, the explorations of musical time are like an interplanetary expedition. In Mahler, there is metric time, nearly always in flux, as strong beats occur where you least expect them and the resulting temporal flow is rarely steady. Harmonic points of arrival exert a kind of magnetic force on tempo, sometimes slowing it, and other times slinging it by like a comet accelerating around the sun. A thorough analysis of the symphonies of Mahler, just for their tempo implications, is a lifetime's work.

And then there is narrative time. Mahler often seems suspended between his present—often with the undertones of someone not completely at ease with his own generation—and a past that is reluctant to ease its hold. Sounds of his past: folk melody, birdsong, cowbells, and sleigh-bells decorate his scores. The poignancy that

one often senses in Mahler comes, at least for this listener, from this temporal ambiguity. Here is the sense of being constantly on the cusp of change, from the ineffable sense of twilight he creates.

Roland Auzet's new work, *M.Alone: a theatre and percussion concerto for Fiona Digney*, which will receive its first performance this weekend with the extraordinary and charismatic Fiona Digney as soloist, might seem far from Mahler, but it really isn't. Here also we find the need to manage multiple time streams—tempos changing rapidly, intricate interlocking rhythms in the ensemble—just as Mahler asks of us. And, through the dramatic action on stage—Fiona is as much an actor at times as she is a musician—we get an exploration of narrative time that also feels related to Mahler.

But what Auzet offers that no one else can is his far-flung and eccentric background. He is a percussionist himself and a composer; but he also has run a theater company in Lyon and is a circus artist and producer. And perhaps some of you saw his recent one-person performance on this stage using a car! There is very little that one can do on a stage that Roland Auzet has not done. And he brings all of this to bear in *M.Alone*.

We are pleased to welcome him to San Diego, not just because he is one of my oldest and dearest friends, but his engagement with time—musical and dramatic; political and poetic—is deep and probing. Perfect for this moment. At the time of this writing, I cannot tell you much about what his piece will sound like: isn't that the magic of a first performance? But, I can tell you it will be riveting!

So listen carefully to musical time in all of its guises tonight. Soak it in. And when you next have a moment of quiet, imagine yourself in a world without clocks, where time is plasma not commodity. Imagine yourself afloat on that dark river, headed who-knows-where in our mysterious and beguiling universe. And know that the closest we humans can come to touching that mystery is through music.

Steven Schick