

# From the Conductor

The conversation usually goes something like this: I'll ask a group of music lovers what they love about music. (After all, that's why we call them *music lovers*.) After a tentative start, someone will say, "beauty, pure and simple." Or, "I love a melody that I can sing." There is usually someone in every group who grooms the image of the tragic romantic composer toiling in isolation to produce a work of great genius. And, for every fan of the profane, there is someone who hews to the sacred. "When I listen to music, I feel like I can touch the cosmos," went one comment, more or less. And, every once in a while—frankly more often in our audiences than anywhere else—someone will make my day. "Music is a way of experimenting with life." Bless you! You know who you are.

Cosmic, romantic, personal, strange, intimate, experimental. If these answers seem about right, then you'll love today's concert. And, if we have done our work well, you'll find all of them in every piece.

2019-20 Nee Commission recipient, Celeste Oram's extraordinary and inventive piece, *a loose affiliation of alleluias*, exists only in my mind at the moment—I am writing these words before our first rehearsal. But, imagine a piece that opens with three "Teen Angels" singing a beautiful melody by the experimental Brooklyn singer, serpentwithfeet, which is answered by an improvising violin soloist, the extraordinary Keir GoGwilt, and a traditional symphony orchestra playing music with rhythmic and tonal roots in the Renaissance. We're only one minute into the concert and all the answers above are already on the table. Based loosely on the structure of a popular song, and drawing inspiration from diverse sources, Oram's piece balances theater and sound; old and new; cosmic and intimate.

When the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus established the Nee commission in honor of my predecessor, long-time music director Thomas Nee, this kind of freshness and inventiveness was just what we hoped for!

We'll follow Celeste Oram's evocation of the mystical and meticulous in music by an equally

engaging and enigmatic counterpart from the 19th century, Robert Schumann's *Violin Concerto*. And as soloist, we welcome back the 2016 winner of the La Jolla Symphony's Young Artist Competition, the mesmerizing Keir GoGwilt, as soloist. No sooner was Keir's electrifying 2017 performance of Thomas Adès's *Concentric Paths* in our rearview mirror than he and I began talking about a return engagement. From the stratospheric Adès we go to the strato-spiritual Schumann. There are many similarities: Neither piece represents an easily defined musical orthodoxy, and both lead musicians and listeners alike through layers of introspective encounters with sound and idea.

More metaphysical music follows in John Adams's *Harmonium*. Starting with his slowly unfolding setting of John Donne's "Negative Love," both text and music are seemingly more defined by what they are not, than what they are. The chorus first intones the word "No" then "Never." As the instrumental texture gradually thickens, a listener is so aware of the act of *becoming* that the arrival of actual text—"I Never stoop'd so low..."—comes as a true shock. The lover in Donne's poem is not so ordinary as to be attracted by mere physical beauty or even moral uprightness. True love exists beyond any measurable dimension and perhaps in its highest form is expressible only as a negative.

The inward gaze of the Donne text and the tightly-held privacy of two Emily Dickinson poems that form the basis of the final two movements might seem at odds with the ebullient musical language of John Adams. In fact, *Harmonium* was his "break-out piece," a strange juxtaposition with texts that are in essence trying to break in, toward the dimly lit center of the human psyche.

Here we understand that fueling Adams's extraordinary music is a deep connection between a private experience of great emotion and the shared experiences of communal importance. I think that every great piece of music finds this conduit between private and public. And when we look at what music lovers love about music, the oppositional qualities of

personal and communal figure prominently—that music should simultaneously be intimate and cosmic; comforting and epic. This reconciliation of the large and small finds its ultimate expression in Emily Dickinson's portrayal of death. So, in Adams's moving setting of Dickinson's justly famous words, "Because I could not stop for Death, He kindly stopped for me," the image of a slow ride with death toward an unavoidable destination is rendered by an unfolding of harmonies so patient that when the moment of finality arrives we say about the music, as we will undoubtedly say about life itself: how sad that we are finished so soon.

This mournful sense of death's inevitably contrasts starkly with the aura of fevered eroticism in *Harmonium's* third movement, "Wild Nights." This is music that speaks for the fragile human heart. For Dickinson, the longed-for wild night was indeed a luxury, as the text indicates—the intensity of her desire matched only by the

hopelessness of its realization. Casting sexual passion as a wind-whipped sea, Dickinson confesses to having her "Heart in port." It's all just imagination then, and the musical rhyming of this moment with rhythms from the first movement shows that Adams sees this, too, as a version of Donne's negative love.

In *Harmonium*, the most private sentiments are rendered by the most public music. It's ironic: I can't think of a sadder use of the subjunctive than Emily Dickson's "...were I with thee..." against Adams's cyclonic rhythms as the hectoring counterpoint of unattainable sexual love. And, I can't think of a more achingly sensual line than "Might I but moor—Tonight—in thee!" Love is cast here as a safe harbor. But by the end of the piece, I feel anything but safe.

It's all so cosmic and romantic; so personal, so strange. These are the things we love about music. But we could also be talking about life. ■



## STEVEN SCHICK music director

Percussionist, conductor, and author Steven Schick was born in Iowa and raised

in a farming family. Hailed by Alex Ross in *The New Yorker* as "one of our supreme living virtuosos, not just of percussion but of any instrument," he has championed contemporary percussion music by commissioning or premiering more than 150 new works. The most important of these have become core repertory for solo percussion. In 2014 he was inducted into the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame.

Schick is in his 13th season as artistic director and conductor of the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus. He is also co-artistic director of the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity Summer Music Program and artistic director and conductor of the Breckenridge Music Festival.

As a guest conductor he has appeared with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Milwaukee Symphony, Ensemble Modern, the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), and the Asko/Schönberg Ensemble.

Schick's publications include a book, "The Percussionist's Art: Same Bed, Different Dreams," and many articles. He has released numerous recordings including the 2010 "Percussion Works of Iannis Xenakis," and its companion, "The Complete Early Percussion Works of Karlheinz Stockhausen" in 2014 (both on Mode). He received the "Diapason d'Or" as conductor (Xenakis Ensemble Music with ICE) and the Deutscheschallplattenkritikpreis, as percussionist (Stockhausen), each for the best new music release of 2015.

Steven Schick is Distinguished Professor of Music and holds the Reed Family Presidential Chair at the University of California, San Diego.