

PROGRAM NOTE by ERIC BROMBERGER

Aeriality

ANNA THORVALDSDOTTIR

Born 1977

Anna Thorvaldsdottir had her early training in Iceland, where she received her bachelor's degree, and then completed her Ph.D. in composition at UCSD. She received the Nordic Council Music Prize in 2012, and in 2015 she was named recipient of the New York Philharmonic's Kravis Emerging Composer Prize. Thorvaldsdottir's music has been performed by a number of ensembles, including the Oslo Philharmonic, Iceland Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Ensemble Intercontemporain, ICE, San Francisco Chamber Players, and the BBC Scottish Symphony. *Aeriality*, which has just been released on a new recording from Deutsche Grammophon, will also be performed by the New York Philharmonic in May 2017.

The composer has supplied a note for *Aeriality*:

Aerialty is a work for a large instrumental force, written in 2010/2011, consisting of vast sound-textures combined – and contrasted with – various forms of lyrical material. The piece was commissioned by the Iceland Symphony Orchestra to be premiered November 24th 2011, conducted by Ilan Volkov in Harpa, the new Concert and Conference Center in Reykjavik, Iceland.

Aeriality refers to the state of gliding through the air with nothing or little to hold on to – as if flying – and the music both portrays the feeling of absolute freedom gained from the lack of attachment and the feeling of unease generated by the same circumstances. The title draws its essence from various aspects of the meaning of the word 'aerial' and refers to the visual inspiration that such a view provides. 'Aeriality' is also a play with words, combining the words 'aerial' and 'reality', so as to suggest two different worlds; "reality", the ground, and "aerial", the sky or the untouchable.

Aeriality can be said to be on the border of symphonic music and sound art. Parts of the work consist of thick clusters of sounds that form a unity as the instruments of the orchestra stream together to form a single force – a sound-mass. The sense of individual instruments is somewhat blurred and the orchestra becomes a single moving body, albeit at times forming layers of streaming materials that flow between different instrumental groups. These chromatic layers of materials are extended by the use of quartertones to generate vast sonic textures. At what can perhaps be said to be the climax in the music, a massive sustained ocean of quartertones slowly accumulates and is then released into a brief lyrical field that almost immediately fades out at the peak of its own urgency, only to remain a shadow.

The piece is in one movement and is approximately 13 minutes in duration.

Anna Thorvaldsdottir

Poem of Ecstasy, Opus 54

ALEXANDER SCRIBIN

Born January 6, 1872, Moscow

Died April 27, 1915, Moscow

As a composer, Alexander Scriabin had two distinct careers. He graduated from the Moscow Conservatory and set out to make his reputation as a virtuoso pianist, performing throughout Russia and Western Europe. Scriabin also wished to compose, and his early music was very much in the manner of Chopin—he wrote preludes, waltzes, mazurkas, impromptus, and etudes. But in the first years of the twentieth century Scriabin’s life and art underwent a profound change. Falling under the influence of Nietzsche and the theosophism of Madame Blavatsky, Scriabin came to believe that the entire universe was straining toward a mystical unity and that his role as an artist was to bring order to a fragmented world. He began to create a series of visionary works suited to this mission, based on single-movement forms, chromatic harmonies, and sometimes daring ideas about presentation. These include his *Divine Poem*, *Poem of Ecstasy*, *Prometheus* (scored for orchestra and “color organ”), and the projected-but-never-written *Mysterium*, which would bring about the actual transformation. Scriabin envisioned a performance of *Mysterium* in India in which the audience and performers would be garbed in white, all the arts—including “the art of perfume”—would be fused, and in the course of the performance mankind would be elevated to a state of ecstatic consciousness.

About 1905, during the earliest years of his own spiritual journey, Scriabin wrote a long

poem that described the longing of a human soul for this transformation. This poem became the inspiration for Scriabin's *Fifth Piano Sonata* and for his *Poem of Ecstasy*. In the score to the sonata, Scriabin quoted four lines that might apply equally to the *Poem of Ecstasy*:

I call you to life, O mysterious forces
Submerged in depths, obscure!
O thou creative spirit, timid of life,
To you I bring courage!

Scriabin composed the *Poem of Ecstasy* between 1905 and 1908, and it was first performed on December 10, 1908, by the Russian Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Modest Altschuler in New York City.

Scriabin described the *Poem of Ecstasy* as a symphony—his *Fourth*—and others have described it as a sonata-form movement, but neither of those statements is correct. Instead, the *Poem of Ecstasy* is a sort of tone poem, about twenty minutes long, that mirrors the progress of a soul (or of an artist) from uncertainty to fulfillment. Scriabin scores *Poem of Ecstasy* for a large orchestra (one that includes eight horns, five trumpets, two harps, and a vast percussion section, as well as an optional organ) and introduces all his themes in the first few minutes. These themes then evolve across the course of the work, moving from the uncertain harmonic suspension of the beginning to an overpowering and triumphant conclusion. Listeners should not search for a literal depiction of a soul's progress but instead take the music as a generalized mirror of that journey. The *Poem of Ecstasy* has produced numerous interpretations, some of them encouraged by the composer himself. One observer has made out a three-part structure: “the first relates to the soul in an orgy of love, the second to the realization of a fantastic dream, and the third to the glory of music as an art.” Another describes the music as “the joy of creative activity.” Still another sees it as explicitly sexual, much like the poem that helped inspire it.

Scriabin's own performance markings in the score (in both Italian and French) are often the clearest indication of his own sense of the music. The quiet beginning of *Poem of Ecstasy*, full of inchoate theme-shapes, is marked *with a languid desire*, and this is quickly answered by a strident trumpet marked *imperious* (the solo trumpet will play an increasingly prominent role as this music unfolds). Other markings include *moderate and with delight, highly perfumed, almost delirious, with a noble and joyous emotion, softly expressive and caressing, charming, voluptuous*, and (as the music nears its climax) *with a voluptuousness more and more ecstatic*. In the final section, the music races to its concluding chord in a section marked both *majestic* and

flying. Scriabin believed that in some senses his music was always straining toward the light, and the conclusion of the *Poem of Ecstasy* demonstrates this perfectly. After all the harmonic uncertainties of this journey, after all its subtle thematic evolutions, the *Poem of Ecstasy* concludes with a blazing chord in C major—that purest of keys—shouted out triple *forte* by the entire orchestra.

Lachrymae

BRYCE DESSNER

Born 1976, Cincinnati, Ohio

Bryce Dessner is one of the most sought-after composers of his generation, with a rapidly expanding catalog of works commissioned by leading ensembles. Known to many as a rock guitarist with The National, he is also active as a curator – a vital force in the flourishing realm of new creative music.

His orchestral, chamber, and vocal compositions have been commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Ensemble Intercontemporain, Metropolitan Museum of Art (for the New York Philharmonic), Kronos Quartet, New York City Ballet, and many others. He has worked with some of the world’s most creative and respected musicians and visual artists, including Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Johnny Greenwood, Justin Peck, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Matthew Ritchie. Last year Dessner was tapped, along with Ryuichi Sakamoto and Alva Noto, to compose music for Oscar Award-winning director Alejandro Iñárritu’s film, *The Revenant*, which received a 2016 Golden Globes nomination for Best Original Score.

Dessner’s music -- called “gorgeous, full-hearted” by NPR and “vibrant” by *The New York Times* – is marked by a keen sensitivity to instrumental color and texture. Propulsive rhythms often alternate with passages in which time is deftly suspended. Bridging musical languages and communities comes naturally to him. After early training on the flute, he switched to classical guitar in his teens. While in high school he started a band with his twin brother Aaron, also a guitarist. “I was playing classical guitar recitals, and people said, ‘You know, you can’t really do both things,’” recalled Dessner. “My intuition told me they were wrong... Someday that diversity of experience would be more enriching or rewarding than just going down one path.”

Dessner earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Yale University.

Lachrymae is written for string orchestra. It was commissioned by the Amsterdam Sinfonietta, the Scottish Ensemble, and the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra, and premiered on June 16, 2012 by Amsterdam Sinfonietta.

Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, Opus 67

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

None of us can remember the first time we heard Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*—this music is so much a part of us that we seem to be born knowing it. The *Fifth* surrounds us: as background music for chocolate and motor oil commercials, as the symbol for Victory in World War II, as the stuff of jokes. Even children who know nothing about classical music sing its opening four notes on playgrounds. Those four notes are the most famous in classical music, and Beethoven's *Fifth* is certainly the most famous symphony ever written.

Music so white-hot in intensity, so universal in appeal, cries out for interpretation, and over the last two centuries many have been ready to tell us what this symphony “means.” To some, it is Fate knocking at the door. To one nineteenth-century critic, it told the story of a failed love affair. Others see it as the triumph of reason over chaos and evil. Still others have advanced quite different explanations. But engaging as such interpretations are, they tell us more about the people who make them than about the music itself. The sad truth is that this music is so over-familiar that we have almost stopped listening to it: the opening rings out, and our minds go on automatic pilot for the next thirty minutes—we have lost the capacity to listen to the *Fifth* purely as music, to comprehend it as the astonishing and original musical achievement that it is.

Beethoven made the first sketches for his *Fifth Symphony* in 1804, soon after completing the *Eroica*, but did not begin work in earnest until after finishing the *Fourth* in 1806. Most of the composition took place in the summer of 1807, and the score was completed that fall. The first performance took place on December 22, 1808, six days after Beethoven's 38th birthday.

The stark opening of the *Allegro con brio*, both very simple and charged with volcanic fury, provides the musical content for the entire movement. That (seemingly) simple figure saturates the first movement, giving it extraordinary unity. Those four notes shape the main

theme, generate the rhythms, and pulse insistently in the background—they even become the horn fanfare that announces the second theme. One of the most impressive features of this movement is how short it is: of Beethoven's symphonies, only the Haydnesque *First* has a shorter first movement. The power unleashed at the beginning is unrelenting, and this movement hammers to a close with the issues it raises still unresolved.

The *Andante con moto* contrasts two themes. Violas and cellos sing the broad opening melody in A-flat major; Beethoven reportedly made eleven different versions of this theme before he got the one he wanted. The second subject, in heroic C major, blazes out in the brass, and Beethoven simply alternates these two themes, varying each as the movement proceeds. The third movement returns to the C-minor urgency of the beginning. It seems at first to be in scherzo-and-trio form, with lower strings introducing the sinuous opening idea. But horns quickly sound the symphony's opening motto, and the movement never quite regains its equilibrium; the trio, with lumbering fugal entries in the strings, subtly incorporates the opening rhythm as well. At just the point where one anticipates a return to the scherzo comes one of the most famous—and original—moments in music.

Instead of going back, Beethoven pushes ahead. Bits of the scherzo flit quietly over an ominous pedal, and suddenly the final movement—a triumphant march in C major—bursts to life: this dramatic moment has invariably been compared to sunlight breaking through dark clouds. Beethoven's scoring here reminds us of something easy to overlook—his concern with instrumental color. The march theme is announced by a full orchestra that includes three trombones (their first use in a symphony), and Beethoven employs a piccolo and contrabassoon to good effect here as well. Near the middle of this movement, Beethoven brings back some of the scherzo, which briefly—and darkly—slows progress before the triumphant march bursts out again to drive the symphony to its close. The coda itself is extremely long, and the final cadence—extended almost beyond reason—is overpowering.

No matter how familiar this symphony is, no matter how overlain it has become with extra-musical associations, the music remains extraordinary. Heard for itself, free of the cultural baggage it has acquired over the years, Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* is as original and powerful and furious today as it was when it burst upon an unsuspecting audience on a cold winter night in Vienna two centuries ago.