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By Christian Kriegeskotte » February 28, 2014, 7:00 am Concert

American Composers Orchestra's Lines on a Point at Carnegie Hall

CARNEGIE HALL

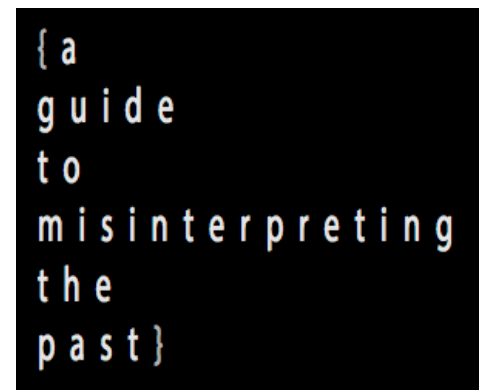
While the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (or ASCAP to its friends), has been wrapped up in its hundredth birthday celebration this year, it

has essentially been business as usual in assisting the professionals itemized in its familiar acronym make a living doing what they love and seeing that our evolving culture continues to understand and cherish its value. The concert in Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall on Thursday, February 20 offered an excellent balance of the birthday fun and the very essence of ASCAP's mission with a collaboration between Orchestra Underground, an ongoing project of the American Composers Orchestra, and Philadelphia's choral virtuosos The Crossing. Featuring two world premieres commissioned by the orchestra and two New York premieres, the program juxtaposed emerging, young composers Ted Hearne, Lisa Renée Coons and Amy Beth Kirsten alongside new and known works by established masters David Lang and Steve Reich. Even better, four of the five featured composers were in attendance, illuminating the fact that in this esoteric field, composers are people, too.



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ACO – Photo by Christopher Smith

After a few introductory comments made by the ACO's Artistic Director, composer Derek Bermel, including the recitation of a Dr. Seuss-themed poem written in honor of Fran Richard (ASCAP's recently retired director of concert music), the concert got underway without a hitch featuring a solo performance by The Crossing, conducted by the ensemble's music director, Donald Nally. Composer Ted Hearne, a founding member of New York-based collective Sleeping Giant, offered his work *Ripple*, originally composed in 2012. In keeping with the zeitgeist, the chosen text is a single sentence taken from one of the 400,000 classified military cables known as the Iraq War Logs, famously leaked by PFC Chelsea Manning during his infamous 2010 Wikileaks scandal. The composition was successful, conjuring a thoughtful breadth of contrasting musical material, anchored by various permutations of the chosen sentence. The work also offered a fitting showcase for Nally's superb choir, who performed with a unified confidence and energy that truly exemplifies the quintessence of professionalism.

In a rather efficient changing of the guards, the music stands that had been occupied by the members of the choir were re-appropriated by the strings of the ACO's Orchestra Underground, who performed on their feet (all but the cellos, of course) the world premiere of Lisa Renée Coons's *Vera's Ghosts*, which was commissioned for the evening by the ACO and conducted by Music Director George Manahan.

Rather than being a carefully notated timeline of events, the musical material of Coons's work is intended to emerge as a result of the communication between the conductor and orchestra; his physical gestures transforming into musical



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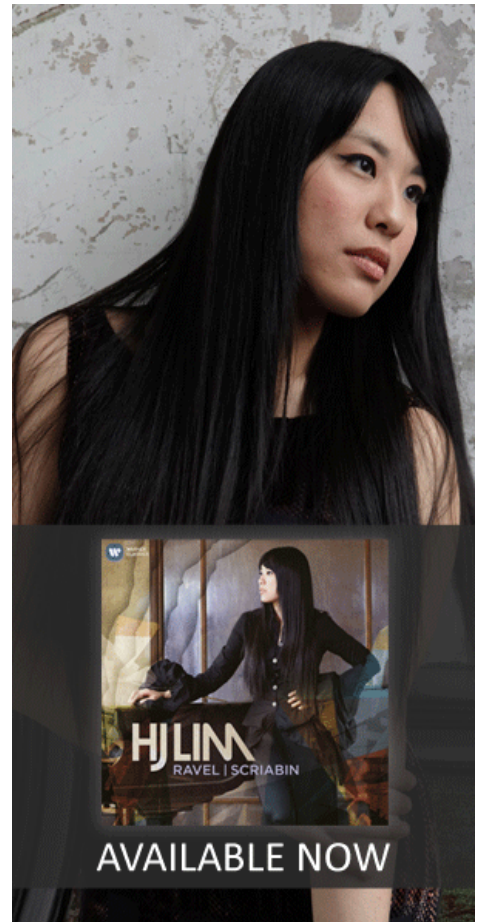
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gestures produced in response by the players. Somewhat weighed down by its concept the intention of the piece seemed better articulated by the program notes than in the performance and it was difficult for me to distill a real sense of individuality from the material of the work. The piece did offer some glimmering moments, but overall felt largely homogenous.



ACO and David Lang – Photo by Christopher Smith

The Crossing returned to the stage to join the strings of the ACO, complimented by a lone bass drum, in the New York premiere of David Lang's *statement to the court* (composed in 2010), which the composer verbally dedicated to the evening's honoree, Fran Richard.

Another testament to the skill of the choir, Lang's work drew upon a different set of sensibilities in his use of repetitive figures and more delicate harmonic material, which seemed to only subtly transform and develop over time. The text is a dramatic speech delivered by American socialist Eugene Debs, who, in his day, had been found guilty of sedition for opposing America's participation in World War I. A constant, irregular tap on the bass drum immediately established a sense of urgency and tension, interrupting and sounding over the desperate phrasing of the choir and orchestra, possibly alluding to the judge's gavel as suggested by the text.

Following intermission, the addition of a piccolo, alto flute and two clarinets set the stage for the second world premiere of the evening, Amy Beth Kirsten's *strange pilgrims*, another commission by the orchestra and featuring The Crossing. Enhanced by the projection of a special video by filmmaker Mark DeChiazza, Kirsten's program notes indicate that the work is a true collaboration, pieces of music having grown out of images and film segments created by DeChiazza, and bits of film being inspired in turn by musical material created by Kirsten, eventually weaving together into a unified tapestry of musical and visual events. The duo's work exhibited a rare instance in which one piece did not come across as merely an afterthought of the other. Kirsten's own, rather cryptic libretto seemed to reflect the process of trial and error, or mounting attempts to reach a whole, which she describes as her compositional method.

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The grand finale of the concert was Steve Reich's *Eight Lines*, which, while composed in 1983, received its Carnegie Hall premiere Thursday night. Reich's work was saturated by the kinetic excitement and harmonic approachability he is known for, providing an excellent balance to the evening's offerings and allowing Manahan and the orchestra to really strut their stuff. A fitting destination to the evening's course, *Eight Lines* seemed like a kind of summary of the works that preceded it on the program, encapsulating the spirit of a very American evening of new music.



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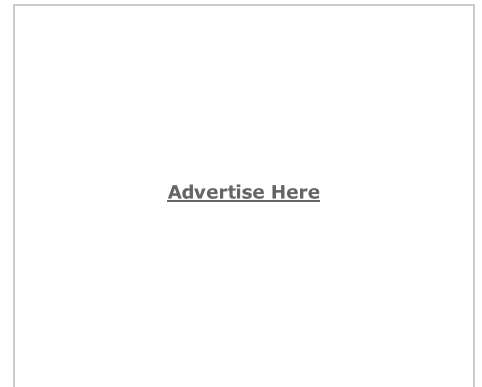


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