

Aaron Jay Kernis

City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra
Hugh Wolff, conductor

SECOND SYMPHONY

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AARON JAY KERNIS

SECOND SYMPHONY MUSICA CELESTIS INVISIBLE MOSAIC III

City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra
Hugh Wolff, conductor

For a composer coming of age, the 1980s was a bewildering period marked by openness to multiple stylistic currents. The richness of possibilities that beckoned is apparent in the gamut represented by Aaron Jay Kernis' mentors: from the West Coast Minimalism of John Adams to the serialist rigor of Charles Wuorinen. Between such extremes, the heady eclecticism of the 1980s and '90s extended to embrace a rebirth of the romantic impulse, neotonalism, hip pop culture references, and reclamations of once-obscure composers from the historical treasure trove of world music.

In Kernis' pantheon of influences, Mahler and Beethoven share a table with Hildegard of Bingen, Arvo Pärt, and John Lennon; the sonic technology and complexity of the modernist orchestra become grounded in a sensibility that feels at home with the textures of Minimalism or the resonance of an Indonesian gamelan.

Yet Kernis' depth of musical knowledge—which is wedded to an approach of meticulous craftsmanship—doesn't translate into a merely cerebral outlook: this is music that feels exuberantly *lived* through. The yearning to re-establish direct lines of communication with the listening public—a desire shared by Kernis and many of his peers who also emerged in the last two decades—coincided with the collapse of avant-garde orthodoxies.

Moreover, the pursuit of originality as a goal in itself lost its status as the mandate *par excellence* for artistic validation. Lofly visions of how music history should progress could no longer be used to justify the obvious alienation of lovers of concert music that had been taking place in the last half of the 20th century.

But to point to the accessible qualities of Kernis' works is not to imply a dalliance with superficial pleasures or an incompatibility with music that presents a serious challenge—*aesthetically* and even morally—to the listener. Indeed, his most-encountered pieces hardly fail to prompt a visceral response from audiences.

This is especially the case with the *Second Symphony*, a work of unrelentingly tragic intensity and weight that is also a harrowing testament to the urgency of expression mentioned above. Kernis typically fuses his host of influences into a unique coherence. The work's central coordinates might be plotted to encompass both the Mahler tradition of the expressionist symphony (in which form follows emotional function) and an indigenous American tradition rooted in the visionary, coloristic eccentricities of Charles Ives.

Like his cohorts, as a young artist Kernis encountered repeated declarations of the death of the symphony—and of orchestral music by extension. But in the 1990s they reclaimed the genre with a vengeance. The *Second Symphony* arguably belongs to a relatively recent, indigenously American subgenre of the post-Vietnam era, which might be identified as the “anger symphony.”

This music is characterized by a passionate intensity that frequently directs its rage at an issue of contemporary reality. Its seeds can be found in Leonard Bernstein's more polemical works, while another well-known recent example is John Corigliano's *Symphony No. 1* (inspired by the first generation of the AIDS crisis, it won the *Grammeyer Award* in 1991, the year in which Kernis composed his *Second Symphony*).

While working on the *Second Symphony*, Kernis recalls the collective national fixation on images of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. For the composer, these “exerted a kind of fascination and sense of horror at what seemed to be a purely technological war, one that was heavily manipulated by the government for the media.” One specific image that haunted Kernis came from the cover of *The New York Post*, which documented the accidental bombing of an apartment building in Iraq. “Something about the immediate annihilation without warning gave me the sonic image of pulverizing and obliteration”—an image with which the *Symphony* reaches its climax.

Kernis describes an overarching narrative structure to the three-movement work, centered on a metaphor of humanity facing the brutalizing machine: “The work is very linear, with the long line put forward in different contexts in each movement. In the first, the line is set against an unyielding mechanical, rhythmic profile, giving the sense of a wave threatening to overtake the melody. The second movement winnows essentially to melody and accompaniment (with some areas of counterpoint), while in the third the stark line is mostly exposed alone against the wave of percussion. Equally important is the gradual stripping away of layers as the piece goes on.”

The *Second Symphony* contains a virtual compendium of traits characterizing Kernis' voice as a composer. For all his stylistic range, an essentially organic unity and tightness of conception underlie the changing appearances in which the core thematic line is presented. Along with such intricate shaping is an exuberantly imaginative ear for coloristic orchestral

variety and restlessly shifting textures. Kernis' generous lyrical sensibility coexists with a dramatic flair for vivid contrasts and an overarching intensity of purposes that carries moral weight.

With the tempo marking "aggressively," the first movement ("Alarm") immediately lays out a long statement in the horns and bass clarinet that will recur in various guises throughout the work. The interval of a fifth figures prominently in its angular, far-ranging contour; this contributes to the line's suggestion of constant striving and pushing forward (the composer compares it to a "fighting for breath"). At the same time, turbulent figurations in the strings and lower winds unleash a motoric rhythmic energy that soon overtakes the musical texture. Kernis thus establishes from the outset his fundamental dialectic between unfolding line and a mechanistic, jagged juggernaut of rhythm. The prominence of percussion corresponds to his image for "the engine of this machine."

The second movement is the Symphony's longest and most emotionally complex. Its ambiguous character is apparent in the title ("Air/Ground"), which mixes military jargon with baroque connotations of an air over a ground bass. The violas sob a recurrent motif of four notes rising in a wave motion as a kind of ground bass. Meanwhile the clarinet intones a prayerful, lingering melodic line that evokes Copland's tender lyricism—minus his optimism. As the music heats up to a boil, the famously dissonant, catastrophic chord from Mahler's *Tenth Symphony* Adagio casts its shadow.

"Barricade" is the title given to the last movement, the Symphony's most graphic. On the heels of a hairpin crescendo in percussion, a less-stable version of the long, striving line from the opening of the work is spun out. In contrast to the mercilessly unstoppable energy of the first movement, thickly clotted harmonies and a frightening barrage of percussion lay out a rigid landscape, as if threatening to freeze the line in its tracks. But when the tremendously powerful final passages are reached, there is no catharsis: the music subsides, only to be crushed by an overwhelming rush of implacable percussion which roars "to maximum volume" before dying out.

Kernis composed his *Second Symphony* during a fertile period when he was enjoying his first taste of international recognition. In the preceding year, 1990, the Lark Quartet had commissioned his first String Quartet. This reversed genre proved an ideal medium for the

composer's characteristically intense fascination with the implications of traditional musical discourse. (His *String Quartet No. 2*, subtitled "musical instrumentalist," garnered a Pulitzer Prize in 1998.)

The *String Quartet No. 1* takes its name from the subtitle of its slow second movement: "musica celestis." This is also the name Kernis applies to what has become perhaps his best-known work to date. In the tradition of Samuel Barber's similarly extracted *Adagio for Strings*, *Musica Celestis* is an arrangement of that Quartet movement for string orchestra (with double bass added), completed in 1991.

Kernis ascribes his inspiration to the medieval concept of the music of the spheres, "which refers to the singing of the angels in heaven in praise of God without end." He cites his discovery of Hildegard of Bingen, yet *Musica Celestis* evinces a broader range of influences: from English pastoralism and the Barber Adagio to the radical simplicity of Beethoven's *Heiliger Dankgesang* from Op. 132—all framed by a sonority reminiscent of *Lohengrin*'s "silvery blue." A major harmonies.

Musica Celestis presents its basic material—"a simple, spacious melody and harmonic pattern"—in different lights as a theme and variations, framed by an introduction and coda. Particularly in its long-sustained climactic passage (which begins about two-thirds through, a ratio sanctioned by the classical "golden section"), Kernis emphasizes extremities of range (not just in the violins—in this passage even the cellos play notes high in the treble clef).

Just as the musical texture presents variations of the hymn-like basic melody, the near stasis of its Adagio opens into a quickening section of scalar ascents in the interior of the piece. Texture and tempo reveal the composer playing with fundamental paradoxes: between tension and resolution, basic diatonism and transient dissonance, and, finally, the conundrum of seeming change against an underlying permanence. The variations gradually deconstruct the theme so that only the ghost of its intervals remains (foreshadowing the thinning out of density that occurs in the *Second Symphony*). Kernis notes that here he was veering away from the theme itself "to emphasize different string colors and gradually lead toward an ecstatic, expressive view of Minimalism."

The 1988 work *Invisible Mosaic III* (Kernis first used the phrase in the context of a chamber work) seems more like a pocket symphony than a free-form tone poem. Indeed it looks ahead to the *Second Symphony* in its attempt to integrate orchestral textures, and even in some of its rhythmic patterns. Lasting only a bit over a quarter-hour, the score's call for a large orchestra decked out with a vast array of percussion suggests a young composer's bravura attempt to master the intricate art of instrumentation.

Kernis mentions a viewing of Ravenna's famed Byzantine mosaics as inspiration for *Invisible Mosaic III*. The impulse was not just the surface brilliance of their shining tesserae but their elaborate craftsmanship. Both aspects are apparent in the work's profusion of glittering textures and in the "joining work" that fuses wildly disparate sections into a larger, unifying architectural span. To oversimplify, the piece moves from an outburst of chaotic, primal energy into a finale of prolonged and majestically insistent E-flat tonality.

Hints of the Second Part of *The Rite of Spring* coexist with surreal fanfares and discernible traces from the composer's earlier forays into Minimalism. It features a Scherzo section with English horn and flute solo that specifically invokes the quicksilver playfulness (quite out of fashion at the time) of the brilliant "Queen Mab" movement from Berlioz's *Romeo and Juliet* Symphony. Everywhere, Kernis seems to know exactly what sort of sound he intends to evoke, inscribing his score with meticulous details (such as the small pane of glass heard shattering about 5 minutes in, right before the embedded Scherzo commences).

What holds the listener's interest is precisely how Kernis orchestrates his movement from point to point. The dynamism of the opening measures evokes the same kind of energy that Kernis endows with such an ominous character in the *Second Symphony*. Here, the effect is more purely coloristic---but beneath the flash of sound he traces rising scalar patterns that play a prominent role in the piece, becoming tamed into triadic arpeggios in the final pages of the score. The sudden, blazing triumph of its peroration seems to reinstate a romantic rhetoric of resolution and to call it into question at the same time by virtue of its blatant insistence.

Thomas May

"A portion of this essay was adapted from a note that originally appeared in the program book of the San Francisco Symphony."

The American conductor **Hugh Wolff** is among the leading conductors of his generation. He was born in 1953 in Paris of American parents. After graduating from Harvard, Wolff returned on a fellowship to Paris, where he studied conducting with Charles Bruck and composition with Olivier Messiaen. He then continued his studies in Baltimore with Leon Fletsher.

Wolff began his professional career as Associate Conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Washington under Mstislav Rostropovich in 1979. He then served as Music Director of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra from 1985 - 1992. His association with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra began with his appointment as its Principal Conductor in 1988; he held the position of Music Director from 1992-2000. Of this partnership, *The New York Times* wrote: "*The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, under the direction of Hugh Wolff, has developed an effortlessly polished sound...Mr Wolff shapes his interpretations with impeccable taste*". He has toured with the orchestra in the United States, Europe and Japan.

Hugh Wolff became Principal Conductor of the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra in September 1997. In 2003 Hugh Wolff extended his contract for a second time, which will see him at the helm of the orchestra until the end of season 2005/06. He has made several recordings with the orchestra, and has appeared at the Salzburg Festival, the Rheingau Festival and Mozart Festival in Würzburg, and in France, Italy and Estonia, as well as on a highly acclaimed three-week tour of Japan. *The Sunday Times* wrote of their recording of George Antheil's Symphonies Nos 1 & 6 "*the Frankfurt Radio SO under Wolff dazzles throughout*".

He appears regularly with all the major North American orchestras, including those of Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco and Toronto, and he has conducted leading ensembles in Canada, Australia and Japan. European engagements include appearances with the Leipzig Gewandhaus, NDR Hamburg, Philharmonia Orchestras and the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie, Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks, Oslo Philharmonic, Danish National Radio Symphony, Orchestre National de Lyon and Czech Philharmonic orchestras.

Wolff has an extensive discography on the Teldec label, with works ranging from Haydn to Stravinsky with the St Paul Chamber Orchestra and the Philharmonia Orchestra. His recordings for Decca include a disc of works by Aaron Jay Kernis with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (Argo label), and a disc with Jean-Yves Thibaudet and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. He has also recorded the Barber and Meyer Violin Concertos with Hilary Hahn for Sony Classical, which along with the disc of Antheil Symphonies 1 & 6, won a 2001 Cannes Classical Award. Wolff and his wife, Judith Kogan, have three sons: Alexander, Matthew and Aaron.



Photo credit: Kim Punt

Aaron Jay Kernis

Aaron Jay Kernis was born in Philadelphia on January 15, 1960. He began his musical studies on the violin; at age 12 he began teaching himself piano, and in the following year, composition. He continued his studies at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and Manhattan and Yale Schools of Music, working with composers as diverse as John Adams, Charles Wuorinen and Jacob Druckman. Kernis first came to national attention in 1983 with the acclaimed premiere of his first orchestral work, *Dream of the Morning Sky*, by the New York Philharmonic at its Horizons Festival.

One of America's most honored composers, Mr. Kernis received the coveted Grawemeyer Award in Music Composition (2002) for the cello and orchestra version of *Colored Field*, the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for his *String Quartet No. 2* ("musical instrumentalism"), and Grammy Award nominations for both *Air* and *Second Symphony*. Among his many other awards are the Stoeger Prize from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Rome Prize. He has become an especially familiar and much-admired presence in Minnesota's Twin Cities; in September 1993, he was appointed Composer-in-Residence for the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Minnesota Public Radio, and the American Composers Forum, and he returned in the fall of 1998 as New Music Advisor to the Minnesota Orchestra, a position he retains to this day. In 2003 he joined the composition faculty at Yale School of Music.

His music figures prominently on orchestral, chamber, and recital programs around the world. America's foremost musical institutions have commissioned his work, including the New York Philharmonic for its 150th Anniversary (*New Era Dance*) and the San Francisco Symphony (*Colored Field*, an English horn concerto for Julie Giacobassi). Other commissions include *Air* for violinist Joshua Bell; *Lament and Prayer*, a work for violin and string orchestra for Pamela Frank and the Minnesota Orchestra; a piano quartet (*Still Movement with Hymn*) for Christopher O'Riley, Pamela Frank, Paul Neubauer, and Carter Brey for American Public Radio; *Goblin Market* for narrator and ensemble, on a text by Christina Rossetti for the Birmingham [England] New Music Group; and *Double Concerto for Violin, Guitar, and Orchestra*, commissioned by the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Aspen Music Festival, and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra for Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg and Sharon Ishii.

Recent orchestral works included *Newly Drawn Sky* (2005) commissioned by the Ravinia Festival for James Conlon and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, *Color Wheel* written in 2001 for the Philadelphia Orchestra and the opening of the Kimmel Center. *A Concerto for Toy Piano and Orchestra* was created in 2003 for Margaret Leng Tan, the Singapore Symphony and Minnesota Orchestra, and in a chamber ensemble version for WNYC radio. New works were commissioned and premiered by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Lincoln Center Great Performers Series (for Renee Fleming), Dale Warland Singers, and the Rose Center for Earth and Space at the American Museum of Natural History.

Recordings of the music of Aaron Jay Kernis are available on Virgin Classics, Decca/Argo, Koch Classics, CRI, Nonesuch, Arabesque, Phoenix USA and New Albion. Decca/Argo, with which Mr. Kernis had an exclusive recording contract, released many of the works written between 1989 to 1996, including *Symphony in Waves*, *New Era Dance*, *Colored Field*, *Lament and Prayer* and this disc of the *Second Symphony* and other works.

Mr. Kernis' music is published by Associated Music Publishers, and since 2001 by AJK Music for which Boosey & Hawkes acts as administrating publisher.