

Symphony No. 7, “Symphonic Concerto”

William Bolcom

B. May 26, 1938, Seattle, Washington

Premiered by the Met Orchestra under the direction of James Levine, May 19, 2002, at Carnegie Hall, New York, N.Y.

Scored for multiple soloists including oboe, clarinet in B-flat, bassoon, three trumpets, trombone, violin, viola, cello and contrabass along with three flutes (third doubling on piccolo), oboe, English horn, clarinet in B-flat, bass clarinet, bassoon, contrabassoon, four horns, trombone, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, three percussionists (playing snare drum; tenor drum, tom toms, bass drum, cymbals, Chinese cymbals; crotales; glockenspiel; Thai gongs; snare drum; tambourine; triangle; and xylophone), with strings. (approx. 25 minutes).

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the National Medal of Arts, and named 2007 Musical America Composer of the Year, William Bolcom is one of today's leading musical voices and has taught at the University of Michigan since 1973. His musical influences are panoramic, ranging from the keyboard works of Louis Couperin to the vocal stylings of Argentinian tango-singer Carlos Gardel, from Mahler's Symphonies and Wagner's operas to Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag." While Bolcom began composing in a serial idiom, admiring the works of Pierre Boulez, his teacher Olivier Messiaen, and his friend Luciano Berio, his mature signature style obscures the boundaries between "serious" and popular, traditional and modern, European, American, and international. Another stylistic hallmark is his music's dramatic sense of gesture, both melodic and formal and often drawing upon literature and poetry to tell a story. This dramatic impulse culminated in three operas for Chicago Lyric (*McTeague* [1992], *A View from the Bridge* [1998], and *A Wedding* [2004]). Although echoes of rock, jazz, and Americana folk music may be heard at today's concert, it is this dramatic quality of Bolcom's music, rather than polystylistic mixture, that figures most prominently in his Seventh Symphony.

The symphony began with the ring of a telephone. Metropolitan opera conductor James Levine had called the composer to request a concerto for orchestra. Bolcom himself tells the story best:

"Jimmy began a list of instruments he would like me to feature - without names - just 'cellist,' 'clarinetist,' and the like. As I took it down, I paid particular attention to where each instrument fit in his list: those mentioned first, I decided, would be given the more important soloistic parts. A [list of] dramatis personae began to emerge as in a Shakespearean play, with prominent "characters" and smaller supporting parts. (In fact the piece, as I wrote it, began to feel like an opera for opera orchestra.) The whole became in my mind a Symphonic Concerto, in other words, a work with deeper formal overtones than the usual concerto."

The piece is performed in four movements, but three "Acts." In the first the listener meets the main characters - the four instruments Levine had mentioned first over

the phone - solo clarinet, solo trombone, solo cello, and solo string bass (often the whole bass section to help with acoustic balance). These are the first four voices heard during the piece and indeed it is not until bar sixteen that the full unison orchestra joins with an athletic atonal theme. (This burst is preceded by Thai gongs that will often serve to signal a shift in structure and harmony.) As the movement unfolds, solo parts for bassoon, timpani, flute, horn, viola, oboe, trumpet, piccolo, and violin appear. Indeed, basically every player in the orchestra gets the sonic spotlight during this work, including each individual player in the wind sections (second clarinet, fourth horn, etc.).

Rather than harmony, the opening is unified by gesture, with two “families” of characters emerging, roughly defined by the wind and string families. Bolcom’s solo writing is idiomatic and shows his intimate knowledge of each instrument’s capabilities, yet it is also rhythmically complex and virtuosic. The trombone and flute, for example, will be asked to flutter tongue and the strings will make extensive use of plucking pizzicato and portamento slides - each instrumental character bringing its distinctive voice to the fore. Yet, as he was writing for the players in one of America’s top orchestras, Bolcom seems to have been unconcerned with the incredible difficulty of the passagework.

Bolcom’s melodic gestures suggest emotional archetypes such as anger, joy, or (later) weeping. Musical material is shared among the characters: some agree while others quarrel. Relationships such as siblings at play or lovers may be suggested as the musical argument develops. The first movement ebbs and flows with dramatic changes in tempo and dynamic contrast as loud and soft alternate, ending with an explosive *fortissimo* pitch cluster.

Act II (subtitled “Conspiracy: Confrontation”) offers the dramatic action sequence of Bolcom’s symphonic opera. The composer describes this movement as amounting to a “war” between the orchestral families (think Capulets versus Montagues). Rather than a typical Italian tempo marking, such as *Andante con moto*, at the head of this movement Bolcom writes “Implacable (quarter = 72),” which suggests a stubborn inflexibility. The movement is made up of a series of apparent arguments often beginning with a thinner texture in which solo instruments and sections interject that builds to a climactic tutti with the entire orchestra. The pace of the conflict accelerates and at times one or the other family (winds or strings) dominates. Again the movement culminates with an explosive tone cluster (this time including ten of the twelve Western European pitches).

Bolcom originally intended for the second movement to go directly into a third and final Act, yet somewhat to his surprise he was compelled to create a mournful interlude, which made his three-movement concerto for orchestra into a four-movement symphony. Again, Bolcom’s own words explain this artistic shift best:

“Sometime in the summer of 2001 I felt a great, inexplicable need to interpose a very slow, mournful Interlude between the second and third “acts,” in which the main instrumental characters are in the background and two soloists, little-heard-from up to then, would be featured. The need for such a lamentation would appear to all of us the following September, while I was still working on Act II. I report this only because I’ve found that so many other artists felt the same mysterious, prescient dread as I did before the World Trade Center’s destruction.”

Although not intended as a 9/11 elegy, the third movement Interlude addresses in music some terrible tragedy that changes the course of the second movement’s battle and

transforms each solo character. The slow tempo, soft dynamic and predominantly string texture reverse the argument of the second movement. The bassoon introduces a lamentation theme, using a characteristic gesture of paired falling notes to suggest weeping. This theme will soon be picked up by the violins, while the oboe offers a variation. The entire orchestra then “weeps” before the texture dies away with solo double reeds accompanied by strings and a distant horn.

The fourth movement, Act III (Climax: Dénouement), picks up right where Act II ended - with a fortissimo pitch cluster and violent agitation. Yet under the influence of the Interlude, this dramatic conflict soon dissipates. Rather than a driving scherzo, we hear outbursts by smaller instrumental groupings separated by short then longer pauses. After a brief horn chorale, the solo cello offers a free, unmeasured solo and welcomes the string basses, trombone, and clarinet back into a quartet reminiscent of Act I. Solos and instrumental conversations recall the debate and lively play of the opening movement and evoke what the composer calls a “cycle of alternating self-congratulation and self-pity that only toward the end begins to grasp the deeper meaning of the tragedy.” To close the work, horns and strings sound the opening unison orchestral motif, leading to a final, powerful chord - now a triumphant D major triad affirming the conclusion of the Interlude instead of the dissonant clusters that had closed Acts I and II.

This is the Detroit Symphony Orchestra premiere of William Bolcom’s Symphony No. 7.

Program note by Mark Clague, Assistant Professor of Musicology and American Culture, University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance.