

LIAISONS 2020: Re-Imagining Sondheim from the Piano
Celebrating Stephen Sondheim at 90
Anthony de Mare, piano

Williams College – Brooks-Rogers Recital Hall - March 3rd, 2020

COMPOSER COMMENTS:

Stephen Hough • Pretty Lady

I was enchanted when I first heard “Pretty Lady” - its gentle melancholy, its quirky harmony, its graceful simplicity. When Anthony asked me to write something for the Liaisons project, I decided to take this song and reimagine it as a kind of Gymnopédie, in homage to Erik Satie.

Anthony de Mare • All Things Bright and Beautiful

“All Things Bright and Beautiful”, originally from *Follies*, was replaced, although Sondheim included sections of it in the ravishing orchestral prologue to the show. For my setting, I’ve dipped into this opening segment, gradually segueing into the song, using variation as the core technique throughout, with fleeting tributes along the way to Ravel, Liszt, Richard Rodgers, Olivier Messiaen and John Adams. Though the lyrics of the original song highlight the hopeful, optimistic dreams of Sally and Ben, the reality of their bittersweet relationship is also accented at times within the harmony.

Jeff Beal • Not A Day Goes By

“Not A Day Goes By” has all the qualities I adore in Sondheim – its unforgettable melodic and lyrical hook is on one level startlingly simple, on another full of sly harmonic and melodic invention. Its emotive qualities of deep love, coupled with the ache of a breakup, counterbalance each other perfectly. My arrangement explores the bones of the original, highlighting an almost Bach-like architecture in the source, so the listener can feel the “two hands” in play. Like so many of Mr. Sondheim's songs, it’s a monologue that also feel like a conversation between two parties – in dialog with another soul.

Paola Prestini • Always (after “I Wish I Could Forget You”)

I fell in love with “I Wish I Could Forget You” from *Passion* for its directness, its rich, surprising harmonies, and for the incredible story in which it’s embedded. For my adaptation I decided to inject motivic interpolations, taken from fragments within the original work, but chose not to study the piano reduction of the original orchestration. These fragments create a kind of simulacrum – a mapping on an original, without seeing the original, which creates a duality that I hope stays true to the lyrical directness in the work by Sondheim, in homage to his lush and passionate score.

Christopher Cerrone • Kiss Me

For “Kiss Me”, I had in mind a statement of Sondheim’s from an interview he did with another famous Steve a few years back: “Steve Reich is the king of the vamp.” I loved the cheeky idea of Reich’s work being “vamps” – moments before or after something happens in a play. Vamps stretch time, and Steve does nothing better. So in turn my “Kiss Me” turns a minute-long song into four. It opens with a long vamp before compressing for the song’s climax, before luxuriating again in another long vamp—a simple piano ostinato augmented by fragmented layers of electronic sound.

Jonathan Batiste • The Gun Song/The Ballad of Booth

The brilliance of both these compositions, and one of the most profound characteristics of Sondheim’s music, is the perspective. “The Gun Song” explores the vast manpower, craftsmanship, and design ingenuity that go into creating a gun, before it even enters the hand of its user. He continues by examining the impact that a gun has on the psyche of the person who possesses one. In the musical *Assassins*, he examines how people with guns have altered the course of history. He accomplishes this in large part by writing from the perspective of some of the most infamous assassins of our time, including John Wilkes Booth. In my arrangement, I transition lyric-less from “The Gun Song” into “The Ballad of Booth” and evoke the essence of each composition whilst using the words of Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, Malcolm X, Reverend Marti Luther King Jr., Presidents John F. Kennedy and Donald J. Trump to evoke our history of guns.

Ted Hearne • Another National Anthem

“Another National Anthem” is song for people dispossessed by the "American dream."

Mark Bennett • Everybody Says Don’t

“Everybody Says Don’t” is a compact and driving song about making a difference and overcoming the roadblocks naysayers put in your way. I thought it would be fun to springboard off of both Steve’s perfect repeating 16th note-based musical portrait of the “watch-cries” of those naysayers (“Everybody says DON’T...Everybody says STOP, Everybody says WAIT”) and the longer musical lines and water imagery of the B section lyrics (“This time a ripple, Next time a wave.”) morphing those earlier, rapid-fire 16th notes into an accompanying “wave” that carries us through the B section, the return of the A, and the coda.

Timo Andres • Nice is Different Than Good (after I Know Things Now)

Sondheim’s song “I Know Things Now” (from *Into the Woods*) seems to me to be largely about how it’s possible for memory to work against one’s own interests by repressing, distorting, and finally replacing itself with false versions. In my paraphrase, a new harmonic skeleton (rising open 5ths) generates a churning, refracted version of the original song’s melody; we hear the process of questioning and defamiliarizing one’s own memories. In the absence of lyrics, the music is imbued with the underlying weight and meaning of what is, in its surface qualities, a rather lighthearted song.

Marc Schubring • Rhapsody in Red (after “Goodbye for Now”)

Coming last to the roster I was happy to see that no other composer had chosen “Goodbye for Now” from *Reds*. My attempt was to write a prelude to Sondheim’s song, a rhapsody that paraphrases an artist’s life, finding one’s self, experiencing successes and failures, doubts and acknowledgment. It is no coincidence that my piece has 90 bars, which in no way means I was trying to describe Sondheim’s life musically. As a composer of musical theatre, I just needed a storyline. When you hear the last fermata imagine it would be continued by the original song of the Maestro.

Nico Muhly • Color and Light

The light-suffused chords that open *Sunday in the Park with George* are some of the best-spaced chords ever. I used to obsessively study them and play them and dream about ways to steal them. What is particularly astonishing about *Sunday*, too, is the way in which the “mechanical” music that drives the score gives way to an emotional immediacy with the characters instantly: it’s the best tension between the motor and the heart. This is clearest, I think, in “Color and Light”, a multi-part duet between George and Dot and, indeed, the orchestra. My homage to this piece tries to accentuate the angular music, making it somewhat dangerously unhinged, while always returning to the more supple landscape of the love story.

Steve Reich • Finishing the Hat – Two Pianos

“Finishing the Hat - Two Pianos” - for Stephen Sondheim is a rather faithful re-working of one of Sondheim’s favorite songs from *Sunday in the Park with George*, and incidentally the title of his recent book. Harmonically very close to the original, and melodically adding only occasional variations, my only real change is in the rhythm of constantly changing meters. This gives my two piano version a rhythmic character more in line with my own music and, hopefully, another perspective with which to appreciate Sondheim’s brilliant original.” For this performance, Anthony de Mare accompanies himself with his own recording of the Piano 2 part.

David Rakowski • The Ladies Who Lunch

Like all of the composers in The Liaisons Project, I was presented with the problem of reframing a song that is already perfect -- and in my case, my favorite Sondheim song, “The Ladies Who Lunch”. My solution was, to the best of my ability, to concentrate on the character’s deep sadness, thereby eschewing the song’s big finish for a slow, introspective one.

Kevin Puts • Being Alive

A composer I admire very much recently labeled me a “harmonist”, and I had to agree! So I guess it’s no surprise that it was Sondheim’s utterly unique harmonic vocabulary which drew me to his music as a young teen. As it gradually builds through a variety of pianistic textures, this take on “Being Alive” is a celebration of the song’s harmony, and my love for it.

The Liaisons Project features the following composers:

* - indicates Liaisons2020

Andy Akiho
Timo Andres *
Mason Bates
Jonathan Batiste *
Jeff Beal *
Eve Beglarian
Mark Bennett *
Derek Bermel
Jherek Bischoff
William Bolcom
Jason Robert Brown
Kenji Bunch
Christopher Cerrone *
Mary Ellen Childs
Michael Daugherty
Anthony de Mare *
Peter Golub
Ricky Ian Gordon
Annie Gosfield
Ted Hearne *
Jake Heggie
Fred Hersch
Stephen Hough *
Ethan Iverson
Gabriel Kahane

Phil Kline
Tania Leon
Ricardo Lorenz
Wynton Marsalis
Meredith Monk *
Paul Moravec
Nico Muhly
John Musto
Thomas Newman
Paola Prestini *
Kevin Puts *
David Rakowski
Steve Reich
Max Richter *
Eric Rockwell
Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR)
Frederic Rzewski
Marc Schubring *
Rodney Sharman
Duncan Sheik
David Shire
Bernadette Speech
Conrad Tao *
Mark-Anthony Turnage
Nils Vigeland

ANTHONY DE MARE is one of the world's foremost champions of contemporary music. Praised time and again by *The New York Times*, his versatility over the past three decades has inspired the creation of over 75 new works by some of today's most distinguished artists allowing him to develop a growing fan base that extends far beyond the traditional contemporary music audience. Known for his entrepreneurial performance projects over the years, he continues to expand the boundaries of the repertoire, which includes the speaking-singing pianist genre that he pioneered over 25 years ago. The *Chicago Sun Times* says "de Mare's passion and vision almost radiate from the stage ... he causes all involved – composers, performer and audience members --to think about how music is made and how we listen to it."

As creator, performer and co-producer of ***Liaisons: Re-Imagining Sondheim from the Piano***, this landmark commissioning and concert project has definitively brought the work of Stephen Sondheim into the concert hall, through the extraordinary re-imaginings of composers from across the musical spectrum. In addition to the Project's acclaimed national, U.K., Canadian, and Australian tours, his recording of the first 36 pieces in the compendium, released by ECM's prestigious New Series label, was cited on numerous "Best Of" lists in 2015 and was included as a winner of the 2016 Grammy Award for Classical Producer of the Year. In addition, Mr. de Mare was recently featured on NPR's "All Things Considered" and on HBO's documentary "Six by Sondheim". The *San Francisco Chronicle* declared that "this irresistible new CD set — is a little short of breathtaking ... many of the composers give de Mare plenty of opportunities for virtuoso showing off — which he grabs with gusto. The whole undertaking is a triumph."

In honor of Sondheim's 90th birthday in 2020, de Mare has extended the Project under the title "***Liaisons2020***", bringing the total compendium to 50. Announced composers include Timo Andres, Jonathan Batiste, Jeff Beal, Mark Bennett, Christopher Cerrone, Ted Hearne, Stephen Hough, Meredith Monk, Paola Prestini, Kevin Puts, Max Richter, Marc Schubring, and Conrad Tao. A national tour will continue through 2021 with performances at the 92nd Street Y in NYC, UCLA's Royce Hall, Ravinia, Williams College (Sondheim's alma mater), Maverick Concerts, Green Music Center at Sonoma State, University of Iowa, Oregon Center for the Arts at SOU, among others. Another U.K. tour is also in the works.

The adaptability of his programming to traditional classical, jazz and theater spaces speaks to the range of de Mare's versatility. His performances over the years span five continents and his discography of over twenty recordings includes works by Ives, Cowell, & Harrison, Cage and Meredith Monk, Astor Piazzolla, Frederic Rzewski and many others. Since his debut with Young Concert Artists, his accolades and awards have included First Prize and Audience Prize at the International Gaudeamus Interpreters Competition (The Netherlands) and The International Contemporary Piano Competition of Saint-Germain-en-Laye (France). He gave his Carnegie Hall debut at Zankel Hall in 2005.

A Steinway Artist, he currently is Professor of Piano at Manhattan School of Music and New York University. He also serves as new music curator for the Sheen Center for Thought and Culture in NYC.

STEPHEN SONDHEIM wrote the music and lyrics for Saturday Night, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, Anyone Can Whistle, Company, Follies, A Little Night Music, The Frogs, Pacific Overtures, Sweeney Todd, Merrily We Roll Along, Sunday in the Park with George, Into the Woods, Assassins, Passion and Road Show as well as the lyrics for West Side Story, Gypsy and Do I Hear A Waltz? and additional lyrics for Candide. Anthologies of his work include Side by Side by Sondheim, Marry Me A Little, Putting It Together and Sondheim on Sondheim. For films, he composed the scores of "Stavisky," co-composed "Reds" and wrote songs for "Dick Tracy" and the television production "Evening Primrose." He co-authored the film "The Last of Sheila" and the play Getting Away With Murder. Mr. Sondheim is on the Council of the Dramatists Guild, having served as its president from 1973 to 1981. His collected lyrics with attendant essays have been published in two volumes: "Finishing the Hat" (2010) and "Look, I Made A Hat" (2011). In 2010 the Broadway theater formerly known as Henry Miller's Theatre was renamed in his honor.