

Derek Bermel

"With a background in jazz and rock as well as classical music, the New York-based Bermel is an eclectic with wide-open ears."

Toronto Star

DEREK BERMEL

List of Works

INTRODUCTION

For Derek Bermel, the human voice – or, more generally, language and the yearning to communicate – is the doorway to composition. His music is filled with vocal inflection. Choruses of wah-wahing trombones are everywhere and it's easy to hear the gospel and soul influences in the works of this very singular composer, surely the only one on the contemporary scene who has spent time transcribing Stevie Wonder's crazily melismatic vocal on "Village Ghetto Land."

But as much as Bermel's music mimics the voice, at times in wildly humorous ways, he also goes beyond that to communicate in a much broader sense. Drawing on the most unlikely source materials – the sighs and moans of jazz or soul, or the ornamental inflections that pepper Bulgarian folk songs – he lifts them up, turns and inspects them, answers them from a distance, varies them, and builds up thickening textures, line upon line, echoing and transforming all of it, before reducing the storm to a spare, iridescent haze. And there's another thing: unlike many contemporary composers, Bermel recognizes a good tune and knows how to write one.

Born in 1967 and raised in Manhattan and nearby New Rochelle, Bermel, who now lives in Brooklyn, has assimilated a range of influences, from Monk to Messiaen; from Dolphy to Debussy; from the Beatles to Bartók; and from Richard Rodgers to the rapper Rakim. He has served as artistic director of the Dutch-American arts group TONK as well as singer-keyboard player in the New York-based rock

band Peace by Piece. He has studied the Lobi gyil xylophone in Ghana with master player Ngmen Baaru, and clarinet in Bulgaria with Nikola Iliev, a legendary virtuoso in the Thracian tradition. On the classical side, his mentors include Henri Dutilleux and Louis Andriessen, as well as Andre Hajdu (who helped fuel his interest in Jewish and Arabic folk music) and William Bolcom (with whom he shares a love of jazz). If that isn't enough, Bermel the composer has a parallel career as a clarinet recitalist and soloist. His many performances of his clarinet concerto *Voices* include appearances with the Los Angeles Philharmonic conducted by John Adams, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and at the Beijing Modern Music Festival.

Turning Variations for piano and orchestra, composed in 2006 and dedicated to Dutilleux and pianist Christopher Taylor, provides an ideal introduction to Bermel's world. He begins with a simple hymn-like tune (Randy Newman should set words to it), which becomes the subject of a set of variations and the springboard for all sorts of orchestral imaginings. Asian gongs enter the landscape, then vanish, as do traces of gospel, and a Gottschalk-like rag. Sound fields stretch and deflate or rub against each other, while Bermel plays with hazy firefly effects or introduces an über-Romantic (and entirely diatonic) outburst or turns the orchestra into a giant pentatonic xylophone, of the sort he studied in a village in northwest Ghana. Inspired by a lifetime of unorthodox listening and study (at least for a "classical" composer), he is, in this piece and many others, able to find points of intersection among musical traditions and influences, reconciling them through his own voice, creating music that is at once challenging and accessible.

Let's focus on that voice, literally. I attended a concert of Bermel's music by San Francisco's Adorno Ensemble that took an interesting turn. During a Q&A session with the audience, Bermel sat down at a piano and, in a soft falsetto, sang the gorgeous melody that runs through *Soul Garden*, his gospel-influenced work for solo viola and string quintet, composed in 2000 on a commission from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. In that falsetto rendering lies a key to Bermel's music: he has internalized his source material, understands it on a basic level as song. In *Soul Garden*, that melody, ringing with Gershwin and played by the viola, is answered by a riffing

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cello: gospel counterpoint. And then the sounds grow elastic, melting into the glossolalia of a black church on Sunday morning, the strings ranging through quarter-toned vocal effects via the composer's precise and varied use of glissandi. There are flashes of Romanticism here, too, and the music travels to some far-out abstracted places, but it keeps coming home to the church, with a pleasure-filled sashay.

In *Slides*, Bermel strips back his interest in African-American vocal expression to rudiments. Commissioned by the New Jersey Symphony, which premiered the 16-minute piece in 2003, it is an orchestral working out of his fascination with vocal gestures – the swoop, the glide, the groan, the jazz singer's "fall off" from a melodic phrase.

"Resignation to Alarm", the first movement, creates conversation and ever denser argumentation, often hilariously, between the instruments and sections. "Bridge of Sighs", the second movement, isolates several of those Sarah Vaughan-like melismas, set like jewels in the muted, midnight-jazz mood created here. Bermel writes that "Saw/See", the third movement, is based on the flow of rap lyrics. I hear the virtuoso metric manipulations of a big band, filtered through the vocalized avant-angularity of Eric Dolphy.

Voices, a concerto for clarinet and orchestra (composed in 1997), begins in similar territory: "Id" references the improvised "conversations" that Dolphy recorded with bassist Charles Mingus in the early '60s. With this foundation, Bermel conjures a world from sliding pitches – a street-corner conversation with voice-like squawks, murmurs, shouts, growls and guffaws. It segues to "She Moved through the Fair", inspired by the traditional Irish song of that name, and here we enter a gentler world, lyrical and softly ululating, like a set of uilleann pipes (yet another instrument which Bermel has studied). Finally, there is "Jamm on Toast", which finds the drummer's ride cymbal leading the orchestra through a funk jam-out. The score asks the musicians to play "Phat and juicy", which must be a first in the classical repertory.

While *Voices* evokes the spirit of improvisation, *Three Rivers* (commissioned by WNYC Radio and composed in 2001) integrates Bermel's vernacular compositional talents with actual improvisation. Three rhythmic streams operate, at times flowing separately, at other times concurrently. The playful, jazzy toying with pulse is coupled with Bermel's layering of



themes. The "lugubrious funk" that opens the piece – more "talking" instruments, played in subterranean registers – saunters about like a drunken dinosaur, then gets pitted against whirling, mechanical outbursts of piccolo and vibraphone. Improvisational interludes open up the textures in a loft-jazzy way, and, bit by bit, through systematic accretion, Bermel builds a daffy-yet-serious sound world that, for me, tips its hat to composer and reed player Anthony Braxton, one of Dolphy's heirs.

Another sort of idiomatic authority flows through *Migration Series* for jazz ensemble and orchestra, commissioned for the American Composers Orchestra and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra through a Music Alive residency grant and premiered at Lincoln Center in 2006. Inspired by Jacob Lawrence's set of 60 paintings about the Great Migration of African-Americans from rural south to urban north, it unfolds in five movements with three connecting interludes and is dedicated to trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, leader of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and a soloist at the premiere.

This deeply evocative work opens with a four-note ostinato, over which a trumpet sings a wistful song. We soon encounter those wah-wahing trombones, the movement of a train, gathering steam amid call-and-response conversations, and then a memorable gospel ballad, sweetened by strings to recall the sunshine-soul songs on old Marvin Gaye and Archie Shepp LPs. There are jubilant clashing voices; warm echoes of Mingus and Ellington; stretched out tempos, reminiscent of dub or hip-hop; and mad bebop figures alternating with quiet, gleaming memories of the south as the migration nears its end.

During one of the interludes Bermel even throws in some Thracian breakouts for the clarinet. Then again, his *Thracian Echoes*, a 20-

minute orchestral work from 2002, includes “talking” strings more commonly found in his jazz-inspired works. His language echoes from work to work, in other words; the landscape changes, but that quality of the human voice, swooping and sighing, remains.

In *Thracian Echoes*, Bermel seizes on the way in which Thracian folk music often comments upon itself; there are repeating elements in songs, tails on the ends of phrases, bits of melody that seem to look back at what came before. The work monumentalizes this phenomenon, so that various types of “echoes” emerge through counterpoint and harmony. There is a duality in the piece, too, as it captures the near-maniac quality of Bulgarian dance music along with the melancholy of those famed Bulgarian women’s choirs with their close harmonies.

Tied Shifts, commissioned for eighth blackbird in 2004 with funds from the Greenwall Foundation, builds on another element of Thracian music: its way of tying melodic notes, even lightning-fast embellishments, across bar lines. The result is a blurring of the meter, which, to Western ears, seems to shift from measure to measure. The work’s first movement is madly motoric and quasi-minimalist: those embellishments, obsessively repeated, become melodic cells from which new embellishments keep growing. The second movement revolves around a great hymn, derived from the opening material, but slowed down. There is a “rubbing” of opposed harmonic fields, so the hymn takes on an in-between-ness, the feeling of the blues. But it’s the majesty of the song that stays with you once *Tied Shifts* has ended.

For *Golden Motors*, his collaboration with poet Wendy S. Walters, Bermel has composed some three dozen songs to tell the story of workers at an imaginary Detroit auto plant during the early 1980s. Love breaks out. A murder happens. The economy fails. And Bermel captures it all in tunes that draw on his love of gospel, Motown, country, pop, and Broadway. Scored for 12-piece orchestra, *Golden Motors* has developed under the auspices of New York’s Music-Theatre Group. As of this writing, it awaits a full production – it will be fascinating to see how Bermel extends his reach here and in future works that bring together the many facets of his musical soul.

Richard Scheinin

(Richard Scheinin is classical music and jazz writer for the San Jose Mercury News, California)

CHRONOLOGY

1967

Born in New York City, USA. Raised in Manhattan and New Rochelle

1985-95

Studies at Yale University with Michael Tenzer, and at University of Michigan with William Bolcom and William Albright

1991

Awarded a four-year Javits Fellowship from US Dept. of Education

1993

William Albright premieres *Two Songs from Nandom* for organ at the American Guild of Organists National Convention

1994

Dust Dances for orchestra, premiered by Norwalk SO as winner of the Quinto Maganini Prize “Making Score” programme for young composers. Semi-finalist in Masterprize competition in 2001

Composer-in-Residence with Banff Opera Program, Canada

1995-96

Subsequent studies on a Fulbright Fellowship in Amsterdam with Louis Andriessen, and with Henri Dutilleux at the Tanglewood Music Center. Diverse studies also include ethno-musicology and orchestration with André Hajdu in Jerusalem (1989-90); Thracian folk style in Bulgaria (2002); uilleann pipes in Dublin (1998); caxixi in Brazil (2003) and Lobi xylophone in Ghana (1992)

1996

Turning for piano premiered in Paris by Christopher Taylor

Co-founds Dutch-American multi-disciplinary collaborative arts ensemble TONK, along with guitarist Wiek Hijmans and poet Wendy S. Walters

1997

Continental Divide for large ensemble commissioned and premiered by Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble as winner of the Harvey Gaul Prize

Awarded NYFA Artists Fellowship

Turning awarded Brian Israel Prize from the Society for New Music

1998

Premieres his own clarinet concerto, *Voices*, in Carnegie Hall with the American Composers Orchestra under Tan Dun. Has since performed it with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, the Albany and Kalamazoo Symphonies, BBC SO in London, the LA Phil (under John Adams) and the Tianjing SO (as part of the 2007 Beijing Modern Music Festival)

Collaborates with UK choreographer Sheryl Wray and her company JazzXchange on *Messengers*, conducting and performing his own music

1999

Founding clarinetist of Music from Copland House, the acclaimed resident ensemble at Aaron Copland’s New York home, now restored as a unique creative center for American music

Awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship

Forms Brooklyn-based band Peace by Piece, featuring Bermel as bandleader, singer, songwriter. Have released two albums to date “Peace by Piece” (2000) and “The Elements” (2004)

Recipient of a Ford Foundation Conducting Award; conducts Cleveland Chamber Orchestra and Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble in *Continental Divide* and other works

2000

Soul Garden for viola and string quintet commissioned and premiered by Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

Natural Selection for baritone and ensemble, commissioned by Faber Music Ltd for its Millennium Series, Bermel was nominated by Nicholas Maw. Premiered at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival by Julian Tovey, Ensemble 10:10 and Clark Rundell

Signs publishing agreement with Peermusic Classical New York
Resident composer at Yaddo (subsequent residency in 2004)

2001

Awarded Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome

Conducts premiere of *Three Rivers* for large ensemble, a WNYC commission, in The Kitchen, New York City

Founding director of the New York Youth Symphony's "Making Score" programme for young composers

2002

Awarded a five-week Music Alive residency with the Albany SO
Full-length disc of his chamber music, "Soul Garden", is released to much acclaim on the CRI label (now available from New World Records, NWCR895)

The Sting for narrator and orchestra, to a text by the composer, premiered by the St Louis SO and David Amado

The Ends, a tongue-in-cheek orchestral encore, premiered by National Symphony Orchestra and Leonard Slatkin

Thracian Echoes for orchestra, commissioned and premiered by Westchester PO and Paul Lustig Dunkel

2003

Slides for orchestra commissioned and premiered by New Jersey SO and Carlos Kalmar

Tag Rag for orchestra commissioned and premiered by Pacific SO and Carl St. Clair

Composer-in-Residence with the Aspen Music Festival and School, *Catcalls*, a three-movement brass quintet, premiered

Guest composer/lecturer at Conservatory Universita Federal da Bahia in Salvador, Brazil

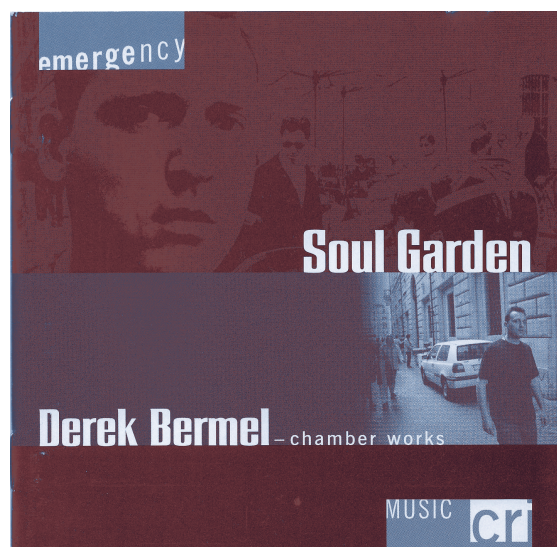
2004

Language Instruction premiered by various chamber groups as part of a Fromm Foundation commission.

2005

Tied Shifts commissioned and premiered by eighth blackbird who subsequently tour it throughout the USA

Twin Trio commissioned and premiered by the Flute/Clarinet Duo Consortium, consisting of 17 US/Canadian groups



In Tangle, a brass fanfare, commissioned and premiered by the Tanglewood Music Center

Guest composer/lecturer at Rotterdam Conservatorium

Resident composer at Civitella Ranieri in Umbria

2006

Philharmonia Orchestra give a Composer Portrait on London's South Bank as part of its "Music of Today" series. Includes UK premiere of *Soul Garden* and Bermel performing *Thracian Sketches*

Turning Variations for piano and orchestra, commissioned by the American Pianists Association, premiered at its National Conference by Christopher Taylor with the Indianapolis SO and George Hanson

A Child's War, a song-cycle for childrens' voices to texts by the composer's father, premiered by the Young People's Chorus of New York City and Francisco Nuñez

Elixir for orchestra premiered in Carnegie Hall by American Composers Orchestra and Steven Sloane

Migration Series for jazz band and orchestra, premiered by Wynton Marsalis, Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and the American Composers Orchestra, under Steven Sloane

Andrew Russo premieres *Fetch* for speaking pianist, libretto by Will Eno

Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters

2006-9

Serves as Music Alive Composer-in-Residence of the American Composers Orchestra

2007

Golden Motors, a musical to a libretto by Wendy S. Walters, produced by Music Theatre Group (USA)

Performs John Adams's *Gnarly Buttons* with the LA Phil, under Adams's baton

Composer-in-Residence with the ADORNO ensemble, San Francisco Bay Area

Soul Garden, version for string orchestra, premiered in Australia, Kathryn Lockwood as soloist

Guitarist Alan Thomas premieres first four études from *Elektrokosmos* at the Output Festival in Amsterdam

Summer Composer-in-residence at the Louisiana Museum (Denmark), where Figura Ensemble performs *Cabaret Songs*

Awarded Paul Boylan Alumnus Award from University of Michigan, conducts *Dust Dances* with University SO

2008

Orchestral disc "Voices" to be released by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, to include *Dust Dances*, *Voices*, *Thracian Echoes* and *Elixir*

Sidman Fellowship, awarded by the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Michigan

Commission from Guarneri Quartet, *Passing Through*, marks their farewell season and is toured throughout USA

Commission for chorus and orchestra (text by Wendy S. Walters) from Pittsburgh Symphony, for 250th Anniversary of the city

Composer/Performer in Residence at Moab Music Festival, Utah

Co-commission from American Composers Orchestra and Promusica Chamber Orchestra. Dennis Russell Davies to conduct NY premiere in Carnegie Hall (2009)

Awarded 2008 Trailblazer Award by the American Music Center

2009-11

Residency with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra

STAGE WORKS

Golden Motors (2007)

music-theatre in 2 acts

Libretto: Wendy S. Walters (Eng)

In preparation

ORCHESTRAL

Dust Dances (1994)

orchestra

Duration 10 minutes

3(II=picc,III=af).3(III=ca).3(II=Ebcl, III=bcl).3(III=cbsn) – 4331 – timp – perc(3): xyl/susp.cym/slapstick/mcas/ratchet/chi.cym/tgl/whistle/flexatone/gong/wdbl/mar/cowbell/chi.cym/glsp/BD/anvil/vib/mark tree/wind chime/conga/3 tom-t – pno/(cel) – harp – strings

FP: May 1998, Norwalk, CT, USA: Norwalk Symphony Orchestra/Jesse Levine

Score and parts for hire

Elixir (2006)

orchestra

Duration 9 minutes

3.1.ca.1.bcl.1.cbsn – 4.2.2.btrbn.1 – perc(3/4): chinese cym/siz cym/2 rainstick/deep nipple gong/2 mark tree/2 wind chime – 2 harps – theremin – elec bass – strings

Commissioned for the American Composers Orchestra by the esteemed music

patron Betty Freeman

FP: 3.5.06, Carnegie Hall, New York, NY, USA: American Composers Orchestra/

Steven Sloane

Score and parts for hire

Ends, The (2002)

orchestra

Duration 6 minutes

3(III=picc).2.2.3 – 4331 – timp(=flexatone) – perc(3): SD/tgl/glsp/cyms/susp.cym/BD/xyl – harp – pno – strings

Commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra

FP: 19.9.02, The Kennedy Center, Washington, DC, USA: National Symphony

Orchestra/Leonard Slatkin

Score and parts for hire

Migration Series (2006)

jazz band and orchestra

Duration 32 minutes

Jazz ensemble: 5 reeds, 4 tpt, 3 tbn, pno, elec gtr, upright bass, drums

Orchestra: 0.1(=ca).0.1 – 4001 – timp – perc(2): vib/mar/glsp/susp.cym/

2 cowbells/tgl/sleighbells/conga/tamb/cabassa/clave/rainstick/mcas/Brazilian shaker/caxixi/egg shakers – harp – strings

Commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra/Music Alive

FP: 16-18.11.06, Rose Hall, Lincoln Center, New York, NY, USA: Wynton Marsalis/

Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra/American Composers Orchestra/Steven Sloane

Score and parts for hire

Slides (2003)

orchestra

Duration 17 minutes

2(II=picc).2(II=ca).2.2 – 4331 – timp – perc(2): flexatone/conga/ratchet/tamb/xyl/cow bell/cuica/2 slide whistle(high + low)/vibraslap/wdbl/lion's roar/slapstick/gong in tub of water/guero/drum kit (hi-hat/BD/SD/susp.cym/3 tom-t)/tgl – harp – strings

Commissioned by the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra

FP: 6, 7 & 9.3.03, New Jersey Performing Arts Center, Newark, NJ, USA: New Jersey Symphony Orchestra/Carlos Kalmar

Score and parts for hire

Soul Garden (2000/arr 2007)

solo viola and string orchestra

Duration 13 minutes

FP: 26.6.07, Toowoomba, QLD, Australia: Kathryn Lockwood/Camerata of St John's

Score and parts for hire (also see under Chamber)

Dust Dances

'The bold, brisk composition, based on the marimba-like gyil music of Ghana, was an invigorating, percussive delight; still, its true alliance felt less West African than American with nods to Bernstein, Ives and Copland. And for all its microtonal passages and motoric, Minimalist phrasing, Dust Dances had refreshing charm – hardly the un-approachable stuff so much modern classical music gets accused of being.'

The Memphis Commercial Appeal

Elixir

'... fresh and offbeat... Bermel is a musician of almost incredible breadth and productivity – a virtuoso clarinetist and apparent stylistic packrat who remembers and incubates everything he hears. While Elixir is informed by the shimmering "spectral music" that flourished in France in the 1970s, it also sounds distinctively American and decidedly maritime, with shore sounds and a constant rocking that outdoes Debussy's En Bateau in its motility.'

The Villager, New York City (Michael Clive), May 2006

The Ends

'... cute, funny and brilliantly orchestrated – the longest, most elaborate bowing out in music after Beethoven's Fifth.'

Washington Post (Tim Page), September 2002

Migration Series

"The work opens with a moody episode built atop a repetitive descending bass riff, with plaintive harmonies and sinewy solo lines. When he scores bluesy brass chords, Mr. Bermel spikes them effectively with gnarly modernist dissonance. There were riveting passages that combined choralelike harmonies with unhinged rhythms; a bleakly comic episode in which the brass players from the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra evoked a wondrous gaggle of squawking, whining and pleading human voices."

New York Times (Anthony Tommasini),

18 November 2006

Slides

'The 15-minute work, which provokes many a smile with its humorous whimsy, is like a Jackson Pollock painting, where random splotches of color become, in their anti-organization, a kind of form in itself.'

Newark Star-Ledger

Sting, The (2001-2)

narrator and orchestra
(See under Vocal)

Tag Rag (2003)

orchestra

Duration 4 minutes

picc.1.2..1(=Ebcl).bcl.asax.bsn.cbsn – 2221 – perc(2): BD/field drum/SD/xyl/sml & lrg wdbl/conga/tgl/susp.cym – pno – elec gtr – strings

Commissioned by the Pacific Symphony Orchestra

FP: 28.1.03, Costa Mesa, CA, USA: Pacific Symphony Orchestra/Carl St. Clair

Score and parts for hire

Thracian Echoes (2002)

orchestra

Duration 21 minutes

picc.2(II=picc).2.ca.3(I=Ebcl, III=cl in A).2.cbsn – 4331 – timp – perc(2): 2 susp.cym/glsp/SD/2 tamb/ch/xyl/wdbl/conga/BD/tgl/vib/cabassa – pno/cel – strings

Commissioned by the Westchester Philharmonic Orchestra

FP: 23.11.02, SUNY Purchase, NY, USA: Westchester PO/Paul Lustig Dunkel

Score and parts for hire

Turning Variations (1995/2005-6)

piano and orchestra

Duration 20 minutes

2(II=picc).2(II=ca).2(II=Ebcl).2(II=cbsn) – 2221 – timp (4 drums) – perc(2): glsp/crot/vib/ch.ba/xyl/flexatone/gongs/tgl/sleigh bells/susp cym/chinese cym/cyms/tam-t/vibraslap/ratchet/latin cowbell/cast/low wdbl/cabassa/lion's roar/tamb/SD/timbale/4 tom-tom/conga/BD/sml BD – harp – strings

Commissioned by the American Pianists Association, through the Christel

Award, for its 2000 Fellow, Christopher Taylor

FP: 21.4.06, American Pianists Association National Conference, Indianapolis, IN,

USA: Christopher Taylor/Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra/George Hanson

Solo part, full score and parts for hire

Voices (1997)

clarinet and orchestra

Duration 18 minutes

picc.2.2.ca.2(II=Ebcl, III=bcl).asax.2.cbsn – 4331 – timp – perc(3): glsp/flexatone/anvil/tamb/cabassa/sleigh bells/ratchet/button gong/tuned gong/lion's roar/mar/lrg BD/susp.cym/cuica/cowbell/agogo bell/clave/slapstick/button gong/police whistle/xyl/drumkit/cast/vibraslap – pno – harp – elec gtr – elec bass – strings (14.12.12.12.8)

Commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra with funding by the Cary Trust

FP: May 1998, Carnegie Hall, New York, NY, USA: Derek Bermel/American

Composers Orchestra/Tan Dun

Solo part, score and parts for hire

LARGE ENSEMBLE

Continental Divide (1996)

chamber ensemble of 17 players

Duration 11 minutes

1(=picc).1(=ca).1(=bcl).1(=cbsn) – 1111 – pno(=cel) – harp – elec gtr – perc(1): xyl/SD/ch.cym/gongs/hi-hat/wdbl/tamb/whip/flexatone/ratchet – 2 vln.vla.vlc.db (=elec bass)

Commissioned by the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble

FP: March 1997, Roelof Shalom Hall, Duquesne, PA, USA: Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble/Ed London

Score and parts for hire

Hot Zone (1995-6)

2 singers (optional) and chamber ensemble of 17 players
(see Vocal)

Natural Selection (2000)

baritone and chamber ensemble of 15 players
(see Vocal)

Tag Rag

'The snappy, pop inspired Tag Rag was good fun, full of merry percussion effects and playing around with a short riff that the composer lifted from an Amsterdam street musician.'

The Los Angeles Times (Mark Swed)

Thracian Echoes

'A world premiere work destined to lead a long, illustrious life. [Bermel] has lived in these Bulgarian rhythms and melodies, woven them far into the complex texture of his composition, and as a result, created a powerful work of art that speaks a language all its own and is built to last.'

The Journal News, Westchester County (John Aiello)

Voices

'... a concerto for clarinet, with the composer playing the solo part brilliantly, was fun, music with brash humor, clever scoring, evocations of elegiac Irish bagpipes in the slow movement, and Led Zeppelin in the finale... A truly exceptional talent.'

The New York Times (Anthony Tommasini), 28 May 1998

'Derek Bermel's Voices, a concerto for clarinet and orchestra, is a crowd-pleaser that is likely to enter the repertory of every orchestra that had a representative in the audience. Part of the appeal lies in the virtuosity and charisma of the composer, who was soloist... There doesn't seem to be anything Bermel can't do with the clarinet; at one point he took off the top, and played it like an ebony trumpet. But the appeal also lies in the music, which adds dimensions of wit and intelligence to melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic elements of immediate popular appeal. This is the kind of piece that makes your day.'

The Boston Globe (Richard Dyer)

Continental Divide

'The high point of the evening... a clever, jazz-influenced confection by Derek Bermel – winner of PNME's 1996 Harvey Gaul Composition Contest... fun, fanciful, and brief.'

The Pittsburgh Post Gazette

'Bermel's Continental Divide makes no claims to monumentalism, instead shooting musical accents off long notes and exuding jazzy energy. Hints of lyricism peek through the textures, as do passages of gleeful cacophony. The composer led a crisp account of his inviting nine-minute piece.'

The Cleveland Plain Dealer

Three Rivers (2001)

chamber ensemble of 12 players (including improvisers)

Duration 14 minutes

1(=picc).0.2(I=asax, II=bcl).1 – 0110 – perc(1): vib/xyl/wdbl/3 metals/SD/whistle/ratchet – drum kit – keyboard – vln.vlc.db

Commissioned by WNYC Radio

FP: 1-3.3.01, The Kitchen, New York City, NY, USA: Kitchen House Blend/Derek Bermel

Score and parts for hire

CHAMBER ENSEMBLE

Catcalls (2003)

brass quintet (1211)

Duration 10 minutes

Commissioned by the Aspen Music Festival and School

FP: July 2003, Aspen Music Festival, CO, USA: Aspen Contemporary Ensemble

Score and parts PE62282-726 on special sale

Coming Together (1999)

clarinet and cello

Duration 6 minutes

Commissioned by Merkin Hall

FP: May 1999, Merkin Hall, New York, NY, USA: Derek Bermel/Fred Sherry

Set of parts PE62047-781 on special sale

In Tangle (2005)

brass and percussion

Duration 3 minutes

3331 – perc(2): tom-t/crash cym/susp.cym/tubular chimes

Commissioned by the Tanglewood Music Center

FP:10.7.05, Tanglewood Music Center (Ozawa Hall), Lenox, MA, USA: Fellows of

the Tanglewood Music Center/Barry Tuckwell

Score PE62226-730 and parts PE62225-732 on special sale

Language Instruction (2003)

chamber ensemble of 4 players

Duration 15 minutes

cl – pno – vln.vlc (performance also requires a stage director)

Commissioned by the consortium of Contrasts Quartet, New York; Auros Ensemble,

Boston; Mallarmé Chamber Players, North Carolina; SOLI Chamber Ensemble, San

Antonio, TX, USA

FP: 1.12.03, Merkin Hall, New York, NY, USA: Contrasts Quartet

Score and parts for hire, or special sale

Manifest Destiny (1998)

baritone and chamber ensemble of 5 players

(see Vocal)

Mountains (1998)

baritone and chamber ensemble of 5 players

(see Vocal)

Mulatash Stomp (1991)

violin, clarinet, and piano

Duration 7 minutes

Written for the Broadview Trio

FP: May 1990, Kyoto, Japan

Score and parts PE62044-784 on special sale

Oct Up (2005)

double string quartet (with two optional percussion)

Duration 8 minutes

perc(2): caxixi – 4 vln.2 vla.2 vlc

Commissioned by Fontana Chamber Arts

FP: 15.7.05, Fontana Chamber Music Festival, Kalamazoo, MI, USA: Pacifica Quartet

& Quorum Quartet

Score and parts on special sale

Old Songs for a New Man (1996-7)

baritone and chamber ensemble of 6 players

(see Vocal)

Three Rivers

Three Rivers by Derek Bermel, a new-music composer who has dipped into rock and African music, finessed the distinction between big band and chamber ensemble. As the themes overlapped, grappled, fused and pulled apart, the earthy beat and angular melodies made the music swagger like a more abstract “West Side Story”.

The New York Times (Jon Pareles), 7 March 2001

Coming Together

‘This duet is genuinely strange – and from me that’s a compliment. The two instruments moan and wail throughout, with extensive use of glissando. The result is a keening of two voices, truly human and something beyond at the same time, funny and eerie.’

Fanfare Magazine (Robert Carl), February 2003

‘A piece which is at times (surely intentionally) laugh-out-loud humorous, it is difficult to conceive of this as anything other than a ‘tour de force’ of performance art, where the gestural vocabulary is writ large in a musical equivalent of slapstick.’

Tempo (John Kersey), April 2003

Language Instruction

‘... an amusing full ensemble work based on the rhythms and gestures of language tapes. The clarinet was, in effect, the voice on the tape, and the other instruments were the students – variously willing or difficult, competent or bumbling – who must repeat the phrases. Mr. Bermel spins this interaction into an increasingly chaotic fantasy that would have been perfectly at home on a program with Berio’s Sequenza III.’

The New York Times (Allan Kozinn), 8 December 2003

Mulatash Stomp

‘Hungary is at the heart of Mulatash Stomp for violin, clarinet, and piano, an early work and one of the most attractive on the disc. The ‘mulatas’ is an all-night Hungarian party, and to bring some American influence to the piece Bermel adds a techno rhythm. Clearly Mozart is also a guest, for a theme from the ‘Jupiter’ symphony makes much of the running as the piece goes on.’

Tempo (John Kersey), April 2003

Passing Through (2007)

string quartet

Duration 6 minutes

Commissioned by Norma and Edward Dworetzky for the Guarneri String Quartet

FP: 9.2.08, Krannert Center, University Musical Society in Ann Arbor, MI, USA:

Guarneri String Quartet

Score and parts in preparation

Soul Garden (2000)

solo viola and string quintet (2 vln, vla, 2 vlc)

Duration 13 minutes

Commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

FP: April 2000, Alice Tully Hall, NY, USA: Paul Neubauer (vla)/Chamber Music

Society of Lincoln Center

Score and parts PE62092-765 on sale

String Quartet (1992)

Duration 7 minutes

FP: March 1992, Ann Arbor, MI, USA: Jeremy Williams, Megan Reiter, violins,

Young Park, viola, and Amy Cooper, cello

Score PE62101-757 and parts PE62102-758 on special sale

Tied Shifts (2004)

chamber ensemble of 6 players

Duration 15 minutes

fl.cl – perc(1): mar/xyl/susp.cym/(siz.cym)/high & low metal sheets/brake drum/

soft shaker/wdbl/large caxixi/tgl/bongos/tom-t – pno – vln.vlc

Commissioned by eighth blackbird with funds from the Greenwall Foundation

FP: 29.1.05, Columbus ,OH, USA: eighth blackbird

Score and parts for hire

Twin Trio (2006)

flute, clarinet and piano

Duration 18 minutes

Commissioned by the Flute/Clarinet Duos Consortium with very generous support from the Brannen-Cooper Fund

FP: August 2005, National Flute Conference, San Diego, CA, USA: Jill Felber/Paul

Bambach/Diane Frazier Cross

Score and parts PE62171-784 on sale

Wanderings (1994)

wind quintet

Duration 10 minutes

1111 – 1000

Commissioned by the New York Youth Symphony

FP: March 1995, Weill Recital Hall, New York, NY, USA: members of the New York

Youth Symphony

Score and parts PE62036-710 on sale

INSTRUMENTAL

Dodecaphunk (1992)

piano

Duration 3 minutes

FP: March 1993, Ann Arbor, MI, USA: Karen Walwyn

Score on special sale as movement 4 of Five Funk Studies

Elektrokosmos (2007)

electric guitar

Duration 10 minutes (as at February 2008) (work in progress)

FP: 30.9.07, Output Festival, Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Alan Thomas

Score in preparation

Fetch (2004)

speaking pianist

Duration 8 minutes

Text: Will Eno

Commissioned by Andrew Russo with funds from the James S. Marcus Foundation

FP: September 2004, 'Say What?' Festival, The Cutting Room, New York, NY, USA:

Andrew Russo

Score on special sale

Soul Garden

'... represents the confluence of two main-streams – the romantic-modern waters that originated in Europe and the blues-jazz-gospel waters that flowed from African-American communities. The most striking and pervasive effect in the piece is the use of sliding notes, or quarter-tones, to emulate the vocal inflections of African American music. But "effect" isn't quite the right term because these inflections are not separable, conceptually or compositionally, from the core musical ideas: Bermel's highly complex but fully controlled approach to harmony and rhythmic structure... nearly every moment is both appealing and challenging, familiar and strange. It is music by a composer who thinks deeply about where music comes from, how it is made and what it is for.'

San Antonio Express-News (Mike Greenberg), July 2004

'Like many of his pieces, this essay for solo viola and a string quintet (a quartet with an extra cello, in this configuration) draws freely from several musical worlds. The music's surfaces are painted in the coloration of blues and gospel. Glimpses of blues-based pop turn up as well...

The work's underpinnings, though, use rhythmic and harmonic techniques more germane to contemporary concert music, and the tensions between those languages give the music its poignancy. The bluesy turns of the solo viola line, played with a warm tone and an almost vocal inflection by Paul Neubauer, suggest a simple, direct approach to tonality. Yet the quartet writing, with its hazy, tonally ambiguous shimmer, pulls in the opposite direction. The piece moves quickly: its 13 minutes hardly overstay their welcome.'

The New York Times (Allan Kozinn), 31 March 2004

'In Soul Garden Bermel shows a more serious side, and it is possible to detect a strong blues and gospel influence in the viola's opening lament, from which everything else in the piece is derived. There is much in the contrast between lyricism and activity here to interest the listener, with the 'rub' (as Bermel calls it) of combined European diatonicism and African pentatonicism – of course at the heart of the gospel tradition, with its heightened use of controlled dissonance.'

Tempo (John Kersey), April 2003

Five Funk Studies (2004)

piano

Duration 12 minutes

1. Step; 2. Lullaby; 3. Jaunt; 4. Dodecaphunk; 5. Kontraphunktus

See individual movement titles for details of premiere performances

Score PE62176-501 on special sale

Kontraphunktus – A New Goldberg Variation (2004)

piano

Duration 3 minutes

Commissioned by the Gilmore International Keyboard Festival

FP: April 2004, Kalamazoo, MI, USA: Gilbert Kalish

Score on special sale as movement 5 of *Five Funk Studies*

SchiZm (1994)

oboe and piano, or clarinet and piano

Duration 9 minutes

(Ob/pno) FP: May 1994, Ann Arbor, MI, USA: Harry Sargous/Anton Nel

(Cl/pno) FP: 1995, Alma College, MI, USA: Derek Bermel/Christopher Taylor

Piano score and part PE62059-346 on sale

Sonata Humana (1991)

bass clarinet and piano

Duration 13 minutes

Written for Robert Tuttle and Lynn Kompass

FP: October 1992, Midwest Composers' Symposium, Oberlin, OH, USA: Robert

Tuttle/Lynn Kompass

Piano score and part for hire

Theme and Absurdities (1993)

solo clarinet

Duration 4 minutes

FP: February 1993, Ann Arbor, MI, USA: Derek Bermel

Score PE62093-345 on special sale

Thracian Sketches (2003)

solo clarinet

Duration 8 minutes

FP: July 2003, UFBA, Salvador, Brazil: Derek Bermel

Score PE62124-345 on special sale

Three Funk Studies (1991)

piano

Duration 5 minutes

FP: December 1991, Ann Arbor, MI, USA: Soo-Ryeon Kim

Score on special sale as movements 1-3 of *Five Funk Studies*

Turning (1995)

piano

Duration 16 minutes

Commissioned by Christopher Taylor

FP: June 1996, Studio Raspail, Paris, France: Christopher Taylor

Score PE62050-501 on sale, 'Carnaval Noir' movement available separately on

special sale, PE62231-501

Two Songs from Nandom (1993)

organ.

Duration 4 minutes

Commissioned by William Albright

FP: July 1993, AGO National Convention, Washington DC, USA: William Albright

Score PE62100-525 on special sale

CHORAL

Kpanlongo & Pete Pete (West African Folk Songs) (1994)

TTBB or SATB chorus

Duration 3 minutes

Translations by Amma Serwah and Richard Na-Ile

Commissioned by the University of Michigan Chamber Choir

FP: February 1995, Hill Auditorium, Ann Arbor, MI, USA: University of Michigan

Tied Shifts

'With a background in jazz and rock as well as classical music, the New York-based Bermel is an eclectic with wide-open ears. The first movement of his two-movement opus began with violin and cello playing the same phrases over and over but that deceptively simple beginning developed into a fast and energetic interplay of all six players, the music developing an engaging rhythm.

Like an increasing number of composers these days, influenced at least in part by the minimalists, Bermel doesn't resist giving his music a sequential logic that makes it easy to follow. But *Tied Shifts* turned out to be anything but slavishly predictable, with its second movement incorporating hymn-like material and echoes of Bulgarian folk music.'

The Toronto Star, January 2005

'Bermel, an important emerging New York composer, has his own brand of fusion. Jazz and the klezmer clarinet find their way into his music. In *Tied Shifts*, he explored Bulgarian folk styles as a 21st-century Bartók might. One witnessed not so much folk tunes, but the comet's tail of folk tunes. Smeared rhythms, harmonies and instrumental combinations are left in tunes' wakes, and they light up the sky. It's exciting original music, and eighth blackbird gave it an exciting and original performance.'

Los Angeles Times (Mark Swed), October 2005

'... pulsed its way through the Balkans, chock full of ungainly difficult clarinet runs, raw fiddling and crazy stop-time rhythms, songs growing out of embellishments, which grew into more songs. It all ended with a tolling hymn, part rock song, part Beethovenian exaltation.'

San José Mercury News (Richard Scheinin), February 2005

Wanderings

'... *Wanderings* is keen in sonic imagination.'

The Cleveland Plain Dealer

SchiZm/Theme & Absurdities

'Most conspicuous was composer-clarinetist Derek Bermel. He played his *Theme and Absurdities*, flaunting its stubborn atonality and braying glisses that led finally to a tonal arpeggio broken off by an appoggiatura out of the introduction to "Zarathustra." Bermel... with pianist Claudio Martinez-Mehner, emphasized both the lyricism and liveliness in his own *SchiZm*.'

The Village Voice

VOCAL

At the End of the World (2003)

high voice and piano

Duration 5 minutes

Text: Nicole Krauss (Eng)

Commissioned by Meet the Composer and the American Symphony Orchestra League

FP: March 2002, Albany, NY, USA: Barbara Hannigan/Dogs of Desire/David Alan Miller

Score PE62286-202 on special sale

Cabaret Songs (1998)

soprano and piano

Duration 10 minutes

Black Hat; Lullaby; At the End of the World; See How She Moves; Valentines Shuffle

Score PE62287-202 on special sale

Cabaret Songs (1998/2007)

soprano and chamber ensemble of 3 players

See How She Moves (solo voice); Black Hat; Spider Love*; One Fly*; Old Ones; Fine;

Dog*; Mushrooms; Airport Poem; At the End of the World; Ma's Kitchen

cl(=bcl) – perc(1): vib/amplified dobro/mar/glsp – gtr(=db+dobro)

Commissioned by the Figura Ensemble

FP: August 2007, Louisiana Museum, Denmark: Figura Ensemble

Score on special sale (Peermusic Classical & Faber Music Ltd*)

God's Trombones (1998)

narrator, 3 (or 4) trombones, and percussion.

Duration 13 minutes

Text: James Weldon Johnson (Eng)

Commissioned by Jeremy van Hoy

FP: April 1998, Merkin Hall, New York, NY, USA: Damon Gupton (narrator)/Jeremy

van Hoy/James Markey/Mark Horner (trbns)/Pablo Rieppi (perc)

Score PE62288-871 on special sale

Hot Zone (1995-6)

2 singers (optional) and chamber ensemble of 17 players

Duration 6 minutes

Text (optional): (Dagari, Ghana)

1111.asax.tsax – 1110 – pno – kybd – perc(1): drumkit//4 tam-t/cyms/hi-hat/BD/

brake drum/african bell/fire bell/lion's roar/tamb/vibraslap/wdbl/whistle/

mark tree/tgl – 2 vln.vla.vlc.db(=elec bass)

Commissioned by the Albany SO ('Dogs of Desire')

FP: October 1996, Schenectady Community College, Schenectady, NY, USA: Dogs of

Desire/David Alan Miller

FP (chamber version): May 1996, Koninklijk Conservatorium, Den Haag,

Netherlands

Score and parts for hire

Natural Selection (2000)

baritone and chamber ensemble of 15 players

Duration 17 minutes

Text: Wendy S. Walters and Naomi Shihab Nye (Eng)

fl(=picc).ob(=ca).cl(=bcl).bsn(=cbsn) – 1.1(=flhn).1.0 – perc(1): drumkit (5 tpl.bl/3 tom-t/SD/

ride cym/hi-hat/BD/gong/susp.cym/tgl/cowbell/cast (or vibraslap)/ratchet/

flexatone/anvil (or brake drum)/vib/xyl/glsp/t.bell) – pno – harp – 2 vln.vla.vc.db

Commissioned by Faber Music Ltd for its Millennium Series

FP: 25.11.00, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, St Paul's Hall,

Huddersfield, UK: Julian Tovey/ Ensemble 10:10/Clark Rundell

Published by Faber Music Ltd, full score 0-571-52066-9 on sale, vocal score and parts

for hire. Vocal score also on special sale from the Hire Library

Nature Calls (1999)

baritone and piano

Duration 12 minutes

Text: Wendy S. Walters, and Naomi Shihab Nye (Eng)

Commissioned by the Cactus Pear Music Festival

FP: July 1999, San Antonio, TX, USA: Timothy Jones

Published by Faber Music Ltd, score on special sale from the Hire Library

Three Funk Studies

'... propulsive, raw and damnably difficult: imagine Thelonious Monk crossed with Prokofiev.'

The New York Times (Anthony Tommasini),

13 April 2004

Turning

'Turning is a major piano work, about 20 minutes long. On the surface it looks like another set of character pieces, but in fact it's also a set of variations on its little pseudo-hymn tune. And its grander dimensions allow Bermel to combine more diverse elements... which shows him off to greatest strength.'

Fanfare (Robert Carl), February 2003

Hot Zone

'The best works display a high level of craftsmanship while at the same time conveying the spirit of a given idiom... Derek Bermel's Hot Zone features virtuosic, dynamic orchestrations and colors via heavily syncopated tutti rhythms which contrast nicely with melismatic solo writing for English horn and cello. The use of 5/4 also keeps Bermel's African-inspired grooves from getting stale.'

New Music Connoisseur, New York

Nature Calls & Three Songs on Poems by Wendy S Walters

'Bermel set the texts inventively [Nature Calls/ Three Songs on Poems by Wendy S. Walters]. Vocal lines moved effortlessly from song to speech to halfway between. The scores even seemed to ask for the dramatic movement and gestures that Timothy Jones used to make his performances almost magical.'

Houston Chronicle (Charles Ward), 23 January 2001

Natural Selection

'Composer Derek Bermel may not be a household name yet, but if there is any justice in the music world, he soon will be. His Natural Selection, a song cycle based on poetry of Wendy S. Walters and Naomi Shihab Nye, is a group of animal portraits that achieves a dramatic complexity that belies its commonplace subject. Baritone Timothy Jones was extraordinary. He connected so completely with the text that it was easy to overlook the challenges of the score.'

Chicago Tribune (Michael Cameron), May 2006

Old Songs for a New Man (1996-7)

baritone and chamber ensemble of 6 players

Duration 11 minutes

Text: Wendy S. Walters (Eng)

tpt.trbn – perc(1): susp.cym/mar/bells/glsp/tom-t/mark tree/hi-hat/gong/cowbell/ratchet/tpl.bl/anvil (or brake drum)/flexatone/ride cym/SD – pno – vln.db

Commissioned by the Stony Brook Contemporary Chamber Players, Gilbert Kalish, director

FP: April 1997, Miller Theater, New York, NY, USA: Kimako X. Trotman/Stony Brook Contemporary Chamber Players/John Tighe

Score and parts for hire

See How She Moves (1997)

solo medium voice

Duration 2 minutes

Text: Wendy S. Walters (Eng)

FP: June 1997, Lincoln Center Director's, New York, NY, USA

Score PE62289-201 on special sale

Sting, The (2001-2)

narrator and orchestra

Duration 15 minutes

Text: Derek Bermel (Eng)

3(III=picc).3(III=ca).3(II=cl in A + Ebcl, III=bcl+ssax or tsax).3(III=cbsn) – 4331 – timp – perc(3): tgl/crot/susp.cym(small & large)/flexatone/mark tree/ratchet/wdbl/tpl.bl/slapstick/xyl/vib/mar/glsp/chime/SD/BD/anvil/lion's roar – pno – harp – strings

Commissioned for the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra by the officers of Enterprise Rent-a-Car and The ASCAP Foundation

FP: 17.3.02, St Louis, MO, USA: Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra/David Amado

Score and parts for hire

Three Songs on poems by Wendy S. Walters (1992-3)

baritone voice and piano

Duration 9 minutes

Written for Timothy Jones and Carol Isaac

FP: March 1994, Banff Centre for the Arts, Canada: Timothy Jones/Carol Isaac

Score PE62290-203 on special sale

SYMPHONIC WIND BAND

Ides March (1990, revised 1995)

symphonic wind band

Duration 4 minutes

picc.2 fl.2 ob.3 cl.bcl.2 bsn.2 asax.tsax.bsax – 4 hn.3 tpt.2 trbn.btrbn.euph.tuba – timp – perc(3): SD/chimes/susp.cym/tgl/tamb/xyl/cyms/wdbl/whip/BD/gong

FP: March 1995, Hill Auditorium, Ann Arbor, MI, USA: University of Michigan

Symphony Band/H. Robert Reynolds

Published by Faber Music Ltd, score & parts 0-571-56488-7, score 0-571-56504-2 on sale

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Portrait Concert

(Soul Garden; Thracian Sketches &

Twin Trio): Philharmonia Orchestra; Queen

Elizabeth Hall, London, 4 April 2006

'The earlier concert in the free "Music of Today" series focused on the American composer and clarinettist Derek Bermel, whose diverse output shows just how many types of music can impact on a contemporary musician, from classical to jazz, from R&B to hip-hop, as well as innumerable folk traditions. Thracian Sketches, which Bermel played himself, is a steadily rising crescendo of solo clarinet hyper-activity, drawn from folk songs he transcribed in a region of Bulgaria. If Bartók is the obvious model, there's something distinctive not only in the piece's use of indigenous rhythms and melodic shapes but also in its increasingly manic attitude. Even more striking was Soul Garden for viola and string quintet, whose origins lie in African-American gospel music. With soloist Rachel Roberts emulating the vocalism of an alto gospel singer answered by the church baritone represented by an ensemble cellist, the result lies in the tradition of Aaron Copland's popular Americana in its immediacy and sense of respectful parody.'

The Guardian (George Hall), April 2006

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