

Music



A Big Year for a Full-Service Composer

By MATTHEW GUREWITSCH

AS an applicant to the composition program at the Paris Conservatoire in 1960, the Seattle native William Bolcom churned out his regulation fugue and sonata movement on cue. But asked to present what he was working on, he offered “One Little Bomb and Boom!,” a jaunty waltz from his cabaret opera “Dynamite Tonight,” modeled on novelty numbers from the time of World War I. The lyric was by the New York poet Arnold Weinstein, who blended classical learning and jive with wicked panache.

“This is when everyone’s talking about Boulez and Stockhausen and the total chromatic,” Mr. Bolcom said recently from home in Ann Arbor, Mich., “and here’s this popsy little number extolling the virtue of bombs. It was so different. It was popular theater. Messiaen was there. I’ll never forget the bemused look on his face.”

Olivier Messiaen, Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen: composers and teachers of towering intellect, grandest of the panjandrums of a new music for the 20th century. Mr. Bolcom took in their gospel with eager ears, but he was no disciple. A far more kindred spirit was a composer Mr. Bolcom had worked with in the United States, Darius Milhaud,

by then an elder statesman of the avant-garde. Milhaud wore his learning lightly, wrote with ease in styles both popular and arcane and was never above blending jazz, saudades or other exotic flavors into his spicy brew.

In 1965, when Mr. Bolcom submitted his String Quartet No. 8 for the composition prize at the conservatoire, it placed second. He later learned, he said, that only a sort of spiritual tune in the finale had cost him the top honor.

But Mr. Bolcom's voice, like Milhaud's, is most his own when he is speaking in tongues. His setting of William Blake's "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" — for a symphony orchestra of Mahlerian proportions, a slew of soloists and massed choruses — is encyclopedic in its embrace of styles, from the mandarin modernism of his student years to barroom ballads and reggae and other vernacular modes.

The great American maverick Charles Ives comes to mind, having intimated immortality in collisions of hymns, parlor songs, military marches and arias. But Ives left his "Universe Symphony" a shambles. Mr. Bolcom managed to complete his maximum opus to huge acclaim.

The much-decorated American composer John Corigliano, Mr. Bolcom's friend and contemporary, regards his fluency with a kind of awe. "I envy Bill's chops," Mr. Corigliano said recently in New York. "He's got such skills, such great compositional techniques. Music flows out of him the way it flowed from Mozart."

Mr. Bolcom demurs a little. "Does it matter how long music takes coming out?" he asked. "I just work a lot. Pieces germinate in my mind a long time, and then they come out rather quickly." (The three-hour Blake cantata, which took shape over nearly 30 years, was the exception.)

In May, Mr. Bolcom turns 70, and the many performances in his honor this year include what might seem an almost boastful number of premieres. The Guarneri Quartet and the Johannes Quartet joined forces this month for his new half-hour Octet: Double Quartet. Next month the New York Festival of Song introduces "Lucrezia," based on the sex farce "Mandragora" ("Mandrake Root") by Machiavelli, better known as the author of "The Prince."

"A zarzuela as imagined by the Marx brothers," Mr. Bolcom called "Lucrezia," referring to the popular Spanish variety of light opera. He had the action transposed from Florence, around 1500, to a "contemporary cuckoo-land Argentina that allowed me to write fandangos and tangos."

On a grander canvas is his Symphony No. 8, nearly 40 minutes long, a choral setting of prophetic texts of Blake, which scholars study like the kabbalah. James Levine conducts the premiere with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Tanglewood Festival Chorus at Symphony Hall on Thursday and the New York premiere at Carnegie Hall on March 3.

“The passages I’ve chosen are the clearest and least burdened with cosmology that I could find,” Mr. Bolcom said. “I’ve been looking at these texts since I fell in love with them at 17. I thought that maybe they would make more sense sung than spoken. Singing spreads them out. When I read these poems aloud, they make a weird kind of sense. But people have gotten all ‘aw, shucks’ about reading poetry aloud today. It’s like listening to a bank draft. T. S. Eliot was like that. Blake is kind of a gloss on Handel. His prophecies are the arias of their time.”

For decades, Mr. Bolcom has been a full-service composer, turning out some 300 symphonic works, chamber pieces and songs. Other larger pieces include the musical “Casino Paradise,” a compulsively hummable latter-day “Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny,” and three full-fledged operas, all commissioned by Lyric Opera of Chicago and shot through with the spirit of American popular song. The expressionist shocker “McTeague” (from the same Frank Norris novel that inspired Erich von Stroheim’s silent film epic “Greed”) might be Mr. Bolcom’s “Wozzeck”; “A View From the Bridge” (after Arthur Miller’s tragedy of a common man), his “Cavalleria Rusticana”; “A Wedding” (after the Robert Altman film), his “Nozze di Figaro.” All three have been revived by Indiana University Opera and Ballet, in Bloomington; “A Wedding” was heard earlier this month.

A glory of that score is the instrumental writing, which magically evokes bird song, reflections in a mirror and the hazy consciousness of a morphine addict. (A recurrent score marking is “fairy-light.”) Social dances of all kinds weave through as infectiously as the waltzes of “Der Rosenkavalier.” The cast of characters is large, yet each principal is etched sharply: among them, the physician who made his fortune buying and selling art by Pollock, de Kooning and Kline, whose names become his witty refrain. (Miller and Altman helped adapt their scripts, but the principal credit for all three librettos goes to Weinstein, also the lyricist for “Casino Paradise.”)

Mr. Bolcom’s Symphony No. 9 is on the way, commissioned by 11 university concert bands. And his pace may soon accelerate, this being his final semester teaching composition at the University of Michigan, where he has worked since 1973.

Throughout his career, Mr. Bolcom has been an academic, and few labels scare listeners off as effectively as that one. Previous university affiliations had been neither happy nor productive for him. “In a world where the draft didn’t exist, I might happily have gone freelance in New York as a theater composer,” Mr. Bolcom said, “but when the Selective Service hounds came after me, academic jobs saved me from having to kill Vietnamese (or help kill them). Michigan, where being a complete musician involves keeping up your performing abilities, was healthful in a way many places have not been in my estimation for young composers. Despite academic pressures, we have to remain musicians first and foremost, not verbal apologists for a particular aesthetic.”

Mr. Bolcom’s vocal writing is catnip to singers of many persuasions, from his third wife, Joan Morris, a cabaret mezzo-soprano, to the veteran tenor Plácido Domingo, who gave the first performance of Mr. Bolcom’s song cycle “Canciones de Lorca” in 2006.

“Not only is Bill’s music wonderfully colorful,” Mr. Domingo said recently. “It is also completely logical because his melodic invention is based on the cadence of the sentence. Like the great song composers of the past, Bill is guided by the words. From personal experience, I can say that singing Bolcom’s music is a joy.”

As a performer, Mr. Bolcom has proved similarly inspirational. A demon at the keyboard, he made his name during the ragtime revival of the late 1960s with his nimble hands and sparkling improvisations. In the mid-1970s, the concert and recording team of Bolcom and Morris began exploring American popular song, ranging forward and back from the vaudeville period. Combining archival research and oral history, Mr. Bolcom and Ms. Morris’s scholarship is impeccable, but what audiences take away from their performances is their contagious delight in discovery.

Steven Blier, of the New York Festival of Song, said recently that Mr. Bolcom and Ms. Morris’s example changed his life. “My ethos about what it means to be onstage in front of people, to give people something with intelligence and heart and culture and depth, that really comes from Bill and Joan,” Mr. Blier said. “Their performances were always so free. The spigot was just open. You could see what the song meant when it was new, what it means now and what it just meant.”

Mr. Bolcom’s catholicity of taste set an example too. “Music doesn’t have to be thorny or academic or frankly unpleasant to be worthy,” Mr. Blier said. “Bill has always encouraged me not to feel guilty about loving all kinds of music but simply to follow my own loves to discover things and share them with people, which is what I think he did. He’s been a beacon.”

In the worldview of Isaiah Berlin, Mr. Bolcom knows just where he stands. “I’m the ultimate fox,” he said, “not a hedgehog. I can’t help it. I don’t know one big thing. I know lots of little things.”