The New Criterion

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# To praise the prize?

*by Daniel Asia*

*Andrew Norman and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project.*
*Photo: Dina Rudick*

Prizes in the arts are a curious phenomenon of modern times. As far as I know, neither Beethoven nor Leonardo received any. Bach pretty much worked for pay and in praise of God. Ives said "prizes were for boys". Yet today it is hard to turn around without seeing some new prize for an artistic production or product. In music there are older ones like the Rome Prize, usually given to younger composers to provide time just for writing. The award is given on the basis of a body of work that suggests promise. In contrast, the Pulitzer Prize in Music, first given in 1943 to William Schuman, is for a specific work first performed in a given year which, in the estimation of the judges, rises above all the others. As with all human enterprises, besides taste and aesthetic judgment, politics and professional clubbiness are inherent to the process.

The Grawemeyer Awards, with one in music, were founded by H. Charles Grawemeyer, industrialist, entrepreneur, astute investor and philanthropist, at the University of Louisville in 1984. Each recipient receives $100,000 (The Pulitzer by contrast is a paltry ten grand.) The first

award was presented in 1985 and, like the Pulitzer, it is for a single work rather than for life-long achievement.

Like most prizes or awards, some selections will be better than others. Anomalies will sneak in, and there certainly are, have been, and will be, one-piece composers. Sometimes a fine work is created early on with nothing much to follow. And sometimes works are selected that just aren't that great but represent something of the zeitgeist of the time. This is all reflected in the compositions of the last two winners of the Grawemeyer Award for Music, Andrew Norman and Hans Abrahamsen, and their respective pieces, *Play* and *let me tell you why.*

Andrew Norman, youngish at thirty-nine, has a good educational pedigree. He attended the University of Southern California and then the Yale School of Music, and now is back on the faculty at USC. He has had numerous high-profile commissions and performances, and was a Rome Prize winner. He is judged quiet and introverted, and possesses a good degree of self-doubt, an unusual quality for a composer these days.

*Play* is an ambitious work for orchestra. It is brash, energetic, and a bit vulgar. While not a symphony at all, it is in three quasi movements, called "Levels 1, 2, and 3," after the language of video games. There are sections and materials that are up to the discretion of the conductor, who handles more than just the niceties of tempi and interpretation, but also decides on placement of materials in time. Thus while the work is in closed form—it has a predetermined beginning, middle, and an end—it has sections that are constructed, during the performance itself, and thus are "open" in form. In the wonderful recording by the Boston Modern Orchestra Music Project, conducted by Gil Rose, it clocks in at forty-six minutes.

Norman says "that the symphony orchestra is for me an instrument that needs to be experienced live. It is a medium as much about human energy as it is about sound, as much about watching choices being made and thoughts exchanged and feats of physical coordination performed as it is about listening to the melodies and harmonies and rhythms that result from those actions." It is a funny idea, really, harkening back to the 1970s notion that music is really about social interaction rather than the ideas expressed as music. Championed by such composers as Christian Wolff, it put process before artistic object.

"The title of each movement winks at the world of video games . . . as if each depicted a scenario of ascending difficulty." Video games are thus the new muse, a new paradigm for the arts. I think them a form of entertainment and not an art. My students tell me they are on their way to becoming the latter, but I find this assessment unlikely. If the medium is the message, it is superficial and banal.

Norman is clear about the architecture of the work, describing it as being driven by both individual melodic lines and a broad chorus of diffuse melodic motion—it is both "goal-oriented" and "open-ended" in video-game terms. But Norman can't have it both ways. He wants to create a symphonic structure with material and procedures that are more suited to a Roadrunner and Coyote cartoon.

*Play* is a huge tempest about things that just don't matter. It is ironic and flat, perfect for those without any relationship to music of more than the immediate past, or through a connection to the superficial world of pop music. It is caught in the present with all of its clichés and banalities.

Norman has craft, chops, and musical instincts that can't be taught. He needs now to find something to say. To do so, he must drop his guard and find something richer than the world of video games as his muse. He needs to find himself, and grow into a composer who has something important to tell us. Then he will produce music worth listening to a second time. *Play* isn't that.

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Hans Abrahamsen is one of the leading composers of the European generation in their mid 60s. Danish by nationality, his output is small but well considered. He too is of good pedigree, having studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, and with the noted composers Per Nørgård and György Ligeti. He is known for taking compositional "breaks" to ponder his next step and also for having a sense of self-doubt. His style is modern, not post-modern. He aims for emotional depth and range, yet his music is restrained, a little chilly.

*let me tell you why* (*lmtyw*) was written in 2013 for the vocal phenomenon Barbara Hannigan and the Berlin Philharmonic, and is based on texts by Paul Griffiths which are taken from the eponymous novel written in 2008. The texts are vague, but then again they are supposed to be. As Tom Payne wrote in the *Guardian*,

> In the book he (Griffiths) tells Ophelia's story, using only the words that Ophelia speaks in Hamlet. But Ophelia doesn't say all that much, and much of her most interesting vocabulary comes from the snatches of old songs she chants as she heads for the willow-shaded brook. Griffiths pulls off some fine tricks, and shows how much of her speech can be chopped up and made to sound like Beckett, or the Beatles (she quotes *Love Me Do* verbatim), or Oscar Wilde. There are the rhythms of recognizable nursery rhymes throughout.

There is play going on of a tongue-in-cheek sort. The libretto is enigmatic, wan, allusive, dull, juvenile, and feckless. It is suggestive of what might be called "Eurosclerosis," a boredom with, and a going through the motions of, life. We are not far from the world of *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*.

Part I of the piece is an exploration of words, memories, and then music and time. The themes of Part II are music and night, then light and glass (as a reflector of light, and now in relation to the lover). Part III moves from the lover to snow/winter—to an almost soullessness, but one of a begrudging drudgery, with the final line "I will go on."

Hannigan's voice and vocal line drive the music. Hers is an exquisite voice, which can be light or dark, gentle or richly dramatic. Her almost non-attacks on the highest of notes must be heard to be believed. Her instrument is not always used to its best advantage though, as throughout the cycle Abrahamsen uses an adaptation of a Monteverdian technique: a rebounding on one note, which is

not an attractive gesture. The Symphony of the Bavarian Radio, under the direction of Andris Nelsons, plays with a full range of colors and dynamics. Only sometimes are they ponderous or heavy-handed.

Abrahamsen's language is that of an extended tonality: there are frequently tonal references and even certain pitches that become central. If there is one underlying problem with this work, however, it is that it aims for movement but has trouble supplying it because there is no harmonic motion to be found. For example, in movements that are fast and suggest quick motion, what actually is heard is a fast gyration, or a trembling in place; the body is all aquiver but the feet just can't seem to move.

The composition begins and ends with high piccolos, harp, celesta, and strings that are in a descending scalar pattern, but the instruments are out of sync and "wrong" notes are occasionally interspersed. It sounds familiar, but just a little off-kilter. Movement is slow, almost glacial. To words that have a Glassian lack of connection or meaning, the music is calm, introspective, and ethereal. Texts are mostly presented syllabically, and the atmosphere is one of lightness combined with deep gravity, as if the world presented is made solely of the highest atmosphere and hardest ground below. There is maybe something in the mist. Movement Two, about music and memory, starts fast, burbling and babbling, dappled and scintillating. The second of its three verses is slow and ethereal, with the register moving from high to low, bright to dark. The vocal line is not particularly memorable, although Hannigan makes some gorgeous swoops. The third section, all about time ("Time of now . . . time turned and loosed, time bended. . . . Time blown up here and there"), is again slow. It is bleak, portentous, and tedious.

The Lover comes into play in Part II. The first movement is quite short at only two minutes, and is again slow and desultory. (This musical tone makes a particularly odd setting for the final line of text: "your face is my music lesson and I sing.") In the second movement, by contrast, the texts suggest joy and ecstasy, but the vocal line is skittish. The rhythm is bouncy, and the orchestration tries to be jovial as well, but it is too heavy and thick to achieve this emotional state. A high texture surrounds the final line of text, "turned me to light"; it should glisten, but it doesn't.

*lmtyw* almost succeeds but doesn't quite deliver the goods. There is never a real melody to be heard, one that opens up and pulls at the heart. It never overcomes its problem of pace, so a rhythmic and melodic sameness sets in. Whereas *Play* alternates between hysteria and utter bleakness, *lmtyw* occupies a muddled mid-ground. In Mahler's work, a background force, there is a large span of emotion from capricious joy to utter sadness. *lmtyw* is too constrained to fully satisfy. It is desultory, not realizing any strong emotional statement—emotionally out of focus (like a mediocre Renoir), disconnected, almost somnolescent.

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*Play* is thoroughly American in its playfulness, and completely juvenile as well. Its primitive superficiality is representative of its time and much of what passes for high music in our current culture. Don't forget this is an age in which the downtown musical goddess Laurie Anderson can

write a piece, on commission no less, for dogs. *lmtyw* is earnest and attractive, but it can't seem to shake a quality of boredom and lethargy. Both works have moments of beauty, but they are few and far between. I fear the Grawemeyer got it wrong, as there is thoroughly successful music out there, worthy of being rewarded as such. Hopefully they will find it in the coming year.

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