

William Bolcom

Embracing All Terrain

BY RONNI REICH

To celebrate William Bolcom's seemingly endless sonic curiosity, there could hardly be a more fittingly named vehicle than the All Terrain String Festival: Bolcom 4 x 4. In this series of four programs featuring music for string quartet, each concert will highlight one distinctive work by the composer, a modern master with a virtually unparalleled ability to encompass a vast variety of musical traditions with unflagging expertise and originality.

Fitting itself to Bolcom's ability to veer off the road of classical tradition while upholding his elastic yet exacting technique, the festival will feature ensembles that follow suit: the Harlem Quartet, the Chiara String Quartet, the Arditti Quartet, and the Shanghai Quartet.

"The quartet world is a lot more diverse than people really understand," says Peak Performances founder and executive producer Jedediah Wheeler.

"Each group has a specialty it can offer," says Nicholas Tzavaras, cellist of the Shanghai Quartet, which has been in residence with Peak Performances and Montclair State University for 10 years. "It makes this a really unique festival of string quartets for our audiences," he adds. "Everything is done with the audience in mind, to open up their musical palettes to things they are not familiar with, whether it's playing by memory or improvised jazz tunes or cutting-edge contemporary music."



Bolcom's music is part of what will be new to most audiences; the festival coincides with the recent publication of six of his early string quartets by Edward B. Marks Music Company and includes the world premiere of his twelfth. While his string quartets are not his best-known works, they form a musical autobiography, spanning Bolcom's career from age 11 to 78.

"I tend to want to ask performers to do what I know I can't do," Bolcom says. "If I had my druthers, I would be a string quartet. I'd be an 8-armed, 4-played entity."

Bolcom traces his love of quartets back to the Juilliard Quartet's visit to his hometown of Seattle in 1949 when he was 11 years old, "probably the first time [Alban] Berg's *Lyric Suite* was played west of the Mississippi." Bartók and Hindemith were early influences, and he went on to study with 20th-century luminaries including Darius Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen.

Yet relatively early in his career, Bolcom began to stray from the stark, non-tonal traditions of the day. In 1970, he published the first of a collection of ragtime-style pieces. "It was a way to liberate myself from the kind of chromatic style we were expected to write if we were writing up-to-the-minute music," he says.

At the festival, the Harlem Quartet will play a selection of Bolcom's rags, arranged for string quartet, alongside Latin and jazz standards and a Mozart work. The quartet is devoted to such diverse programs in order to engage new audiences, and its 2013 collaboration with Chick Corea won a Grammy Award.

The liberating effect ragtime had for Bolcom may be similar for the Harlem Quartet musicians—and for listeners. Of its non-classical programming, Ilmar Gavilán of the Harlem Quartet says, "It's very therapeutic, because we let loose, and often we apply the

same mentality to the classical repertoire, respecting the score but being spontaneous and free on the stage.”

Showcasing another side of Bolcom’s body of work—which includes the Pulitzer Prize-winning *12 New Etudes for Piano* (1988) that recall the composer’s training with Messiaen—will be the Arditti Quartet. Known as a standard-bearer of contemporary repertoire, the Arditti will play Bolcom’s String Quartet no. 8 on a program that also includes works by Elliott Carter and Wolfgang Rihm.

The Shanghai Quartet will appear on all festival programs, serving as guest artists with the three other quartets.

“Each quartet has its own vision that I want to honor and celebrate,” Wheeler says. “It’s about all the different places they can go, how broad music can be.”

The Shanghai will play Bolcom’s Octet: Double Quartet (2007), a work originally written for the prestigious Guarneri and Johannes String Quartets, alongside the Chiara String Quartet. The Chiara, recently in residence at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, made its mark mastering the challenging feat of playing music by heart and championing live composers.

“We live in a vacuum,” Shanghai’s Tzavaras admits. “String quartets are always playing with the four members of the group. It’s nice to have some outside input; you get an injection of new ideas.” Hyeyung Julie Yoon of the Chiara adds, “A really animated conversation is a good way to describe an octet performance—you feed each other as you respond to a melody.”

While duo quartet collaborations are relatively unusual, one of the touchstones of the string repertoire is Mendelssohn’s String Octet, op. 20, which was an inspiration for Bolcom.

“There is a touch of the Mendelssohn Octet that is referenced ... but very dysfunctional,” Bolcom says of his Octet: Double Quartet.

Also on the Chiara’s program will be a driving, rock-tinged work by Jefferson Friedman and *Leyendas*, a work by Bolcom student Gabriela Lena Frank that draws on folk tunes she discovered in an Andean Mountain village.

Bolcom recognizes the stylistic freedom of composers today, including those under his tutelage at the University of Michigan, and he sees a contrast to the technical strictures expected when he began his own career.

“They were able to do whatever they wanted,” he says of composers like Frank and Friedman. “It was something for us [in the previous generation] to pull from underneath this sort of dictatorship. I’m glad we were able to move that obstacle for people younger than we are.”

Bolcom’s great achievement in musical catholicity remains his *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, in which William Blake’s poetry inspires an empathetic, expressive, and ear-opening collision: orderly classicism, jarring dissonances, country rock, bombastic British theater style, and moments that evoke hymn, tribal chanting, and old-time fiddling. A sprawling, 25-years-in-the-making work for orchestra, choir, and five to ten soloists, the piece won four 2006 Grammy Awards for a recording made at the University of Michigan.

Bolcom’s latest work, his String Quartet no. 12, which falls to the Shanghai

Quartet for its premiere, seems to be rooted in a similar communicative impulse, drawing on a variety of resources and textures in order to convey a series of moods and experiences. “I’m figuring this is my last quartet,” Bolcom says. “I like the idea of a cycle of 12.”

Written in short movements like brief episodes of dreams and wakefulness, the work includes a “*Fantasia Notturna*”—“my nocturnal version of Beethoven’s op. 131”; a slow movement, “Rude Awakening,” which marks getting up in the middle of the night; a fast, skittering “Hallucination” that builds to a brutal climax; “*Timor Mortis*,” fear of death; “*Amor Vincit*,” a more placid interlude “very frankly in D major”; and “as if from far away,” which the composer describes as “very simple” and “almost like old music.”

“It’s dangerous to say, but Bill Bolcom really wants people to listen to what he’s written. It’s a listenable, communicable musical style,” says Wheeler. “I think of him as someone with open arms, bringing as many people as he can possibly gather. By bringing in the diversity of styles of American music, he creates his own vernacular.”

With the variety of styles and tones, the exploration of the historical and the contemporary, and the recognition of living master artists with a high level of craftsmanship and distinctive voices, the festival honors both Bolcom’s work and Peak Performances’ mission.

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Ronni Reich’s writing has appeared in the *Washington Post*, *Back Stage*, and *I Care If You Listen*. She was a staff writer and classical music critic for the *Star-Ledger* from 2009 to 2015.