

Sebastian Chang
Walking

THE VITAL STATS

Composer: born January 1, 1988, Mission Viejo, CA.

Work composed: 2013 (Teddy Abrams premiered *Walking* with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra on November 20, 2013)

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 trombones, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, bass drum, crotales, cymbals, guiro, shakers, snare drum, wood blocks, piano, harp and strings.

Estimated duration: 6 minutes

Composer Sebastian Chang began his musical adventures at a young age. He began piano lessons at age four, wrote his first composition at five and hasn't slowed down since. Chang holds degrees in composition from The Curtis Institute and the University of Southern California, and is the recipient of three BMI Student Composer Awards, as well as five ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer Awards. Chang's compositions have been performed throughout the United States, by ensembles including the Philadelphia, Detroit and Louisville Symphonies.

Chang first conceived the main theme for *Walking* while hiking through the Cleveland National Forest, near his childhood home in Mission Viejo, CA. This primary theme, for clarinet, leads us confidently into the heart of this six-minute work. The music shimmers with a broad spectrum of orchestral colors, accented by an array of percussion instruments. Chang describes the first iteration of this theme as "insouciant and poppy;" when this "walking theme" repeats, a trumpet takes over and the tempo slows noticeably, as if an invisible hand is holding the walker back from a headlong rush deeper into the forest. Chang says, a bit enigmatically, that "the middle section [beginning with a chorus for horns] contains a reflection of my deeper musical desires," without defining exactly what these desires might be. Eventually the "walking theme" returns, in altered form, or, as Chang puts it, "the theme has gained the capacity to think outside itself and fathom new ideas."

Béla Fleck
"The Impostor" - Concerto for Banjo and Orchestra

THE VITAL STATS

Composer: born July 10, 1958, New York City

Work composed: Fleck received a commission from the Nashville Symphony to write this concerto in 2010. *The Impostor* is dedicated to the legendary bluegrass banjo player Earl Scruggs, who attended the premiere on September 22, 2011.

Instrumentation: solo banjo, piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 trombones, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, bass drum, bells, glockenspiel, large gong, sea urchin chimes or rainstick (optional) snare drum, triangle, wind gong and strings

Estimated duration: 36 minutes

When Béla Fleck set out to write a concerto for solo banjo and orchestra, he was not unlike the pioneers who packed their covered wagons and headed West in the 19th century. Other than a concerto written for Pete Seeger in the 1960s and another, somewhat obscure, work by Swiss banjo player Jens Kruger, only musical satirist P.D.Q. Bach had contributed anything to banjo concerto repertoire.

In addition to his formidable skills and deep familiarity with traditional bluegrass music, Fleck has decades of experience as a cross-genre artist. He has collaborated on award-winning classical and world music compositions with bassist Edgar Meyer and tabla player Zakir Hussain, among others. Fleck's 2001 album *Moto perpetuo* won two Grammys, for Best Classical Crossover Album, and, with Meyer, for their arrangement of Debussy's *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum*. Fleck's body of work, both within and outside traditional banjo bluegrass repertoire, amply demonstrates the instrument's ability to interpret all kinds of music. As Fleck explains, the sound of the banjo "is not present in the orchestra," having the banjo perform the solo role as it interacts with orchestral instruments brings new colors, emotional depths and even cultural possibilities to the established concerto format.

Fleck approached his concerto as an outsider, and there is a subversive quality to his music, especially the first movement, appropriately titled *Infiltration*. Writing for an orchestra – writing music at all (as opposed to improvising it, which is how Fleck typically creates music) presented challenges Fleck found daunting. He explains, "My ability to read music was rather primitive. I do read banjo tablature, a form of notation using numbers for every fret of the banjo. The reason I have gotten away with this for so long is because of the banjo's tuning. The 5-string banjo in standard G tuning can often play the same notes at several different locations on the fingerboard. It becomes far more critical to know where each note is, rather than what each note is ... So how was I going to write a piece for 80 instruments, none of which read banjo notation?" Fleck used his computer and a composing software program called Sibelius, which transformed Fleck's tablature notations into actual notes. "I could write musical ideas in tab, and copy/paste them onto any orchestral instrument stave, and voilà - the notes would magically appear in standard notation. This was a miracle, as far as I was concerned."

The underlying narrative of this music – which, Fleck emphasizes, emerged as he wrote, rather than being a preconceived blueprint – is a hero's journey, with the banjo in the starring role. "The banjo is the hero in this play and is trying to avoid the truth of who he is, but in the end cannot avoid it," Fleck explains. "In the first movement, especially with its solo cadenzas, the banjo is at its most 'classical,' even though I wasn't trying to emulate any particular composer. But you can hear an evolution in my own writing of the piece as it goes on. As it continues, I become more comfortable with the idea that this can be whatever I want it to be, and it ends by returning to my roots in bluegrass and Earl Scruggs."

The title of the piece (which occurred to me after the composing) refers to ... the feeling of being the outsider or the 'other,' that you really don't belong. A musician like myself can feel that way pretty regularly, even though the point of much of what I do is to attempt to find ways to fit naturally into many diverse environments. I often do feel like an impostor, and if anyone ever figured out the truth, I'm certain that I'd be ejected, immediately. So maybe the banjo player snuck into the orchestra with a disguise on (*Infiltration*), was pretty convincing that he belonged there (*Integration*) but at some point he let the cat out of the bag (*Truth Revealed*): He/I am a low class banjo playing scuffler, and should be tossed out forthwith! But that's just one interpretation."

Johannes Brahms **Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68**

THE VITAL STATS:

Composer: born May 7, 1833, Hamburg; died April 3, 1897, Vienna

Work composed: Brahms began working on his first symphony in 1856 and returned to it periodically over the next 19 years. He wrote most of the music between 1874 and 1876.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani and strings.

Estimated duration: 45 minutes

“There are fewer things heavier than the burden of a great potential.”

– Linus van Pelt, *Peanuts*

In 1853, Robert Schumann wrote a laudatory article about a 20-year-old composer from Hamburg named Johannes Brahms, whom, Schumann declared, was the heir to Beethoven’s musical legacy. Schumann wrote, “If [Brahms] directs his magic wand where the massed power in chorus and orchestra might lend him their strength, we can look forward to even more wondrous glimpses into the secret world of the spirits.” At the time Schumann’s writing was published, Brahms had composed several chamber pieces and works for piano, but nothing for orchestra. Schumann’s article brought Brahms to the attention of the musical world, while at the same time dropping a crushing weight of expectation onto Brahms’ young shoulders. “I shall never write a symphony! You have no idea how it feels to hear behind you the tramp of a giant like Beethoven,” Brahms is said to have grumbled.

Brahms took almost 20 years to complete the Symphony No. 1. It is commonly supposed that Brahms was intimidated by the idea of writing a symphony worthy of the Beethovenian ideal (he was), and this fear kept him from finishing the symphony more quickly. However, this theory, on its own, does him a disservice. Brahms wanted to take his time, a reflection of the serious regard he felt for the symphony as a genre. “Writing a symphony is no laughing matter,” he remarked.

Brahms began to compose the first movement of the Symphony No. 1 when he was 23, but recognized he was handicapped by his lack of experience writing for orchestra. Over the next 19 years, as he continued working on his first symphony, Brahms wrote several other orchestral works, including the *German Requiem* and *Variations on a Theme of Haydn*. The enthusiastic response to both works bolstered Brahms’ confidence in his ability to write effectively for orchestra. In 1872, Brahms was offered the conductor’s post at Vienna’s Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (Society of Friends of Music). This opportunity to work regularly with an orchestra gave Brahms an invaluable first-hand understanding of how the different sections of an orchestra interact. 23 years after Schumann’s article first appeared, Brahms premiered his Symphony No. 1 in C minor. It was worth the wait.

Brahms’ friend and critic, Eduard Hanslick, summed up the feelings of many: “Seldom, if ever, has the entire musical world awaited a composer’s first symphony with such tense anticipation . . . The new symphony is so earnest and complex, so utterly unconcerned with common effects, that it hardly lends itself to quick understanding . . . [but] even the layman will immediately recognize it as one of the most distinctive and magnificent works of the symphonic literature.”

Hanslick’s reference to the symphony’s complexity was a polite way of saying the music was too serious to appeal to the average listener, but Brahms was unconcerned. Uninterested in wooing the public with pretty sounds, Brahms declared, “My symphony is long and not exactly lovable.”

The symphony is carefully crafted; one can hear Brahms’ compositional thought processes throughout, especially his decision to incorporate several overt references to Beethoven. The moody, portentous atmosphere of the first movement, the short thematic fragments from which Brahms spins out seemingly endless developments, are all hallmarks of Beethoven’s style, as is the choice of C minor, a key closely associated with several of Beethoven’s major works, including the Symphony No. 5, Egmont

Overture and Piano Concerto No. 3. And yet, despite all these deliberate references to Beethoven, this symphony is not, as conductor Hans von Bülow dubbed it, “Beethoven’s Tenth.” The voice is distinctly Brahms’, especially in the inner movements.

The tender, wistful *Andante sostenuto* contrasts the brooding power of the opening movement. Brahms weaves a series of dialogues among different sections of the orchestra, and concludes with a duet for solo violin and horn. In the *Allegretto* Brahms slows down Beethoven’s frantic scherzo tempos. The pace is relaxed, easy, featuring lilting themes for strings and woodwinds. In the finale, a strong, confident horn proclaims Brahms’ victory over the symphonic demons that beset him. Here Brahms also pays his most direct homage to Beethoven, with a majestic theme, first heard in the strings, that closely resembles the “Ode to Joy” melody from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. When a listener remarked on this similarity, Brahms, never one to suffer fools, snapped irritably, “Any jackass could see that!”

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