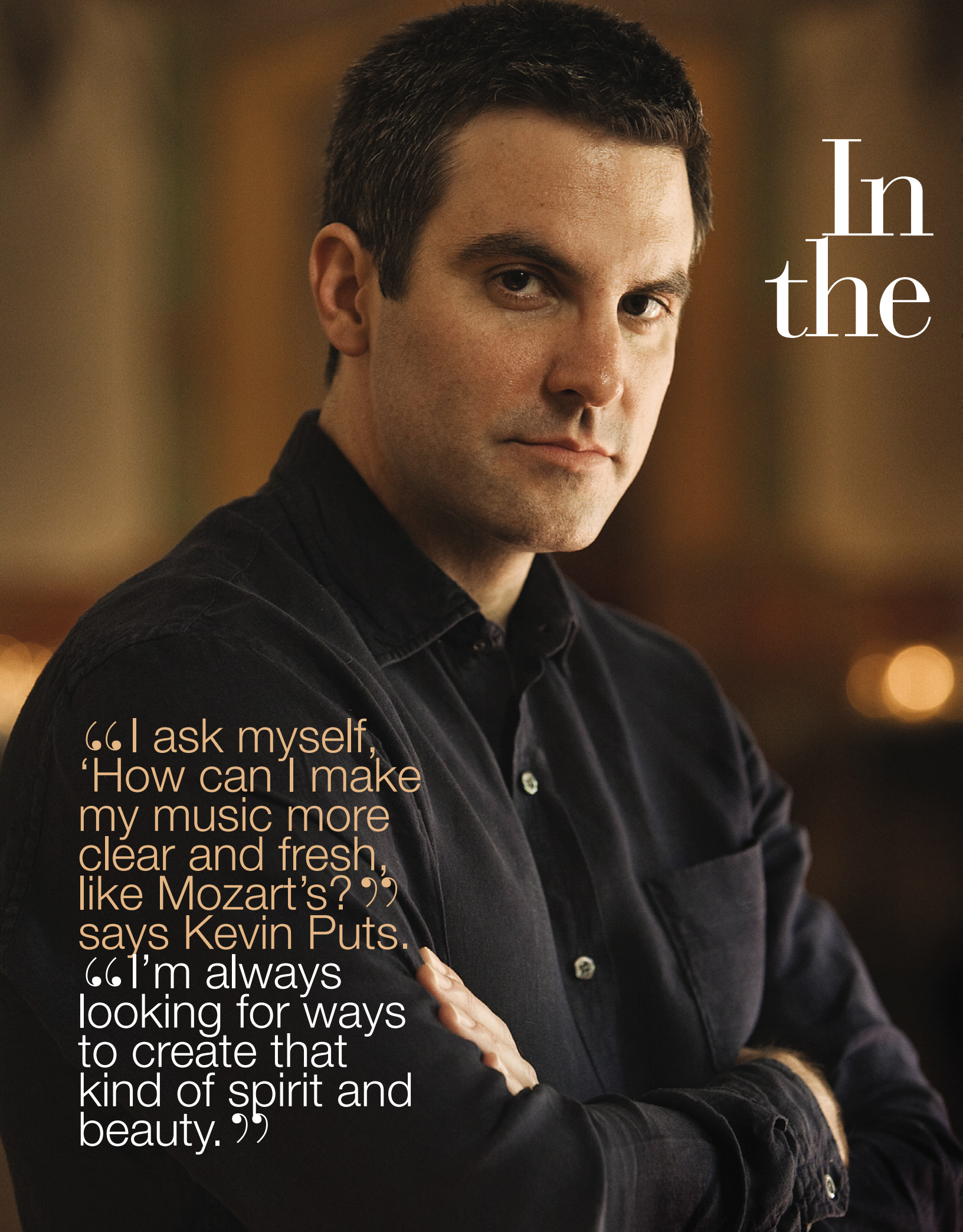


In the

“I ask myself, ‘How can I make my music more clear and fresh, like Mozart’s?’” says Kevin Puts. “I’m always looking for ways to create that kind of spirit and beauty.”

by Ann McCutchan

Moment

Eschewing the ivory tower, composer Kevin Puts aims to communicate with performers and audiences—without compromising his individual voice.

"I know there's still a fear among some of us," says Kevin Puts, "that trying to hold the audience rapt with attention means you're selling out, you're not a real composer. But for me, composing is much more complicated than the communication of an abstract idea. First thing, I've got to revel in the kinds of musical language that *I* care most deeply about, or I can't write anything convincing; I might as well be dead as try to work within someone else's aesthetic realm. Second thing—and this is not the primary aim of every composer, but I admit that it is mine—I *want* to communicate. I want audiences to be held in the moment, and be taken to the next moment. If that's not happening, I feel like I'm falling short."

Puts (pronounced like its generic namesake, the verb "puts") undoubtedly speaks for many other composers who never took totally to the ivory tower or the electronic studio basement, who never refrained from writing a distinguishable melody or a gut-felt tonal progression out of fear that it would cramp their careers. Puts, 37, is one of a growing number of composers writing for orchestra today who've refused to compromise their unique voices but who remain mindful of the need to communicate, both with fellow artists and with an audience. The evidence lies in his sizable orchestral catalogue, which already includes four commissioned symphonies, plus six concerti for such solo artists as Yo-Yo Ma and Evelyn Glennie. In the case of Glennie, the Percussion Concerto—commissioned by the Utah and Pacific symphony orchestras, and premiered by the latter in 2006—was in part the result of her positive experience with Puts's Marimba Concerto, which she and the Vermont Symphony Orchestra had premiered in 1997.

Puts's success stems largely from his respect for the social aspects of composition, wherein all sides of the composer-performer-listener triangle are ideally congruent. Often the performer forms the base of that triangle. Glennie, for example, looks for new pieces she personally wants to perform and introduce to others. With Puts's work, she says, "There's a harmonic satisfaction that people can relate to. Also, he's not frightened of writing a melody—and to write a melody is one of the hardest things to do. He taps into a beauty that seems to resonate with audiences. He's very confident that he has a particular voice, and one he knows he can develop. He's not trying to sound like another composer, not following trends. He's completely comfortable with what feels right for him as a composer."

Genesis of an Orchestral Voice

Pinpointing where a composer's voice originates is hardly a simple matter, but one can trace influences and proclivities. Puts says that manuscripts he produced during his teens reveal some of the same melodic and harmonic tendencies his music exhibits today. "I can't really escape them," he says. "I found I couldn't develop my voice through a series of intellectual decisions related to style, I could only do it through the actual writing. You start to shed things that don't interest you, that don't feel genuine, and hopefully you have a voice at the end of all that."

He cites several composers who have made a big impact on his work, and interestingly, they're all great orchestrators. Stravinsky is "endlessly fascinating," he says, and so is John Adams. Puts recalls that when he first heard Adams's *The Chairman Dances*, in a performance by a student orchestra at the Eastman School of Music, "I was just floored by it. I went straight to the piano and started improvising in this kind of style. It was minimalism more beautifully orchestrated than what I'd heard—a real dazzling use of the orchestra, like Ravel." Puts also admires the music of Michael Torke, and was awe-struck when he came across the "Color Music" pieces from early in that composer's career. Orchestral color, says Puts, is often the generating element in his own music.

But Mozart is his key obsession. "I go through times when I ask myself, 'How can

I make my music more clear and fresh, like Mozart's?' It's not that I want to plagiarize. But I am always looking for ways to create that kind of spirit and beauty, that balance and perfection and leanness of sound—and the instinctual knowledge, upon listening, that everything is there for a reason."

Clarity and balance were foremost in Puts's mind in April 2009, when clarinetist Bil Jackson and the Colorado Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Music Director Jeffrey Kahane, premiered Puts's Clarinet Concerto, a work commissioned by new-music philanthropist Kathryn Gould through the nonprofit organization Meet The Composer. It's scored for chamber orchestra, in this case an ensemble consisting only of strings, harp, percussion, and piano. In rehearsals Puts consulted often with Kahane on the balance between soloist and orchestra. Some players were cut, others were asked to sit out particular passages—typical adjustments made during a work's first outing.

"People were telling me the balance problems were due to the hall," Puts says, "but that wasn't it. I've found that if you get everything right in a piece, it sounds good in every hall." A well-crafted piece, he adds, can also hold up well even in a less-than-ideal performance. "Mozart, for example, sounds really good even if a youth orchestra plays it. Of course you hear things that are wrong, like intonation, but it still somehow *sounds*. It works, it's convincing. So that's what I try for."

Colorado Symphony musicians report favorably on the Clarinet Concerto. "It's beautiful—he did a masterful job," says Peter Cooper, the CSO's principal oboist (and one of the bench-warmers for this piece). Concertmaster Yumi Hwang-Williams, a musician highly experienced in contemporary repertoire through her other role as concertmaster of the Cabrillo Festival Orchestra in California, calls Puts "a good craftsman, very meticulous. It's a privilege to work directly with a composer, and I've always enjoyed Kevin's pieces. They're challenging to play. His voice is lyrical, exciting, and accessible to both the players and the audience. Working on the concerto with him was a wonderful process."

With much of Puts's music, it's important to understand some of the socio-political narratives that have inspired him. Dramatic examples of this would be his two works that arose from the calamity of September 11, 2001.

Midwestern Transplant

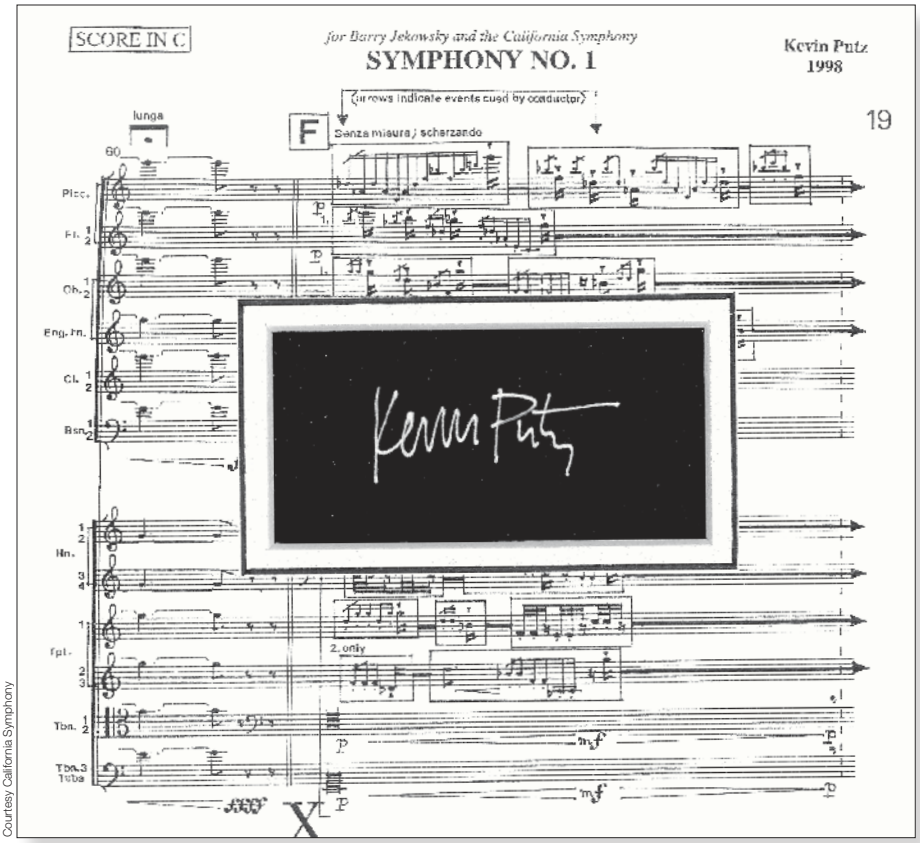
Kevin Puts was born in St. Louis and grew up in Alma, Michigan, a city of about 10,000 in the south-central part of the state. His father is a mathematics professor at Alma College, and his mother taught high school English until her recent retirement. Puts received his bachelor's degree from the Eastman School of Music, where his principal teachers were composers Samuel Adler and Joseph Schwantner. He went to Yale for a master's in composition, and returned to Eastman to pursue a Doctor of Musical Arts degree, studying composition with Christopher Rouse and piano with Nelita True. At Tanglewood he received further guidance in composition from Bernard Rands and William Bolcom. Rouse describes Puts as an artist who possesses "a dazzling array of talents. He's a profoundly musical composer who has always been open to trying new things rather than getting caught in a rut. What he's produced is deeply impressive."

In 1996, when he was 24, Puts was named composer-in-residence for both Young Concert Artists and the California Symphony. Over the next three years, that orchestra premiered his orchestral compositions *Network*, *Exalted Virelai (after Guillaume de Machaut)*, and Symphony No. 1. *Network* enjoyed subsequent performances by the Baltimore and Cincinnati symphony orchestras. The commissions began to accumulate. Puts accepted a teaching post in composition at the University of Texas in the fall of 1999. He soon realized that the demands of full-time university life were not to his liking, however, and in 2005 he left Austin for New York, the city where he and his wife, New York Philharmonic violinist Lisa GiHae Kim, now make their home. But the insular existence of a full-time working composer proved to be as unsatisfying as the academic schedule he had maintained in Austin. To restore some balance to his professional life Puts has joined the adjunct faculty of Peabody Institute, commuting to Baltimore two days a week.

"I tend to be a hermit in New York," he says. "I don't think most people even know I live in New York. I go to concerts and they say, 'How's Texas?' And I say, 'I haven't lived there for five years!' I really should get out more, but I just don't like to schmooze, and I don't feel like I fit into the New York new-music scene. I'm not downtown, I'm not uptown—I don't know where I am!"

Puts may not characterize himself as a networker, but he has established a reputa-

Puts confers with Music Director Marin Alsop during a rehearsal of California's Cabrillo Festival Orchestra in 2005.



Courtesy California Symphony

On display at the California Symphony's office is this autographed page from the symphony it commissioned from Kevin Puts and premiered during his third year as Young American Composer in Residence.

tion as a composer who's easy to work with. "He listens to all sorts of ideas," says Glennie. "You know you're dealing with someone who is extremely conscientious, who will deliver everything on time. And he allows you access to the emotions that most composers go through when they're writing a piece of music."

Marin Alsop, whose association with Puts goes back to 2003, when she first programmed his music at the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, concurs. Last summer the festival orchestra performed the West Coast premiere of his *Two Mountain Scenes*—the title reflects its provenance as a joint commission from the New York Philharmonic and Colorado's Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival—and Alsop has invited Puts to return to Cabrillo this summer to solo in his own Piano Concerto, a 2008 commission from the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. "Kevin is a delight to work with," she says. "He's accommodating, while maintaining his own strong opinions; he is appreciative and always approaches things with a self-deprecating sense of humor that endears him to the musicians."

Social Engagement

And what about the third point of the composer-performer-audience triangle? Some observers question the significance of standing ovations, which vary in frequency and meaning depending on the community and the nature of the concert. But orchestras and music directors do respond to feedback from the audience, and because Puts's works are generally popular with concertgoers they tend to live well beyond their premieres. Critics have offered mixed opinions, some praising the depth and freshness of Puts's ideas, others deeming his music less innovative than they'd like to hear.

The latter sentiment brings out a touch of exasperation in the composer. "Let's say I have a piece played and the audience really responds to it. My Fourth Symphony, for example, was premiered at Cabrillo in 2007, and I never had a better response than the audience gave to that: a ten-minute standing ovation. Clearly they were very emotional—it was really gratifying to make something that would truly connect. And the critics wrote it off in one sentence. They didn't discuss the event, how all those people *felt*. It's a strange world, but this is what some of us deal with."

Miguel Harth-Bedoya, music director of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra, observes that "with a good composer, every work is different"—the implication being that it's hard to judge anyone on the basis of a single piece. Like Alsop, Harth-Bedoya has over the years programmed several of Puts's works, and he chose him as the Fort Worth Symphony's first composer-in-residence in the 2006-07 season. As part of that residency Puts wrote a violin concerto for FWSO Concertmaster Michael Shih. It's included on a CD the orchestra released last summer, one that also features two works by Gabriela Lena Frank—*Elegia Andina* and *Leyendas: An Andean Walkabout*—as well as Puts's Symphony No. 3 ("Vespertine"). "The thing I like about his music is that it's direct," says Harth-Bedoya. "From the music to the players to the audience, there are no long roads to get the message across. And that means the use of timing. If a composer doesn't know how to use time well, then you can risk not getting your point across. But with Kevin, it's very, very clear."

Much of Puts's music is inspired by socio-political narratives. Dramatic examples of this would be two works that arose out of the calamity of September 11, 2001: his Symphony No. 2 ("Island of Innocence")—commissioned by the Utah-based Barlow Foundation for the Utah and Cincinnati symphony orchestras, and premiered by the latter in 2002—and *Falling Dream*, a tone poem commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra/BMI Founda-

Click **here** to listen to selections from two works by composer Kevin Puts. His Violin Concerto was recorded live by the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra, led by Music Director Miguel Harth-Bedoya, in Bass Performance Hall in 2007 with Concertmaster Michael Shih, during Puts's tenure as the FWSO's composer-in-residence. The Colorado Symphony, led by Music Director Jeffrey Kahane, gave the world premiere of Puts's Clarinet Concerto on April 10, 2009 with Bil Jackson as soloist.

RR Jones

tion for premiere in 2002. *Falling Dream* evokes images of victims leaping from the World Trade Center. Wayne Lee Gay of the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* offered a succinct description of the piece: "The music immediately transcends the horror and sorrow of that moment. The concept and explicit structure of *Falling Dream* are easily grasped: The piece slides generally downward in pitch, creating a sensation of falling for the listener. Subtle shifts of tonality and rhythm stimulate an emotional response in the listener. One senses resignation, acceptance and, finally, a sense of triumph."

Puts's Clarinet Concerto was a reaction to *Section 60*, an HBO documentary on the section of Arlington National Cemetery dedicated to fallen soldiers of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. As Puts describes it, the film "shows family members of the deceased, sitting on the graves all day, sleeping at the gravesites. The fact that there was little music in the documentary made me think of music, and then a lonely clarinet. It got me going. And once I get going on anything, I just do what needs to happen musically."

Influences of Copland and Barber can be heard in the lyrical first movement of this concerto, with slices of Messiaen and rolling swaths of Adams-style minimalism in the second. In reviewing Puts's music, critics have also referenced Bach, Sibelius, Prokofiev, Mahler, and Ives. And at least one recent composition reveals Puts's openness to contemporary pop: his Third Symphony ("Vespertine") was inspired by the Icelandic singer Björk. In his own program note for the work, Puts stated that he was "drawn to the dazzling array of sounds supporting her, the stark contrasts between fragile, transparent timbres and rich, lush orchestral and choral textures … I wanted to create an impression of her improvisatory, jazz-induced, and utterly distinctive melodic style as filtered through my own aesthetic." Despite the purely instrumental scoring, her free-floating voice seems to meander through the work.

What Comes Next

Since Kevin Puts's music is often motivated by dramatic, emotion-packed situations, it's no surprise that he's working on his first opera, a commission from the Minnesota Opera scheduled for premiere in November 2011. Based on the 2005 French film *Joyeux Noel*, about the legendary 1914 Christmas Eve cease-fire between French, German, and Scottish forces, it's a perfect emotional fit for this composer.

"The story feels orchestral," Puts says, noting that he admires the lucidity of Benjamin Britten's operas and will follow that composer's example by making use of orchestral interludes in *Joyeux Noel*. "Britten's orchestration is very clear; he creates a lot of definition through the use of pizzicato and harp, so the orchestra doesn't get lost down there. I have great respect for what he did, and I hope I can come close."

His next project after *Joyeux Noel* is a commission from the Houston Symphony and Chorus for premiere in the 2011-12 season. Aurelie Desmarais, the orchestra's senior director of artistic planning, says the idea of having Puts write a large choral-orchestral work for the Houston Symphony began to evolve after the orchestra performed his Symphony No. 1 in 2007. "From a commissioning organization's point of view," says Desmarais, "there is always a desire for connection, relevance, avenues of accessibility—whether it's in the language or the topic. Kevin's music is extremely well constructed, and he's got such a gift for orchestration. But it's not simplistic music. When he gets around to thinking about a text, we hope to strike some sort of connection to social or time relevance." Puts is hoping for that as well.

And beyond that, he's thinking he might like to write a film score. "It's pretty irregular to be 'found' by a director with whom your sound resonates," he says. "But it happened with Corigliano, Golijov, several others. And it's sort of the ultimate opportunity to communicate with a large audience." S

ANN McCUTCHAN is the author of *The Muse That Sings: Composers Speak About the Creative Process* (Oxford University Press); *Marcel Moyse: Voice of the Flute* (Amadeus); and *Circular Breathing: Meditations From a Musical Life* (Sunstone).

Got an opinion? Join the discussion!

Does your orchestra have a composer in residence? How do you break down the "ivory tower" that can separate composer and audience?

Click Discussions below to comment.