

Jörg Widmann

*"Partita," Five Reminiscences for Orchestra*

JÖRG WIDMANN was born in Munich on June 19, 1973, and lives in Berlin. He composed "Partita," Five Reminiscences for Orchestra, in 2017 and 2018 on a joint commission from the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig and from the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Andris Nelsons, Music Director, through the generous support of the New Works Fund established by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency, completing it in March 2018. The Gewandhausorchester gave the world premiere with Andris Nelsons conducting on March 8, 2018, in Leipzig. These are the American premiere performances; the BSO with Maestro Nelsons conducting is scheduled to give the New York premiere on April 13 at Carnegie Hall. This is the second Widmann work to be performed by the BSO. His "Trauermarsch" for piano and orchestra was played here in October 2016 with Andris Nelsons conducting and soloist Yefim Bronfman.

THE SCORE OF "PARTITA" calls for four flutes (first, second, and third doubling piccolo; fourth doubling alto flute), four oboes (second doubling oboe d'amore, third doubling English horn), four clarinets in A and B-flat (third doubling bass clarinet, fourth doubling contrabass clarinet), four bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), six horns (third through sixth doubling Wagner tubas), four trumpets in C (first and second doubling high B-flat), three trombones, tuba, percussion (three players: I. glockenspiel, xylophone, tubular bells, triangle, suspended cymbals, low tam-tam, tambourine, vibraslap; II. crotales, crash cymbals, suspended cymbal, sizzle cymbal, medium and low tam-tams, four tom-toms, bass drum, whip, ratchet, birch brush; III. low tam-tam, Chinese cymbals, gong, snare drum, four tom-toms, bass drum, wood blocks), harp, celesta, and strings (five-string double basses with low string to B). The duration of the piece is about thirty-six minutes.

This season the Munich-born Jörg Widmann was named the first-ever Gewandhauskomponist ("Gewandhaus-Composer") in the long and storied history of the Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig. His new work, *Partita*, is a joint commission from the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig and Boston Symphony Orchestra in celebration of the historic alliance recently established between the two ensembles. Widmann's music will be presented in orchestral and chamber music concerts in Leipzig, and he will also perform with the Gewandhausorchester as clarinet soloist. He performs Elliott Carter's Clarinet Concerto with the Gewandhaus this coming June.

Widmann studied clarinet with Gerd Starke in Munich and with Charles Neidich at the Juilliard School. He worked with such composers as Hans Werner Henze, Heiner Goebbels, Wilfried Hiller, and Wolfgang Rihm, all of whose music employs diverse styles and techniques toward dramatic ends. Widmann's music admits virtually any sonic possibility, from triads and traditional scales to unfamiliar sounds produced via extended techniques. Very prolific, he has worked on many scales, ranging from miniatures to two full-length operas. Works for orchestra, with and without soloist, include the Viola Concerto, a series of *Labyrinth* pieces for orchestra, and "epic" concertos for violin, oboe, and cello, as well as *Trauermarsch* for piano and orchestra, composed for Yefim Bronfman. This spring baritone Christian Gerhaher premieres Widmann's new song cycle *Das heiße Herz* ("The Hot Heart") with the Bamberg Symphony, and he is currently at work on a "farewell" piece to mark the end of Simon Rattle's tenure with the Berlin Philharmonic.

Based in Berlin since 2017, Widmann has spent a good deal of time in the U.S. He has held summer residencies at the Marlboro and Yellow Barn festivals, both in Vermont, where he finds the environment particularly conducive to composing. He also likes the broad approach to repertoire at both festivals, neither of which focuses just on new music, nor on the traditional repertoire, but thoughtfully programs both to allow each work to inform the listener's response to the others. Widmann's continuing relationship with traditional repertoire exerts a strong influence on his own compositional practice. In addition to performing as a clarinetist, he is also an accomplished conductor, currently serving as principal conductor and artistic partner of the Irish Chamber Orchestra, with which he has recorded repertoire ranging from his own works to symphonies of Mendelssohn. His repertoire as a clarinetist includes Mozart's Clarinet Concerto and Clarinet Quintet, Brahms's Clarinet Quintet and Clarinet Trio, Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, and many works by contemporary composers, as well as his own music. This season he tours with the Hagen Quartet playing his own Clarinet Quintet. Many major composers have written works for him, among them Wolfgang Rihm's *Music for Clarinet and Orchestra* and Aribert Reimann's *Cantus*.

Widmann's stature as a world-class clarinetist working with similarly high-level performers throughout Europe doubtless played a role in solidifying his reputation as a composer. By his mid-twenties his music had been championed by such musicians as violinist and conductor Christoph Poppen, violinist Isabelle Faust, cellist Jan Vogler, and many others. In the U.S., during the 2011-12 season, he and his music were a focus of Carnegie Hall's "Making Music" series, and he was also the Daniel R. Lewis Young Composer Fellow of the Cleveland Orchestra. For any artist, engaging with art of the past is inevitable, but that engagement can be deliberate or passive, depending on the artist's overall predilections as well as the goal of a given piece. If deliberate, it remains to be decided whether one's stance is negative—a rejection of past themes and techniques—or positive, as in a

continuation or expansion of an earlier idea. Negative reactions have often involved rejection of the immediate past, whereas a positive conversation might entail anything from a further examination of one's teacher's philosophies to a fascination with styles or personalities from hundreds of years ago. In music, as in other arts, a way of focusing one's dialog with the past is through the use of established formal models. For a poet, this might be sonnet or sestina; for a composer, it might be minuet, sonata form, or, on a broader scale, symphony. Widmann suggests that this approach requires a kind of naivety from the composer, who otherwise might quail at attempting to add to a genre already well-stocked with masterpieces. The urge to take part in a tradition—like a modern painter taking on the idea of the Pietà or the Crucifixion—is a strong one, but the reasons to do so are found in the details, the differences from one artist to the next.

The Widmann works that thrive on direct, albeit varied, responses to the music of his great predecessors include his Octet, which takes its cues from (at least) Mozart and Schubert; the flute concerto *Flûte en suite*, derived from Baroque concertos; *Con brio* for orchestra, commissioned to respond to Beethoven's symphonies, and *Trauermarsch*, a meditation on the funeral march tradition. His new *Partita* is another such work: a partita is a dance-movement suite of the Baroque era, employed frequently by Bach. Widmann's piece duly includes a Gigue and a Sarabande, with a Chaconne as the concluding movement. (The most famous of all chaconnes is the immense final movement of Bach's D minor Partita for solo violin.) Those dance underpinnings provide the propulsion that Widmann says is an ever-present goal in his music.

Because of its origin as a co-commission from Leipzig, *Partita* specifically alludes to two of Leipzig's great historical musical figures, Bach and Mendelssohn. Its overall tonality of B minor is a subtle homage to Bach's B minor Mass, and the ensemble virtuosity of Bach's *Brandenburg* concertos is echoed in the central Divertimento. In a nod to the American aspect of the commission, Widmann instilled the Divertimento with a rhythmic vitality that he equates with American 20th-century classical works as well as jazz, an acknowledgement of the BSO's new-music legacy. (But it was via traditional repertoire that Widmann originally got to know the orchestra: as a child he owned a cassette of the BSO and Seiji Ozawa's recordings of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, featuring soloist Harold Wright, and Bassoon Concerto, featuring Sherman Walt. He played it until it was worn out.)

The two-part form implied by the first movement's title "Grave—Gigue" creates an expectation of a slow introduction to a fast movement, which Widmann compares to a traditional symphonic first movement. The dark solo for bass clarinet that opens the movement is, according to the composer, perhaps the longest solo he has ever written in an orchestral work; although it's pushed aside by other forces, it is insistent, eventually convincing the rest of the orchestra to accept the character it establishes. A different solo woodwind instrument begins each movement, those sonorities being the foundations on which the orchestral tutti passages are built.

Although a tonal center is usually present throughout *Partita*, Widmann avoids the clarification of common chord forms or progressions. The Grave's opening tonality of G minor, suggested rather than defined, foreshadows the G minor Gigue at the end of the movement, but the journey there is circuitous, with the slow part of the movement stretching to an unexpected length out of proportion to the brief Gigue. Widmann describes the movement as *trying* to be a fast movement, succeeding only for a short time before succumbing again to gravity. Its potential (including the resolution of a thwarted cadence in B minor) is realized only in the final movement.

The second-movement Andante is based entirely on an andante movement from a Mendelssohn clarinet sonata that Widmann has recorded. The tune is presented, notably, not by clarinet but by English horn, couched in a kaleidoscopic orchestration that gives this slightly archaic music a new, surreal context. Widmann adds a detail from Mendelssohn's "biography"—his Jewish heritage—in the klezmer shadings of the solo violin and elsewhere. The presence of this elegant, pleasant movement balances the fourth-movement Sarabande in the overall symmetry of the piece, which is similar to the five-movement form of Mahler's Symphony No. 7 with its two *Nachtmusik* movements framing a central scherzo. Playing the role of scherzo in Widmann's *Partita* is the Divertimento, a sardonically humorous, even madcap movement leavening the seriousness of the outer movements. A series of short, overlapping woodwind solos builds up to a tutti, in which harpsichord can be heard for the first time, cementing the Divertimento's neo-Baroque ancestry. Virtuoso passages are traded contrapuntally among a few solo instruments, usually violin and flute, with commentary echoing throughout the ensemble. Some of the humor is positively Haydnesque.

A sarabande is a stately triple-meter dance frequently encountered in Baroque suites. Widmann's begins with solo bassoon extremely high in its range, as in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, deliberately creating a sense of exertion and strain in the instrument's sound. This runs counter to the expected elegance of the dance, setting things slightly askew. (This persistent feeling of strangeness is accomplished by different means in each movement.) Oboes and violins enter at a register lower than the bassoon's first passage, and the texture builds contrapuntally. Eventually the dance loses its way, becoming almost static at its quiet conclusion.

With the Chaconne finale, Widmann not only evokes Bach but also the shattering last movement of Brahms's

Fourth Symphony, which employs the similar form of the passacaglia, a set of variations over a repeated bass line. The chaconne theme here, played first by alto flute (another solo woodwind opening), is an eleven-note rising scale from A to A, missing only E-flat from the full chromatic. This line is taken up by violin, viola, clarinets, and cellos overlapping before new ideas are added, the texture becoming increasingly complex. The movement surges to a preliminary climax and subsides suddenly for a double bass/contrabass clarinet unison passage, a strange, dark, thrilling sonority. The texture expands again, with violins and flutes playing a melody in triplets; celesta enters to add a shimmering gleam to the orchestral sound. Surging, suddenly subsiding, then surging again, the movement pushes toward a massive conclusion.

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