

Anthony de Mare's Liaisons: Re-Imagining Sondheim From the Piano

Part 1: Thursday, May 24, 2018 at 8pm

Mazzoleni Concert Hall

Anthony de Mare, piano

PROGRAM

William Bolcom: "A Little Night Fughetta" (after "Anyone Can Whistle" & "Send in the Clowns") (Ontario premiere)

Ricky Ian Gordon: "Every Day a Little Death" (*A Little Night Music*) (Ontario premiere)

Gabriel Kahane: "Being Alive" (*Company*) (Canadian premiere)

Nico Muhly: "Color and Light" (Canadian premiere)

Steve Reich: "Finishing the Hat" – Two Pianos (*Sunday in the Park with George*) (Ontario premiere)

Frederic Rzewski: "I'm Still Here" (*Follies*) (Canadian premiere)

David Shire: "Love is in the Air" (*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*) (Ontario premiere)

Wynton Marsalis: "That Old Piano Roll" (*Follies*) (Canadian premiere)

Kenji Bunch: "The Demon Barber" (A Fantasia on "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd") (Ontario premiere)

INTERMISSION

Film interlude: onstage interview with Stephen Sondheim, conducted by Mark Eden Horowitz at Liaisons' New York City premiere (Symphony Space 2012)

Andy Akiho: "Into the Woods" (*Into the Woods*) (Canadian premiere)

Rodney Sharman: "Notes on Beautiful" (after "Beautiful" from *Sunday in the Park with George*)

Paul Moravec: "I Think About You" (after "Losing My Mind" from *Follies*) (Ontario premiere)

Jake Heggie: "I'm Excited. No You're Not" (after "A Weekend in the Country" from *A Little Night Music*) (Ontario premiere)

Anthony de Mare: "Sunday in the Park ~ Passages" (*Sunday in the Park with George*) (Ontario premiere)

All pieces were commissioned expressly for The Liaisons Project, Rachel Colbert and Anthony de Mare, producers. The Liaisons Project has been produced with the express permission of Stephen Sondheim.

From Anthony de Mare:

Like many of us, I have long held in highest esteem the work of Stephen Sondheim, whose fearless eclecticism has emboldened many a musical risk-taker. Over the years, I often found myself imagining how the familiar and beloved songs of the Sondheim canon would sound if transformed into piano works along the lines of what Art Tatum and Earl Wild did for George Gershwin and Cole Porter, or what Liszt did for Verdi, Schubert, and so many others.

In 2007, after many years of working with talented composers from across the musical spectrum, I decided to pursue a formal commissioning and concert project. With a generous spark of enthusiasm from Mr. Sondheim

(including some wonderful suggestions for composers to invite), *LIAISONS: Re-Imagining Sondheim from the Piano* was born.

Liaisons now features the work of 36 composers ranging in age from 30 to nearly 80, representing seven different countries and 44 Pulitzer, Grammy, Tony, Emmy, and Academy Awards. Taken as a whole, they demonstrate the way Sondheim's influence has extended far beyond the musical theatre to reach into the realms of classical, jazz, pop, theatre, indie, and film. The entire collection now stands as a celebration of Sondheim and the composers who rose to the challenge of adding their voices to his, a creative alchemy that affirms that his work is as much at home in a concert hall as on a Broadway stage.

A project this ambitious in scope is by definition a team effort. Producer Rachel Colbert joins me in thanking all the donors, designers, scholars, skeptics, presenters, partners, and friends who helped us make *Liaisons* a reality. We would also like to thank ECM Records, one of the recording industry's greatest supporters of musical innovation, for giving *Liaisons* such a welcome and fitting home. In addition, we add a special thanks to Mervon Mehta and the staff here at the 21C Music Festival for the opportunity to present *Liaisons* over these two evenings.

Thank you for being a part of this journey. To add further context, I have asked each of the composers to write something about their piece, and following are their comments – a true testament to the diversity of talents represented by the project, and to the singular impact Sondheim's music has had on us all.

Composer Comments

William Bolcom: "The main theme for '**A Little Night Fughetta**' is taken from "Anyone Can Whistle", a melody that struck me as a fugue subject – with a countersubject of "Send in the Clowns." I thought Steve would be amused at a fugue-like, and mercifully short, piece -- thus a fughetta and not a fugue."

Ricky Ian Gordon: "In 1973, when Stephen Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* was running on Broadway, I was 17 years old and I was obsessed with it. I saw it six times. There was one song, though, that I could not wait to hear at every show – '**Every Day A Little Death**.' So, when I began this piece for Tony, I did not even look at the music – I just started riffing on what I myself might like to play, as if I were playing that song for someone, introducing its delicate intricacies, its stunning melody, and the counter melody of the duet. I took some things out of their original time and meter ... I guess you could say I sort of made love to it, with gratitude for all the pleasure it has given me over the years."

Gabriel Kahane: "'**Being Alive**' begins as a scherzo of sorts, taking Sondheim's 'doorbell' motif and contorting it into various humorous guises before the appearance of the tune in a fractured chorale, followed by a series of reharmonizations. The doorbell motif re-appears as a transition to the bridge of the original song, which I have re-imagined here as an homage to Ligeti's first piano étude, "Désordre." Finally, the main tune returns triumphantly in bi-tonal guise, giving way to an emotionally ambiguous coda."

Nico Muhly: "The light-suffused chords that open *Sunday in the Park with George* are some of the best-spaced chords ever. I used to obsessively study them and play them and dream about ways to steal them. What is particularly astonishing about *Sunday*, too, is the way in which the 'mechanical' music that drives the score gives way to an emotional immediacy with the characters instantly: it is the best tension between the motor and the heart. This is clearest, I think, in '**Color and Light**,' a multi-part duet between George and Dot, and, indeed, the orchestra. My homage to this piece tries to accentuate the angular music, making it somewhat dangerously unhinged, while always returning to the more supple landscape of the love story."

Steve Reich: "'**Finishing the Hat**' – **Two Pianos** – for Stephen Sondheim is a rather faithful re-working of one of Sondheim's favorite songs from *Sunday in the Park with George*, and incidentally the title of his recent book. Harmonically very close to the original, and melodically adding only occasional variations, my only real change is in the rhythm of constantly changing meters. This gives my two piano version a rhythmic character more in line with my own music and, hopefully, another perspective with which to appreciate Sondheim's brilliant original." For this performance, Anthony de Mare accompanies himself with his own recording of the piano 2 part.

Frederic Rzewski: "My friend – almost a brother – Steve ben Israel, whom I knew for almost 50 years, died recently. The thought '**I'm Still Here**' hit me in a way I had never known. That is when I wrote this arrangement of Stephen Sondheim's great song. I stuck rigorously to the song's structure. It helped me to get feelings out which I would not have been able to express otherwise."

David Shire: “My arrangement of ‘**Love is in the Air**’ takes the piece through some ragtime and jazz territory. The quote from “Comedy Tonight” is a reference, of course, to the number which replaced ‘**Love is in the Air**’ as the opening to *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. The first time I heard ‘**Love is in the Air**’ was when Steve played it for me, soon after we first met, while he was writing *Forum*. What an indelible and treasured memory that is.”

Wynton Marsalis: “Stephen Sondheim employs many syncopated and expressive devices in ‘**That Old Piano Roll**.’ My arrangement uses these concepts to evoke the styles of three great jazz pianists. The basic stride style of James P. Johnson is answered by the jagged, obtuse style of Thelonious Monk. Both find resolution in the ragtime-swing style of New Orleans pianist Jelly Roll Morton. The parlour piano elegance of the second theme, with its tresillo rhythm, is juxtaposed to a 4/4 New Orleans ragtime stomp. In the 1920s, a heated debate swirled around jazz as polite society music or red-hot dance music. Now, we happily play it all.”

Kenji Bunch: “My first exposure to *Sweeney Todd* came as a 10-year-old watching a PBS broadcast of the Broadway production. I was both terrified and fascinated, and have felt the work’s and Sondheim’s influence ever since. For ‘**The Demon Barber**’ – an homage to the seething, menacing introductory song, ‘The Ballad of Sweeney Todd,’ I highlighted the original song’s oblique references to the Dies Irae Gregorian melody into a persistent, ominous chant that surfaces throughout. I also wanted to amplify the work’s horror-show qualities with low register rumblings, shrieking high clusters, and insistent rhythmic ostinato patterns.”

Andy Akiho: “The first time I listened to it, I loved the concept of *Into the Woods* – being lost in and confused by the woods, and the consistent and driving rhythms of the opening prologue. I was also intrigued by Sondheim’s innovative and witty use of spoken narrative against his catchy melodies, particularly during each character’s introduction. My goal in re-imagining this prologue was to orchestrate each character’s personality with the use of prepared piano – for example, dimes on the strings for the cow scenes, poster tack on the strings for door knocks and narrated phrases, and credit card string-clusters for the wicked witch. My goal was to portray each character’s story and mystical journey using exotic piano timbres in place of text.”

Rodney Sharman: “**Notes on ‘Beautiful,’** commissioned by Anthony de Mare through the generosity of the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, was written in the Valentine Studio, Leighton Arts Colony, Banff, Alberta. The piece is a transformation of the duet “Beautiful” between mother and son, from *Sunday in the Park with George*, and dedicated to Anthony de Mare and the memory of my mother.”

Paul Moravec: “**‘I Think About You’** takes its title from the second – and oft-repeated line of ‘Losing My Mind’ from *Follies*. In my re-imagining for piano solo, the eponymous musical phrase repeats maniacally to the point of ‘losing its mind.’ The piece is a musical meditation on obsession, heartbreak, and, finally, the timeless need to love and be loved.”

Jake Heggie: “**‘I’m Excited. No, You’re Not’** is my take on Stephen Sondheim’s amazing ensemble, ‘A Weekend in the Country.’ I tried to capture the energy and the momentum, as well as a few bumps in the road, in creating a big, fun, splashy tour-de-force for Tony de Mare.”

Stephen Sondheim (b. 1930)

Sondheim wrote the music and lyrics for *Saturday Night* (1954), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *The Frogs* (1974), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), *Into the Woods* (1987), *Assassins* (1991), *Passion* (1994), and *Road Show* (2008); lyrics for *West Side Story* (1957), *Gypsy* (1959), and *Do I Hear A Waltz?* (1965); and additional lyrics for *Candide* (1973). Anthologies of his work include *Side by Side by Sondheim* (1976), *Marry Me A Little* (1981), *You’re Gonna Love Tomorrow* (1983), *Putting It Together* (1993/99), and *Sondheim on Sondheim* (2010). For films and television, he composed the scores of *Stavisky* (1974) and *Reds* (1981), and songs for *Dick Tracy* (1990) and *Evening Primrose* (1966). Mr. Sondheim is on the Council of the Dramatists Guild, having served as its president from 1973 to 1981. His collected lyrics with attendant essays have been published in two volumes: “Finishing the Hat” (2010) and “Look, I Made A Hat” (2011). In 2010, the Broadway theatre formerly known as Henry Miller’s Theatre was renamed in his honour.

Anthony de Mare

Piano

Anthony de Mare is one of the world's foremost champions of contemporary music. Praised time and again by *The New York Times*, his versatility has inspired the creation of over 60 new works by some of today's most distinguished artists, allowing him to develop a growing fan base that extends far beyond the traditional contemporary music audience. Known for his entrepreneurial performance projects, he continues to expand the boundaries of the repertoire, which includes the speaking-singing pianist genre that he pioneered over 25 years ago.

As creator, performer, and co-producer of *Liaisons: Re-Imagining Sondheim from the Piano*, he has brought together many of today's most highly esteemed composers spanning multiple genres to bring the work of Stephen Sondheim into the concert hall, adding another 27 composers to the list of those he has commissioned, and another 36 compositions to the repertoire. The 3-CD box recording of *The Liaisons Project* on ECM was named on twelve "Best Of" lists, including *The New York Times*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *Washington Post*, and *NPR*, and was included as a winner of the 2016 Grammy Award for Classical Producer of the Year.

In addition to performances at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, the London Jazz Festival at the Barbican, and across North America, Australia, and Europe, Mr. de Mare was recently featured on *NPR's* "All Things Considered" and on *HBO's* documentary "Six by Sondheim." Since his debut with Young Concert Artists, past accolades and awards include First Prize and Audience Prize at the International Gaudeamus Interpreters Competition (The Netherlands) and The International Competition of Contemporary Piano Music (France). His discography includes over 20 recordings.

A Steinway Artist, he currently is Professor of Piano at Manhattan School of Music and New York University. He also serves as new music curator for the Sheen Center for Thought and Culture in NYC and is represented by Bernstein Artists, Inc.

Visit www.liaisonsproject.com to learn more or get in touch.

Anthony de Mare is making his Royal Conservatory debut during this Festival.
