

May 2025

by Rebecca Winzenried

William Bolcom (b. 1938)
Orphée-Sérénade (1984)

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|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| I. Ouverture | IV. Hurluberlu |
| II. Romance | V. Elégie |
| III. Pas des Bacchantes | VI. Energique |

William Bolcom's music has long embraced an eclectic, playful mix of styles and approaches, from Baroque to early 20th-century parlor songs and beyond, often in a single piece, as evidenced by his best-known work, the large-scale choral and symphonic setting of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Glance over the movements of *Orphée-Sérénade* and you'll quickly spot the acrostic arrangement, spelling out the musical character of myth for whom it is named. A second look, and a listen, uncovers the melange of styles from which the composer draws.

Orphée-Sérénade was written in 1984 for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, with the title serving as a nod both to that group and its namesake. It is scored for wind and string quintets and piano, with movements spotlighting instruments in solo treatments. Bolcom, who won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for his *12 New Etudes for Piano*, was the pianist for the premiere.

He had found early inspiration in a work by his mentor Darius Milhaud, whose *Aspen Serenade* spelled out that town's name in its movements. However, the musical structure of *Orphée-Sérénade* flows from French court music. Bolcom wrote in his own program note, "The Orpheus legend lurks somewhere in the background (see the Bacchantes in the third movement), but more directly referred to is the Baroque suite, French style, and the serenade of Mozart's time.

These short movements run the gamut from almost complete atonality to frankly traditional tonality, although C major is the root key of the whole serenade."

Thus, the *Ouverture* functions to set up the structure and tonal plan of the piece, while the youthful spirit of the *Romance* also suggests the loss of Euridice. *Pas de Bacchantes* derives from a family of dances and the fast-moving symphonic movements of Roussel. *Hurluberlu*, a French term similar to "hurlyburly" in its evocation of a free-for-all, originally came to Bolcom from a cartoon of that name by Milhaud's son Daniel for which he had written music, and the movement hurtles along in a similar vein. The lament of *Elégie* morphs into the final *Energique*, which wraps up the piece with a quote from the fourth movement of Mozart's *Haffner Serenade*. But not before Bolcom adds a trademark bit of whimsy with an "angry violin solo" that "is also a complaint." He wrote, "After all, doesn't the solo violin always have a lot to play in the classic serenade? ('Where's my solo? This piece is almost over!') - and this complaint becomes the solo!"

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Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)

Andante spianato in G Major et Grande polonaise brillante in E Flat Major, Op. 22 (1834/1830-31)

What exactly was Frédéric Chopin thinking when he appended a nocturne to his existing Grande polonaise brillante in 1834? We'll never know for sure but it hardly matters, as the odd-couple pairing gave us one of the most sublime openings in the piano literature.

Andante spianato translates as "smooth and even" and the movement embodies that description. Hypnotically rippling arpeggios push the listener off onto the journey, providing the undercurrent for a gentle melody tinged with nostalgia; there's a pause at the bend of the stream for a brief chordal sequence before drifting off on the currents once more.

The Grande polonaise brillante announces itself with a heraldic fanfare (played by horn in the original version for piano and orchestra), and adopts a stately attitude that allows plenty of room for virtuosic piano fireworks. Chopin was 20 years old and still living in his native Warsaw when he wrote this rousing polonaise, although he was about to depart permanently for Vienna and other parts of Europe. He gave a last nod to his country's most well-known musical form in a grande polonaise with orchestra, although the perfunctory role of the symphonic forces has led this to become a popular choice for solo piano performances.

Ensconced in Paris a few years later, Chopin was invited to perform at a Paris Conservatory benefit, and he added the new Andante spianato for the occasion. The solo piano introduction made an even stronger case for the combined work to be played without orchestra, allowing listeners to revel in a duality of experience, from the calming Andante spianato to the technical pyrotechnics and satisfyingly triumphant finish of the polonaise.

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Lera Auerbach (b. 1973) *Dreammusik* (2014)

This concert concludes with a special gift: an opportunity to hear the reprise of a work written by one acclaimed artist to another, blessed with years of friendship and music-making.

Dreammusik was written by Lera Auerbach for Camerata Pacifica and Principal Cello Ani Aznavoorian, who premiered it here in 2014. The two have known each other since they were suitemates at Juilliard, where Auerbach had landed after deciding, while on a tour of the United States from her native Russia, that she wanted to stay. It was near the fall of the Soviet Union and the teenage Auerbach, who was already an established concert pianist, became one of the last artists to defect. She has gone on to compose nearly 200 works that have been sought out by the world's major ensembles, orchestras, opera and ballet companies.

The one-time Juilliard roomies have continued collaborating in performances and recordings, including of Auerbach's 24 Preludes for Piano and Cello. Auerbach wrote a variation, 24 Preludes for Viola and Piano, for Camerata Pacifica and was the pianist for its premiere in 2018 with violist Richard O'Neill.

Dreammusik, described as a modern cello concerto, unfolds in a single movement over about 35 minutes. Aznavoorian sees it as hovering somewhere between wakefulness and deep slumber, a world

that can change on a dime from somber tragedy to a frantic waltz, with unusual instrumentation floating in a sea of colors and textures, "uncertain of where we've been or where we're heading."

At the time of its premiere, Aznavoorian described *Dreammusik* as "dark and brooding, and tremendously beautiful." Time has allowed her to embrace a slightly different approach, digging into Auerbach's enigmatic soundworld, and mastery of atmosphere and characters. "I think there are moments of levity and twisted sarcasm we might have missed in it the first time. Perhaps we think of it more as Tim Burton and less like Stanley Kubrick," she says.

Capturing Auerbach's artistic essence is no easy matter. The composer moves fluidly between her roles as composer, pianist, visual artist, writer, and increasingly, conductor. Rather than describing her music in words, she often elects to create artworks to accompany her compositions. For the premiere of *Dreammusik*, she painted a Chagall-like dreamscape of deep aquamarine with a floating cello and fish. The flow of expression from one medium, one genre, to the next is natural for Auerbach, who says, "There is no reason to keep something locked in its cage and not connect it."