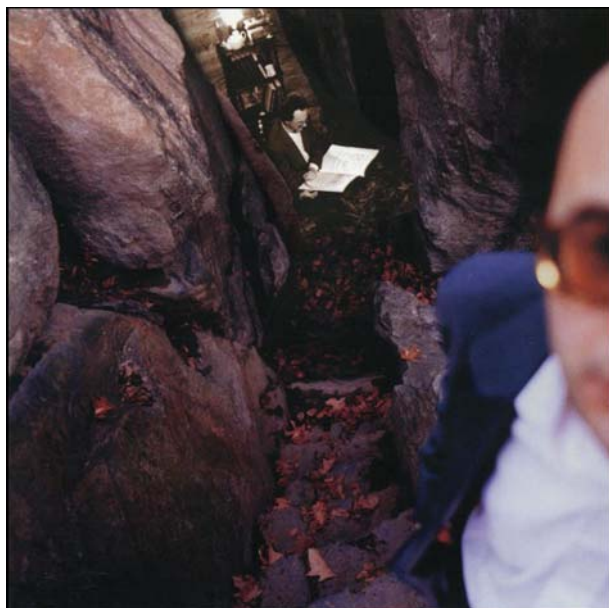


NWCR873

Nathan Currier

From the Grotto



From the Grotto: A Sonata for Mozart's Secret Society (1995) (32:36)

1. I. Theory of the Enlightenment (from Afar) (7:10)
2. II. Fast-Forward (to Post-Presto) (6:31)

3. III. On the Loss of Family and Related Species (via K. 310) (6:40)
4. IV. Minuet/Dirge (or Self-Division) (6:17)
5. V. Dirty Humor (or Living with Pollution) (5:58)

Nathan Currier, piano

A Musical Banquet (1987) (25:34)

6. I. First Fughetta (1:34)
7. II. Improvisation (2:29)
8. III. Duo for Violin and Cello (2:50)
9. IV. Second Fughetta (3:31)
10. V. Music Box: Cradle Song for Violin and Piano (2:57)
11. VI. A Rock Song (1:48)
12. VII. Third Fughetta (1:28)
13. VIII. Ragtime (1:12)
14. IX. Aria for Cello and Piano (5:00)
15. X. Fourth Fughetta (2:45)

The Peabody Trio: Violaine Melançon, violin;
Natasha Brofsky, cello; Seth Knopp, piano

Total playing time: 58:16

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Notes

Nathan Currier (*b* Rhode Island, 1960) writes fanciful, engaging, virtuosic, and richly inventive music, realized with impeccable taste and a sure command of form. The two pieces recorded here, *From the Grotto: A Sonata for Mozart's Secret Society* (1995) and *A Musical Banquet* (1987), are best described by the composer himself (see below), but some commentary from an admirer may be in order as well.

Very few composers have been allotted the gift to express humor in concert music: either the jokes fall flat or they take over the music entirely (the works of our best musical satirists, from Anna Russell to P. D. Q. Bach, may be counted in the latter category). What impresses me about Currier's two pieces is the sheer sense of civilized good humor that runs throughout them, even in the most somber sections. This is not to say that *From the Grotto* and *A Musical Banquet* are "funny"—drollery would get rather tired over the course of fifty-eight minutes—but the listener always has the sense of a civilized, companionable intellect at play.

Currier does not fit into any of the prefabricated categories that have been set aside to describe composers. Despite the intense expressive qualities of his best music, he is not quite a "neo-Romantic" for there is none of the angst-ridden grandiosity that typifies so much work in that genre. To call him a "neo-Classicist" would be more accurate but still reductive, for he is quite willing to take the emotional leaps that are proscribed within the tidy worlds of most composers in this genre. And while Currier's music is often wildly virtuosic (he

is a first-class pianist), it never seems overcrowded with notes, as so much work by the so-called "maximalists" does.

Ultimately, Currier is an independent, with no seeming allegiance to any creed but the most valuable one of all—that of creating succinct, personal, well-crafted music to the best of one's ability. He is mercifully free of dogma: when he wants to write dissonant music, he does, but he is equally at home within the perimeters of traditional harmony. Such an attitude may seem cavalier to listeners with a philosophical stake in the modernist movement, yet it strikes me as an entirely plausible response to the overwhelming diversity of the music that surrounds us. Listen in.

—Tim Page

Composer's Comments:

From the Grotto

Mozart, not long before his death, wanted to form a secret society. All we know about it is that he wanted to call it "The Grotto." Grottoes (natural or artificial caves used as decorative features in eighteenth-century European gardens) were extremely fashionable during Mozart's lifetime, and in the 1770s and 1780s they became something of a craze. Mozart actually left an unfinished essay about The Grotto—which was lost, unfortunately, when plans for the first biography were under way a few years after the composer's death.

Mozart's choice of a name is quite interesting. He was already a member of the Freemasons when he first wished to start The Grotto, and it is frequently assumed that his secret society's

beliefs would have been based on the ideals of Freemasonry. But to me, Mozart's use of the name The Grotto speaks otherwise. While Masonic symbolism expressed the masculine brotherhood of freethinking rationalism, the grotto was clearly understood during the period to be a feminine symbol of the dark and untamable secrets of Mother Nature. The image of Mozart's dreamt-of, but unrealized, cult seemed perfect for the title of my composition, which could be described as musical reflections on how the Enlightenment has shaped our modern relationship (or lack of relationship) with the natural world.

When I first began writing the opening movement, however, Mozart's Grotto was not yet in my mind. At that point, I simply had one of James Lovelock's books lying on my piano and was ruminating about how his Gaia hypothesis—a bold yet benevolent idea stating that the Earth and all its life forms comprise one vast super organism—necessitated seeing our planet from the great distances of space for its conceptualization. This jogged my mind while I played with the material of my new piano composition. I began with the opening measures of the first movement, which sound so very classical—like something out of a Haydn sonata—until, after a few bars, the music peters out in a way strangely remote from the stylistic framework of that epoch.

I realized that the feeling of alienation from the classical period embodied in this opening phrase expressed something stemming from the readings in ecology then engrossing me, which typically impugned the Enlightenment as that terrible over-rationalistic period when man and nature filed for their divorce. But, ironically, Lovelock's idea of Gaia actually had its precedent with a contemporary of Mozart, the geologist James Hutton, who first proposed as a fact of science the idea that the Earth was a living organism. (For both Hutton and Mozart, one might almost point to a certain "romanticism" that saved them from the limited thinking of their period.) And the Scotsman Hutton came from the north, where the fashion of the wilder English gardens of his day led to the romantic revival of grottoes, which spread throughout Europe and touched Mozart.

And so, not quite knowing what I was doing, I dug down deeper—and made a kind of musical cavern, full of its own echoes. As I wrote, the music's spirit seemed almost antithetical to traditionally "neoclassical" works. Rather than feeling bound by a set of limits (a game of "freedom through limitations," as Stravinsky had described it), I felt impelled to push the boundaries as far as possible, to expose the gulf, the distance, from the classical age. It felt like I was using classical materials, first of all, to prove our inevitable alienation from classicism, but then, more deeply, to understand better how I truly relate to this repertoire. I call this movement *Theory of the Enlightenment (from afar)*.

After a slow but continuously accelerating introduction, the next movement, *Fast Forward (to Post-Presto)*, takes a common eighteenth-century idiom of virtuosic keyboard music and whips it into a thoroughly modern feeling of franticness (indeed, the final section is marked "as fast as humanly possible").

This is followed by the slow movement, the centerpiece of the work, called *On the Loss of Family and Related Species (via K. 310)*. Birds seem to chirp above an ominous pedal, and a simple, mid-eighteenth-century-style melody enters as well. It is this movement's middle section that brought me to mention Mozart's K. 310 in the title, not because of any specific quote, but because of the section's general feeling and its triplet accompaniment pattern, with its minor second dissonances in the right hand. Mozart wrote his piano sonata K. 310, one of

only two that he wrote in a minor key, shortly after the death of his mother, in the summer of 1778, while in his early twenties. I began learning it, as many piano students do, in my early teens, and now it seemed to be haunting me.

One reads that a decade or so later, shortly before his own death, Mozart was heartbroken at the death of his pet parakeet, which he had taught to sing the melody of the last movement of his piano concerto in G, K. 453. As the haunted and plaintive feeling of K. 310 seemed to emerge from all the chirping, I realized that I was transposing the feeling of mourning for Mozart's mother to his bird (indeed Mozart, at least on the surface—and it is just such works as K. 310 and K. 304 that show that it was only on the surface—seems to have mourned more for his pet parakeet than for his mother).

The fourth movement, *Minuet/Dirge (or Self-Division)*, is virtually two movements played at once—each in their own tempo. This is what would be the minuet section of a classical sonata, but a dirge plays along with it. At the outset, threads of each are heard side by side. Then they start to play together, in counterpoint, the minuet above, and the dirge beneath it. The minuet accelerates into a fast waltz, while the dirge gets even slower, deeper, louder. After reaching a sort of maximum disparity, all the while sounding together in counterpoint, the two pieces start to "converge," retracing the tempo shifts back to their initial states. They come to a standstill, then "cross": the minuet starts to become slower and the dirge becomes more and more animated. This, too, comes to a head and then begins to recede. Once the dirge is again the slower of the two and the minuet has again picked up its steam, there is a final climax, and then both "pieces" begin to wind down. The minuet has the last word.

Low cluster-chords held as pedal points, heard periodically throughout the work as strange intrusions into the virtually classical eighteenth-century textures, become in the last movement an almost continuous sort of noisy thunder accompanying the principal theme. A musical "pollution," if you will (and couldn't one look at the whole history of harmony since the eighteenth century as the slowly evolving growth of musical "pollution," the dirtying-up of the pure diatonic waters?) *Dirty Humor (or, Living with Pollution)* tries to revel in its own polluted musical environment, perhaps somewhat like one of Mozart's scatological humor-filled letters, in which the young composer can't refrain from his boyish interjections about excrement and the like.

From the Grotto is, ultimately, very eighteenth century. I said above that I was using classical materials to both show our alienation from classicism and to understand better how I myself relate to this music.

I think that I came away from writing the work feeling a sense of affirmation for the Enlightenment as a whole, feeling that, whether in ecology or in music, we can only continue to pick up the unfinished threads from our past (as Lovelock had unwittingly done) and keep slowly winding them onward—a faith that is itself so rationalistic that it would make Voltaire proud.

A Musical Banquet

Many of my earliest compositions were made up of series of short movements strung together. When I composed the piano trio recorded here, I named it after one of the seminal works of this kind, a collection of suites by Johann Hermann Schein called *Banchetto Musicale*. *Banchetto Musicale*, published in 1617, is a collection of twenty suites, each made up of five dance movements. These became the first famous works of German instrumental chamber music. Like other collections of instrumental dance movements, they feature great contrasts

of character, and even of national style (the Italianate *gagliarda* against the Germanic *allemande*, for example). But, atypically, Schein's preface claims that his suites are also designed to be related sets of matched movements, not just series of contrasting dance types.

Today, we live in a world of unbridled heterogeneity. Eclecticism rules the aesthetic roost. But my abiding interest was always to find ways of binding disparate things together. My piano trio, Schein-like, consists of a suite of ten movements, in two groups (movements I–IV and movements V–X). Like a baroque suite, it uses forms loosely based on musical vernacular: just as the movements of, say, a Schein suite nominally have a relationship with the “popular” dance music of that time, so too does *A Musical Banquet* have movements that come out of rock, jazz, and rag. Hence, a “banquet.” But these movements are placed between others, called *Fughettas*, that make a very different kind of reference to the Baroque. This title is also used loosely, but the bits of imitative counterpoint found in these movements do play an important role in creating my version of what Schein aimed for so long ago. The fughetta movements (I, IV, VII, X), while they each have their own discreet subject, also freely share material, with each successive fughetta using material from the previous one for its subsidiary materials. This helps to create a unified whole out of the disparate vernacular pieces, or, put another way, to borrow a phrase from Schein's preface, it creates a series of pieces that “finely correspond.”

With more than a decade's hindsight, what strikes me most about *A Musical Banquet* is the way in which it uses jazz, ragtime, rock, and other popular musical languages. Leonard Bernstein listened to the piece at Tanglewood the summer after I completed it and said that everything in it—even the most “classical” passages, where I was perhaps unaware of any direct influence—really came out of jazz.

Bernstein's comments now strike me very different than they did at the time. Bernstein may one day come to be seen as the climax of American contemporary classical music's search for its lifeblood, its vital energy, through jazz. Bernstein's idealism was ultimately like that of Dvořák's—concerned with how to give new life to the classical tradition. Indeed, Bernstein wrote an essay on Dvořák's “New World” Symphony in which he mentions in passing that, long after Dvořák's visit to America, a true American folk music—jazz—was born, which composers would come to have as a “real part of our musical thinking”. Through the use of jazz, Bernstein implies, American composers had finally achieved what Slavic and other nationalist composers had done back in the mid- and later nineteenth century. Recent developments might make one ask not only whether this is correct, but also whether is it even desirable.

Even if Bernstein was largely correct about *A Musical*

Banquet (although he might have underestimated how important rock music, as opposed to jazz, is in parts of the work), I still can no longer subscribe to that Bernsteinian ideal. Is jazz a folk music? In the last decade, jazz has become very “classical,” and now the great complexity of jazz's historical development makes it seem more and more like a parallel musical history to classical music in this century, and nothing like a folk music at all. On the other side, “classical” music seems now to be at times in full flight, with artists “crossing over” to various pop idioms with ever greater frequency, and not just Dvořák but Beethoven himself sometimes looking like a fragile threatened species. Thus, it has now become harder to believe, as Bernstein did, in the “pop” saving the “classical”—a belief that was the real essence of his ideal and the bedrock meaning behind his highly flattering comments about my trio.

Ultimately, to me, it doesn't matter whether the “classical” music in *A Musical Banquet* comes out of jazz, as Bernstein intelligently observed, or whether the “jazz” sounds perfectly “classical,” as it does to me increasingly with time. What matters is how the whole strikes some kind of aesthetic balance, how the internal workings of the parts strive for an organic development (becoming somehow “alive”), and whether or not the large aesthetic breadth of the many movements are somehow bridged by the technical means at hand, creating, as Schein first tried to achieve back in 1617, pieces which “finely correspond.” I am not sure whether I have achieved it, but I am certain that it is this sense of aesthetic balance that led to “classical” music being called “classical.”

—Nathan Currier

Since winning the prestigious Naumburg Chamber Music Award in 1989, the **Peabody Trio**—Violaine Melançon, violin; Natasha Brofsky, cello; Seth Knopp, piano—has established itself as one of the leading chamber music ensembles in the world. They have received widespread acclaim for their exhilarating interpretations of both modern masterpieces and repertoire classics.

The Trio has performed in many of North America's most important music centers, including New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Chicago, Montreal, San Francisco, Boston, Philadelphia, Seattle, and the summer festivals of Tanglewood and Ravinia. Tours abroad have taken them to Japan and Israel. They have also been heard in numerous radio broadcasts, including Morning Pro Musica, NPR's Performance Today, and the Listening Room on New York's WQXR.

The Peabody Trio is the resident faculty ensemble of the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, Maryland, and has a summer residence at the Yellow Barn Music School and Festival in Vermont.

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