

## MARTIN BRESNICK (b. 1946)

In the age-old debates about music and language, many questions have been posed and pondered: should music be considered a language or an escape from language? How best to study its syntax and semantics? What might be gained or lost in the process of translation? While such questions have occupied composers for centuries, only a few have answered with such varied eloquence as Martin Bresnick. In the words of his former student Evan Ziporyn, Bresnick has produced “a veritable compendium of the genres and styles of [the twentieth century]... theater pieces that recall and update Kurt Weill, hard driving works for amplified instruments, ground-breaking music for extended-technique virtuosi, and delicate solo works for marginalized instruments like piccolo, mandolin, and toy piano. His range of output, and Bresnick’s fluency within it, speaks not merely to his considerable skills, but to his always-open ears and mind.”

Something of this openness must also underlie Bresnick’s extraordinary gifts as a teacher. As critic Joshua Kosman puts it: “[He] has devoted his career to two complementary and intertwined pursuits: composing music of wiry, tender-hearted eloquence, and training a younger generation to write brilliant music that sounds nothing like it.” In addition to serving as musical godfather—or perhaps patron saint—to the composer-founders of the Bang on a Can Festival (Michael Gordon, Julia Wolfe, and David Lang) his many years as the Coordinator of the Composition Department at Yale University and guest appearances at dozens of colleges and conservatories across the country have allowed him to count among his proteges Michael Tenzer, Christopher Theofanidis, Michael Torke... and that’s just the “T” section of the alphabet!

Also suggesting a notable diversity of approaches are Bresnick’s own teachers: John Chowning at Stanford (where he earned his D.M.A.), Gottfried von Einem in Vienna, and especially György Ligeti, whom he sought out with great determination and with whom he shares a skeptical respect for musical tradition. One can hear the impact of Ligeti’s innovative “micropolyphony,” in which tiny motivic cells circulate to create an active but indistinct musical surface, in a number of Bresnick’s scores from the 1970s and 1980s, including *Wir weben, wir weben* (We weave, we weave) (1978) and *B’s Garlands*, for eight cellos (1973). Ziporyn observes: “His music is often scored for massed forces of a single sound... and yet this collective energy sings of personal, individual longing. His music is generated out of cycles, repeating patterns and recurring events, yet each piece moves forward with a narrative logic. In sum, the music seems poised between impersonality and expressivity, individuality and collectivity, circularity and linearity, all generated by a masked rigor.”

If Bresnick is ecumenical in his sources of musical inspiration, he is equally so in his love of literature. The piece we will hear tonight, *Songs of the Mouse People*, is his fourth score written in response to the writings of Franz Kafka. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* provides the epigraph for his Ird String Quartet (1992); *Tent of Miracles* (1984, for saxophone and electronics) recreates the magical realism of Brazilian author Jorge Amado; and *Pine Eyes* (1999, for clarinet, percussion, piano, and narrator) is based on “The Adventures of Pinocchio.” Bresnick’s concerto for two marimbas, *Grace* (2000), treats an essay by Heinrich von Kleist called “The Puppet theatre,” assigning one marionette-like marimba to play “straight man” to the other’s voluble effusions.

In *My Twentieth Century* (2002), which takes its title from Tom Andrews’s paean to the counterculture of the 1960s, Bresnick unites his keen understanding of poetry with an evocation of (or perhaps a nostalgia for) the progressive politics that have often glinted through even his most refined scores. His leftist spirit is occasionally overt—after all, he grew up in a union-based cooperative housing project in the Bronx—but more often subtle. *Wir Weben, Wir Weben* alludes

to Heinrich Heine, who expressed his sympathy with striking German textile workers in the 1844 poem “The Silesian Weavers.” More recently, the composer organized a number of his shorter works into a cycle called *Opere della musica povera* (Works of A Poor Music), emphasizing each one’s striving against constraints—whether musical or social. As he told Joshua Kosman, “my music is often concerned with the insulted, the oppressed, the downtrodden—the Sancho Panzas rather than the Don Quixotes, the horse of Alexander the Great rather than Alexander himself.”

In 1998, Bresnick became the first composer ever to be awarded the Charles Ives Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; he was elected to membership in 2006. In addition he has received Fulbright, Guggenheim, and MacDowell Colony Fellowships, the Rome Prize, the Berlin Prize, three NEA Composer Grants, prizes from Composers Inc. and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and numerous teaching awards. His many commissions include those from the Koussevitzky and Fromm Foundations, and his scores have been performed by the San Francisco and Chicago Symphonies, American Composers Orchestra, Kiel Philharmonic, City of London Chamber Orchestra, Izumi Sinfonietta Osaka, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Da Capo Chamber Players, Speculum Musicae, Bang on A Can All Stars, Zeitgeist, and the Left Coast Ensemble, among others. Bresnick’s music was featured at this year’s Festival of New American Music at CSU Sacramento, where he was also invited to give the keynote address.

**Bresnick, *Songs of the Mouse People* (1999) for cello and vibraphone**

Like his Second String Quartet “Bucephalus” (1983-84) and his chamber works *e Bucket Rider* (1995) and *BE JUST!* (1995), Bresnick’s *Songs of the Mouse People* takes its inspiration from Franz Kafka. In fact, it was shortly after playing the latter two chamber works that Steven Schick and cellist Maya Beiser approached Bresnick to commission this Kafka-inspired duo. The composer took as his text “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse People,” in which Kafka explores the inner life and unusual vocal prowess of a mouse diva who “has to put such a terrible strain on herself to force out not a song—we can’t call it song—but some approximation.”

Both the strain and the overriding impulse to sing are amply evident in Bresnick’s mercurial score. The coloratura cellist vaults into its highest registers, the vibraphone mallets scamper to and fro over the keys. e piece unfolds like Kafka’s own prose—sometimes astonishingly compact, sometimes charmingly digressive, always turning each of its numerous new corners with a sense of wonder and surprise. Composer John Halle (at one time Bresnick’s colleague at Yale) notes that Kafka’s original possesses “the tragi-comic tenderness of what is nearly a children’s tale.” Not coincidentally, these same qualities permeate the *Songs of the Mouse People*. As Kafka’s narrator tells us: “Something of our poor brief childhood is in it, something of lost happiness that can never be found again, but also something of active daily life, of its small gaieties, unaccountable and yet springing up and not to be obliterated.”

Program Notes by Steven Schick