

Moxie

Kristin Kuster (1973–)

Written: 2015

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Five minutes

Kristin Kuster was one of ten composers asked to write a new piece of music to celebrate the Baltimore Symphony's one-hundredth anniversary. Baltimore's audience was asked to submit ideas for the pieces, and the idea that Ms. Kuster chose was to honor the Baltimore Symphony's much loved music director, Marin Alsop. For her piece, Ms. Kuster uses "Marin" as a cipher, assigning a different chord to each letter of the name.

Moxie is a bright, celebratory piece that starts with impetuous rhythms and big, blocky chords. The opening rhythms eventually break down and become irregular. The chords become more atmospheric while a recurring melody layers over itself. Soon the woodwinds play cascading scales while the melody continues. The blocky chords return, as do the opening rhythms, leading up to a smashing end.

Kristin Kuster is currently an Associate Professor of Music at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theater, and Dance. She was recently awarded one of the highest honors the University bestows upon junior faculty – a 2015 Henry Russel Award. The award recognizes faculty early in their academic careers who already have demonstrated excellence in teaching. Given yearly, university-wide junior faculty are eligible for the Henry Russel award, and Kuster is among only four music faculty to receive the award since its inception in 1926.

Kuster grew up in Boulder, Colorado. She earned her Doctor of Musical Arts from the University of Michigan where she studied with William Bolcom, Michael Daugherty, Evan Chambers, and William Albright.

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Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

Written: 1900–01

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 33 minutes

Even though Sergei Rachmaninoff was considered the rising star (both as pianist and composer) in Russia, that didn't spare him from disaster at the premiere of his first symphony. The critic Ceasar Cui called it "a program symphony on the Seven Plagues of Egypt" with the potential of giving "acute delight to the inhabitants of Hell." (It wasn't necessarily the symphony itself; it was the performance. The conductor, Alexander Glazunov, was drunk!) Rachmaninoff went into a severe depression, unable to compose. Among the various suggested cures was a visit to Leo Tolstoy for inspiration. Tolstoy's remarks didn't help: "You must work. Do you think that I am pleased with myself? Work. I work every day." And when he heard Rachmaninoff play his own music, the great man replied, "Tell me, do you really think anybody needs such music? I must tell you how much I dislike it."

Finally, Rachmaninoff sought help from the hypnotist Dr. Nikolay Dahl. Rachmaninoff would lie half-asleep in the doctor's study while Dahl would repeat "You will begin to write your concerto . . . You will work with great facility . . . The concerto will be of excellent quality . . ." It worked. "Although it may sound incredible, this cure really helped me," Rachmaninoff wrote. Soon he had more than enough material for a concerto. He wrote the second and third movements first and performed them at a benefit concert. It was an instant success. Cured of his depression, he completed the first movement and premiered the entire work in 1901. Since then, it has become one of the most-loved piano concertos.

If there is a single characteristic of this concerto, it is its long, unfolding melodies. It is also distinctive by how often the orchestra gets the melody and the piano only the

accompaniment. In each of the movements, the orchestra gets the first utterance of the tune. And in the last movement, the orchestra gets the last grand statement of the melody—later exploited by Frank Sinatra as “Full Moon and Empty Arms.” The first and second movements have faster middle sections that serve to expand on the content of the main melodies. The third movement begins quickly but has slower inner sections to accommodate the expansive melodies.

Igor Stravinsky said that Rachmaninoff was the only pianist he had ever seen who did not grimace. Hearing Rachmaninoff’s melodies in this concerto, you can understand why.

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Symphony No. 5 in D Minor, Op. 47

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

Written: 1937

Movements: Four

Style: 20th Century

Duration: 46 minutes

Many people consider Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony* to be one of the greatest twentieth-century symphonies. Orchestras frequently program it, and there is an excellent concert band arrangement of the final movement. Marching bands even perform the "triumphant" finale. Throughout the years, audiences have interpreted this work in dramatically different ways.

In the Soviet Union in the middle of the 1930s—known as “The Terror”—Stalin executed countless millions or sent them to prison camps. Artists did not escape “The Terror.” Once hailed as the greatest of all Soviet composers, Shostakovich received a stunning condemnation. In an article entitled "Muddle instead of Music"—probably written by Stalin himself—Shostakovich was accused of the worst possible crimes for an artist: He was a "bourgeois aesthete" and a "Formalist." Curiously, the dreaded knock on the door never came. Shostakovich was never “sent away” like many artists. He simply became an "unperson."

Then, in 1937, Shostakovich wrote his *Fifth Symphony*. Supposedly repentant, Shostakovich subtitled the work “A Soviet Artist's Practical Creative Reply to Just Criticism” and gave the following description:

The theme of my fifth symphony is the making of a man. I saw man with all his experiences in the center of the composition, which is lyrical in form from beginning to end. In the finale, the tragically tense impulses of the earlier movements are resolved in optimism and joy of living.

The Soviet authorities were pleased. This symphony had, at least, a triumphant finale worthy of "Socialist Realism."

For years, this was the accepted interpretation of this symphony. Then, in 1973, *Testimony, the Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich* appeared. Westerners were shocked to discover a different meaning to the symphony. Shostakovich claimed:

I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the *Fifth*. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat . . . It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,' and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, 'Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.' What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that. Fadeyev [a Russian author] heard it and he wrote . . . 'the finale of the Fifth is irreparable tragedy.' He must have felt it with his Russian alcoholic soul.

Throughout this work, you will hear many repeated notes, which may begin to affect you like the repeated blows of an oppressor. You will hear anger and desperation in the angular themes and the militaristic march in the first movement. The second movement is a sarcastic, sardonic little thing. The third movement, written in just three days, is truly tragic. The contemporary critic Ian MacDonald claims that "understanding music like this is simple—particularly if half your family has been arrested and you are alone and terrified and trying to smile." Then, finally, there is the "triumphant" finale.

At the work's premiere, the audience openly wept during the slow movement. The applause at the end lasted longer than the work itself. Did they "get" it? Shostakovich's answer

from *Testimony*: "Of course they understood, they understood what was happening around them and they understood what the *Fifth* was about."

Nowadays, there is quite a controversy going on in academic circles regarding the meaning of Shostakovich's work. Many scholars discredit Shostakovich's *Memoirs* and insist that his *Fifth Symphony*, while truly a great work, doesn't carry any political meaning. It is simply music. Here is where the audience is important. What do *you* hear? How does this music make *you* feel? What do *you* think?

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