

The Least and the Most in a Tanglewood Series



Michael J. Lutch for The New York Times

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

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LENOX, Mass. — An attraction of the Tanglewood Music Center’s annual [Festival of Contemporary Music](#) is an unpredictability that makes guessing which of the many competing species of modernism will dominate a largely fruitless exercise.

Nearly every year the festival, which opened here on Wednesday, is put in the hands of a new director, usually a composer, sometimes a conductor. And the balance of works changes to reflect the director’s interests, which are often broader than you might expect.

There have been exceptions, most notably the [2008 festival](#), which was devoted fully to the music of Elliott Carter. But that was a special occasion, Mr. Carter’s centenary, and it was the only single-composer summer in the festival’s history.

This year [Charles Wuorinen](#) is directing the festival, and listeners who are stuck in the musical politics of the relatively recent past or who think that Mr. Wuorinen’s music lies on the severe, atonal side, might assume that this year’s festival would tilt toward what Milton Babbitt semijokingly called maximalism. There is some of that: The prospectus includes music by Brian Ferneyhough, Jason Eckardt, David Felder and Babbitt himself. The style’s antithesis, Minimalism, is scarce.

But there is much else too, including works by genre-straddling musical populists like Fred Ho (whose “Fanfare to Stop the Creeping Meatball” is the curtain raiser for five of the festival’s seven concerts), John Zorn and Errollyn Wallen.

Mr. Wuorinen’s own music has become surprisingly accessible in recent years, as two pieces in the opening program demonstrated. After Mr. Ho’s brief, whimsical, jazz-tinged fanfare for two trumpets and two trombones, Mr. Wuorinen presented two of his own vocal works, both built around the weirdly imaginative poetry of [James Tate](#).

In “Never Again the Same” (2006) Mr. Tate describes a sunset so strange and kaleidoscopic that its witnesses are terrified and left feeling hollow. Mr. Wuorinen supplied a twist of his own, setting the piece for bass voice and tuba, and giving both performers distinctive, often lyrical lines.

Most of that lyricism is, understandably, in the vocal writing, and David Salsbery Fry sang it with a winning fluidity and some impressive sepulchral tones. But there are also wonderful touches in the tuba line, which punctuates, emphasizes and comments on the text.

“It Happens Like This” (2011), commissioned for this concert, is based on seven poems from Mr. Tate’s “Return to the City of White Donkeys” (2004) and scored for a vocal quartet and a large chamber ensemble. The poems are fairly talky: most are miniature dramas, with dialogue and strange twists. A guest who has no idea why he was invited to a dinner party turns out to have been designated — probably — as a human sacrifice. A dog, rewarded for a good life by being reincarnated as a human, laments his fate. A candy store owner fends off misdirected customers and two armed robbers by proclaiming his own rules: “I’m sorry, this is a candy store. We don’t do holdups.”

Mr. Wuorinen did not strain to bend these stories to his music: In some cases all but a few lines — invariably the most emotionally pregnant ones — are spoken. Elsewhere the singers divide up the characters and sing the dialogue with a clarity that keeps the pieces moving quickly, and in some Mr. Wuorinen has the full quartet sing an appealingly harmonized setting of the narrative. The superb, dramatically astute singers were Sharon Harms, soprano; Laura Mercado-Wright, mezzo-soprano; Stephen Brennfleck, tenor and Douglas Williams, bass-baritone.

As in “Never Again the Same” the ensemble comments and illuminates. At times it supplies action — the gunshot (by way of percussion) at the end of “Intruders” — that the text only hints at. James Levine was supposed to have conducted the work, but when he bowed out of his Tanglewood commitments because of poor health, Mr. Wuorinen agreed to lead it himself. The student musicians — the New Fromm Players and fellows of the Tanglewood Music Center — gave a lively, sharp-edged performance, with light staging by Ken Rus Schmoll. Freeda Electra Handelsman danced the animal roles gracefully.

The Festival of Contemporary Music runs through Sunday at Seiji Ozawa Hall, Tanglewood, Lenox, Mass; (888)266-1200, bso.org.

REVIEW

August 05, 2011 |
By Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff



Charles Wuorinen lead a world premiere performance of his work, *It Happens...* (Stu Rosner for the Boston Globe)

FESTIVAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC Charles Wuorinen, director

At: Ozawa Hall, Tanglewood (Wednesday and last night)

LENOX - Every summer at Tanglewood, for a few enticing days, the fringes become the center and an adventurous audience convenes in Ozawa Hall for the Festival of Contemporary Music. This year's festival is being directed by the composer Charles Wuorinen, often grouped with high-modernism's old guard. But the programs are at least somewhat generationally and stylistically diverse.

Fred Ho's newly commissioned "Fanfare to Stop the Creeping Meatball!" is a short, swinging, and extroverted curtain-raiser for two trumpets and two trombones, and Wuorinen has placed it as a kind of call to order before most of the concerts, including Wednesday night's opener, which was otherwise devoted to two Wuorinen settings of poetry by James Tate. The first, "Never Again the Same," was a pithy vocal-instrumental duo for bass (David Salsbery Fry) and tuba (Jose Martinez Anton), full of deft vocal writing underscored by the tuba's playful commentary and daubs of color. But the evening's main event was the premiere of Wuorinen's "It Happens Like This," a new cantata built from settings of seven Tate poems, and scored for four singers with chamber ensemble.

The piece (staged by Ken Russ-Schmoll), came together wonderfully, as Wuorinen's fractured and spiky style finds improbable kinship with Tate's witty and urbane poetry. Several of the poems use the animal world to hold a mirror to human quirks and frailties. "The Promotion," for instance, tells of a speaker pining away for his former life as a dog, set by Wuorinen as a modernist-antique madrigal. At every turn, the cantata's vocal and instrumental writing seemed to catch the absurdist charm and fleeting pathos of Tate's originals. The ensemble playing under Wuorinen's direction was shapely and sensitive and the excellent singers were Sharon Harms, Laura Mercado-Wright, Steven Brennfleck, and Douglas Williams.

Arts Talk

2011 Festival of Contemporary Music @ Tanglewood, 8/03/11

August 4, 2011

By Priscilla McLean, Special to the *Times Union*

If the opening concert of this year's Festival of Contemporary Music is any indication, these five days will be a rousing success. This evening's offering was all about two very creative artists—composer and conductor Charles Wuorinen and poet James Tate.

The evening began with a three-minute "Fanfare to Stop the Creeping Meatball!" by Fred Ho, a Tanglewood commission and world premiere. Two trumpets and trombones performed funky sliding jazz to kickstart the concert, which then continued with a very short song, "Never Again the Same" by Wuorinen, poetry by Tate. David Salsbery sang a challenging bass line, unfortunately often covered up by tubist Jose Martinez Anton, a fault which easily could have been remedied by a microphone for the singer.

These were warm-ups for the main work, a world premiere and Tanglewood commission which lasted thirty-five minutes, and which was so inviting that one wished for more. "It Happens Like This," a cantata for four singers and twelve players on seven poems by James Tate, was composed and conducted by Wuorinen and appreciated by a wildly excited audience.

The poems are fascinatingly surreal and original, and were expertly brought to life through Wuorinen's fine sense of balance and orchestration. The twelve-tone method of composing, Wuorinen's hallmark, served as bulwark when each song had its own distinctive style and drama, the music sometimes spiky, and sometimes almost tonal.

The singers — Sharon Harms, soprano, Laura Mercado-Wright, mezzo-soprano, Steven Brennfleck, tenor, and Douglas Williams, bass-baritone, all top vocalists — alternated between speaking the text and singing, with the instrumental ensemble coming in between or acting as accompaniment, or, with the poem "The Formal Invitation" beginning the work sans singers. This allowed all the words to be heard and understood.

The fourth song, "The Promotion", about a dog being reborn as a human, but with a worse life, was a very lovely madrigal with the four singing chorally, the harp, piano, and other instruments playing lyrically, and Freeda Electra

Handelsman ballet dancing in front of the singers wearing a dog's head. She also appeared wearing a goat's head in the first song, and a turkey's head in the last, as these animals were featured in the poems. The other two poems had her standing motionless, which appeared awkwardly static.

With a standing ovation sendoff, the evening was a happy occasion for the opening of this festival, and Charles Wuorinen, its new director.

Priscilla McLean is a freelance writer and composer/performer.

MUSIC REVIEW

Music of Charles Wuorinen

2011 Festival of Contemporary Music

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday, August 3, 2011

Where: Ozawa Hall, Tanglewood, MA

Duration: One hour, no intermission