

Fall Arts: Traveling With Wayne Horvitz, Richard Hugo, and the St. Helens String Quartet

By Gavin Borchert Tue., Sep 15 2015

Ever since medieval composers combined sacred Latin texts and French secular ones in the same motet, or those of the renaissance built Masses above bass lines borrowed from snatches of folksong, “crossover” (to use the most simplistic term) has been an oft-used compositional strategy, the mixing of “high” and “low” (to use the most vulgar terms). In fact, it would be difficult to name a period in music history that *didn't* freely indulge; creators as disparate as Haydn and Ives, Grieg and Bartok infused their work with the color and flavor of vernacular music.



So that's not where the novelty lies in two recent local recordings, **Wayne Horvitz's** *Some Places Are Forever Afternoon* (Songlines) and the **St. Helens String Quartet's** *American Dreams* (Navona Records). The difference is in the artists' attitude. For centuries, this approach was generally seen as an infusion, the blend of separate, even opposed, worlds. But these recordings succeed, I think, simply because the composers decline to believe that these *are* separate worlds—and from their heartfelt evocation of a sense of place. It's not a graft of style A onto style B; this is just what America sounds like. (Richard Hugo, the late Northwest poet who inspired Horvitz's record, also provides insight as to how to make this approach work; of this more later.)

It's even harder to separate out the stylistic strands that intertwine in Horvitz's music. ("Progressively inclined acoustic jazz and ultra-modern classicism," reads the press-release description. Sure, why not?) *Some Places Are Forever Afternoon* comprises 12 instrumentals for seven players, each linked to a poem by Hugo (1923–1982). Born in White Center, trained at the UW, and later settling in Missoula, Hugo's writing is steeped in Northwesternness. "I loved the language, the era, the places" in his work, Horvitz says; "it's a bygone era of drinking and fishing and writing."

He knew, though, after falling for Hugo's poems, that he wouldn't take the most obvious path: setting them as song lyrics. But what makes them "inherently 'musical,'" as Horvitz describes them? "Partly the imagery," he explains, "but mostly the way the lines flowed, how they sounded when they are read out loud (I had heard some recordings of Hugo reading his poems). I could feel that lines followed other lines due to their shape and cadence, as well as the narrative. Later I read Hugo's book about writing, culled from various lectures to students, and my suspicions were confirmed."

The Triggering Town is that book, and passages jump out that seem to describe not only what Horvitz hears in Hugo's poems, but what I hear in Horvitz's music: "Depend on rhythm, tonality, and the music of language to hold things together," advises Hugo. "You must assume that the next thing you put down belongs not for reasons of logic, good sense, or narrative development, but because you put it there. You, the same person who said that, also said this. The adhesive force is your way of writing."

That's Horvitz's music all over—and also describes the way the composers on *American Dreams* avoid what might otherwise come off as pastiche, a musical buffet arbitrarily sampled. Never mind that this bit recalls gospel, that one German expressionism, and these a blues bar at closing time—or, for that matter, that some of the music is written out, some improvised. The adhesive force on *Afternoon* is Horvitz's own conviction and imagination.

Hugo traveled the region often, seeking just such triggers; and in planning his suite, Horvitz and his daughter Nica (whose photos adorn the album booklet) retraced the poet's route, staying in, for example, a Montana cabin Hugo himself frequented. Noting that Hugo always had his car radio on, Horvitz says that "music was, clearly, a visceral pleasure for him . . . I find compelling his obvious reverence for music as a kind of gold standard when it comes to discerning the importance of the conscious and the intuitive; how much of each, how they interact with each other."

In addition to serendipitously providing subject matter, for Hugo the idea of travel, of exploration, links up directly with his compositional method: "I believe Hugo, like some novelists I know, and certainly some composers, including myself, was inclined to begin somewhere and see where it led him," says Horvitz. In *The Triggering Town*, Hugo admits as much; he cites Auden's quotation of a

character in an E.M. Forster novel who says “How do I know what I think until I see what I’ve said?” Back we come to the idea of musical improvisation, of the “adhesive force” that (if you’re good at it) binds your travels from idea to idea, idiom to idiom, into a convincing whole.

One collaborator with Horvitz in just such exploration, for more than 30 years, has been Bainbridge guitarist Bill Frisell; he’ll be the soloist in Horvitz’s new commission from the Seattle Symphony for its annual “Sonic Evolution” concert, a tribute to Seattle artists past and present. Horvitz returned to *Afternoon*, released in July, as a thematic source for his 15-minute *Those Who Remain*. Here again, personal relationships inform the music; he describes it as “essentially a concerto for Bill, except his part is improvised, but it relates to the orchestra like a concerto.”

One clear difference between these projects: The optimism the St. Helens hears in *American Dreams* is rare in the Hugo poems Horvitz drew upon. The title *Those Who Remain* comes from Hugo’s “Three Stops to Ten Sleep,” in which, as Horvitz describes it, the poet “evokes a group of pioneers heading west, and their steady decline from hope to despair”:

Wait. The mountains are never closer. What/is this land? We lost too many last night/in the storm and those who remain/are the worst, the ones we hesitated to take/when we started back at the river.

Though who knows? In a later line, the poem’s narrator asks a question that could apply to any art-making endeavor: “Even if we fail, wasn’t it worth the trip?”

WAYNE HORVITZ Cornish College, 710 E. Roy St., cornish.edu. \$14–\$28. 8 p.m. Sat., Oct. 10; and Steve Cox Memorial Park, 1321 S.W. 102nd St., earshot.org. Free. 6 p.m. Sun., Oct. 11.