

The 20/19 Project: A Centennial Celebration

Anne Leilehua Lanzilotti

While researching repertoire, I came across a surprising historical synchronicity: three of the most performed viola sonatas in our repertoire were written in the same year, 1919. Arts patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge held a composition competition that year calling for viola sonatas as submissions. She encouraged two of her close friends, Rebecca Clarke and Ernest Bloch, to submit works. Halfway around the world, a young Paul Hindemith was finding his voice and wrote his own viola sonata inspired by Claude Debussy's colorful writing.

To celebrate the centennial of that milestone season, I have commissioned three new viola sonatas by Andrew Norman, Anna Thorvaldsdottir, and Scott Wollschleger. In this series for the *Journal of the American Viola Society*, I'll be sharing the process of the commissioning project at various stages. This first article shares background information about The 20/19 Project and gives some insight into how to commission new works.



Anne Lanzilotti. Photo by Blaise Hayward Studio

Celebrating a Centennial

There are several wonderful projects that celebrate the centennial of the 1919 sonatas. Ruth Lomon orchestrated the Clarke Sonata so it can be performed as a gorgeous viola concerto. Violist and scholar Daphne Gerling wrote her doctoral dissertation about the history of the three 1919 sonatas by Bloch, Clarke, and Hindemith.¹ Along with Andrew Braddock, David Bynog, Hillary Herndon, and Katrin Meidell, Gerling has been continuing her research in the form of presentations and performances of other sonatas that may have been entered in the 1919 Coolidge Competition. These projects amplify the historical significance of the original works.

Since my interests are more in contemporary music, I wanted to celebrate the centennial by commissioning new works. The idea solidified in my mind as I was finishing my doctorate: I decided that I needed to start another big project to keep my momentum and be excited about moving forward after my dissertation was completed. This system of overlapping long-term goals has become a positive force in keeping my own creative momentum since I'm interested in many different things. It also allows for lulls in projects to overlap with moments of action in others. Ultimately, it is a system that keeps me hopeful: even if I get discouraged about a smaller task I have to do, or I feel bogged down by the minutia of administrative work, I can plug these in to larger projects that I am really excited about.

Commissioning New Works

Once I had the idea of commissioning new works for the centennial, I had to decide who the

specific composers would be. The three I chose are composers whose work I admire, especially because of their string writing—Norman is at the forefront of extended techniques for strings and I have dedicated my academic research to his music. Thorvaldsdottir’s haunting timbres turn strings into whispering echoes of an unremembered text. From the first time I heard her music live, I was taken by her powerful voice as a composer. Finally, Wollschleger is a close collaborator and friend whose work often explores the disintegration of memory and sound. Through my personal connection with two of the composers, I knew that they were good to work with. In a project of this scale—taking place over a five-year period—that is essential. Although I didn’t know Thorvaldsdottir well, I had only ever heard great things about her. She has a reputation as someone who was professional and kind, and I love the way she talks about her work.

gain international recognition. Norman won the Grawemeyer Award for his symphonic work *Play*, and recently had an opera co-commissioned by the Berlin Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and London Symphony Orchestra. Thorvaldsdottir was awarded the Kravis Emerging Composer for the New York Philharmonic—which meant they also commissioned her new work *Metacosmos*, which is currently being played by orchestras all over the world—and she is currently Composer-in-Residence with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra. Wollschleger “has become a formidable, individual presence”² in the contemporary American musical landscape. His debut album, *Soft Aberration* was named a Notable Recording of 2017 in *The New Yorker*. I believe in these composers and their work. Beyond any awards or external validation, this belief and genuine enthusiasm is essential when talking to donors, writing grants, writing press releases, and of course



Composers (left to right) Andrew Norman, Anna Thorvaldsdottir, and Scott Wollschleger. Photos by Bryan Sheffield (Norman), Kristinn Ingvarsson (Thorvaldsdottir), and Anne Lanzilotti (Wollschleger).

In terms of the musical aspects of the commission, I only specified the length and instrumentation. While Norman and Wollschleger will be writing sonatas for viola and piano, I left it up to Thorvaldsdottir to choose. Her new work is for viola solo and electronics—a twenty-first century take on the traditional sonata. It was important to me to not specify any other musical elements and let the composers write whatever they wanted. I felt that the centennial and instrumentation were strong enough elements to draw a connection between the original 1919 sonatas and these new 2019 sonatas. This gave the composers much more freedom.

In the time since I first asked the composers about two years ago, they have continued to

when talking to an audience about the new work in a performance.

The next hurdle was how to pay for the commissions. Before meeting with any of the donors, I got permission from the composers to put up a project page on my website outlining the basic idea with photos and links to their music. Having an organized digital project page helped me focus my vision and also helped show others that I had put a lot of thought into the arch of the project. Then, I sat down with several friends who are in charge of fundraising for nonprofits to ask about narrowing down a list of potential donors. I met with a handful of these known sponsors to pitch the idea and get feedback. All of them were very generous with their

time and had different opinions about how to move forward. But it was clear when the right donors came along to help realize the project.

I'm extremely grateful to Elizabeth and Justus Schlichting for their generous support of the commission funding—and I especially love that another Elizabeth is honoring Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge's legacy of commissioning new works! The Schlichtings allowed me to share their name publicly because they want to encourage others to become sponsors of classical contemporary music as well. Justus Schlichting was inspired by a famous patron himself. He described an instance where he was listening to some of Beethoven's Quartets: "I was sitting there having an incredibly emotional response to the music and realized someone back then had made it all possible—this Razumovsky. And I suddenly thought, 'I don't know who he was.' It turned out he was just fascinating."³

These conversations about commission funding were all two years in advance of the deadline for the composers. Especially for a commission of this length, it is important to secure initial payments in order to ask the composers to start writing. (If you're unsure how much standard rates are, New Music USA has a handy "Commissioning Fees Calculator" online.⁴) However, I also knew I needed to find funding for the other aspects of the project which are important to the potential impact and legacy of new works.

Beyond Creative Ideas

Other aspects of managing the project involve writing the commission contracts, continually applying for grants, reaching out to presenters for performance opportunities, organizing rehearsal/performance/recording schedules, and pitching the album to potential labels. Many professional musicians like myself write their own grants, press releases, and liner notes. It's something that I enjoy doing, but also a necessity of the current artist economy—especially if you're interested in pursuing your own projects. I have also been building momentum for the project by performing works by and writing scholarship about Norman,⁵

Thorvaldsdottir,⁶ and Wollschleger.⁷ Rather than go into detail about the many important logistical aspects of the project, here are a few resources that I found helpful in planning and executing these various other tasks.

- *Beyond Talent* by Angela Beeching: from building strong habits for creative productivity/project planning, to how to write to presenters, to how to plan out a timeline for press on a project, this book is the definitive guide to freelancing in the twenty-first century. Beeching also has an excellent weekly mailing list that she sends out and free weekly Facebook live meetings that anyone can join in which she rotates through various topics.
- *Getting It Published* by William Germano: this book is more geared towards publishing a book or article after one has already written a dissertation, but some of the points he addresses in terms of whether to go with a formal publisher or self-publish are applicable to writing articles as well.
- *NewMusicBox*: NewMusicUSA publishes a blog online with articles by members of the music community as well as some of their staff writers/editors. For example, editor Molly Sheridan has a great introductory article to grant writing⁸, and they update the website every year to give clear guidelines about their own granting programs.

Vision & Impact

Looking back at the original 1919 sonatas made me think about how legacy is developed over time through the impact of works which are given substantial resources beyond the premiere: in particular, high-quality recordings which lead to repeated performances and integration into curriculum. The original pieces became staples of the viola repertoire through performances by great viola soloists such as Clarke and Hindemith themselves, scholarship such as Gerling's excellent dissertation, and recordings/curation of the three works together because of their origins in the same year. Therefore, in my planning for The 20/19 Project, I wanted to go beyond the commissions and premieres of the sonatas to include recordings of the works and video tutorials to show extended techniques used in the pieces. Through this extensive free educational resource (an expansion of www.shakennotstuttered.com) other performers,

students, and audience members will have a window into the creative process and a way to continue to learn the works, spark curiosity, and support a thriving culture of contemporary music for everyone.

Filmmakers/percussionists Kevin Eikenberg and Evan Chapman of Four/Ten Media have been filming the new videos for *Shaken Not Stuttered* in workshops with each of the composers—I'll share more about that process in the next article in this series. Alongside the technique videos, we'll be recording the three new sonatas. By recording these works and releasing them as an album, I will be able to have an impact and reach audiences beyond my immediate community. My hope is that the three new sonatas by Norman, Thorvaldsdottir, and Wollschleger will become a part of the standard repertoire, will be performed by many other musicians, and will inspire audiences for generations to come.

In the next article, JAVS readers will get a behind the scenes look at workshops with the composers at University of Northern Colorado, Oberlin Conservatory, and Thorvaldsdottir's studio in London. The workshops give us a chance to work together on the new commissions, and to develop digital educational resources to complement the pieces. Reaching out into these communities—through the University workshops and more globally online—is important to me as an educator, and deep down, as a viola nerd.

Anne Leilehua Lanzilotti is a composer-performer, scholar, and educator with a passion for contemporary music. For a complete bio, please visit: <http://annelanzilotti.com>

Notes

- ¹ Daphne Cristina Capparelli Gerling, "Connecting histories: Identity and exoticism in Ernest Bloch, Rebecca Clarke, and Paul Hindemith's viola works of 1919" (DMA diss., Rice University, 2007).
- ² Alex Ross, "A Wollschleger moment," *The Rest Is Noise*, March 23, 2016, <https://www.therestisnoise.com/2016/03/a-wollschleger-moment.html>.
- ³ Alex Marshall, "The 21st century patrons commissioning classical music masterpieces," *How to Spend It*, June 7, 2018, <https://howtospendit.ft.com/art-philanthropy/203593-The-21st-century-patrons-commissioning-classical-music-masterpieces>.
- ⁴ <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/commissioning-fees-calculator/>
- ⁵ Lanzilotti, "Cut to a Different World: Andrew Norman," *Music & Literature*, October 25, 2016, <http://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2016/10/25/cut-to-a-different-world-andrew-norman>.
- ⁶ Lanzilotti, "Anna Thorvaldsdottir: A Part of Nature," *Music & Literature*, May 18, 2017, <http://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2017/5/18/anna-thorvaldsdottir-a-part-of-nature>.
- ⁷ Lanzilotti, Liner notes for "American Dream," *Cantaloupe Music*, February 8, 2019.
- ⁸ Molly Sheridan, "Grant Applications: 5 Mistakes Not to Make," *NewMusicBox*, September 1, 2004, <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/Grant-Applications-5-Mistakes-Not-to-Make/>.