

AN ARCHITECTURE OF SOCIETY

THE AMERICAN COMPOSER ANDREW NORMAN

by Anne Lanzilotti

■ *Try. Split. Suspend. Switch.*

Play. Many of the titles for Andrew Norman's recent works are both a window into formal devices used in the piece and an invitation for the audience to engage in active listening. Often, Norman presents a complex texture at the beginning of a work that is slowly untangled through actions in the orchestra – actions which sometimes contradict each other as the orchestra tries to resolve the formal puzzle of non-linear narratives. Processing these contradictions in a meaningful way requires both the calm ability to recognize them, and the empathy to take on different perspectives. Contemporary music requires one to confront preconceived notions of sound, and challenges the listener to process these contradictions in real time. Therefore, although listening to a classical music concert is often considered a passive activity, Norman is asking the audience to make it an active one by questioning their aesthetic assumptions and being open to problem-solving.

Norman does this not only with narrative, but also in the way he employs extended techniques. While many modern composers use extended techniques to enhance the texture and complexity of their works, Norman's awareness of the instruments allows for an incredible range of sound. He develops and chooses the techniques he uses through tactile experimentation on the piano and viola – his two primary instruments. Because of this, the techniques are comfortable to execute and are generated with an awareness of the physicality and energy required of the performer. In an interview for *New Music Box* Norman states:

«I really love seeing people make choices and taking risks on stage ... to take a risk, to have a definite idea about the interpretation of a piece ... To me, the heart and soul of written music is about creating something with enough depth and complexity, but also enough openness in it to allow for many different realizations ... And that has also led me into really exploring this idea of human interaction in music. How can I open up that space on the written page for human beings to be human beings when they play music?»¹

For those unfamiliar with Norman's music, here is an introduction to two of his works: *The Companion Guide to Rome* and *Play*.

THE COMPANION GUIDE TO ROME

The Companion Guide to Rome (2010) is a string trio inspired by churches in Rome. The piece is a journey through various musical styles: Norman experiments with different ideas of physicality, coordination, and narrative in these miniatures. The work was premiered in 2010 at Radialsystem V in Berlin by the Scharoun Ensemble, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 2012.

Each movement of *The Companion Guide to Rome* uses different compositional techniques to express visual metaphor in the churches. For example, Norman uses musical palindromes in the second movement, *Benedetto*, to represent the cosmatesque floors of San Benedetto in Piscinula. The movement sounds like a lost string trio by Maurice Ravel reimagined by M.C. Escher (<https://soundcloud.com/psny/andrew-norman-benedetto>). In the words of

musicologist Alex Ross, «Geometrically elegant patterns of expanding and contracting intervals give [Norman's] structures an architectural solidity.»² Just as suddenly as the movement started, it is cut off in the middle of the last palindrome, only to be re-visited later in the work.

Perhaps the most humorous of the movements, *Lorenzo* starts with a tight six-



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«How can I open up that space on the written page for human beings to be human beings when they play music?» | Andrew Norman

teenth-note hoquet in the three strings running quickly through the circle of fifths, picking up where Benedetto was abruptly cut off. However, instead of moving back through the palindrome, the players are asked to «gradually fall apart» both in rhythmic tightness and in timbral cleanliness. In the score, Norman indicates, «change

the sound from elegant and precise to rough, rude, and sloppy.» Watching this happen live, one may observe that the synchronized physicality it takes to play together at the beginning of the movement changes dramatically as the three players begin break away from the hoquet. This musical gesture reflects the church for which

the movement is named, San Lorenzo fuori la Mura, in particular, a specific place in the cosmatesque floor that was broken and repaired in a sloppy manner. Lorenzo marks an important turning point in the piece: the players allow the texture to fall apart through a transition to noncoordinated playing. In allowing the music to fall apart



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Fascinating structures | the old Cosmatesque mosaic floor (12th–14th century) of the San Benedetto church in Piscinula (Italy)

and «failing» to stay together, the players can continue on, finding new systems of organization and methods of reflection in the final movements of the work.

PLAY (2013, REV. 2016)

Play is a sprawling symphonic work in three movements, or «levels» as they are named. Stunning timbres are highlighted by rapid jump cuts in a formal maze of interwoven narratives. The piece begins with all these narratives in conflict with each other. As the work unfolds, the audience begins to hear singular voices emerge, and may follow their individual journeys through the piece.³

Norman is intrigued by the many ways that physicality can be involved in sound. Certain techniques require seemingly small physical motion but create extreme timbral distortion such as the technique Norman calls heavy bow pressure with light fingered tremolo.⁴ Others, like the pitchless bounce and noisy shift⁵ involve large physical gestures from the players that produce almost no sound.⁶ Drawing the audience’s attention to the physical aspects of performance emphasizes the humanity of the individual players on stage.

In program notes that Norman wrote for the recent performance of the revised version of *Play* by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, he says:

Play explores many different ideas – ideas about choice, chance, free will, and control, about how technology has rewired our

brains and changed the ways we express ourselves, about the blurring boundaries of reality in the internet age, the murky grounds where video games and drone warfare meet, for instance, or where cyberbullying and real world violence converge. *Play* touches on the corrupting influence of power and the collapse and rebirth of social systems, but it also explores the physicality and joy of instrumental playing, as well as the many potential meanings of coordinated human activity – how the display of massed human synchronicity can represent both the communal best and coercive worst of our race.⁷

THE VOICES OF OUR TIME

Norman has received a lot of press recently for being awarded both Musical America’s

2017 Composer of the Year, and the Grawemeyer Prize for Musical Composition for *Play*. Given such press, Norman could be pushing his upcoming projects, but instead he has taken the opportunity to voice his concerns about the classical music community. In an interview with NPR in response to receiving the Grawemeyer, Norman chose to: «... call attention to the fact that there are problems. For instance, this award has been given to three women out of its 30-year history. And to me that’s kind of an issue. And in all honesty, I’m a white man and I get lots of commissions and there are systemic reasons for that, reasons we should all be talking about ... The canon is so overwhelmingly white and male, but we can use new music to fix that problem. There are so many voices who

Exploring social systems as a musical metaphor | Andrew Norman: «Play» for orchestra (2013/16), score p. 118

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should be heard in the concert hall today, of people whose music reflects a wide variety of experiences. That, to me, is the most important issue right now for contemporary classical music and classical music generally — how to get what happens in the concert hall to reflect the diverse society that we are. I think that orchestras have such an opportunity, especially now in this really conflicted, contentious moment, to say something powerful and meaningful about our own time, with all of the voices of our own time.»⁸

In his acceptance speech as Musical America's 2017 Composer of the Year Norman went on to say: «I have been blessed with way more than my fair share of opportunities in this field, way more chances than I deserve to cultivate my voice, to grow as a musician, and to learn from great artists and mentors. I've also, and perhaps most importantly, been given the opportunity to fail, to fail repeatedly, and to fail in public, and I'm so grateful for that. . . . I can't help but feel that this gift of failure also puts me in an incredibly privileged position. I think about all the composers who have not been granted the same good fortune that I have, composers who don't get the chance to fail because they don't get the chance at all, and I wonder what we as a community can do about it. . . . it is our foremost responsibility as musical citizens to find [these voices], to cultivate them, to give them plenty of opportunities to succeed and to fail, and ultimately to let them take the art form to places we cannot yet imagine.»⁹

To those who don't know Norman, these comments may seem surprising. However, one of the narratives of *Play* is the personal journey of each individual in the orchestra having the opportunity to try out ideas that fail many times before finding the one that they were searching for all along. Voices in the back of the orchestra, traditionally not in roles of leadership, are given solos that inspire the rest of the orchestra to also break out and find their voices. In the premiere of the new version of *Play* in October in Los Angeles, Norman highlighted this aspect of the piece by shaking the hands of the two solo violin players at the back of the sections instead of the concertmaster's hand, as is traditional.

Clearly, Norman is trying to find ways to discuss these ideas of opportunity, privilege, and diversity in the concert hall in musical terms. These metaphorical ways of



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In search of new sounds and performance techniques | Andrew Norman in rehearsals with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra

discussing social issues allow for conversations that otherwise might not be possible between people of opposing political views. In the premiere of the revised version of *Play* this fall, I was sitting behind an elderly couple that was whispering to each other the whole time, leaning over the edge to see what was happening on stage. At the climax of the piece when all the individual narratives finally join together to create a unified melody, the couple suddenly held hands. In these moments, art inspires us to find each other. If audience members can be swept away by the experience of live performance, then perhaps in empathizing with members of the ensemble, they can begin to extend that empathy to others whom they would traditionally not give a voice to in their own lives. ■

¹ Andrew Norman: «Andrew Norman: Empowering Performance», interview by Alexandra Gardner, in: *New Music Box*, www.newmusicbox.org/articles/andrew-norman-empowering-performance/ (accessed February 1, 2014).

² Alex Ross: «Composer of the Year 2017: Andrew Norman», in: *Musical America Worldwide*, http://www.musicalamerica.com/pages/?pagename=2017_Composer_Norman

³ For a more detailed analysis of the piece see: Anne Lanzlotti: «Cut to a Different World: Andrew Norman», in: *Music & Literature* 26.10.2016, www.musicandliterature.org/features/2016/10/25/cut-to-a-different-world-andrew-norman.

⁴ see: <https://soundcloud.com/psny/andrew-norman-benedetto>.

⁵ see: <https://vimeo.com/115079848>.

⁶ see: <https://vimeo.com/115079850>.

⁷ see: Norman: [Programmbook to *Play*], <http://andrewnormanmusic.com/archives/220>.

⁸ Norman: «Andrew Norman Wins the Grawemeyer Award for Music», interview by Tom Huizenga, in: *Deceptive Cadence from NPR Classical*, 28.11.2016, www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2016/11/28/502559072/andrew-norman-wins-the-grawemeyer-award-for-music.

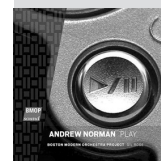
⁹ Norman: «On Being Named Composer of the Year by Musical America», in: *New Music Box*, 9.12.2016, www.newmusicbox.org/articles/on-being-named-composer-of-the-year-by-musical-america.

■ INFO

WORLD PREMIERS

[Violin Concerto].
Jennifer Koh (violin), Peter Oundjian (conductor),
Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra
October 14/ 15, 2017 Los Angeles / USA

A Trip to the Moon. A new opera for children and adults to sing and perform
June 17/ 18, 2017 Philharmonie, Berlin
July 9, 2017 Barbican Centre, London
March 2/ 3, 2018 Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles



CD

■ Andrew Norman: *Play* for Orchestra; Gil Rose, Boston Modern Orchestra Project; BMOP/sound 1040