

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Mason Bates

Born January 23, 1977, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

***Music from Underground Spaces* for orchestra and electronica**

Mason Bates composed this work in 2007. The first performance was given by the California Symphony in Walnut Creek, California, in May 2008. The score calls for two flutes and alto flute, two oboes, two clarinets and E-flat clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, percussion, electronica (realized by the composer on electronic drum pad and laptop at these performances), harp, piano, celesta, and strings. Performance time is approximately fourteen minutes.

These are the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first performances of Mason Bates's *Music from Underground Spaces*.

The first hint that Mason Bates is not your standard composer, straight off the conservatory shelf, comes on the home page of his Web site, which is neatly divided between classical and electronica. (Actually, your first clue would be the Web site address, masonicelectronica.com, after his DJ club moniker, Masonic.) Bates prefers the term *electronica* (which word-processing programs automatically change to electronic) to electronic music, because, as he says, "the trajectory of almost every classical composer into electronics has been through computer music." That is not Bates's story. For starters, Bates has impeccable conservatory credentials. After a relatively normal musical upbringing in Richmond, Virginia, which included piano lessons and singing in the choir, Bates studied composition and English literature in the Columbia-Juilliard joint program. He worked with David Del Tredici (his *Final Alice* was a hit of the Solti era in Chicago), and John Corigliano (the CSO's first-ever composer-in-residence), and then moved to the Bay Area in 2001 to enroll in the Ph.D. program at Berkeley's Center for New Music and Audio Technologies. He has been lavished with big league honors, from institutions such as the American Academy in Rome and the American Academy for Arts and Letters (an award that "acknowledges the composer who has arrived at his or her own voice"). But in San Francisco—as in New York City, as well as on stints in Berlin and Rome—he had also discovered a thriving club scene, where he spent many nights as a DJ, an after-hours experience that turned out to be central to the serious business of finding his voice as a composer.

Omnivorous Furniture, commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and premiered on its Green Umbrella Series at Disney Hall in 2004, was his first attempt to merge the classical and electronic sides of his background. With that work, Bates suggested that he was perhaps uniquely equipped to create an organic mix of different kinds of music that had nothing to do with faddish posturing or gimmicky cross-culturalism. As composer and critic Kyle Gann put it, "Eventually, someone was bound to grow up so immersed in genre-mixing that they would get both sides of the equation right." Bates was quickly pegged as a leader of the new breed of composers who might actually take music in a fresh direction. Since then, he has continued to carve himself a comfortable spot somewhere midway "between the dance-floor origins of electronica and the concert hall," as he describes it.

In pieces like *The B-Sides*, which the Chicago Symphony will play under Riccardo Muti next season, Bates unashamedly embraces his love of the nineteenth-century orchestral tradition, with its big narrative forms, as well as his innate disregard for stylistic boundaries. "I like mixing it up," Bates recently said, "But I am a classical composer—there is a level of focus at a classical concert that my music needs." Last year, Bates gained even wider exposure when the YouTube Symphony played part of his *B-Sides*, in its

highly publicized Carnegie Hall debut concert, with Bates performing electronica in the middle of the orchestra. (Bates is so busy writing that he can't always travel to play in his works, but he is here in Chicago this week to perform on electronic drum pad and laptop in these concerts.)

Music from Underground Spaces—the work Alejandro Cerrudo has choreographed as *Deep Down Dos*—found its shape when Bates began to think about the Hayward Fault that runs beneath the East Bay, where he was starting to write a new piece for the California Symphony, which had commissioned the work. A visit to the Berkeley Seismology Laboratory put him in touch with “the beautiful and eerie earthquakes recordings processed by Peggy Hellweg,” and soon Bates had what he called a “runaway idea”—a musical journey through a twenty-first century underworld. There are four seamlessly connected movements (Tunnels, Infernos, Crystalline Cities, and Tectonic Plates), three of which feature electronics, including the haunting sounds of “gentle aftershocks” and “distant teutonic pops” in the final pages.

Bates continues the story:

Music from Underground Spaces marries orchestra and electronics to vividly conjure up a variety of underground worlds. We begin with “Tunnels,” where subways roar past kaleidoscopic orchestral figuration. As the work delves deeper in each movement, the propulsive motives and driving techno-rhythms of the opening become gradually stretched out. Indeed, the unusual trajectory of this work takes us from blurry activity to slow-motion ambience. The fleeting textures of “Tunnels” morph into the surreal effects of “Infernos,” where a demonic techno groove, paired with flickering figuration, moves the work into one hell of a nightclub. The cultish tension accumulates until all this pressure forges “Crystalline Cities”—a kind of euphoric limbo, where sudden crescendos fuse into sparkling bits of diamond and crystal. Featuring the orchestra alone, this slow-motion, sparkling netherworld finally gives way to the glacial textures of “Tectonic Plates.” Initially eerie, this final movement explores primarily the beautiful possibilities of the subsonic. The lowest members of the orchestra trade sonorities like slow-motion sea swells, with the ghostly earthquake recordings sounding like the gentle creaking of a boat.

Deep Down Dos

Alejandro Cerrudo, choreography
Mason Bates, music
Branimira Ivanova, costume design
Nicholas Phillips, lighting design

Making Deep Down Dos

by Phillip Huscher

Alejandro Cerrudo, the popular resident choreographer for Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, says that normally the hardest thing about making a new dance piece is finding the right music. But in the case of *Deep Down Dos*, his new work being premiered at this week's Chicago Symphony concerts, he was simply handed the music—or more accurately, he was given a handful of pieces to choose from, all of them written by Mason Bates, who has since been named one of the Chicago Symphony's new Mead Composers-in-Residence starting next season. Cerrudo was immediately drawn to *Music from Underground Spaces*, Bates's high-energy orchestral piece that is shot through with sounds from the underworld—the roar of the subway, seismic tremors. But then, after picking it, he realized that he had no idea how to choreograph it. “It was as if Mason had given me a blank canvas, and all the colors, and all the tools,” he said during rehearsals last month, while the finished dance piece was in the process of being fine-tuned. The blank canvas turned out to be an unexpectedly welcome challenge for Cerrudo, particular since he is the kind of artist who doesn't like to repeat himself. After being stumped initially, he began with a single gesture—like a swath of color spread across the canvas, Cerrudo says—and from there, the piece began to unfold with relative ease, coming together in a matter of weeks.

Last month I peaked in on rehearsals to see what Cerrudo ultimately found in Bates's music. With the score blaring from the sound system, Cerrudo was putting the dancers through their paces—or, more accurately, they were showing him the piece he had imagined and that only now, in a bright, mirrored

studio in Hubbard Street's west loop building, was actually coming to life. One essential difference between composing a score and creating a new dance piece is that choreography can be continually "rewritten" in rehearsal in a way that music traditionally isn't, as details—and sometimes even bigger ideas—get adjusted while the dancers and choreographer negotiate their way through the work.

Cerrudo and the Hubbard Street dancers have an easy, respectful, exchange. Cerrudo is, after all, still one of them; this is the first time, in fact, that he hasn't danced with the company in its Chicago Symphony collaborations. He asks them to readjust the position of an arm, or the tilt of the head; they show him how something might work slightly differently; together they try things out. Cerrudo naturally shifts between demonstration and explanation. A native of Madrid, and a Chicago resident since 2005, Cerrudo sometimes fishes for the English words to explain what his body does instinctively (in the process inventing a new verb, "to umbrella").

Rehearsing dance is not unlike rehearsing music—except that dancers "know" the music by the gestures they are learning to put with it: they find their place in the piece not by calling out rehearsal or measure numbers, they way musicians do, but by signaling a specific move, a gesture of the arm, a particular stance. Bates's piece has now taken on a new physical dimension; although most of the Hubbard Street dancers have never seen Bates's score, they know it intimately nonetheless, just from a different point of view. When Cerrudo urges the Hubbard Street dancers to "be attentive to each other" it is equivalent to a conductor asking his musicians to listen to each other.

How these two dimensions, the music and the dance, end up living together, is partly a question of how musical the choreographer is—how sensitive he is to the way the music is put together, to the ebb and flow of its energy, its shape, the arc of its form. Although Cerrudo isn't a trained musician, his previous works have all found wonderfully apt movement for the music he has picked, whether it is the bustling traffic patterns of a pulsating Philip Glass piece (*Extremely Close* from 2008) or the cheeky slips and slides of a Devendra Banhart song (*Lickety-Split*, 2006). Less than a month before the Chicago Symphony engagement, Cerrudo was still trying to clarify the relation between movement and sound—fussing to get the jittery energy of the opening right; to make sure the quirky, lurching movements later on line up with the score's off-kilter rhythms; to see that the look on a face, or the arch of a back matches a single sound in Bates's busy soundscape.

After rehearsal one afternoon, Cerrudo and I sat down and talked about the process of turning *Music from Underground Spaces* into *Deep Down Dos*.

Phillip Huscher: You have said that everything begins with the music. Did you listen to *Music from Underground Spaces* often during this process?

Alejandro Cerrudo: I got the music quite a long time ago, and I listened to it a lot. But just before the process begins, I try not to listen to it, so it will continue to surprise me. I think when you listen to one piece too many times, you get numb to it. Once I know the music, I listen to it just at the moment when I feel inspired. I actually don't want to learn the music. I don't even want to learn my choreography, because I want it to keep surprising me as much as possible. I know what's coming, but I have to ask the dancers what's the next step.

So they know it in a way that you don't.

Absolutely. I couldn't dance my work right now. I don't know the steps. I have an idea of course. I know when it's right. I know when they forget a step.

You had trouble getting started with this piece. Where did you begin finally?

It was not at the very opening, it was a little bit into the piece. It wasn't anything intentional. It was—and I hate using this word—almost random, actually. The first movement that I did was just what the music was telling me in that moment. And of course as soon as I saw something I started modifying it. I went from there.

The final duet is a real shift from the rest of the work, just as Mason's score ends in an unexpected way. Did you always know you would end with this duet?

At first I didn't know what I was going to do with the ending. I thought that maybe I would try something with all of the dancers. And I tried a few different things before I got the idea of a duet.

You say that you try things out on the dancers. Do they make suggestions to you?

Absolutely. I ask them to do so. The more comfortable they feel, they more they'll give.

In the middle of choreographing the work, do you go back to the music?

When I get stuck, the first thing I do is play the piece again. I let it speak to me. The music helps me a lot. In particular this piece is music-based. All my ideas came from what the music was telling me in that moment, with the dancers that I had, and the movement that I had created so far. When I get lost, I let the music inspire me and then I ask the dancers: What do I do now? What do we do now? And sometimes they don't know either, and sometimes they suggest something that I don't like, and sometimes they suggest something that is perfect.

And you take it.

Of course!

Was this piece tougher to choreograph than your other works?

It was very different. At first I thought it would be the toughest, but I don't think it was, actually. There were two sections that were hard for me, but the rest of the piece was quite enjoyable and I knew what to do. My last work for the company [*Off Screen*, to film scores] was hard to do, because the music came from so many different places, and to put that together and to have it make sense visually was a big challenge.

Did the process feel different this time?

It was different. But I don't think I've had two works yet where the process was the same. I don't have a formula. I wonder if I ever will have one. I don't think I even want to have one. If you always work the same way, it is harder to create something new. Maybe someday I'll find something that I want to keep studying and I'll use the same formula over and over, not to make it easier on myself but to go deeper and deeper. But if you take a different approach every time that you work on something, that's going to affect how different that work looks from the last one. That's very important to me.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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