

MUSIC

ANTHONY TOMMASINI

A Bracing Breath Of Spring Air From All Directions

FOR many American orchestras, especially those in smaller cities with regional reputations, a concert at Carnegie Hall is only a dream.

When such ensembles decide to take the financial risk of renting Carnegie Hall for a concert, their conductors often let their marketing departments talk them into playing it safe. The idea of performing a new work by a hometown composer or Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra or an overlooked piece like Prokofiev's Fifth Piano Concerto is vetoed in favor of a program that will show New York audiences and critics how well the visitors can play Beethoven's Seventh Symphony or Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique." With no real news happening, these concerts often attract negligible audiences and are given a pass by critics.

Spring for Music, a festival that makes its debut on Friday evening at Carnegie Hall and offers seven concerts over nine

days, hopes to change this pattern. When the festival was announced in 2008, the organizers invited North American orchestras large and small to dream, to take chances, to make news. Those taking part, selected from 25 applicants, were chosen on the basis of the creativity and artistic merit of their proposed programs.

The participants include four ensembles that have played Carnegie regularly over the years: the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. Three orchestras are making long-awaited Carnegie Hall debuts: the Toledo Symphony, the Albany Symphony and the Oregon Symphony. The festival has significant foundation and corporate support, and tickets for each concert are \$25, with some balcony seats at \$15. Given the imagination and content of the programs, the concerts should attract audiences and critics alike.

Orpheus, the conductorless ensemble that opens the festival, is presenting "The New Brandenburgs," the fulfillment of a multiyear project involving six composers, each commissioned to write an orchestral work inspired by one of Bach's six "Brandenburg" Concertos. The pieces, by Aaron Jay Kernis, Melinda Wagner, Peter Maxwell Davies, Christopher Theofanidis, Stephen Hartke and Paul Moravec, were introduced individually in Orpheus programs and will be played as a group for the first time. So here is a fresh Bach-infused program without a single Bach work on it.

The organizers of Spring for Music are David V. Foster, president of the management firm Opus 3 Artists; Thomas W. Morris, the artistic director of the Ojai Music Festival in California and a former executive director of the Cleveland Orchestra; and Mary Lou Falcone, a veteran public relations consultant. From the start this team made clear that both major orchestras and fledgling ensembles were invited to apply, and that choices would be based on the intrinsic merits of the programs, not the clout of the institutions.

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MICHELLE V. AGINS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

A Voice Where Romance And Dysfunction Meet

By STEVE SMITH

ARE you really going to ask me that?" the composer and vocalist Corey Dargel inquired near the end of a sprawling conversation one recent evening, his measured tone briefly betraying impatience and resignation. What bothered him was being asked how he felt about his constant characterization as an artist whose work concerns bridging the gap between classical and popular music. Though not inaccurate, the description has become convenient shorthand, warding off deeper investigation of his work.

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The child of musical parents in McAllen, Tex., a town chiefly notable for its proximity to Mexico and its exorbitant health-care costs, Mr. Dargel felt the creative urge from an early age. During childhood piano lessons, he said, he preferred to offer his own creations rather than laboriously practice music composed by others.

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GARY D. GOLD





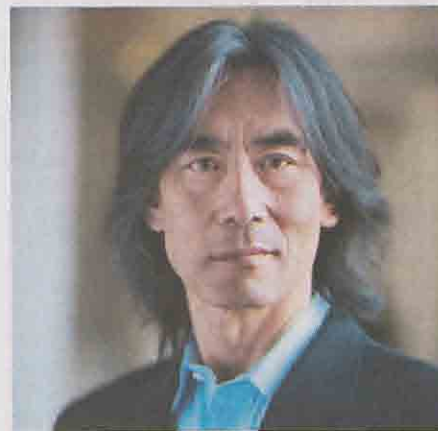
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OREGON SYMPHONY



TOLEDO SYMPHONY



BENJAMIN EALOVEGA

From top, David Alan Miller of the Albany Symphony; Carlos Kalmar of the Oregon Symphony; Stefan Sanderling of the Toledo Symphony; and Kent Nagano of the Montreal Symphony.

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Several top-tier orchestras — including renowned ensembles often recruited by Carnegie for its regular season offerings — chose not to get involved with Spring for Music. Evidently they did not like the appearance of competing with, and perhaps losing to, regional orchestras. They will not be missed, given the richness and variety of the festival programs.

Take the one the Toledo Symphony, conducted by Stefan Sanderling, presents on Saturday night. It pairs Shostakovich's Sixth Symphony with André Previn's "Every Good Boy Deserves Favor," a musical-theater work for actors and instrumental ensemble on a text by the playwright Tom Stoppard. The story is set in a Russian gulag, and the orchestra portrays a mysterious character who could be, the music suggests, a mentally unstable prisoner. This piece should complement the moody, dark and, by its last movement, quite boisterous Sixth Symphony, an intriguing and ungainly work, not that often heard, composed in 1939 when Shostakovich was under scrutiny by the Soviet state.

Another thematic program is "Spirituals Reimagined," which the Albany Symphony, under its adventurous conductor David Alan Miller, will perform on May 10. It presents New York premieres of eight works inspired by traditional spirituals, from composers including John Harbison, Donal Fox, Tania León and Daniel Bernard Roumain. The evening ends with Copland's "Appalachian Spring," inspired partly by a Shaker hymn that might be considered a different kind of American spiritual.

As the inclusion of "Appalachian Spring" indicates, repertory staples were not scorned by the festival directors as long as they were placed in artistically interesting contexts. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, speaking of staples, turns up on the May 14 concert, "The Evolution of the Symphony," with Kent Nagano conducting the Montreal Symphony. Selections from Gabrieli's "Sacrae Symphoniae" will open the program, which includes Webern's Symphony, a spiky, vibrant 12-tone work, and Stravinsky's strangely haunting "Symphonies of Wind Instruments." Between the orches-

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"It's not something I think about," Mr. Dargel said. "When I sit down to write, I don't think, 'All right, I'm going to write a piece that's 20 percent jazz and 40 percent indie rock,' or 'I'm going to write an indie-classical piece.' I don't even define my audience when I'm writing something."

But the question, however esoteric, points to the way Mr. Dargel's work has in turn been defined by audiences and critics alike. At the age of 33 he has built a profile as a writer of distinctive art songs that show his compositional ingenuity and his knack for pop-inspired directness, all delivered in his smooth, deadpan baritone. His lyrics, almost exclusively self-written, deal whimsically and sympathetically with romance, dysfunction and, often, their intersection.

"Corey writes catchy, sweet-sounding songs that contain hidden difficulties, both in their subjects and in the music itself," the composer Judd Greenstein wrote in an e-mail. New Amsterdam Records, the influential new-music label Mr. Greenstein helped to found, has released two albums by Mr. Dargel. "His songs are like Trojan horses, using their surface charms to get past your emotional defenses, then delivering their subtle, nuanced messages on repeated listens," Mr. Greenstein added.

Initially confined to downtown clubs and alternative spaces in New York, Mr. Dargel's career has built serious momentum during recent seasons, and this month brings three high-profile engagements. On Tuesday Mr. Dargel will reprise selections from "Removable Parts," a 2007 cycle, for a New York Festival of Song program assembled by the composer Phil Kline. "Say Yes," a new group of songs, will have its premiere on May 11 during the MATA Festival. And on May 23 the string quartet Ethel will accompany Mr. Dargel in an ambitious recent work, "What Might Have Been," during the Tribeca New Music Festival.

"I'm constantly worried that I might be boring, so I might bring that up every once in a while," Mr. Dargel said, laughing gently, near the start of an interview at a restaurant in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, where he has lived almost exclusively

since arriving in New York in 2001. He hardly needs to worry. Lean and wiry, with a cleanshaven head, a penetrating gaze and a placid smile, Mr. Dargel is arresting even before he speaks, let alone sings.

The child of musical parents in McAllen, Tex., a town chiefly notable for its proximity to Mexico and its exorbitant health-care costs, Mr. Dargel felt the creative urge from an early age. During childhood piano lessons, he said, he preferred to offer his own creations rather than laboriously practice music composed by others.

Epiphany turned up, against all odds, in a shopping-mall record store. "There were probably like 10 or 15 classical CDs in their classical music section, and one of them happened to be 'Tehillim' by Steve Reich," Mr. Dargel said. "I don't know why, but I picked that one up, I think because it had a photo of a living person on the cover, and not some work of art from the Romantic period. That was my first exposure to any music written after 1900, basically."

Newly aware that composing could be a serious pursuit, Mr. Dargel enrolled at 17 in the Interlochen Arts Academy, a fine-arts boarding school in Michigan. But there was another, more pressing reason to leave home.

"One of the reasons that I left Texas was that I was gay, and there was no one out or openly gay at the time," Mr. Dargel said.

Corey Dargel is taking his distinctive art songs beyond his usual downtown clubs and alternative theaters to a wider audience.

"My parents would not have accepted that I was gay, and in fact, when I came out to them, tried to get me to go to rehabilitation therapy. Before I came out to them, I left and went to Interlochen Arts Academy, because I thought that that would maybe be a place where I could meet other gay people." (Mr. Dargel added that he now has a healthy relationship with his parents.)

After Interlochen he spent a year at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, then moved on to the Oberlin College Conservatory in Ohio to study with Pauline Oliveros and John Luther Adams. Mr. Dargel emphatically cited Mr. Adams as an enduring mentor.

"His and my music could not be more dissimilar," Mr. Dargel said, "but he had a respect for what I was doing, as I did and still do for what he's doing. He was able to meet me where I was and to get me to ask the right questions about what I wanted to do and what I was trying to do."

Mr. Adams returned the admiration. "I worked with a lot of remarkable young mu-

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Romance and Dysfunction

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sicians there, but he was certainly among the most remarkable I've ever worked with anywhere," he said of Mr. Dargel, who was already mixing avant-garde impulses, Neo-Classical clarity and pop-music influences.

"In particular I think I heard the Smiths and Morrissey in what Corey was doing," Mr. Adams said. "But I also thought I heard the troubadours and the trouvères."

After graduating from Oberlin, Mr. Dargel moved to New York with his partner, Yvan Greenberg, a lapsed composer turned stage director and graphic designer. The move hastened a decisive shift in Mr. Dargel's compositional trajectory.

"I knew I was moving to New York, I didn't know a lot of people here, and I knew that I could sing," he said. "I started to write lyrics that I felt somewhat confident about. I had the equipment to make and sing my own songs without having to rely on other musicians, and I just felt like that

was a pragmatic thing to do."

Mr. Dargel's earliest New York songs, like "Accutane" and "Little Blue Pill," sound like quirky, kinetic indie pop, with rubbery keyboards, chattering drum machines and darkly playful lyrics about physical infirmities. In time he used a laptop computer to fashion accompaniments that could sound paradoxically natural. (Asked what composing programs he uses, he wryly suggested "spyware.")

More recently Mr. Dargel has focused on works meant for live collaboration, some involving elements of theater and dance. Kathleen Supové, a pianist of flamboyantly stagey inclinations, is integral to "Removable Parts," a heartbreaking work inspired by people longing to become amputees. Mr. Dargel created "What Might Have Been," a breezy meditation on nostalgia and its obsolescence, as part of a Brooklyn Philharmonic fellowship. The overtly homoerotic "Say Yes" he wrote to sing with the quartet Dither. "It's me and four dudes playing electric guitars," he said,

emphasizing "dudes" in a manner suggesting an image as likely as spotting Mr. Dargel in a football scrimmage.

Mr. Dargel is writing for other voices now as well. He composed the epigrammatic "Last Words From Texas," based on the statements of death-row prisoners, for Mellissa Hughes, a busy, versatile soprano. (He had also recorded the work himself.) And Ms. Hughes will play a role in "The Three Christs," Mr. Dargel's opera in progress about people with Messianic delusions.

A persistent inclination toward risky subjects, Mr. Dargel realizes, was shaped by his early feelings of doubt and isolation. "I really do almost always try to find a topic or subject that at first I find sort of off-putting or alienating, or at least difficult to relate to," he said, "and then do enough research into it to where I empathize with people who are in these situations or have these conditions. And I try to find ways of letting audiences see how they're connected to these characters."



Corey Dargel, in blazer, at Ecstatic Music Festival Marathon in January at Merkin Concert Hall.

RICHARD TERMINE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



LEAH NASH

Above, the Oregon Symphony is counting the days to its debut at Carnegie Hall on May 12 as part of Spring for Music.

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