

ANTHONY de MARE
LIAISONS: Re-Imagining Sondheim from the Piano

Williams College – April 10, 2015

FROM THE ARTIST

The music of Stephen Sondheim has been a part of my life as far back as I can remember. Over the years I often found myself imagining how his melodies would sound transformed into piano works. A tradition for this already existed with the songs of George Gershwin, Cole Porter and others, transcribed into great concert pieces by multiple composer-pianists including Art Tatum, Earl Wild and even Gershwin himself.

In 2009, after many years of working with talented composers from across the musical spectrum, I decided to go forward with the idea as a formal commissioning and concert project. With a generous spark of enthusiasm from Mr. Sondheim (including some wonderful suggestions for composers to invite), ***LIAISONS: Re-Imagining Sondheim from the Piano*** was born.

Liaisons now features the work of 36 composers ranging in age from 30 to 75, representing seven different countries and 44 Pulitzer, Grammy, Tony, Emmy and Academy Awards. Taken as a whole, they demonstrate the way Sondheim's influence has extended far beyond the musical theater to reach into the realms of classical, jazz, pop, theater, indie & film. The goal of The Liaisons Project is to show that Sondheim's music can be as much at home in the concert hall as it is on the Broadway stage – and in fact, most of the composers involved can be said to have crossed and combined genres in unique and unusual ways.

A project this ambitious in scope is by definition a team effort. Producer Rachel Colbert joins me in thanking all the donors, designers, scholars, skeptics, presenters, partners and friends who helped us make *Liaisons* a reality. I am also very honored to be performing at Williams College where Sondheim graduated, an institution he speaks and writes about with much warmth and nostalgia. We are deeply grateful to Jonathan Myers, Tony Sheppard, and everyone here for believing in the project, and for giving us this opportunity to bring the music to you.

The complete *Liaisons* collection will be released by ECM Records in the fall of 2015. For more information please sign up at our website, <liaisonsproject.com>.

Thank you for being a part of this journey. To add further context I've asked each of the composers to write something about their piece, and following are their comments — a true testament to the diversity of talents represented by the

Project, and to the singular impact Sondheim's music has had on us all. -

Anthony de Mare

William Bolcom: "The main theme for **A Little Night Fughetta** is taken from "Anyone Can Whistle", a melody that struck me as a fugue subject—with a countersubject of "Send in the Clowns." I thought Steve would be amused at a fugue-like, and mercifully short, piece -- thus a fughetta and not a fugue."

Ricky Ian Gordon: "In 1973, when Stephen Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* was running on Broadway, I was 17 years old and I was obsessed with it. I saw it six times. There was one song, though, that I couldn't wait to hear at every show-- **Every Day A Little Death**. So when I began this piece for Tony I didn't even look at the music-- I just started riffing on what I myself might like to play, as if I were playing that song for someone, introducing its delicate intricacies, its stunning melody and the counter melody of the duet. I took some things out of their original time and meter... I guess you could say I sort of made love to it, with gratitude for all the pleasure it has given me over the years."

Nico Muhly: "The light-suffused chords that open *Sunday in the Park with George* are some of the best-spaced chords ever. I used to obsessively study them and play them and dream about ways to steal them. What is particularly astonishing about *Sunday*, too, is the way in which the "mechanical" music that drives the score gives way to an emotional immediacy with the characters instantly: it's the best tension between the motor and the heart. This is clearest, I think, in **Color and Light**, a multi-part duet between George and Dot and, indeed, the orchestra. My homage to this piece tries to accentuate the angular music, making it somewhat dangerously unhinged, while always returning to the more supple landscape of the love story."

Steve Reich: "'**Finishing the Hat' - Two Pianos** - for Stephen Sondheim is a rather faithful re-working of one of Sondheim's favorite songs from *Sunday in the Park with George*, and incidentally the title of his recent book. Harmonically very close to the original, and melodically adding only occasional variations, my only real change is in the rhythm of constantly changing meters. This gives my two piano version a rhythmic character more in line with my own music and, hopefully, another perspective with which to appreciate Sondheim's brilliant original." For this performance, Anthony de Mare accompanies himself with his own recording of the Piano 2 part."

Tania Leon: **going... gone** is a mosaic of exuberant rapid passages of gradual intensity, harmonic plateaus, rhythmical motions and subtle chords imitations derived from musical references of Sondheim's Good Thing Going. The periodic interruptions by echoes of unexpected interactions of 19th century classic Cuban Dances act as a bridge between different sections of the work.

Wynton Marsalis: "Stephen Sondheim employs many syncopated and expressive devices in **That Old Piano Roll**. My arrangement uses these concepts to evoke the styles of three great Jazz pianists. The basic stride style of James P. Johnson is answered by the jagged, obtuse style of Thelonious Monk. Both find resolution in the ragtime-swing style of New Orleans pianist Jelly Roll Morton. The parlor piano elegance of the second theme, with its tresillo rhythm, is juxtaposed to a 4/4 New Orleans ragtime

stomp. In the 1920s a heated debate swirled around Jazz as polite society music or red hot dance music. Now, we happily play it all.”

Mark-Anthony Turnage: “I have loved *Sweeney Todd* from the first time I heard it. It’s almost perfect and so full of beautiful stage craft and amazing invention. It’s hard to pick a highlight but I was thrilled that **Pretty Women** was still available to mess around with. It’s memorable, sophisticated and above all strangely moving. Very humbling for me to get a chance to write Stephen Sondheim arranged Mark-Anthony Turnage at the top of the score.”

Kenji Bunch: “My first exposure to *Sweeney Todd* came as a 10-year old watching a PBS broadcast of the Broadway production. I was both terrified and fascinated, and have felt the work’s and Sondheim’s influence ever since. For **The Demon Barber** – an homage to the seething, menacing introductory song, “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd,” I highlighted the original song’s oblique references to the Dies Irae Gregorian melody into a persistent, ominous chant that surfaces throughout. I also wanted to amplify the work’s horror-show qualities with low register rumblings, shrieking high clusters, and insistent rhythmic ostinato patterns.”

Andy Akiho: “The first time I listened to it I loved the concept of **Into the Woods**-- being lost in and confused by the woods, and the consistent and driving rhythms of the opening prologue. I was also intrigued by Sondheim’s innovative and witty use of spoken narrative against his catchy melodies, particularly during each character’s introduction. My goal in re-imagining this prologue was to orchestrate each character’s personality with the use of prepared piano - for example, dimes on the strings for the cow scenes, poster tack on the strings for door knocks and narrated phrases, and credit card string-clusters for the wicked witch. My goal was to portray each character’s story and mystical journey using exotic piano timbres in place of text.”

David Rakowski: “Like all of the composers in the Liaisons project, I was presented with the problem of reframing a song that is already perfect -- and in my case, my favorite Sondheim song, **The Ladies Who Lunch**. My solution was, to the best of my ability, to concentrate on the character’s deep sadness, thereby eschewing the song’s big finish for a slow, introspective one.”

Paul Moravec: “**I Think About You** takes its title from the second - and oft repeated line of ‘Losing My Mind’ from *Follies*. In my re-imagining for piano solo, the eponymous musical phrase repeats maniacally to the point of ‘losing its mind.’ The piece is a musical meditation on obsession, heartbreak, and, finally, the timeless need to love and be loved.”

Jake Heggie: “**I’m Excited. No, You’re Not** is my take on Stephen Sondheim’s amazing ensemble, ‘A Weekend in the Country’. I tried to capture the energy and the momentum, as well as a few bumps in the road, in creating a big, fun, splashy tour-de-force for Tony de Mare.”

The Liaisons Project features the following composers:

Andy Akiho
Mason Bates
Eve Beglarian
Derek Bermel
Jherek Bischoff
William Bolcom
Jason Robert Brown
Kenji Bunch
Mary Ellen Childs
Michael Daugherty
Peter Golub
Ricky Ian Gordon
Annie Gosfield
Jake Heggie
Fred Hersch
Ethan Iverson
Gabriel Kahane
Phil Kline

Tania Leon
Ricardo Lorenz
Wynton Marsalis
Paul Moravec
Nico Muhly
John Musto
Thomas Newman
David Rakowski
Steve Reich
Eric Rockwell
Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR)
Frederic Rzewski
Rodney Sharman
Duncan Sheik
David Shire
Bernadette Speach
Mark-Anthony Turnage
Nils Vigeland

STEPHEN SONDHEIM wrote the music and lyrics for Saturday Night (1954), A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum (1962), Anyone Can Whistle (1964), Company (1970), Follies (1971), A Little Night Music (1973), The Frogs (1974), Pacific Overtures (1976), Sweeney Todd (1979), Merrily We Roll Along (1981), Sunday in the Park with George (1984), Into the Woods (1987), Assassins (1991), Passion (1994) and Road Show (2008), lyrics for West Side Story (1957), Gypsy (1959) and Do I Hear A Waltz? (1965) and additional lyrics for Candide (1973). Anthologies of his work include Side by Side by Sondheim (1976), Marry Me A Little (1981), You're Gonna Love Tomorrow (1983), Putting It Together (1993/99) and Sondheim on Sondheim (2010). For films and television, he composed the scores of Stavisky (1974) and Reds (1981) and songs for Dick Tracy (1990) and "Evening Primrose" (1966). Mr. Sondheim is on the Council of the Dramatists Guild, having served as its president from 1973 to 1981. His collected lyrics with attendant essays have been published in two volumes: "Finishing the Hat" (2010) and "Look, I Made A Hat" (2011). His collected lyrics with attendant essays have been published in two volumes: "Finishing the Hat" (2010) and "Look, I Made A Hat" (2011). In 2010 the Broadway theater formerly known as Henry Miller's Theatre was renamed in his honor. *The Liaisons Project* has been produced with the express permission of Stephen Sondheim.

Liaisons Title Design by David Prittie.

LIST OF COMMISSIONERS

William Bolcom was commissioned by William E. Terry.

Ricky Ian Gordon and Nico Muhly were commissioned by Ted and Mary Jo Shen.

Steve Reich was commissioned by Ben and Donna Rosen.

Tania Leon was commissioned by Scott and Roxanne Bok.

Wynton Marsalis and Andy Akiho were commissioned by Bob and Anna Livingston.

Mark Anthony Turnage was commissioned by David and Alice Shearer.

Kenji Bunch and Jake Heggie were commissioned by The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center (University of Maryland).

David Rakowski was commissioned by Beth Rudin Dewoody.

Paul Moravec was commissioned by Martin L. and Lucy Miller Murray.

All pieces were commissioned expressly for *The Liaisons Project*, Rachel Colbert and Anthony de Mare, producers.

In the fall of 2015, ECM Records will release the definitive recording of **LIAISONS: Re-Imagining Sondheim from the Piano**. The 3-CD box set will feature 36 all specially commissioned pieces. But the industry has changed - labels don't pay for things anymore. We have to deliver all 3+ hours of music to ECM at our own cost. You can help us raise the remaining funds through Fractured Atlas.

Visit www.liaisonsproject.com to learn more or get in touch.

