

MASON BATES, 2012-2013 COMPOSER OF THE YEAR

Born January 23, 1977 in Philadelphia.

The B-Sides (Five Pieces for Orchestra and Electronica) (2009)

PREMIERE OF WORK: San Francisco, May 20, 2009

Davies Symphony Hall

San Francisco Symphony

Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 20 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, electronica, harp, piano, celesta and strings

Mason Bates brings not only his own fresh talent to the concert hall but also the musical sensibilities of a new generation — he is equally at home composing “for Lincoln Center,” according to his web site (www.masonbates.com), as being the “electronica artist Masonic® who moved to the San Francisco Bay Area from New York City, where he was a lounge DJ at such venues as The Frying Pan — the floating rave ship docked off the pier near West 22nd Street.”

Bates was born in Philadelphia in 1977 and started studying piano with Hope Armstrong Erb at his childhood home in Richmond, Virginia. He earned degrees in both English literature and music composition in the joint program of Columbia University and the Juilliard School, where his composition teachers included John Corigliano, David Del Tredici and Samuel Adler, and received his doctorate in composition from the University of California, Berkeley in 2008 as a student of Edmund Campion and Jorge Lidermann. Bates was Resident Composer with the California Symphony from 2008 to 2011, Project San Francisco Artist-in-Residence with the San Francisco Symphony in 2011-2012, and began a continuing residency with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in September 2010; he is Composer of the Year with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in 2012-2013.

Bates’ rapidly accumulating portfolio of orchestral, chamber, vocal, theatrical and electronic compositions includes commissions and performances by the major orchestras of London, Lisbon, New York, Washington, Atlanta, Toronto, Phoenix, San Francisco, Oakland, Annapolis, Los Angeles, Miami and Detroit, the Tanglewood, Aspen, Cabrillo and Spoleto USA festivals, Biava Quartet, Chanticleer and New Juilliard Ensemble. In 2010, Bates was commissioned to write *Mothership* for the second concert of the YouTube Symphony Orchestra, an ensemble composed of musicians from around the world who were selected through on-line auditions by Michael Tilson Thomas, the project’s director and conductor, and assembled in Sydney, Australia for rehearsals and a live concert on March 20, 2011 streamed on the internet; the first YouTube Symphony Orchestra concert was held in New York in 2009. Bates’ many honors include a Charles Ives Scholarship and Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Guggenheim Fellowship, Jacob Druckman Memorial Prize from the Aspen Music Festival, ASCAP and BMI awards, a Fellowship from the Tanglewood Music Center, Rome Prize, Berlin Prize and a two-year Composer Residency with Young Concert Artists.

Bates wrote of *The B-Sides*, commissioned in 2009 by the San Francisco Symphony, “It was between Tchaikovsky and Brahms that [SFS Music Director] Michael Tilson Thomas, surprisingly mellow in his dressing room during one intermission, broached the idea of a new work. Fresh off the podium after the concerto, and apparently undistracted by the looming symphony in the second half, he suggested a collection of five pieces focusing on texture and sonority — perhaps like Schoenberg’s Five Pieces for Orchestra. Since my music had largely gone in the other direction — large works that bathed the listener in immersive experiences — the idea intrigued me. I had often imagined a suite of concise, off-kilter symphonic pieces that would incorporate the grooves and theatrics of electronica in a highly focused manner. So, like the forgotten bands from the flipside of an old piece of vinyl, *The B-Sides* offers brief landings on a variety of peculiar planets, unified by a focus on fluorescent orchestral sonorities and the morphing rhythms of electronica.

“The first stop is the dusky, circuit-board landscape of *Broom of the System*. To the ticking of a future clock, our broom — brought to life by sandpaper blocks and, at one point, an actual broom — quietly and anonymously keeps everything running, like a chimney-sweep in a huge machine. The title is from a short-story collection by David Foster Wallace, though one could place the fairy-like broom in Borges’ *Anthology of Fantastic Zoology*.

“The ensuing *Aerosol Melody* (*Hanalei*) blooms on the north shore of the island of Kauai in Hawaii, where a gentle, bending melody evaporates at cadence points. *Djembe* [a rope-tuned, skin-covered, goblet-shaped drum

played with the hands] and springy pizzicati populate the strange fauna of this purely acoustic movement. The lazy string glissandi ultimately put the movement, beachside, to sleep.

"*Gemini in the Solar Wind* is a re-imagination of the first American spacewalk, using actual communication samples from the 1965 Gemini IV voyage provided by NASA. In this re-telling, clips of words, phrases and static from the original are rearranged to show Ed White, seduced by the vastness and mystery of space, deliriously unhooking from the spacecraft to drift away blissfully.

"White's final vision of the coast of Northern California drops us down close to my home. The initial grit of *Temescal Noir*, like the Oakland neighborhood of the title, eventually shows its subtle charm in hazy, jazz-tinged hues. Unbothered by electronics, this movement receives some industrious help in the rhythm department from a typewriter and an oil drum. At its end, the broom returns in a cameo, again altering the tempo, and this propels us into *Warehouse Medicine*. An homage to techno's birthplace — the empty warehouses of Detroit — the final stop on *The B-Sides* gives no quarter. Huge brass swells and out-of-tune pizzicati emulate some of the visceral sonorities of techno, and on this pounding note *The B-Sides* bows out."