

Program notes by Jane Girdham

Tonight's program, *Music on the Cutting Edge*, includes three pieces by 20th- and 21st-century composers, of different nationalities who, in individual ways, confront, use, or express national characteristics through their music. José Pablo Moncayo weaves his most popular work from Mexican folk tunes, accompaniments, and instrumental colors. Mason Bates brings American popular music into his work in ways directly related to his history as a DJ. Finally Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony 5 was a direct response to Soviet condemnation in the 1930s.

José Pablo Moncayo (1912-1958), *Huapango*

Moncayo was a Mexican composer, conductor, and percussionist, who studied mainly in Mexico City. His short piece *Huapango* (1941), whose title is that of a Mexican folk dance, was the result of his teacher and friend Carlos Chávez suggesting he go to the state of Veracruz to collect local traditional music. He wove some of the tunes he transcribed into *Huapango*. The four-bar phrases are deceptively simple, often masking shifting meters, sometimes surprising the listener when they unexpectedly vary. The two outer sections are rhythmically driven, each building in intensity while solo instruments float melodies above the accompaniments. The central section is slower, with fewer instruments, giving both a contrast to and a respite from the constant rhythmic drive before and after. Eventually the music pushes to a very loud end.

Mason Bates (b. 1977), *The B-Sides*

Mason Bates is an award-winning American composer whose work as a DJ often informs symphonic works in which he combines orchestral and electronic sounds.

The genesis of *The B-Sides* (2009) was conductor Michael Tilson Thomas's suggestion to Mason Bates that he compose (in Bates's words) "a collection of five pieces focusing on texture and sonority—perhaps like Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra*." The result is a work dedicated to MTT, one that takes the listener on a journey from the steady routines of everyday life, past Hawai'i and its natural beauty, to the wonders of outer space, before returning to earth in a jazz-infused neighborhood in California and finally to Detroit, home of electronic dance music known as techno. The last three movements are played without a pause.

The large orchestra is augmented by electronica, notably a laptop, speakers, and on-stage monitors, controlled by a percussionist and heard in movements I, III, and V. At other times familiar noises like a sweeping broom and a typewriter anchor us to earth.

Mason Bates's program notes provide a very clear and specific guide to his composition:

"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 florescent orchestral sonorities and the morphing rhythms of electronica. The work is equally informed by Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra* as it is by a variety of American vernacular music.

“The first stop is the dusky, circuit-board landscape of ‘Broom and 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 Northshore of Kauai, where a gentle, bending melody evaporates at cadence points. Djembe and springy pizzicati populate the strange fauna of this purely acoustic movement, inspired by several trips with the Fleishhacker family. 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.

“His final vision of the coast of Northern California drops us down close to 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 by a typewriter and 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.”

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975), Symphony no. 5, op. 47, in D minor

Shostakovich was a boy at the time of the Russian Revolution, and he lived through changing times as the Soviet government asserted less, then more, control over the arts. In 1930 Shostakovich’s opera *The Nose* was well received by the audience but not by the critics, and he was accused of “formalism,” a term used to denigrate an art work that was considered either too difficult for the general public or politically incorrect. In 1934 his new opera, *Lady Macbeth*, was deemed a success by both audiences and critics, but after Stalin attended a performance in 1936 an article appeared in *Pravda* that condemned Shostakovich, warning him to change to a more accessible style. He withdrew his Symphony no. 4, afraid of making his situation worse.

Shostakovich composed his Symphony no. 5 in 1937, at the height of the Great Terror. At the premiere, performed by the Leningrad Philharmonia on November 21st, there was overwhelming enthusiasm from the audience, with weeping in the slow movement and a half-hour ovation at the end. He had rescued his reputation for the moment. Symphony no. 5 continues to be one of his best loved works.

While not as experimental as Symphony no. 4 (which was eventually performed in 1961), Symphony no. 5 is by no means conservative. It is, however, clear in design and powerful in emotional intensity. The first movement presents all the musical material early on. First, a double-dotted leaping line in imitation between upper and lower strings is heard, which then becomes an accompaniment to a smoother melody. Finally a wide-sweeping slow-moving violin melody is heard over a faster repetitive accompaniment figure, which makes it feel both stable and also unsettled. These musical ideas co-mingle in many ways as the music becomes a march, then a canon between woodwinds and strings while the brass play the slow melody, then an unexpected unison passage. The buildup to the climax is merciless, but the flute and horn duet that follows brings a subdued moment of optimism as the sound fades away.

The second movement is a fairly traditional scherzo and trio. The scherzo has an edgy, bitter tone to it, while the trio is much sweeter sounding, beginning with a solo violin, harp, and cello trio. The scherzo returns at first quietly, rescored for bassoon and contrabassoon, but it ends as loudly as it began.

Shostakovich omits all brass instruments in the slow movement, marked *Largo*. The strings are divided into eight sections instead of the usual five. The movement expresses a wide range of emotions, from the understated opening to impassioned string gestures, and to a sense of loneliness especially in some of the barely accompanied wind solos. There is none of the edginess of the first two movements, but there is also no joy.

The finale is immediately brassy, in your face, and relentless, until a soft horn melody breaks the momentum and allows us to relax a little. Melodic lines seem to be rising from the depths before Shostakovich quotes his own song "Rebirth" in a major key. Drumbeats drive a slower version of the opening melody through a slow *crescendo* and the transformation from minor into major. The question remains: is this a real triumphal journey (as in Beethoven's fifth symphony which moves from C minor to C major) or is there an underlying meaning other than victory?