

In a Burning Forest (1996)

Nathan Currier

Brush Fires

Falstaff with Diana's Foresters

Malicious Scherzo: Stravinsky—Last Rites

Squawking

Chopping Song

The Fiddler

Population Shift

Malicious Scherzo: Schönberg—Egyptian Moses

Last Parties

“When I was a young child, I had a great passion for looking at photos of the Amazon jungle and other forests, and dreamed of visiting such places, but as music became dominant in my life, I let these fantasies wither.

Although I began composing at a reasonably early age, my first professional commission was not until 1987, when I was twenty-six, from the Verdehr Trio. I composed for them a work called *Adagio and Variations*, a large panoramic composition. I wrote a second work for the Trio in 1989 called *Entropic Developments*, an extremely different kind of piece, a tight, single-minded one-movement work, that perhaps tried with almost too much intellectual rigor to make a feeling of steady and gradual ‘entropic’ loss of energy, until a final physics-defying coda.

Now with *In a Burning Forest*, my third work for the Verdehr Trio, written a decade after the *Variations*, I was tempted to take a look backward to the first piece, and, further, to the whole early part of my ‘professional’ career. It is a sort of two-tiered musical metaphor. On the one hand, it is a kind of musical autobiography of the period starting with the *Adagio and Variations*, a resume of ten years of life spent as a young American composer in the burning forest of contemporary music, if you will. On another level, it tries to connect my own social morass to the larger fate of those other marshes and jungles that my childhood imagination abandoned for my musical career, where, sadly such unimaginable devastation has occurred, much of it during the period of my musical career.

I received the very first review of my career from *Adagio and Variations*—in the unlikely locale of Poona, India. This surprising first write-up compared my work to a clearing in a forest. The review of the concert began, ‘Have you walked through a dense forest (wondering when it will end) and all at once the trees part and a vista opens up yielding the horizon?’ It spoke of the ‘dense forest’ of familiar repertory, new and old, and compared my work to a clearing. Further, when the critic began to describe my piece, he gave me a slight shiver—his first sentence reading ‘Now the clarinet, now the violin would lead, marking out footfalls from the future,’ and later on he muses, ‘When did the words of Eliot’s poems spring up?’ In fact, I had *Burnt Norton* open in my lap just before receiving the review in the mail and had been dreaming setting it; it made the critic seem almost telepathic to me. Still further along he wonders, ‘Who was this Currier?’ and muses, ‘Did he care that somewhere in a struggling bursting small Indian town he had set fire with a tiny spark?’ I had cleared the forest, set a fire. Meant to be flattering, of course, his particular imagery reverberates differently ten years later.

How very far from the reception back at home! Here the critics were negative and nasty, and poor reviews, utterly lacking in comprehension and sympathy, followed with other succeeding compositions during the years. Here I was in a dense forest of the world of musical composition, a burning jungle of activity amidst carnivorous young composers of almost reptilian competitiveness. I began writing *In a Burning Forest* in January of 1996, during a period of respite from this life, while living in Italy on a fellowship from the American Academy in Rome.

The beginning of my piece almost seems to explicitly refer back to the end of my first Verdehr commission, but those wide arpeggios of the *Variation's* finale, here, at the opening of the new work, give it a Kreisleriana-like fiery energy—hence, *Brush Fires*.

The title *Falstaff with Diana's Foresters* refers to a somewhat obscure line from Shakespeare. In *Henry the Fourth, Part 1*, at the first entrance of Prince Harry and Falstaff, Falstaff says, 'Marry, then, sweet wag, when thou art king let not us that are squires of the night's body be called thieves of the day's beauty. Let us be Diana's foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon, and let men say we be men of good government...' Falstaff's image is of cutting down trees at night, by moonlight, when it can't be seen. The phrase 'Diana's foresters' symbolizes for me all the hidden unapparent ways of clandestinely destroying the nature world, and Falstaff, of course, is that immortal symbol of bawdy humor. The title *Falstaff with Diana's Foresters* thus is meant to highlight the jocularity of the movement,—and much of what follows, including the final 'last parties'—a 'scherzoso' spirit, that hides from us how menacingly 'Diana's' foresting, even by 'good governments' can rob us of the day's beauty—certainly in a way Shakespeare couldn't have dreamed of.

Movements three and eight are both 'malicious scherzo.' Here I step back from the contemporary forest to look at our whole modernist landscape. If modernism set the musical forest ablaze, then two figures, Stravinsky and Schönberg, are amongst the prime arsonists. I spoke above of making a musical resumé—meaning a sort of Schumannesque autobiographical chamber work, but not so much with Schumann's giddy sense of excitement as with a wry sense of stinging criticism, of anger. Here the title even admits of malice, but if I can use an appropriate analogy, it is really like fighting 'fire with fire.'

I am often amazed by the wholly reverential way that many composers still hold up Stravinsky as their model, and would at least expect the kind of reserve that one uses today when discussing Wagner; this Mussolini-loving, self-aggrandizing image has long held a difficult position in my imagination. I cannot, as Glenn Gould did, simply dismiss him as one of the 'least interesting composers in history,' and yet I certainly cannot embrace him wholeheartedly—as I feel the *Rite of Spring*—unquestionably some of the most original and compelling music of the century—is at least as 'dangerous,' if I can use that word, as *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in its implications. Thus, I make fun of it; Allen Bloom once wrote of the 'Nietzschianization of American culture,' about the Dionysian realm of rock music in that sense, rock must be the spiritual grandson of Stravinsky's primitivism, and so I've thrown together a figure reminiscent of a secondary idea in the *Rite's Sacrificial Dance*, with a kind of rock motive, and in the course of this 'roll over Stravinsky' movement, express a range of feelings I have towards this icon of modernism, from plain anger, to, at times, deep and lasting affection.

The Schönberg *Scherzo*, movement eight, might seem even more arcane. Schönberg, as is well known, saw himself in his depiction of Moses, in his final magnum opus *Moses and Aaron* (Aaron, by the way, was none other than Stravinsky!) My title, *Schönberg—Egyptian Moses* refers to a work by that contemporary of Schönberg with whom his influence, and his work itself, is often compared—Sigmund Freud. Freud wrote a work on Moses called *Moses and Monotheism*, and in the course of it presumes that Moses must have been an Egyptian. When Boulez (another nice guy!) wrote *Schönberg is Dead*, his principal criticism was, to put it crudely, that Schönberg had simply tacked the twelve-tone pitch idea onto the gestures of classical music, and thus was archaic, passé. Here, I imagine this archaic Schönberg styles a 'two-dimensionalizing,' thus, a sort of 'Egyptian' representation of 'three dimensional' classical music, where only the flat gesture is left, with the body and depth of tonal harmony removed, and so the compact little gesture that begins my movement—sounding about ripe to jump into the canon of the Second Viennese School, melts into '3D' and exposes it as a familiar piano sonata of Mozart (K. 330!!), and then, in this Webern-lengthened piece, flips back into two dimensions again.

Movements four and six refer to more natural inhabitants of forests. The birds in a real forest, the simple fiddler in the cultural forest. Movement five again uses a rock-like rhythm, and by its title, seems therefore to implicitly impugn the values of our mass culture. *Population Shift* is a short movement, introduced *attaca* from movement six, in which the piano begins as the dominant force, but slows up and virtually dies off, as the background material in the violin and clarinet take over the field.

Throughout the work, there is a short cryptic phrase heard at the beginning of most of the movements, (and occasionally deeper into some of them). It begins the last movement, but here becomes transformed into the main theme of a sort of neoclassical romp, *Last Parties*, full of fun and hilarity, but where the menacing arpeggios of the opening *Brush Fires* return, and where the smoke of those fires seems to pollute the happy tonality of the coda, making the ending both rousing and fearsome.

Fittingly, just as I finished my work, during the summer of 1996, record numbers of fires were burning out of control in California—literally thousands of them at once!”

—Nathan Currier

The world premiere of *In a Burning Forest* was on February 26, 1998 at Shea Auditorium, William Paterson University, Wayne, New Jersey.

Nathan Currier (born 1960, Huntingdon, Pennsylvania) grew up in a musical family in Providence, Rhode Island. He received a doctorate in composition from the Juilliard School in 1989. His principal teachers were David Diamond, Joseph Schwantner, Bernard Rands, Stephen Albert, and Frederic Rzewski.

Currier’s compositions have been performed from Moscow and the Far East to Western Europe and the United States. He has been commissioned by the Jerome Foundation, Concert Artists Guild, Chamber Music America, and the Readers Digest. In addition to the Verdehr Trio, he has written works for the Shanghai and Lark String Quartets, the Chelsea Ensemble, the Ravel Trio, and tenor Paul Sperry. His music is published by Theodore Presser.

Currier has received numerous grants and awards: a Guggenheim Fellowship (1993), the Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1991), a Fulbright Grant (1987), a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship (1992), a grant from the Fromm Foundation at Harvard University (1991), the Leonard Bernstein Fellowship at Tanglewood (1987), and two ASCAP Young Composer Awards (1988-1989). He has received prizes in numerous competitions: the International Barlow Competition (1987), the Juilliard Orchestral Composition Competition (1989), International Olympia Competition for Composition (1990), Chamber Music Chicago (1989), National Orchestral Association (1991), and Concordia Competition (1992). As a pianist, he won the Silver Medal in the International Piano Recording Competition (1984) for his performance of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*.

For ten years, Currier served on the Evening Division faculty at Juilliard, after which he served two years as a visiting faculty member at the University of Virginia. He has had frequent residency fellowships at the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo Colony, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Other fellowships include an Irving Berlin Fellowship, a Victor Herbert Fellowship, and a Gretchinoff Fellowship. In 2016, he initiated a concert series called *Orchard Circle* with concerts in New York City and Philadelphia.

Additional information is available at www.nathankindcurrier.com.