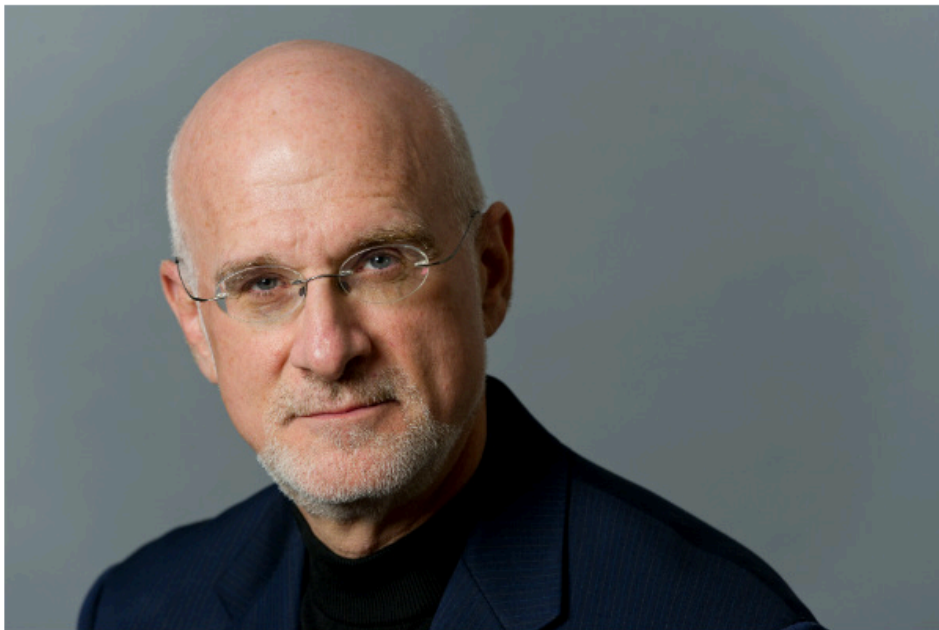


I CARE IF YOU LISTEN

A magazine about new classical music, art, and technology

5 questions to Robert Sirota (composer) about Pange Lingua Sonata

By David Dies
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Robert Sirota – Photo by Brian Hatton

On Wednesday, March 26, Hyeyung Julie Yoon (violin, Chiara Quartet) and Soyeon Kate Lee (piano) will be performing the New York premiere of composer Robert Sirota's Pange Lingua Sonata at SubCulture. Pange Lingua Sonata for violin and piano was commissioned by Yoon in 2012 in memory of her grandfather, Myung Il Paek. We decided to learn more about this commission...

The choice to write a sonata around a plainchant is somewhat reminiscent of Ysayë's *Obsession sonata* or even Duruflé's *Requiem*. I'm wondering two things: when in the compositional process did the idea emerge to base it on a chant? And did the suggestion to use this particular chant come from you or from the violinist/commissioner, HyeYung Julie Yoon?

The idea of basing an extended work on the *Pange Lingua* was mine, and it came at the very beginning of the process. A number of my recent works are inspired by or literally based on hymn tunes. A new work, *Apparitions* for organ and string quartet, consists of four movements each based on a different early American hymn. It will be given its premiere in Boston in June at the national convention of the American Guild of Organists. I would say that Christian hymns have become something of a preoccupation of mine (bordering on an obsession!).

The piece was commissioned by Ms. Yoon in memoriam of her grandfather, Myung Il Paek. Could you discuss the ways in which the memorial aspect of the commission shaped the work?

The Thomas Aquinas text of the *Pange Lingua* is a poetic depiction of the origin of the eucharist at The First Supper. Hyeyung's grandfather was a deeply religious man, and I thought that the use of this epic chant and text would be an appropriate way to honor his life.

The title of first movement of the sonata, *Apologia*, suggests some connection to Thomas Aquinas, the great Christian apologist and author of the text of *Pange lingua*. Could you discuss connections between this movement and Aquinas?

The connection is more linguistic than literal. An *apologia* is an explanation or a justification. This opening movement is the most rhetorical of the three, using multiple ideas and shifting tempi.

The description of the sonata in the press materials suggests the Italian concerto model—fast-slow-fast. In what ways does the piece engage with or re-imagine the instrumental sonata?

I tend to think in threes. Many of my single-movement works have three different energies, but it's not always a matter of fast-slow-fast. It's more a question of sustaining and releasing dramatic tension. My string quartet, *Triptych*, starts with a rather harrowing eight-minute fast movement, and then requires two slow movements of more or less equivalent length to dissipate the energy created by the first movement. My conception of the music I compose is "traditional" in that I want to take the listener through a dramatic arc of some kind. I sometimes follow the concept of "sonata" in that my pieces are frequently (but not always) multi-valent, with contrasting themes/energies juxtaposed and redefined in relation to each other.

In looking through your catalog, I was struck that the titles for this and other works invoke traditional forms. Given the variety of approaches to form and to listening strategies in the last hundred years, I'm wondering what your working definition of "form" is.

I have given a partial answer to this in addressing previous the "sonata" question. Let me add this: Music is written from various aesthetic and intellectual points of view. Some music sets a process in motion and the form is generated through the working out of that process. Other music is really more concerned with evolving and shifting sound. For me, a piece is a narrative of some sort. It can be entirely abstract and non-verbal, but I am absorbed in the coherence and continuity of the narrative.

The titles of some of my works are directly evocative (*Assimilations, Apparitions, Holy Ghosts, Mixed Emotions*) and others are more merely descriptive of the formal conventions that I have appropriated (concerto, symphony, sonata). To use an architectural analogy, these structures all have walls, floors and a roof; it is in the surface elements and relationships among the structural elements that they (hopefully!) distinguish themselves.

<http://www.icareifyoulisten.com/2014/03/5-questions-to-robert-sirota-composer-pange-lingua-sonata/>