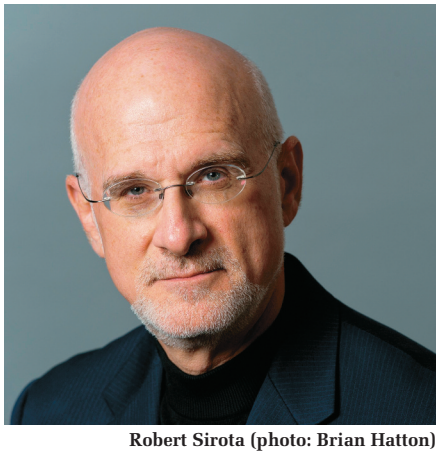
AGO BOSTON 2014 COMMISSIONS

MIRACULOUS THINGS: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT SIROTA

Heinrich Christensen



Robert Sirota (photo: Brian Hatton)

Robert Sirota has been commissioned to write a work for organ and strings for the 2014 AGO National Convention. He sat down with Heinrich Christensen to talk about the upcoming excitement.

You have a long-standing relationship to the organ. Do you remember the first time you heard an organ?

The first time I ever heard an organ might surprise you, because although I am now an Episcopalian, I come from a secular Jewish family. My parents were very culturally oriented and used to take us to churches for concerts—because they were very good, and they were free! We lived on Long Island, so we would go to Fifth Avenue Presbyterian or St. Thomas in New York and listen to the incredible choral and organ music. I also remember my father once brought home a record of Bach played by a Belgian organist, perhaps Flor Peeters, and I listened to that thing over and over again. So, my organ experience goes way back.

Then I met Victoria Ressmeyer at Oberlin. Vicki is now an Episcopal priest, as I am sure many people know, since she was the AGO chaplain. She was a psychology major, and I'm the one who talked her into becoming an organ major. I then became very interested in the organ, really because I was very interested in Vicki. I started writing music for her, because she would ask me to. After we graduated and were married, she became an organist-choir director and music professor. Often, when there were big services, she would ask me on a Saturday for a hymn transition or an organ and brass interlude, and I would quickly do something. So, I started getting fluidity and facility, and of course she played everything so beautifully, it was worth it—like an instant commission; you'd write it, and the next day you'd hear it.

After we had settled in Boston for graduate work at Boston University and Harvard, we became friends with a large number of organists in the Boston area, and I realized that organists were among the finest musicians we have. They have to play and read a lot of music, they have to have good ears, they have to adjust to circumstances around them, because they are always subsuming what they do into the liturgy. They can improvise, they can transpose, they can do everything. They also have this uncanny eye/hand coordination, because you're dealing with this crazy machine. It has knobs and buttons, you have to use your hands and feet, and each one is different.

One of the things I learned as a composer is that you have to get beyond your "first organ piece." I don't even remember what my first piece was, but I put it aside because it was one of those "Oh, let's see what we can do with this stop, and that stop" sort of affairs. Eventually, you learn the literature and history, and you realize that there are things you can do in your own language that work well on the instrument.

The other great thing about the organ is the potential to get a live performance of your organ or choral work in thousands of venues every week. In how many parts of our profession can you say that anymore? So, I try to urge young composers to write for the organ and/or chorus when possible.

You have been commissioned by the AGO for National Conventions before. Tell us about those experiences.

The first one was in 1990. I had converted to Christianity in 1987 and decided I wanted to write a choral Mass. The AGO committee wanted something substantial, and I asked if I could use percussion as well as organ. The instrumentation became two percussionists, organ, SATB soloists, and choir. I set it in English and was absolutely determined to write a full-length Credo that you didn't just race through like you were reciting the alphabet. The Credo became the central piece. Donald Teeters conducted and did a wonderful job, at Boston's Old South Church at 9:00 A.M., on a very hot day—a transformative experience for me.

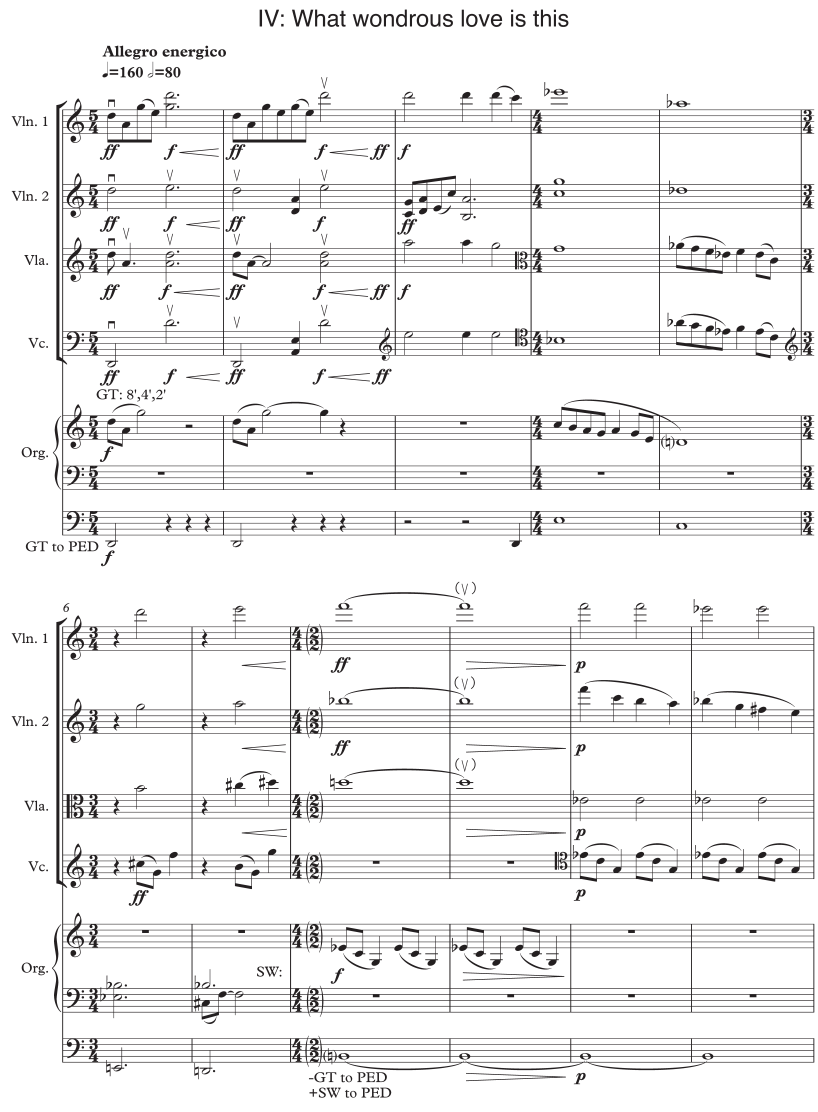
A decade goes by, and I get commissioned to write a concerto. This was one of the most important commissions of my life, as it was going to be for the Seattle Symphony, for the new Fisk in Benaroya Hall. I wrote a piece called *In the Fullness of Time*, a single movement of about 16 minutes. I remember asking the committee, "How big an orchestra?" and they said something you should never say to a composer: "You can make it as big as you want." So, this was a piece like I'd never written before or since. It has quadruple brass, and a lot of percussion. It has been performed a number of times since, by different orchestras and organists. When you get a piece that people actually like and perform again and again, that is wonderful. And then I thought, My cup runneth over, and I can't expect anything more. Yet, here we are 13 years later.

This time we asked for chamber music, specifically organ and string quartet, since you have both an organist and two string players in your immediate family.

Yes, both of our kids are wonderful violists. Jonah is in the Chiara String Quartet, and Nadia is a big new-music violist. They are my major consultants on string writing.

I have been more and more focused on American hymnody for the last several years. The last organ piece I wrote was for the Appleton organ at the Metropolitan Museum. It's an 1830 instrument that had languished behind a wall in a Pennsylvania church. It's a rather ghostly organ, so I imagined the ghosts of early American hymns sort of playing themselves on it, and I went from there. The title of that piece is *holy ghosts*. I was still playing that out in my mind when I found that the 2014 commission would be performed at King's Chapel, which, after all, is one of the central places for 18th- and 19th-century New England hymnody. But I didn't want to do a piece that was aesthetically the same as the earlier one, and I also wanted some interplay between the string quartet and the organ.

At first, I was going to do a massive set of variations on "Wondrous Love" from *Southern Harmony*. The word I keep coming up with for that hymn is "fierce." It has a fierce Southern piety and is incredibly powerful, particularly in its original harmonization. But I didn't want to do a 15-minute set of



variations on that one hymn. The piece, *Apparitions*, evolved into four hymn paraphrases—not so much variations as jumping-off points for something more fantastic. I used two *Southern Harmony* tunes, "Wondrous Love" and "Restoration," and two Northern tunes, "Nettleton" and "Resignation." The idea was to create contrast, but also a mural of American hymnody. I'm really interested in hearing the final result. As we're having this interview, I finished the piece three weeks ago and did the final proofing 48 hours ago, so it's very fresh in mind.

It looks like the work will be very "user-friendly" and very excerptable for use in liturgies or concerts.

I wouldn't be averse to excerpting just one movement if, say, you are using "Wondrous Love" in a service one Sunday. As I get older, I want things to be more useful. There is a commercial value in that, and we tend to pooh-pooh the commercial, but the truth is, if nobody plays your music, it's sad. I want people to enjoy the music, not think, "Oh, we have to premiere this thing." The quartet-writing is challenging, but not virtuosic to the point of being undoable in a church setting. We all know what a church service is like: you might have one special rehearsal, but you're not going to woodshed the work for six weeks. It requires very good players, but very good players could do this on one rehearsal, a dress rehearsal, and a performance.

It is rumored that you'll be putting out a CD in time for the convention . . .

Vicki and I are in the process of finishing a recording of a number of my organ works, going all the way back to the '70s. I think the latest one is *Celestial Wind*, from 2002. We'll have to do another one; there is a lot more music. We are going to launch that CD at the convention, which I'm very excited about. I'm going to be playing on it too, because we'll be doing a piece I wrote in the 1980s called *Letters Abroad*, which, with smart phones and texting, could never be written now. When Vicki was doing research on Fanny Mendelssohn in Europe and I was doing my first year as head of the high-school composition program at Tanglewood in 1980, I would write her little postcards. Even a phone call then was a big deal. We'd have a phone call once a week, and I would sometimes write a letter and enclose a little piece. And those would become seminal material for this piece for piano and organ.

Are there any special considerations when writing for organ?

Yes, without question. One thing the organ does better than any other instrument is pure counterpoint. And that's a bit of a challenge for me, as I am essentially a harmonic composer. That doesn't mean I don't write good counterpoint; it just means that the sonorous image comes first, and I go from there. It's just the way my mind works. So, I have to be very aware all the time that I'm writing lines, and the lines have to really work.

I think another issue is the acoustical reality of the organ as a "steady-state" instrument. You can make great gradations, especially on a beautiful tracker, with attack and release. But once the sound is activated, there it is. So, you want to make sure you are writing lines that either draw attention to themselves or not as you wish them to, because you can't tell the sound in the middle of a whole note to get softer. You can make acoustic adjustments around it so the line either emerges or disappears. One of the misconceptions about the organ is that it is not expressive. I think that is a very childish interpretation of what expression is. The fact that you can't crescendo or diminuendo on individual notes, and that the manuals under expression have their limitations, doesn't mean you can't make things that break your heart; but you have to work with time and relationships.

The other thing is, there is no such thing as an organ. There are a million different instruments, all of which are slightly different. You can write for a generic cello, and most cellos will sound more or less like that cello. That's not true for the organ. It's more like writing for voice, because there is no such thing as a "soprano," either; it's just a person who sings in that range. Everybody has a voice that's different, and organs are like that. I think some people don't bother to learn those sensitivities, and that's why they don't like to write for the organ.

When I learned that my convention piece would be performed at King's Chapel, I made a trip to Boston to refamiliarize myself with the organ that I had heard maybe 25 years ago. You can't make it do what it's not going to do. But if you are thinking about it, you can make miraculous things!

Heinrich Christensen holds diplomas from conservatories in Denmark, France, and the United States. He is the music director of historic King's Chapel in Boston.