

Three New Albums: America's Multiple Musical Voices

By Clive Paget, *Musical America*

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That the U.S. remains a vibrant musical melting pot is borne out in these three recent albums. The works are all written for classical symphony orchestra, yet each one is suffused with its composer's cultural DNA.



Avner Dorman was born in Tel Aviv but now lives in America, where he is an associate professor at Sunderman Conservatory of Music. This high-voltage album from Gil Rose and his intrepid Boston Modern Orchestra Project covers most of Dorman's compositional career, beginning with the *Ellef Symphony*, which he started as a 24-year-old student in Israel. A musical plea for peace after a millennium of atrocities, the first three movements depict fear, slaughter, and an elegy for the fallen, while the meditative finale represents hope for the future. It's bold, colorful music with a cinematic sweep that wears its heart on its sleeve in the very best sense.

The most recent works reflect Dorman's more mathematical approach to rhythm while retaining his natural flair for color and energy. *Siklòn*, a homage to the city of Miami, is named for the Haitian Creole word for hurricane. A swirling and instantly likable tone poem, all metallic edges and elaborate textures, it's still approachably tonal but with a sharper tang of dissonance. *After Brahms* comprises three affectionate orchestral reworkings of pieces for piano, inspired by Dorman's memories of exploring Brahms's late keyboard music.

Astrolatry (2011) channels primitive peoples worshipping the astral grandeur of the night sky. The first movement features long, hushed chords punctuated by glittering outbursts of woodwind, piano, and tuned percussion. The second movement's driving pulse echoes Stravinsky in music of infectious energy building to an ecstatic ritual dance. It is tuneful, memorable stuff, as is *Uriah* (2009), a five-movement suite depicting the Old Testament Hittite general and husband of Bathsheba who was betrayed by a duplicitous King David. With some of Dorman's spikiest writing, and again with a filmic grandeur, it is tempered at its edges by the warm appeal of the composer's imaginative orchestrations. The playing throughout is first-class, as is the clean recorded sound.

Malek Jandali is composer-in-residence at Queens University although his family is from Homs in Syria, and he studied in both Damascus and North Carolina. A committed activist, he believes in integrating Middle Eastern modes into traditional Western classical forms as a means of preserving his musical heritage. Marin Alsop conducts two of his concertos—both responding to issues of social injustice—with her excellent ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Rachel Barton Pine is the soloist for the Violin Concerto, a work intended to honor the courageous women of Syria. The first movement, lasting over 17 minutes, is made up of propulsive orchestral textures amongst which the solo violin soars and dips. Its elegant line is infused with Syrian folk melodies and the musical accompaniment incorporates Arabic musical forms and dance rhythms. An oud (or Arabic lute) is embedded in the texture to heighten the Middle Eastern atmosphere. Barton Pine is an eloquent interpreter, her floating line conveying a multiplicity of moods, from wistful lament to outbursts of indignation. The swaying “Andante,” an ethereal lament, is full of heartfelt melodies, while the lively finale incorporates traditional dance forms embraced by Syrian women.



The Clarinet Concerto from 2021 is a more tautly argued work, composed “in memory of all victims of injustice” and written for Anthony McGill, who plays it here. After a mysterious introduction laced with tick-tock pizzicato, the solo clarinet takes up the first of a number of themes drawn from traditional Syrian music. The flexuous solo line is vividly finessed by McGill who bends and swings the melodies most stylishly, the underlying mood again informed by Arabic modes. The dusky second movement is a series of variations on an old Syrian theme and partly inspired by Bartók’s night music. The vigorous finale finds McGill at his most virtuosic, concluding with a wild, joyful dance. Alsop is a supportive presence throughout and Jandali, who is also the producer, ensures we catch every one of the music’s manifold splendors.



Finally, if it’s vivacity you are after, the British Onyx label has compiled a program of music by Roberto Sierra, a Puerto Rican composer who studied composition with György Ligeti among others. The buoyant music recorded here, played with great panache by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under Venezuelan Chief Conductor Domingo Hindoyan, is direct, tonal, and infused with the Latin spirit of Sierra’s homeland.

Alegría (1996) bursts on the ear like pop from a bottle. It’s beautifully constructed, and lavishly orchestrated, but like all this music it is more than mere Latin froth and maracas (although Afro-Caribbean percussion does feature). Sierra’s music is sophisticated and refreshingly unpredictable, despite

its toe-tapping feelgood vibe.

It has its serious side as well. The first of the *Dos Pezas Para Orquesta* of 2017, a commission by the Bravo! Vail Music Festival, is moody, portentous, and darkly dramatic, in contrast to the brooding dance-like energy of its companion piece. The four-movement Symphony No. 6, a Liverpool co-commission with, among others, the Boston Symphony, is an orchestral autobiography of Sierra’s childhood growing up in Puerto Rico. Musical depictions of city life, a starry night in the tropics, and a wild hurricane, conclude with a celebration of the addictive rhythms of the Caribbean.

The Sinfonietta for String Orchestra was written during lockdown in 2021 when modest string ensembles were about all that was permitted. Its vivacious atmosphere (albeit with the occasional passing cloud) and snapping cross-rhythms must have come as a welcome panacea. Completing the program is *Fandangos* (2000) inspired by a harpsichord piece attributed to baroque composer Antonio Soler (1729–1783). With incorporated snippets of fandangos by Boccherini and Scarlatti, Sierra puts his shapeshifting material through a series of intricate transformations over ten delicious minutes.

Hindoyan directs this music as if it’s in his blood, and the sumptuous recording is full of detail. A superb disc.

Avner Dorman

Siklòn, Ellef Symphony, Uriah etc.
Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Gil Rose
BMOP BMOP1090

Malek Jandali

Concertos for Violin & Clarinet
ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, Marin Alsop, Rachel Barton Pine, Anthony McGill
Çedille CDR90000220

Roberto Sierra

Symphony No. 6, Sinfonietta, Two Pieces, *Fandangos, Alegría*
Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Domingo Hindoyan
Onyx ONYX4232

