



Jorge Martín

composing himself

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Romance is a lyrical composition, but don't call Martín a lyrical composer. This is just one form of classical music expression Martín can imagine. It's title, too, appeals to him in part because of its flexibility. Beyond the obvious definition, he says, "A romance is [also] a sort of fable. It can also be a lie. It has different implications for different people. I like that. There's so many layers to it."

Martín has his own layers as well. Born in Cuba, he began playing piano at age four. He knew early on that writing classical music was what he wanted to do. A less progressive Cuban household in those days would have meant no piano lessons for the boys. Martín was allowed to pursue it, both in Cuba and then in the U.S., where he moved at age five. As he grew older, and into the inevitable adolescent sissy stigma of music appreciation, he says that all the clichés applied: "unathletic, klutzy, smart, thick glasses, classical piano." And, one can assume, talented. He went on to major in music at Yale, followed by a masters and doctorate at Columbia University, where he began to really find his voice, in more ways than one.

"It was very difficult for me musically at Columbia, and in retrospect it registered with me that I was in the closet both sexually and artistically." A good friend took him by the hand and eased the process of coming to terms with being gay; meanwhile, there remained some academic challenges. Martín describes an environment that embraced atonal music, whereas he knew in his heart that he was a tonal composer. After some struggling to fit in,

"I just threw caution to the wind and wrote a piece in E major. My teacher then at first didn't know if I was cracking up or being mischievous or what, but he realized it was serious music....So I sort of came out of the closet in E major."

In both cases, Martín says, "To be acceptable to others meant doing X or Y, and that ultimately to be who you are, you have to do and be who you are, which meant," Martín adds with a laugh, "I am gay and I am a tonal composer."

After a dissertation in the form of a full length opera, says Martín, "I decided to be practical

— to write a one act, something that could be done." The result was *Beast and Superbeast*, four one-act operas based on stories by Saki (a/k/a H.H. Munro). "They're very witty, very Oscar Wilde, satirical, with a bitchy sense of humor." His instinct for change paid off with productions in Maryland and New York City, excellent reviews, and a National Opera Association award for "Tobermory," the first installment.

Graduate school was followed by a period of teaching in New York City, which gave way to Martín's real love, which is the voice and opera. He worked increasingly as a voice coach and accompanist, always with an eye on his writing as well. Periodic trips to Vermont during these years confirmed for him that moving north was a good idea. He arrived here in 1994 and has been writing ever since.

On the subject of the Vermont music community, Martín shows characteristic unwillingness to slot himself into a cubby. "Community is a weird word, it's a very abstract word," he insists. "I think of myself as a composer who happens to be gay, or who lives in Vermont. Although, I don't just happen to live in Vermont, nor do I just happen to be gay." Martín participates enthusiastically in community activities — town meeting, social

events -- but maintains his resistance to simplistic labeling.

"For me, more important is the one on one, who I happen to be with at the moment, people who are important to me or to whom I am important, whether it's professionally or musically, spiritually or socially, or whatever other way....One could just melt into the woodwork, get lost in the woods in Vermont and I'm not sure I want to do that."

Melting into the woodwork seems unlikely at this point. Martín's next project, *The Glass Hammer*, will debut in Middlebury and Burlington in March, before moving onto a little New York venue known as Carnegie Hall.

Then comes a professional recording of the work, funded by an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. "It [*Glass Hammer*] is totally different," he enthuses. "It's a song cycle, about an hour long, it's huge, it's crazy. I'm very excited because [baritone] Sanford Sylvan is performing it."

Add another "don't" to the list: don't ask Jorge Martín to characterize his music for you. "That's the most hellishly hard question to have to answer," he says. Beyond *The Glass Hammer*, with its Southern American motif, and *Beast and Superbeast*, with its British sense of humor and setting, he has his eye on adapting

Before Night Falls written by the late Reinaldo Arenas, who some (but probably not Martín) might refer to as a gay Cuban novelist.

Instead of trying to come up with a blanket description for himself, Martín slides over to the question of what he values most in music.

"It sounds obvious but I believe in expression and communicativeness. It's weird because nowadays the gulf between the elite and pop is so vast, and I don't consider myself either pop or the highest falutin' academic stuff...[neither of which] communicate to a lot of people. It doesn't communicate to me very much. I know what they're doing and appreciate it and all that, but it just doesn't speak much to me." His influences range beyond the obvious classical background. He cites diverse tastes from within his family: one brother's jazz and big band, another's Motown and Broadway, and of course Cuban music, which he calls "some of the most important dance music in the world in this century."

So despite some common assumptions, classical music — at least Jorge Martín's classical music — is an amalgam, a synthesis of sorts. Says the composer, "It brings together elements to make an artwork that isn't necessarily just one thing." Once again, art imitates life. ▼

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