

DEPARTURES

M A G A Z I N E

The Player: Nico Muhly

By Adam Baer

Last spring at the New York concert space The Kitchen, the energetic, always adventurous composer Nico Muhly performed what may have been a first: a work that involved “playing” human hair. Well, not literally. As violist Nadia Sirota, one of several collaborators on stage, bowed the notes, Muhly imitatively stroked and plucked the long red tresses of three women lying above him on slabs. The playful bit of performance art drew chuckles from the admiring crowd, which included Björk and artist Matthew Barney, who had come no doubt expecting some theater. The concert—played on a stage set of bones, skulls, and webs of braided rope created by the Icelandic artist Shoplifter—was classic Muhly, straddling the line between campy and brilliant, between unabashedly affected and profoundly beautiful.

At just 27, Muhly is a rare specimen in the music world: Classically trained yet fearless and rangy, he’s embraced by the establishment but perpetually pursuing experimental work. Muhly’s current projects include composing a new work for the Metropolitan Opera (unheard of for someone under 30) and a score for a Scott Rudin-produced Hollywood film. Last year he wrote a piece for the Paris Opera Ballet and a soundtrack for Isaac Mizrahi’s New York Fashion Week runway show. He also found time to partner with Faroe Islands singer Teitur Lassen on a work accompanied by handpicked YouTube clips—and released his second album, *Mothertongue*, a provocative trio of “suites” simultaneously indebted to historical tropes and aggressively contemporary.



He accomplished all of this—and more—while working for Philip Glass (a multifaceted job he started as a joint Columbia-Juilliard student) and maintaining a performance schedule that has put him on such varied stages as London’s Royal Academy of Music, Symphony Hall in Boston, and New York’s Guggenheim Museum. Muhly may even be the dynamic leading figure that art music has longed for since the halcyon days of Philip Glass and Steve Reich in the seventies, and there’s never been a more dynamic time for fusing genre, never been more people in positions of power at revered arts institutions more

interested in seeking out voices that will speak for an openminded generation of new listeners.

“Nico *is* the rare composer, young or old, who is both original and widely appealing in his musical ideas,” confirms Metropolitan Opera general manager Peter Gelb, who has, since his appointment, three years ago, energized the Met with innovative new productions and original commissions.

Indeed, the influence of minimalism’s masters on Muhly has often been noted, especially in his use of hypnotically repetitive note-cells. But Muhly’s work also enjoys a powerful link to English choral music from the 16th and 17th centuries by composers like William Byrd. And he similarly draws from electronica, American folk, and the jagged rhythms of art-rock, to say nothing of straight-up pop.

“If you want me to *Google-map* my music,” Muhly told me last fall during a pre-performance sound-check at Hollywood’s Hotel Café, “it comes most from two places—the English choral tradition and American minimalism. If my music is derivative, which it *is*, those are the two places from which it’s most derivative.”

The only child of artist Bunny Harvey and filmmaker Frank Muhly, Nico was raised in Vermont in a climate of creative experimentation. He also grew up singing in the church choir. “Liturgical music is my bread and butter,” says Muhly, who now lives in the Chinatown section of Manhattan but regularly attends services at St. Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue at 53rd Street. “I like that nobody claps, and I like that it’s music that’s used not to call attention to itself, but rather to point somewhere else.”

Muhly wrote a mass for the choir at St. Thomas a few years ago, and he plans to ask the group to perform a new choral work—a “church parable,” he calls it—that he’s presenting at Merkin Concert Hall next year. “Basically, it’ll be an adaptation of Benjamin Britten’s “Burning Fiery Furnace,” which is a beautiful chamber oratorio,” Muhly says. He has also written a biblically sourced song cycle called “The Adulteress” for soprano Jessica Rivera, who will give the work its debut this season at Carnegie Hall.

Tall and boyish, with spiky black hair and wide blue eyes, Muhly is fiercely friendly and possesses a sponge-like intellect. He speaks five languages, including Icelandic. He writes an impeccably worded, self-referential blog (topics range from hip-hop and Sarah Palin to travel and cooking—one of his passions), and he occasionally contributes insightful think-piece columns about music to *The Guardian* in London. Unfazed by those who would pigeonhole him, Muhly isn’t jarred by criticisms that he jumps around too much from concert hall to opera house, club to soundstage. He’s simply being himself, and he doesn’t see why he can’t have it all.

New Yorker magazine music critic and MacArthur fellow Alex Ross, who named Muhly’s *Mothertongue* one of his top ten classical albums of 2008, describes the young composer as “brilliant, with a deep awareness of tradition, but by no means trapped by it.” Muhly “speaks in a thoroughly contemporary voice,” Ross asserts.

But what does a term like “contemporary voice” mean in 2009? To begin with, Muhly is emblematic of a new generation of musicians with collaborative, genre-crossing sensibilities shaped by globalization and the Internet. For him, categories and distinctions of high and low are mostly beside the point, and he unapologetically embraces the straight-up popular. “Nico is the best person to learn about all the new R&B hits from,” says Sam Amidon, a popular folk singer-songwriter who frequently works with Muhly. “His music is created with a sense of total freedom and improvisation, where his mind is flying around and catching beautiful sounds. Whether he’s writing an arrangement for my folksong music or I’m working on a piece of his, there’s a sense of abandonment and excitement that goes way beyond genre or any other confining category.”

On Muhly’s *Mothertongue* (produced by Icelandic musician Valgeir Sigurdsson, best known for his work with Björk), Amidon plays banjo and sings an adaptation of an old Appalachian folk song, “Oh the Wind and Rain.” Muhly arranged it as a three-part suite called “The Only Tune,” peppered with recorded sounds such as whale flesh swishing around in a bowl and sampled bits

of Farfisa organ music. The lyrics—sung by Amidon in a stylized, flattened twang as slightly off-kilter patterns repeat and build on each other—tell the story of two sisters walking by a river and one pushing the other in to drown; the body is recovered downstream by a miller who uses her hair and bones to make a fiddle. It's haunting art, alternately jarring and exquisitely lyrical. The album also includes the piece "Wonders," which lays insect-buzz-like harpsichord figures beneath Renaissance-style singing, sometimes in parallel, open chords, by Icelandic artist Helgi Hrafn Jónsson. For its part, *Mothertongue's* title work, which begins with mezzo-soprano Abigail Fischer reciting numbers, addresses, and the names of states and cities in chattering streams, is an ebullient data collage, accompanied by glimmering strings and broadly spaced keyboard tones.

"I had a mystic vision when I was in Vermont a few years ago, where I realized that the Internet was scooting above us, even in the fields with no light or electricity—that there's this constant 'chatter' running around the atmosphere," Muhly says. "I am totally obsessed with the way in which 'identity' can be summarized—by your bank account number, your AmEx card number, your Social Security number, your Student ID code. That's, in a part, what *Mothertongue* is about."

Muhly begins composing with ideas or images—as opposed to, say, musical figures. He's surprisingly candid about his source material, whether it's something he finds on the street, the record store, the kitchen. "I decided a year ago to try to be as public and transparent about everything as possible, much to some people's chagrin—just to try to demystify what it is exactly that a composer does. It's been useful for me, and fun (like the blog), but I think also it's helped people get their heads around other young composers who maybe are more...shy?"

With the notable exception of über-traditionalist Bernard Holland's chilly review of Muhly's March 2007 concert at Zankel Hall in the *New York Times* ("The impression is a flashbulb, monolithic sound a world away from the depth perception experienced with say, a Haydn string

quartet"), Muhly has enjoyed mostly glowing notices. His supporters include composer John Corigliano, who taught Muhly at Julliard and believes it's hugely positive for concert music that a young composer is getting so much attention. "He writes very easily, so he can get a lot of music out," says Corigliano. "Nico has no aversion to crossing over and no barriers to pop classical or hybrids. He's very much a 21st-century American composer."

But a combination of Muhly's openness, personal connections, and good fortune has also led to projects that took his music in unexpected directions, which helps add an element of intrigue to his profile. A few years ago, for instance, artist Maira Kalman, whom Muhly had met when his family lived at the American Academy in Rome, invited him to write a song cycle based on her illustrated version of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. The operatic songs, which debuted in 2005 at the New York Public Library, were scored not only for soprano, tenor, viola, banjo, and percussion but also typewriter, eggbeater, clattering cup and saucer, meat-grinder, duck call, and more.

Shortly thereafter, Muhly was living in Kalman's Tribeca apartment, directly beneath the home of designer Isaac Mizrahi. "I was learning a Stravinsky piece on the piano, and I was playing in the middle of the night," Muhly recounts. "Isaac would call down through the stairwell and be like: 'I'm in rapture!' It was wild." The designer ended up commissioning Muhly to score a runway show of the Liz Claiborne line that Mizrahi oversees. The result: a dark, seething, and string-heavy piece. Quite different from the average fashion show soundtrack.

"You can trace things in music, but a lot of the stuff Nico writes is untraceable," says Mizrahi. "One thing you have to remember about him is that he's deeply melancholy. But his music is very sophisticated, very unsentimental, and just when it gets sad, it gets happy again. It's the perfect temperature."

Muhly's most important commission, for the Met Opera, would also seem to reflect something of a dark streak. The *Sweeney Todd-meets-Peter Grimes-on-Facebook* libretto is based on a lurid true story, concerning a 14-year-old British boy who

seduced another boy in an online chat room, eventually luring him to an alley, where he stabbed him. "It feels very natural to someone my age," says Muhly at the Hotel Café as audience members begin filing in. "When I first got the Internet, I was 15, the same age of these kids. The story is about one of the first crimes using the Internet as a tool, creating different identities and digital manipulation. There's also something really Hitchcock-y about the story. It felt operatic—like a natural and modern extension of British operas, which have these wisps of perversion and insinuation."

Soon, the Hotel Café's eighty percent full, and a fashion designer has sat herself down at our table. But even though Muhly is finishing up his interview with me, he can't help but ask the young woman, who heard about Muhly on Los Angeles-based KCRW.com, what she thinks of the "drippy cloak" he wants to wear on stage. If only for a minute, I interrupt the natural flow of interdisciplinary group discussion to ask Muhly if he would mind finishing up his discussion of the Met opera project. For example, does he feel pressure to impress with it? "No," he replies, matter of factly, with a sly smile in the direction of his new friend. "It feels loose, and I'm just having fun with it right now. It's for, like, 2099! It's unbelievable."

The Muhly Jukebox

Nico Muhly's two albums to date, *Speaks Volumes* (2006) and *Mothertongue* (2008), were both released on the Icelandic label Bedroom Community. His Web site, nicomuhly.com, includes his blog, information about projects, and links to download his music. A voracious listener with discerning musical taste, Muhly offers five essential albums.

1. Glenn Gould plays the *Goldberg Variations* (Sony Classical, 1955)

"This is a classic, revolutionary disc. People either love it or hate it, which can only be a good thing."

2. Steve Reich *Music for 18 Musicians* (ECM, 2000)

"I grew up with this recording. It's an hour, with no track breaks, which insists on a thorough listening. From the very first piano pulse to the last fade-out, I know this album like the back of my hand."

3. Arvo Pärt *Te Deum* (ECM, 1993)

"The recording that has the Berliner Mass on it — the stillness and spacing of this music is one of a kind, and it completely rocked my world when it came out."

4. Paul Simon *Graceland* (Warner Bros., 1987)

"I think this is the best example of "world music" coexisting with "not-world music." There is something so effortless about the way Paul Simon folds in the different elements of this album without seeming tokeny or racist."

5. John Adams *Harmonielehre*, by Edo de Waart and the San Francisco Symphony (Nonesuch, 1990)

"The first twenty seconds of this are the most thrilling music ever."