

Mike Svoboda



Mike Svoboda Photo © Michael Fritschi

Mike Svoboda is, in the best sense of the words, both a performer's composer and a composer's performer. The development of his very own, personal voice as a composer has been the product of an evolutionary process in which his phenomenal abilities and wide range of concert activities world-wide as a trombonist in the course of over 30 years have honed his senses and refined his musical, aesthetic and technical judgment as to what he himself would most like to create and precisely how he might go about it.

After completing his studies in composition in the United States with, most influentially, Ben Johnston (once referred to as "one of the best non-famous composers America has to offer"), during which time he also edited the archives of Johnston's mentor, Harry Partch and, consequently, received a thorough training in the art of just intonation, Svoboda came to Germany in 1982 with the help of a BMI Award to Young Composers. At this point he turned his attention from composition to perfecting his trombone playing (and learning to tap dance) to take on the role of Lucifer in Karlheinz Stockhausen's cycle of operas, LICHT (LIGHT). Mike's work for and with this brilliant, demanding and difficult master continued for over 12 years and proved to be a formidable apprenticeship indeed, not only as a trombonist, but as a composer, since he was intimately involved in all facets of the creative process. Stockhausen was, however, by far not the only significant composer with whom Svoboda had the opportunity to work over the years. Composers as varied as Peter Eötvös, Helmut Lachenmann, Wolfgang Rihm, Martin Smolka, David Lang, and Frank Zappa (to name only a few) wrote for and worked with Mike as a soloist — he has premiered over 400 works for trombone on major festivals around the world — and it is fair to say that this vast experience has contributed significantly to the education of Mike Svoboda, the composer.

During the later 90s, Mike Svoboda started composing again, mostly for himself, during a period after Stockhausen when he was very involved in the development of solo repertoire and, in a very real sense, looking for his own voice. With the new century, Mike embarked decisively on a compositional path which, in many cases, involved various permutations of the Mike Svoboda Ensemble: friends and colleagues with whom he had worked for many years, with whom he could work closely and intensively to refine his musical language and intentions. Many of these works are "music about music," drawing variously upon the works and lives of Richard Wagner, Robert/Clara Schumann-Johannes Brahms, Mozart/Rossini or Erik Satie. There are also works of this nature for himself as soloist with orchestra

("Love Hurts - Carmen Remix" from 2003 for trombone and orchestra on themes of Georges Bizet), or his recent use of motives from John Dowland in "Robin Hood" from 2012, from which the upcoming "Dowland Suite" for brass quintet is taken.

In 2005 Svoboda began a series of music theater collaborations with the German writer/director Manfred Weiss, three of which are ostensibly "children's theater" (though they are indeed well-suited for adults): "Erwin, der Naturtalent" (Erwin, the Natural Talent, 2005/2007), "Der unglaubliche Spotz" (The Incredible Spotz, 2007) and, most recently, "Robin Hood - zu gut, um wahr zu sein" (Robin Hood - Too Good to be True, 2012). While "Erwin" is written for 8 soloists, choir and chamber orchestra (originally with 14, later expanded to 35 musicians), both "Spotz" and "Robin Hood" are more compact and are accompanied by small ensembles without a conductor, much like the meta-music projects from a few years earlier, and the musicians are ingeniously integrated into the action on stage. These works all include a number of invented or "found" instruments and sparkle with a sense of fantasy and humor that delights audience members of all ages.

Increasingly, the trend in Mike Svoboda's music since about 2008 seems (with the exception of certain vocal works where an extra-musical element is offered by the texts) to be towards more abstract, purely musical compositions, often for orchestra and soloist(s), though his love of chamber music, solo compositions, references to other composers and his quirky humor remain. His setting of selected movements from Bach's 3rd and 5th cello suites with the eternally curious "accompaniments" by Robert Schumann (for trombone and piano or, as originally conceived, accordion) from 2012 are evidence enough of that.

The compositions "Konzerttuden für Posaune" and "Music for Piccolo solo," both from 2008, focus upon a single instrument, but are "pure" music, free from any external references or intentions. "More Pentatonic Irony" for 2 amateur (originally children's) choirs and orchestra from 2009 is highly entertaining, using a wide variety of vocal interjections (regulated by hand signals from the conductor) and vocalises with orchestra to create a very simply effective and joyous composition. "Inner Antiphony" (2009) is a double-concerto for two percussionists and orchestra in which a constant underlying pulse of 72/144 bpm serves as the basis and touchstone for diverse continuous variations and divergences on the part of the soloists and orchestra alike - a very concrete, dramatic and satisfying composition.

Since the Baroque era, the list of masterful virtuosi who composed chamber music, concert repertoire and concerti for orchestra and their respective instruments is long, and among Svoboda's newer works to date, the trombone continues to play a dominant role. His three-movement "Music for Trombone and Orchestra" (2010) is a full-blown trombone concerto which, after a sonorous and driving rhythmic first movement, collapses into a somewhat looser and associative second movement humorously entitled "Malapropisms." After a trombone cadenza consisting only of breath sounds, the trombonist manages to incite the orchestra onwards in a dramatic proliferation that makes up the third movement "Cadences," an almost Beethovenesque striving to end the performance.

"Music for Trombone and Brass Ensemble" (2012) is a luscious concerto for

trombone set in a pure brass environment. Dramatic, full of cantilene melodic expressivity, rich in harmonic development, often rhapsodic, this organic composition describes the voyage of a trombonist in the company of his kin.

In Svoboda's trio "Music for Trombone, Piano and Percussion" (2011), the trombone (extremely virtuosic), is still more significant than its colleagues but now embedded in a true chamber music setting in which all three musicians have their say. There are formal similarities to his trombone concerto in that the structure is ternary - initially forging forwards with a jazz feeling both rhythmically and harmonically, followed by a more timbre-oriented, free and "improvisatory" middle section leading into a dynamic, rhythmically jagged conclusion.

Svoboda's music has gone through a very rapid evolution in the past 15 years and has reached a point of maturity, a coming of age in which the rhythmic vitality, the masterful integration of eclectic sources to arrive at a personal style, the instinct for expressive virtuosity, dramatic development and the sensitive melding of color, line and harmony are all in place. Given that, the musical world can most certainly look forward to further developments and many exciting works from this dynamic and versatile composer!

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