

SEBASTIAN CURRIER

Divisions

Born: March 16, 1959, in Huntingdon, PA

Work composed: 2014

First performance: April 23 & 25, 2015, in Seattle; Ludovic Morlot conducting the Seattle Symphony Orchestra

One hundred years ago, Europe was engulfed in the cataclysm of World War I. To mark the centenary of that conflict, Andrey Boreyko, the Russian conductor who currently directs the National Orchestra of Belgium, launched a project to commission a series of compositions reflecting on the event. The composers participating in this project are of varied nationalities. America's representative is **Sebastian Currier**, whose *Divisions* receives its premiere performances this weekend. The work was composed jointly for the Seattle Symphony, the Boston Symphony and the National Orchestra of Belgium.

Sebastian Currier was an astute choice for the assignment of creating a work marking the centenary of the First World War. A composer of highly expressive music, Currier has received performances throughout the world and has been honored with numerous awards, including the Grawemeyer Prize, widely considered music's equivalent of the Nobel Prize. For this first performance of *Divisions*, the composer graciously provided a program note, which is excerpted here:

I am honored to be the American representative of [Andrey Boreyko's initiative] to find some form of musical commemoration to the gruesome destruction that gripped Europe a century ago. That dark time in our collective history is really the antithesis of the creative human impulse, and it is hard to imagine what place music could have, except possibly to once again mourn the dead. But it is one hundred years later, and it seemed to me that the piece should have a connection to the present, or even the future, as well as looking back to this time of unbridled destruction. My starting point was the rather obvious observation that we humans are a jumble of contradictory impulses: at our best, so creative, insightful and altruistic; at our worst, so inexplicably short-sighted, destructive and selfish.

Divisions embodies this basic contradiction. As it unfolds, the musical material moves from fragmentation and fracture to wholeness and connectedness. The word "divisions" points to this process. It first simply refers to the destructive force whereby we humans work against each other instead of together. World War I is certainly an all too familiar instance. "Divisions" also has its military associations, as in a "division" of troops. But it also has a much more benign reference in the world of music: a "division" is an early form of instrumental variations from the 16th century. The term comes from the fact that in each successive variation, as the level of ornamentation increases, there are smaller and smaller note values, so that the beat is further "divided."

In my piece the trajectory is from the one meaning of the word to the other. After an opening of disjunction and fracture, the piece finally settles down into a set of simple variations. However, this movement towards wholeness proves ephemeral. The drum beat of war is never far off.