

GIYA KANCHELI

Nu.Mu.Zu for Orchestra

Born: August 10, 1935, in Tbilisi

Now resides: Antwerp, Belgium

Work composed: 2015

World Premiere: October 16, 2015, in Brussels. Andrey Boreyko conducted the National Orchestra of Belgium.

This year brings the 80th birthday of Giya Kancheli, one of the most intriguing composers of recent years. Kancheli is among several important creative musicians — others are Arvo Pärt, Sofia Gubaidalina and the late Alfred Schnittke — who were born and trained in the former Soviet republics but who emigrated to Western Europe and have offered intriguing ideas about how music might develop in the wake of the highly abstract late-modernist work that dominated composition during the 1950s, '60s and early '70s. In ways distinct from their Western colleagues, they have reintegrated melody, traditional harmonies and deeply expressive gestures into their musical language.

Kancheli was born in Tbilisi, the capital of what was the Georgian SSR and now is the Republic of Georgia. After studying at the Conservatory in his native city, he worked as a composer of film, theater and concert music. In 1991 he left Georgia and moved to Berlin. He subsequently settled in Antwerp, Belgium, where he has lived for the last 20 years, composing prolifically. Among Kancheli's works are seven symphonies and more than a dozen other large-scale orchestral compositions. One of them, *Styx*, for solo viola, orchestra and chorus, was performed by Seattle Symphony in 2013.

Certain features of Kancheli's music — the large scale on which much of it is written, its use of traditional harmonies, its openly expressive character — suggest a neo-Romantic outlook. The composer has endorsed that notion. In a much-quoted statement, he declared: "Music, like life itself, is inconceivable without Romanticism. Romanticism is a high dream of the past, present and future, a force of invincible beauty that towers above, and conquers, the forces of ignorance, bigotry, violence and evil."

This declaration points to one final aspect of Kancheli's music that bears mention: its spiritual and ethical dimension. Much of his output conveys an elegiac character. It seems to sing of wounded humanity, of the sorrows incurred when cruelty and corruption prevail in this world.

Kancheli's latest orchestral piece, *Nu.Mu.Zu*, continues that song. This work, whose composition was commissioned jointly by Seattle Symphony and the National Orchestra of Belgium, takes its title from three words in ancient Sumerian, a language that is all but lost: Nu, Mu and Zu, which translate as "I don't know." Kancheli explained this title in a recent interview. "When I was young, and then middle-aged," he said, "I thought I knew something. Now, when I have turned 80, I realize that I know nothing, and I cannot understand what is going on around us. ... Unfortunately, today there are many troublesome events in Ukraine, Georgia and Asian countries."

These events are certainly tragic, and all a musician has to confront them with is music — not only his own, but that of the rich tradition on which his work stands. *Nu.Mu.Zu* poses melodic and harmonic material suggestive of Bach, Beethoven and the later 19th century against dense,

abrasive sonorities that seem bent on extinguishing the quasi-classical material. Their apparent contention leads to great sonic cataclysm and an ambiguous conclusion.

What to Listen For

The first of many allusions to the musical past occurs at the outset of the piece, as the piano plays a figure in the manner of a Bach toccata, only slowly and blurred, as though heard in a dream. Eventually, the tempo accelerates and we encounter another musical anachronism: a merry, dance-like melodic fragment that would not be out of place in a Beethoven rondo. Soon the piano introduces a figure in skipping rhythms; this, too, will prove a recurring motif. We also hear hints of medieval harmonies, a waltz-like melody and other references to the history of Western music.

But as the piece progresses, contrasting material intrudes: grinding dissonances that repeatedly crescendo to thundering exclamations, then give way to ethereal quiet. The last such event produces a huge explosion of sound and a moment of tense silence. Then, quietly and in slow motion, we hear a remembrance of the toccata figure that opened the work.

Scored for 3 flutes, the third doubling on piccolo and alto flute, also doubling on piccolo; 3 oboes, the third doubling on English horn; 3 clarinets, the third doubling on bass clarinet; 2 bassoons and contrabassoon; 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 4 trombones and tuba; timpani and percussion; harp, piano and strings.