

The slide rules

Steven Parker doesn't want 76 trombones, thank you very much. One will do just fine. He'll use it to play works recently written for him by international composers on Saturday, Nov. 7, for Santa Fe New Music at the Santa Fe Art Institute.

Parker's only stipulations when he commissioned the works were that each would last less than five minutes, explore the concept of language and sound — and, of course, exploit the trombone in a telling or unusual or characteristic way. Slated works for acoustic trombone are SFNM founder John Kennedy's 2006 *Spoletude*, Naftali Schindler's 2009 *Two-Eyed Elk*, Art Gottschalk's 2008 *Charades*, and Timothy McCormack's 2008 *Here is a sequence of signs*, each having a sound and a meaning.

Works for electroacoustic trombone are Gene Pritsker's 2008 *Bach Speaks*, the 2008 *Gavagai* by Kamala Sankaram, Michael Vincent's 2009 *What Jesus Looks Like*, and Corey Dargel's 2008 *Chimpanzees*. A noncommissioned work, Jacob ter Veldhuis' 2006 *I was like WOW* with video by Jan Willem Looze, closes the concert.

"These pieces are all for tenor trombone," Parker said in a phone interview from Austin, where he is a Harrington Fellow at the University of Texas, pursuing a doctorate in performance as well as his own projects. "Some pieces use a particular set of extended techniques, some use prepared trombone, and some use a very standard approach. It is an extremely fresh program that runs the gamut.

"I was really interested in having a solo program that evolved around a curatorial point of view — to get a group of composers to write a variety of pieces that all explored the same theme. Initially I sent e-mails out to friends of mine, and all of them graciously wrote me pieces. Performances and recordings are a kind of exchange for that.

I feel a little bit guilty about all these great pieces I have had written for me that I wasn't able to pay anyone for. So I'm hoping to play them as much as possible."

The composers took the instrument and the musical concepts they adapted to it in highly different directions, Parker said. "One piece was written for me by an Israeli composer, Naftali Schindler, who is also a Tuvan throat singer. Similar to the way the voice produces multiple pitches with overtone singing, you can do that with a trombone — like using a didgeridoo to highlight different notes in a pitch spectrum. Naftali has approached that two ways: using the didgeridoo approach of highlighting different pitches, or multiphonics; or playing straight trombone while singing.

"John's piece, he wrote for me at the Spoleto Festival. It uses a variety of techniques. You know how percussion instruments can be played in water, such as gongs? In the water part of *Spoletude*, I submerge the bell in a tank of water. There's a lot of microtonal things he uses to allude to the influence of Berio's *Sequenza* pieces. There's also a part for body percussion, ankle bells, actually, played while performing."

For the New York-based composer Kamala Sankaram, the chance to come up with a piece for Parker let her also explore another passion. As a doctoral student in psycholinguistics, "this idea of music and language is right up my alley," she said in a phone interview. "There has long been a debate as to whether music has any meaning, specifically determinant meaning," she said. "Bernstein's *The Unanswered Question* tried to go into that. Linguists have pretty much concluded that music doesn't have meaning; it has glamour, it has fascination, but it doesn't have definite meaning."

But language itself can be inconsistent: consider, she said, the phenomenon of linguistic indeterminacy. For example, if you are with someone whose language you don't know, and he points to something and says a word, does he mean the thing itself — a rabbit, for example — or does he mean eat or run or take notice or look? Without understanding the full context of language use, there's no way to be sure.

In setting out to write a piece that *could* communicate a message, Sankaram used a text by John Cage as her source. She identified all the vowel sounds in the score, and then assigned each one a pitch in the chromatic scale — a variant on standard 12-tone practice. Over the course of the piece, she hopes listeners will receive a sense of definite communication of both emotion and information.

In terms of other challenges, Parker said that Timothy McCormack's *Here is a...* is "extremely demanding technically. It's a piece that runs the gamut of extended techniques: singing while inhaling, flutter-tongue techniques, a really wide spectrum of sound textures, and the regular insertion of mutes. I use three mutes, including a plunger!"

Art Gottschalk's *Charade* not only uses extended techniques, it demands theatrical ability from the player. The composer is a professor of trombone at Rice University in Houston, where Parker took his master's degree; and as a master of the instrument, he's taken it to unusual extremes. "*Charade* is pretty incredible," Parker said, sounding happy at the thought of meeting its demands. "The concept was a game of charades. The trombonist plays with the audience as well as to the audience. It also alludes to the Berio *Sequenza* for trombone, brings in the idea of the clown entertainer, and involves deconstruction of the trombone — the various sounds that can be produced by taking apart the instrument."

One thing Parker tries to do whether he's playing avant-garde music, standard classical fare, or jazz, is to make his instrument sound as good as it can. "Of course, I'm biased, but I feel that timbrally there is more potential for variation and expression in brass instruments than other instruments. Sound is created by the mouth and oral cavity, so you're able to replicate so many things you could do as a singer. There are endless possibilities for lyricism." ◀

details

- ▼ *The Language and Sound Project*, trombonist Steven Parker, presented by Santa Fe New Music
- ▼ 7 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 7
- ▼ Santa Fe Art Institute, College of Santa Fe campus, 1600 St. Michael's Drive
- ▼ \$20 in advance at Nicholas Potter Bookseller, 211 E. Palace Ave., 983-5434, or at sfnm.org; \$25 at the door; \$10 for full-time students; for information, call 474-6601



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