

Leon Kirchner
“The Forbidden”

LEON KIRCHNER was born on January 24, 1919, and lives in New York City. His orchestral work “The Forbidden” was commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, James Levine, Music Director, through the generous support of the Arthur P. Contas Fund for the Commissioning of New Works, and is a BSO 125th anniversary commission. These are the world premiere performances. This work is the third in a triptych of pieces by the same name: the first for solo piano (aka Piano Sonata No. 3; 2003), and the second for string quartet (String Quartet No. 4; 2006).

“THE FORBIDDEN” IS SCORED for two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, two trombones, bass trombone, tuba, percussion (four players suggested: I. vibraphone, snare drum, crotales; II. xylophone, snare drum, bass drum, tom-toms, glockenspiel; III. chimes, timpani, piano (doubling celesta), and strings. The duration of the piece is about fourteen minutes (in a single movement).

Leon Kirchner’s music entered the repertoire of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1960, when the composer himself—at age forty-one—conducted his Toccata for strings, solo winds, and percussion, which had been premiered by the San Francisco Symphony in 1956. Also in 1956 he was soloist in the first performances of his own Piano Concerto No. 1 with the New York Philharmonic; the Philharmonic had premiered his Sinfonia in 1952. He had begun making a name for himself by the late 1940s, not only as a composer but also as a thoughtful interpreter, as pianist and conductor, of the music of Mozart, Schubert, and others, as well as his own pieces.

Kirchner studied composition with Ernst Toch, Roger Sessions, and Ernest Bloch, among others. His aesthetic was indelibly shaped by his encounters with Schoenberg, with whom he studied music theory at UCLA in the 1930s and in whom he recognized a surpassingly erudite and brilliant musical mind. Although influenced by Schoenberg’s twelve-tone compositional technique, Kirchner has never been a strict adherent to any system; his music incorporates methods and materials of his myriad musical loves, from Bach to Stravinsky. His is, fundamentally, a deeply personal voice, almost invariably of great energy and intensity. Kirchner’s role as an educator has had a big impact on generations of musicians, beginning at the University of Southern California and including positions at Mills College (Oakland, CA) and, most importantly, Harvard, where he joined the faculty in 1961, remaining until his retirement in 1989. At Harvard he carried further Schoenberg’s completist educational interests, establishing an innovative course combining performance and analysis as well as founding and directing the Harvard Chamber Orchestra. Among the beneficiaries of this instruction who have gone on to become champions of his music are Yo-Yo Ma and the pianist Joel Fan.

Kirchner’s music has been recognized with a Naumburg Award (for his Piano Concerto No. 1) and the Pulitzer Prize (for the String Quartet No. 3 with tape, 1967), among other citations. Though he has written comparatively little music for orchestra, that part of his output has impressive provenance. In addition to giving the premieres of his Sinfonia and Piano Concerto No. 1, the New York Philharmonic commissioned and premiered his *Music for Orchestra*. The Philadelphia Orchestra commissioned his *Music for Cello and Orchestra* for Yo-Yo Ma. The Boston Symphony commissioned and premiered his orchestra-and-voice “duo-drama” *Of things exactly as they are*; his *Music for Orchestra II* was commissioned by the New England Conservatory. Other major works include his 1960 Concerto for Violin, Cello, Ten Winds, and Percussion, commissioned for a Fromm Foundation concert at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art that also included the premiere of Elliott Carter’s Double Concerto and Milton Babbitt’s *Vision and Prayer*. The 1970s were dominated by the composition of his opera *Lily*, based on Saul Bellow’s *Henderson the Rain King*. Of his chamber works, Kirchner’s four string quartets, spanning 1949 to 2007, are a significant addition to the repertoire. The Boston Symphony commissioned his *Music for Twelve*, a *Brandenburg*-like miniature concerto for orchestra, for the Boston Symphony Chamber Players on the occasion of the BSO’s centennial. There are also a handful of works for solo piano for such performers as Leon Fleisher and Peter Serkin, and three sonatas (so called), the most recent being Piano Sonata No. 3, *The Forbidden*.

That sonata was the first of three different takes on the same piece, the present orchestral work being the third. The history of the trilogy is a little complicated. As early as fall 2001, BSO Artistic Administrator Anthony Fogg and James Levine—then recently announced as the BSO’s future music director—had talked of commissioning an orchestra work from Kirchner, one of a few “wish-list” composers that Levine wanted to work with. The decision was finalized in 2002, its having been decided for logistical purposes (mostly having to do with the composer’s

schedule) that Kirchner would orchestrate a planned solo piano sonata. The Sonata No. 3 was commissioned by the Joel Fan Foundation for a consortium of pianists, completed in 2003, and premiered by Fan himself in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on November 11, 2006. Between the completion of the sonata and the orchestral version, *The Forbidden* morphed into a string quartet, requested by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and commissioned for the Orion String Quartet. The premiere of the quartet actually preceded that of the sonata, taking place in August 2006 at the La Jolla (CA) Music Society Summerfest. The premiere of the orchestral version of *The Forbidden*, which ultimately became one of the commissions for the BSO's 125th anniversary, had originally been scheduled for January 2006, but logistics, again, forced its postponement. So here we are.

The precedent for such a transformation can be found in the work of composers throughout history, including Bach, Mozart, Schumann, Mahler, Stravinsky, and Copland, etc., etc., who made a practice of recycling, reconfiguring, recontextualizing their own music. (All kinds of artists do this, of course—the short story becomes a play, the painting a print, and so on.) Kirchner has taken this tack on several occasions. His *Music for Orchestra II* grew out of a short piece he had written in 1988 to celebrate the 70th birthday of Leonard Bernstein; his Piano Trio No. 2 is based on *Music for Cello and Orchestra*. Like the String Quartet No. 4, the orchestral version of *The Forbidden* has the same linear structure and contains almost the same harmonic and melodic materials as the Sonata No. 3.

Those materials, as Kirchner has described the piece, are a reconciliation of the tonal language of the past (his beloved predecessors from Bach to Mahler) and new possibilities made imperative by the work of Schoenberg. As the composer explains below, the title “*The Forbidden*” is an allusion to Thomas Mann's 1947 novel *Doctor Faustus*, in which the composer Adrian Leverkühn (a fictional doppelgänger of Schoenberg) accepts a bargain with the devil, his soul for a period of unparalleled success as a composer.

A few different motifs are audible throughout the fourteen-minute, one-movement piece, characteristically transformed in tempo or register or, in the case of this orchestral score, timbre. These include scale figures, hemiola (clear two-against-three or the reverse), an off-the-beat syncopated figure, and triadic arpeggiation. The sonority of the diminished-seventh chord—functionally invaluable in tonal music—is ubiquitous and lends the work a late-Romantic harmonic hue. Rhythmically, Kirchner builds rubato and brio into his gestures, and although there are metrical shifts throughout, the effect is one of an always forward-moving fluidity (as in Chopin). The intensity this engenders is partly alleviated by a slower central section, a series of episodes set off by frequent tempo changes and pauses between phrases. At one point here, the orchestral score is marked “*Gesangvoll mit innigster Empfindung*” (“Songful, with innermost feeling”), an indication tellingly borrowed from Beethoven's Opus 109 piano sonata. One of the most interesting and poetic aspects of the orchestral score is the retained presence of piano, at first quite prominent but gradually almost completely excised from the texture. The original gestures are not merely transferred (however imaginatively) from piano to orchestra but reimagined (even as each figure keeps its essential identity) for a new and expanded expressive purpose.

Robert Kirzinger