

Gunther Schuller

“Where the Word Ends” (2007)

GUNTHER SCHULLER was born in New York City on November 22, 1925, and lives in Newton, Massachusetts. “*Where the Word Ends*” is a Boston Symphony Orchestra 125th anniversary commission and was written on commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra, James Levine, Music Director, through the generous support of the New Works Fund, established by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency. These are the first performances. James Levine and the BSO will also perform the piece this coming Monday at Carnegie Hall in New York City.

“WHERE THE WORD ENDS” CALLS FOR A LARGE ORCHESTRA of four flutes (second doubling alto flute, third and fourth doubling piccolo), three oboes and English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four Wagner tubas, four trumpets, four trombones, tuba, percussion (five players suggested: xylophone, glockenspiel, vibraphone, marimba, four tom-toms, bass drums, two snare drums, four suspended cymbals, choke cymbal, ride cymbal, small gong, medium and large tam-tams, chimes, crotales, bell tree, three triangles, log drum, temple blocks, wood block), timpani, piano and celesta, two harps, and strings. The single-movement work is about twenty-five minutes long.

*Where the Word Ends*: music expresses what words can't, it's that simple. So says Gunther Schuller of his new orchestral work, written as a 125th anniversary commission for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and its music director James Levine. Schuller was one of a short list of composers Levine hoped to have the BSO commission for a new orchestral work when he became the orchestra's music director in the 2004-05 season. The commission was eventually proffered and the new piece scheduled for the 2006-07 season. Schuller, who works very quickly, began work in late 2006 and, with interruptions, finished the piece in a matter of weeks, completing it in early 2007. When Levine had a look at the score, it was clear to him that it would be better served in a different program. Schuller agreed, and the premiere was rescheduled for this season so Levine could devise a new context that set the piece off in complete contrast; hence the Brahms and Mozart music on this concert. (The original program featured the flashy, spotlight-stealing second suite from Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* in addition to a Mozart symphony and concerto.)

Schuller's ties to the BSO began at Tanglewood, where he joined Aaron Copland as head of the composition program during Erich Leinsdorf's tenure as BSO music director. He went on to become artistic director of Tanglewood from 1970 until 1984. Meanwhile he was also president of Boston's New England Conservatory, which under his guidance became the first such school to add a jazz program to its curriculum, leading nearly every other major music education institution to follow suit.

Schuller's jazz activities are well documented—in his early years he was performing on French horn both under Toscanini and uptown with Miles Davis and Gil Evans. He also arranged and composed for jazz groups. It was Schuller who coined the now common phrase “Third Stream” to denote a style of music blending new classical and jazz sensibilities, an approach that expanded the possibilities for the avant-garde improvising musicians of the late 1950s. His immediate cohorts in this fruitful experience were John Lewis and the Modern Saxophone Quartet, in the same orbit with George Russell, Eric Dolphy, Ornette Coleman, and many others. In his “free time” he has written several books, beginning with the still-used *Horn Technique* in 1962 and including two important volumes on the history of jazz; *Musings*, a collection of essays; and *The Compleat Conductor*, outlining his views on the subject of orchestral conducting. The first volume of his memoirs—as Schuller describes it, a kind of history of mid-20th-century culture through music as seen by one of its most involved participants—is due for publication by the University of Rochester Press, hopefully later this year. On top of all this, he ran his own publishing company (transferred to the G. Schirmer catalogue in recent years) and the recordings label GM Recordings, highlighting great underserved repertoire, mostly new and mostly American.

As a composer, Schuller was essentially self-taught—or rather, like the composers of the past, he learned through taking part in the performances of the great works and by studying scores. Although he is not an exclusively orchestral composer, he leans strongly toward that medium. Among his nearly two hundred works of all kinds, more than two-thirds have been orchestral, including three dozen concertos for all kinds of instruments. As he has said, he was “born in an orchestra”: his father was a New York Philharmonic violinist, and Gunther himself was performing professionally in orchestras already in his mid-teens. Beginning with the Cincinnati Symphony (where he was

soloist in his own Horn Concerto at age eighteen), he later became a member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra at nineteen and also played with the New York Philharmonic. Since he turned from horn playing more to conducting in the late 1950s, he has conducted dozens of orchestras from student-level to the world's elite, not only in his own works and other recent pieces but also the standard repertoire. With the BSO alone (he first led the orchestra in 1964 in his own *Paul Klee Studies*), his conducting repertoire included such composers as Haydn, Mozart, and Schubert, Wagner, Szymanowski, and Strauss, John Knowles Paine, Ives, Bernstein, and Scott Joplin (to name a few).

Schuller's explicit influences center on the *Rite of Spring*/post-neoclassical Stravinsky and on Schoenberg, with particular notice for the latter's *Erwartung* and his Variations for Orchestra. A New York Philharmonic recording of the *Rite* and the work's presence in Disney's *Fantasia* fired his desire to compose, and he was voracious in his approach to learning music. His interests are otherwise remarkably catholic, his personal canon encompassing such early moderns as Debussy, Ravel, Delius(!), Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Szymanowski, and Reger—surprising only if one hasn't paid attention to Schuller's lush chromaticism and verdant orchestration. He has written commissioned works for nearly every major American ensemble, and won the Pulitzer Prize for his *Of Reminiscences and Reflections* (1993), composed for the Louisville Orchestra. *Where the Word Ends* is the third work by Schuller to be premiered by the BSO, after *Museum Piece* (1970, written for the centennial of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston) and *Deai* for three orchestras, a BSO commission premiered in 1979 during the orchestra's tour to Japan. Including the present piece, the BSO has performed, all told, eleven scores by Schuller; James Levine has previously conducted his *Spectra* and *Seven Studies on Themes of Paul Klee* with the orchestra.

Apart from several symphonic-poem-like pieces such as the *Klee Studies* and the early *Vertige d'Eros* that take visual arts as a starting point, many, if not most, of Schuller's orchestral works are symphonic in conception. (Only one of his pieces, from 1965, is actually called "Symphony.") In discussing this predilection, Schuller explained, "This symphonic form invented by Haydn and expanded by Beethoven is not just a classic, it's an eternal form that is inexhaustible in its potential. I cherish this tradition and try my best to retain its best qualities."

*Where the Word Ends*, then, is a symphony-like one-movement work in four sections played without pause. Its span is readily heard as four continuous movements, but with the second-movement Adagio interrupted by the scherzo (complete with Trio): Lento—Adagio—Scherzo; Trio—Adagio—Allegro vivace. The Lento serves as both introduction and fully fledged opening movement, establishing the harmonic and textural world of the piece. It begins with strings alone, and in measure seven (about thirty seconds in—very slow tempo) we hear part of Schuller's "magic" twelve-tone row—which he has employed for most of his pieces for decades—appear in the basses and cellos as a kind of motto, the first true melodic statement within the atmospheric texture of the upper strings. Gradually the orchestra fills out as the Lento expands toward the "grand convulsion" (as it's marked in the score) and climax that precedes the Adagio.

Although some of the figural elements, particularly fast scale passages, of the Lento return in the Adagio, the rhythmic procession of this part is more straightforward, supporting sustained melodic writing until another big crescendo introduces the scherzo. Cellos and basses chug away to keep the quick regular pulse of this primarily 6/8 movement, while insistent figures appear throughout the different orchestral sections, a mosaic of timbres. The Trio section smoothes things out somewhat, but the forward motion continues lively. The scherzo returns verbatim, but truncated, and there follows a clear return to the Adagio, with its heartbeat-like oscillations in the second violins. When this fades away, a quietly wonderful little episode of repeated pitches, beginning in the flutes and working its way through the winds, prepares the sudden arrival of the final section, Allegro vivace. That repeated-note figure reappears judiciously in a relaxation toward the end of this exuberant movement, which ebbs and flows in density and is punctuated liberally with big chords, an orchestra reveling in rich, sonorous life.

Robert Kirzinger