Gunther Schuller (b.1925)

Dreamscape (2012)

I. Scherzo umoristico e curioso
II. Nocturne
III. Birth – Evolution – Culmination

Along with founder Serge Koussevitzky, composer Aaron Copland, and conductor Leonard Bernstein, Gunther Schuller is one of the most prominent figures in the history of Tanglewood—hence the Tanglewood Music Center’s commission of his new orchestra work Dreamscape. Schuller’s association with the festival began in 1963, when he was invited by recently appointed BSO Music Director Erich Leinsdorf to join the composition faculty of the Berkshire Music Center. Schuller was one of four curators for that summer’s Fromm Concerts of contemporary music, along with Copland, Lukas Foss, and Iannis Xenakis, and was appointed Supervisor of Contemporary Music Activities. In 1964, to give Copland a rest, he was also Acting Head of the Composition Department. In 1966 he became Director of the Composition Department, a title he held, with a couple of one-year breaks, until 1984. He was also the overall Director of the Berkshire Music Center from 1975 until 1984, and has participated in the festival as a faculty member and conductor on several occasions since, most recently as co-director of the 2010 Festival of Contemporary Music with John Harbison and Oliver Knussen.

A resident of the Boston area for nearly fifty years, Schuller was born in New York, the son of a New York Philharmonic violinist. He was a phenomenal and precocious horn player, joining the Cincinnati Symphony as principal horn at age seventeen. By that time he was also an accomplished, self-taught composer; at eighteen he was soloist in his own horn concerto with the orchestra. Returning to New York, he joined the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra in 1945, a position he retained until 1959, when he stopped playing horn regularly in order to concentrate on composition. Meanwhile, he also became part of the city’s progressive jazz scene, playing with Miles Davis and Gil Evans. In the later 1950s—parallel with producing orchestral scores for the New York Philharmonic (Spectra), the Minneapolis Symphony (Seven Studies on Themes of Paul Klee) and other orchestras—he collaborated with the Modern Jazz Quartet and John Lewis and coined the phrase “Third Stream,” a melding of mainstream jazz and modern classical music that expanded the perspectives of both of its parent styles and has influenced generations of musicians.

In addition to Tanglewood, Schuller’s educational activities included a ten-year stint as president of the New England Conservatory in Boston; during his tenure there he was the first to introduce jazz into the curriculum of a major conservatory, and nearly single-handedly lit the fuse of the ragtime revival in the early 1970s. He has also been a music publisher, a record-label producer, and author; his Early Jazz and The Swing Era are significant entries to the written history of jazz. Last fall the 650 page first volume of his autobiography, Gunther Schuller: A Life in Pursuit of Music and Beauty, was published by the University of Rochester Press. (This volume takes the reader up to the early 1960s.) He has been, and remains in a more modest capacity at age 87, an important conductor, not only of his own works but of the whole range of the Western classical repertoire. As a composer, he won the Pulitzer Prize for his 1993 Louisville Orchestra work Of Reminiscences and Reflections.

Although Gunther Schuller has left few, if any, genres of concert and dramatic music untouched, his most comfortable medium is doubtless the mutable, complex entity that is the symphonic orchestra. The composer has thought of most of his larger orchestral works as “symphonies”—although only one of his works is designated as such—frequently casting his pieces in traditional symphony-like, multi-movement forms. In speaking of his recent Boston Symphony Orchestra 125th Anniversary Commission Where the Word Ends, the composer said “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.” His new three-movement work, Dreamscape, a Tanglewood 75th anniversary commission, is brief but nonetheless has a symphonic trajectory and breadth. Schuller’s orchestration is characteristically detailed, nuanced, and, in places, lush, the sections of the orchestra working organically to create shimmering sonic textures and its three contrasting moods. This intricate piece—as the composer relates below—was the result of a remarkable mental process, the subconscious result perhaps of an accretion of eighty years of a life of musical immersion. Always busy with multiple projects, Schuller delayed starting work on his Tanglewood commission until the beginning of this year, when it came to a boil on January 14.

The composer’s own note on the piece is below.

—Robert Kirzinger
Dreamscape was commissioned by the Tanglewood Music Center for Tanglewood’s 75th anniversary celebration, to be performed by the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra. I was offered a very generous instrumentation (woodwinds and brass in fours, six percussionists, two harps, and a sizable string section). The one specific requirement was that the piece should be no longer than ten or eleven minutes.

P.S. I now must reveal that virtually the entire work—yes, the entire work—was presented to me in a dream, not just little bits of it but ranging from its overall form and conception to an amazing amount of specific detail. Even more astonishing to me was that my dream forced me to write/compose some things that I had never done before and would in all likelihood never do on my own, so to speak, without my dream. These were particular rhythmic/technical/structural matters as well as for me never previously attempted unusual multi-polyphonic layerings.

The dream also determined that there shall be three movements, and one of these shall be humorous (à la Ives’s “take-offs,” “cartoons”); thus the Scherzo Umoristico e Curioso. By contrast, another movement would have to be dark and somber, i.e., Nocturne. For the third movement it decided that it should deal in some way with the concept of evolution; it called it Genesis.

Even more startling was the amount of detail the dream gave me, utilizing all the tools of our musical craft (pitches, rhythms, dynamics, specific harmonic and melodic decisions, etc.).

We all know that dreams vanish instantly after we’ve awakened. And I had learned from previous musical dream experiences that if you want to retain some of what you dreamt you had better get out of bed right away, and start writing down as quickly as possible as much as you can recapture. Alas, in most previous dream experiences it was very little, too short. But this time I was able to write down, in both verbal and musical notation and all kinds of short cuts and abbreviations a whole ten minutes of vivid precise information—even as I could feel other parts of the dream disappearing.

It was, as I say above, virtually the whole piece. All I had to do now was to flesh out and finalize all that immense amount of detail. So, what you will hear tonight is what the dream composed for me, what it made me compose.

—Gunther Schuller