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Groundbreaking program for young classical composers celebrates 15th anniversary

California Symphony's Young American Composer-in-Residence program marks milestone with first-ever concerto collaboration

“Just like practicing an instrument, one needs to practice writing for orchestras in order to get better at it,” **2001 Masterprize winner Pierre Jalbert** said upon completing a three-year residency with the California Symphony's ground-breaking Young American Composer-in-Residence (YACR) program, founded by Barry Jekowsky. “As a direct result of my involvement with Barry and the California Symphony, I have received performances from the London Symphony and the Budapest Symphony in Hungary. The first work I wrote under the YACR program, *In Aeternam*, won the BBC Masterprize. Last year, I was able to write my largest work to date, *Symphonia Sacra*, a 27-minute symphony. For a young composer to have the opportunity to hear such a lengthy work performed by an orchestra is a rarity these days. All of this has been a direct result of my residency with the YACR program.”

Adds **2001-2002 Rome Prize winner Kevin Puts**: “I can only say that I would not have the career I have were it not for the opportunity the YACR program gave me. The hard thing about embarking on an ‘orchestral’ career is that no one will commission you unless they are convinced you can navigate the challenges of writing for this amazing instrument. And the only way to convince someone is to play a recording – and usually only a really high-quality one works. The California Symphony produced three such archival recordings for me, and they continue to be a personal source of pride. Barry Jekowsky and the fine players in the orchestra clearly take this program very seriously. They play these brand new works by young composers with the same passion and commitment they bring to Brahms or Mahler. This is a unique and wonderful place to be for a young composer. I know of no program in the world that even comes close. Every time an orchestra programs a work of mine or commissions a new one, I feel very

fortunate and I always remind myself that without the California Symphony I would not be living the composer's life I dreamed of.”

It was not surprising that Juilliard-trained music director Barry Jekowsky, a recipient of the Leopold Stokowski Conducting Prize, would be concerned about where the next generation of American classical composers would come from. Profoundly influenced by his close association with such legendary composers as Leonard Bernstein and Jacob Druckman, Jekowsky has included at least one American composition on every program he has conducted for the last 20 years – including at the California Symphony, which he founded in 1986, and the National Symphony in Washington DC, where he served as the Associate Conductor for four years.

Jekowsky had a vision of a program that would fill the gap between formal training and the reality of writing for an actual orchestra. The result: the groundbreaking **California Symphony Young American Composer-in-Residence (YACR) program**, founded in 1991 – which nurtures the development of new American classical works through three-year residencies for emerging composers to hone their craft, using a professional orchestra as their laboratory.

The program has been so successful that YACR alumni have gone on to win many of the world's top honors and competitions – including **two of the three BBC International Masterprizes** awarded to date (**Jalbert** and **Christopher Theofanidis**), and **four Rome Prizes**, (**Kamran Ince**, **Puts**, **Jalbert** and **Theofanidis**). Along with the latest alumni, **Kevin Beavers**, their careers have continued to flourish with either major commissions and/or residencies, putting them at the forefront of contemporary contributors to the American symphonic repertoire.

As significant, CSO's Young American Composer-in-Residence program has made possible the creation of **21 new works by American composers** – an unparalleled achievement for a regional orchestra with an annual budget of less than \$2 million.

The only hands-on training ground of its kind, the YACR program provides resident composers with three world premieres, up to four weeks of annual on-site residency with the California Symphony, audio recordings of reading rehearsals with each commission that gives them enough time for revisions before a work's public debut; direct interaction and feedback from both Jekowsky and members of the orchestra; and a permanent recording of each premiere performance for use by the composers to secure future commissions and positions, among other benefits. “We consider it a model for how an orchestra should work with young composers to develop their talents, business acumen and music,” says Jekowsky.

“My involvement with the California Symphony was literally the defining opportunity in my career,” says **2003 Masterprize winner Christopher Theofanidis**, California Symphony’s 1994-1996 YACR. “A composer spends up to nine or ten years in a conservatory or music school learning their craft, and in that entire time, they’re lucky to have one piece on an orchestra reading session, much less an actual performance. That reading session will probably only last a total of thirty to forty minutes – and that is the extent of the composer’s hands-on experience with the orchestra. This leaves precious little room for error and does not encourage much experimentation and invention.

“Another reason why this residency has been so decisive is that in addition to these incredibly beautiful recordings that I have, which I can trace to having led to almost every other orchestral opportunity since, Maestro Jekowsky takes it upon himself to promote and perform your works outside the California Symphony in his guest conducting positions,” Theofanidis adds. “The year after my residency ended, he programmed an unprecedented two works (one new commissioned piece) for the National Symphony in Washington, D.C., just eight months apart. He also commissioned three works from me since then for the California Symphony! As you can see, this is a program with very long range goals and will cultivate a generation of composers, filling so many of the gaps that exist out there for us.”

To celebrate YACR’s 15th anniversary, Jekowsky has set another precedent by commissioning the first known symphonic work created through a collaboration of composers. **The historic piece, called the *Young American Composers Concerto for Orchestra*, will premiere at the California Symphony’s season finale concerts on May 6 and 8, 2007, in the San Francisco Bay Area.** The concerto consists of four movements – each one emphasizing a different section of the orchestra – composed exclusively by YACR alumni Pierre Jalbert (*Music of Air and Fire*; percussion), Kevin Beaver (*Tipsy*; woodwinds), Kevin Puts (*Furioso*; strings), and Christopher Theofanidis (*Hymn to Music*; brass).

“It’s a very exciting project. One of a kind,” says Jekowsky, whose only direction to the collaborators was: “I told everyone, the orchestra is yours – however you wish to use it. I did not ask any of them to write for a particular section of the orchestra, because each of them would be spectacular in any role that they took.” Says **Kevin Beavers**, the 2003-2005 YACR: “There’s something very appealing about the interdependence of it in that the success of this piece depends upon each of us making equal and worthy contributions that will find serendipitous balance. I certainly had all the faith and trust in my colleagues to believe this will happen in an amazing way.”

Of his contribution to the concerto, Kevin Puts explains: “The piece is only a small token of thanks for the incredible opportunity I had when Barry asked me to be a Young American

Composer-in-Residence. I truly believe I owe the career I have as an orchestral composer to Barry's early belief in me, at a time when he had little to go on (I think I had only written one orchestra piece)! My deepest thanks go to Barry, the amazing musicians in the orchestra, the administration, and the many generous supporters who make the California Symphony one of the greatest cultural assets I know."

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