



# Predictably Unpredictable

**F**rom large-scale works for the opera house and concert hall to intimate violin solos, John Harbison has created an abundant catalogue of music that engages in an extraordinary dialogue between past and present. His compositions are typically atypical, as he continually seeks out fresh angles through which to reconsider the traditional forms, models, and styles that inspire him. Whether his references are Henry Purcell, J.S. Bach, Stravinsky, or the idioms of jazz, the result never comes across as a facile eclecticism. Rather, these are threads of a rigorously crafted language he has made into his own.

In an interview nearly three decades ago, the composer remarked that, when judging the shape a piece will take, “the feeling I’m always most suspicious about is that I’ve been there before.” That’s an instinct that obviously continues to guide him as he turns 80.

Daniel Stepner, who has played much of Harbison’s string music—as a soloist and as the former first violinist of the Lydian String Quartet, with whom he recorded the composer’s first four quartets—recalls that when he first encountered that language, he immediately noticed “a composer’s sensibility that really ‘heard’ what he was composing, rather than artificially constructing it. And yet there was also a palpable, rigorous structural element” as well as “a lyrical quality to his melodies, but often with a bittersweet, and sometimes even a bitter edge—never ingratiating or maudlin.”

Over his career, Harbison has earned attention for high-profile commissions like the millennial *The Great Gatsby*, which the Metropolitan Opera premiered on his

birthday in 1999, as well as numerous concertos and six symphonies. He received the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 1987 for his miniature oratorio *The Flight into Egypt*, in which the composer set out to depict what he calls “the darker side of Christmas.”

Yet alongside his achievements working with voices and symphony orchestras, chamber music for strings plays a central role in Harbison’s oeuvre.

**V**iolinist Rose Mary Harbison (née Pederson), to whom he has long been married, has obviously inspired his writing for her instrument. One of his earliest orchestral pieces is the Violin Concerto he wrote for his wife between 1978 and 1980.

“I’m never quite happy with what I manage to do in the world of instrumental concertos,” Harbison says, confessing that “they are unusually hard for me to write”—even though he’s managed to compose such other exemplars for the string family as concertos for viola, cello, bass viol, and a violin-cello double concerto. In any case, the Violin Concerto already shows him redrawing the outlines of a familiar three-movement format, leading from a sense of threat in the opening fanfare to “a paean to American country fiddling.”

Although Harbison is a highly regarded jazz pianist—jazz was a significant part of his musical upbringing—he also plays viola, which he took up in high school as part of a reading quartet. One of his earliest compositions for strings was

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*By Thomas May*

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commissioned for the Emersons); the harmonically complex, chanted vision in the *Turd* (1993, for the Lydian); the image of the first violin and cello as protagonists in “an instinctive relationship, like encounters between operatic characters” in the *Fourth*, which was, curiously, inspired by the Mozart string quintets during a stay in Umbria (2002, premiered by the Orion Quartet); and the *Fifth Quartet* (2011), made of ten brief movements and written to mark the centenary of the Pro Arte Quartet.

Harbison says he specifically wanted to pay homage to the magnetism of such legendary quartet players as Rudolf Kolisch (a mentor to Rose Mary Harbison).

Still another path is taken by the *Sixth String Quartet* (2016), which was commissioned by a consortium comprising the Lark, Ariel, and Telegraph quartets together with the Tanglewood Music Center. Harbison observes that he became interested in “going back to the prominence of the first violin”—precisely what composers after Haydn have tended to shy away from. He thus arrived at the notion of a “concertante quartet” with a distinctly prominent role for the leader: “At first, from a distance, then closer but still not joining, the first violinist stays physically, psychologically, and temperamentally distant from the string trio, which plays in a relaxed, rural style.”

Lark Quartet cellist Caroline Stinson, who says she has played Harbison’s music for the

Rose Mary and John Harbison

actually a solo viola sonata written while he was still a student in 1961. The adagio movement was first published in *Strings* magazine in 1990 (for a look at the music, visit [Strings-Magazine.com](http://Strings-Magazine.com)).

As a young couple, the Harbisons formed a string quartet in which, the composer recalls in a phone interview, they played “an unusual mix” of classic 20th-century quartets, early music, and “pieces by friends of ours.” As a violist, those early experiences made him familiar with the quartet literature “from inside.” He adds: “My performer side comes out quite often in terms of a certain approach to writing for strings.” In 1989 they together founded the ongoing Token Creek Chamber Music Festival at their summer retreat in Madison, Wisconsin.

One project Harbison set himself in the early days of the quartet he formed with Rose Mary was to write his first essay in the medium, which formed part of their repertoire for some years. But he waited until

the mid-1980s to compose his official First String Quartet, a commission for the Cleveland Quartet.

It is intensely compressed piece, lasting under a quarter-hour, contains not a single wasted note (think Copland Piano Variations). In his commentary on the score, Harbison describes attempting to convey an uninterrupted quartet “mood,” one that “seems to me to contain elements of disillusion, meditative transport, and the kind of many-colored conversation which makes the quartet medium so precious to composers.”

Five more numbered quartets have followed, each of which finds Harbison characteristically rethinking fundamental assumptions about what a string quartet should be. “I try to make them as different as I can,” the composer says matter-of-factly.

Indeed, they could hardly be more different. Consider the expansive fantasy inspired by early-music forms in the *Second* (1987,

past dozen years, was struck by how the Sixth Quartet “breaks apart this whole idea of how the quartet developed from a showcase for first violin to being about completely equal voicing. But for John to go backward historically comes from a personal place. He was examining how we connect to the world around us. During a serious illness, for example, you are apart from the world, but the world goes on without you. You see it happening, but are separated from it by your experience.”

Stinson understands the Sixth as a poignantly musical manifestation of this experience of apartness, beginning with the first violin actually playing off stage and producing “very different music from the string trio onstage—through the course of that first movement, she makes her way through three different physical stations to the first-violin seat and then sits down with the group in the other three movements.”

**T**his strategy of reconsidering earlier moments from musical history—despite the later “evolution” of such genres as the string quartet in the hands of Beethoven and his followers—is also a Harbison trait. Although trained in serial procedures as a student, Stravinsky (and Stravinskian backward glances) was a significant liberating counter-model from early on. Harbison points to his ongoing, lifelong preoccupation with the music of J.S. Bach as an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

“From high school, I got involved in spending a lot of time studying the Bach cantatas”—a pattern he has continued through his association with Emmanuel Music in Boston. (A longtime member of the faculty at MIT and Tanglewood, the New Jersey-born Harbison has for many decades been closely associated with Boston’s music scene.) Indeed, the Bach cantatas served as a kind of bible while he was working on his First Quartet. “Just last summer at Tanglewood, we closely studied Cantata 109. The part writing of its amazing tenor aria [“Wie zweifelhaftig ist mein Hoffen”] has haunted me for years. To me, that is an ideal string-quartet texture.”

Bach likewise figures significantly in a recent project commissioned for Jennifer Koh as part of her Bach and Beyond series linking the solo Sonatas and Partitas with newly written counterpart works. *For Violin*

*Alone* (2014)—the title comes from the literal classification of Bach’s scores (*per violino solo*)—is a substantial response to the partita form, reimagined through the lens of American dances. Koh has found that *For Violin Alone* makes an ideal “partita bridge” between Bach’s First and Third Sonatas when she programs the piece, because “there is always an exchange between the two.”

The violinist sees a parallel between what Harbison does in referencing these older structures and Bach’s adaptation of the past. “The way he takes the structure of what has been established and breaks out of that mold feels similar to me to what Bach does with forms that existed before him. He takes an older form and transforms it into something that is completely contemporary” yet still contains structures from the source.

Koh first got to know Harbison when she played at the Marlboro Music Festival at 16. “I performed some of his pieces while I was in school and remember how supportive he was. He sensed that I was a kind of wild child who wanted to break out of the mold.” Harbison has since also composed a brief solo-violin piece for Koh, *Painting the Floors Blue* (2015). “He writes incredibly well for the violin. And he knows me as a musician. These pieces feel quite personalized to me.”

Jennifer Stinson also emphasizes how fulfilling it is to work with Harbison. “He really is one of the most interesting and compelling composers to play for. For example, the notations in his music are very sparse, since he doesn’t use a ton of dynamics or expressive markings. It leaves so much instinctual room to do what you want to do. Take the rhythms he writes that clearly show his jazz influence but that he doesn’t want you to play in a swung, easy manner that makes them sound ‘jazzy.’”

Stinson adds: “He’s also one of the few composers who can pull off being funny in music. You can find a tremendous amount of humor, of playing little pranks—like Haydn—where he sets up expectations then changes them. He can maintain a sense of humor even when a piece is seriously conceived, like the Sixth Quartet.”

Daniel Stepner finds Harbison’s string writing to be “savvy and idiomatic, without ever being facile or formulaic.” He also points to another aspect of his enduring jazz influences: “One senses a constant improviser behind the strict, even austere structures, and choices

made that are musically cogent and given the test of time in the compositional process.”

In the composer’s own assessment: “The jazz heritage always plays a role. My harmonic ideas almost all derive from being a jazz improviser. I don’t try to suppress that when I’m working on pieces for non-jazz players and instrumentations.”

**I**n view of the unpredictability of Harbison’s approach to a new challenge, it will be intriguing to see how this lifetime of abiding influences will play out in his continuing work. Already he says he’s “done” with symphonies. “I think I’ve written all in that medium I want to.” With a curious postscript, however: October saw the world premiere of a symphonic piece with “obligato organ” titled *What Do We Make of Bach?* (which is accompanied by a short book with the same title). Harbison observes that he thought of the piece, a joint commission by the Minnesota Orchestra and Seattle Symphony, “as freely representing musical types found in Bach, reimagined in our still new century.”

Instead, Harbison finds himself attracted to string music above all. While he indicates he may have written his full of string quartets as well, he does envision a string quintet (with two violas). In part as preparation, he finds himself belatedly drawn to a close study of the Beethoven quartets. “Maybe that’s why this summer I’ve been going through every Beethoven quartet. I know these pieces in a certain way and can pretty much remember them. But when I look closely at the score, I find a great deal I need to think about.”

Also on the agenda is a first Sonata for Viola and Piano, which would complement his two violin sonatas and, as it happens, draw a long arc back to his long-ago student Sonata for Solo Viola.

From Harbison’s perspective, the interest shown by multiple groups in playing his string music is deeply gratifying: “You get to know the piece itself as you get different people who take a shot at it in different ways. I think a lot about new quartets I’ve been lucky to work with. The Kolisch Quartet has always been a model for me of a way of playing the classics with incredible personality, and I think we’re seeing this in some of the young quartets pursuing this model again. We’re in an age of great flourishing of young quartets with strong and forceful personalities.” n