

THE NEW YORKER

Story Time

by Alex Ross

The New Yorker

April 28, 2014

Zankel Hall, the coolly futuristic space beneath the main auditorium of Carnegie Hall, opened a decade ago, amid what turned out to be a golden age of adventurous programming at the Carnegie complex. John Adams oversaw a crazy-quilt festival; far-seeing composers like Frederic Rzewski and Meredith Monk shared space with Youssou N'Dour and Ustad Vilayat Khan; John Cage and Morton Feldman, musical leaders of the heroic mid-century generation that also produced Abstract Expressionism, were celebrated more than five decades after their first meeting, which took place in the Carnegie lobby, as both men fled a performance of Rachmaninoff's "Symphonic Dances."



These days, Carnegie follows a more conservative line: Rachmaninoff takes precedence over Cage and Feldman. But Zankel remains a welcoming space for wayward artists, and this month it will host "Collected Stories," a six-concert series curated by the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer David Lang, who occupies the Richard and Barbara Debs Composer's Chair at Carnegie. Lang explores the various ways in which music suggests a narrative: each program is tagged with a topic ("hero," "spirit," "love/loss," "travel," "(post)folk," "memoir"), and yet each presents a sharp internal contrast, with seemingly disparate styles juxtaposed. The tone is set by the first event, at which Benjamin Bagby's bardic recitation of "Beowulf" will give way to the barbaric yawps of Harry Partch, who found an epic breadth in nineteen-thirties hobo culture.

In later concerts, audiences will hear "Passio," Arvo Pärt's impassive meditation on the Crucifixion of Christ; a spell of Tuvan throat-singing; folk-tinged pieces by Julia Wolfe, Nico Muhly, and Donnacha Dennehy; and, in a detour back into the Romantic mainstream, Liszt's sprawling pianistic travelogue "Années de Pèlerinage." Such groups as Alarm Will Sound, Ensemble Signal, and the early-music collective TENET participate; Louis Lortie, in a three-hour marathon, confronts the Liszt. The final concert features another collision of apparent opposites. First, the actor Paul Lazar and the percussionist Steven Schick will present, in a simultaneous melee, Cage's "Indeterminacy" and "27'10.554"; then, the masterly young violinist Augustin Hadelich will give the world première of Lang's "Mystery Sonatas," which revise and

extend the idiosyncratic virtuoso technique of the Baroque composer and violinist Heinrich Biber.

In an introductory text, Lang writes, “We often listen to music as if it has a tale to tell, teasing a narrative out of all the tunes and harmonies and changes.” Inspired programs elicit narratives not only from the works themselves but also from the ghostly conversations that spring up between them. When Cage made his music of chance, he knew that the listener couldn’t help searching for hidden intentions, even when coins are flipped to determine what happens next. While Lang’s festival makes no use of indeterminacy (except as required by Cage), it still leaves much to chance, because no two listeners will walk away from such a varied feast having perceived the same tale. It is a good model for programming throughout the season: let’s stop telling the same stories.