



The composer speaks: Joseph Waters on 'Surf'

By James Chute

Wednesday, May 2, 2012



Composer Joseph Waters has a mission, and that's to make classical music as vibrant, exciting and accessible as the best pop music. A Yale graduate and now professor at SDSU, Waters grew up immersed in rock music, and sees no reason why he should have to deny an important part of himself when he writes his own compositions. His newest work, "Surf," will be premiered by Orchestra Nova May 11 (at the Coronado Performing Arts Center), May 12 (Irwin M. Jacobs Qualcomm Hall, Sorrento Valley) and May 14 (MCASD's Sherwood Auditorium).

Here are Waters' thoughts about his new piece:

The ocean and surfing are deeply embedded in San Diego culture. Surfing transcends age, class and education. Go to any of the beaches from dawn to dusk and there they are — sitting on their boards between sets, waiting for the chance to negotiate the moment with tons of water squeezed up into a majestic hurling fist. It's thrilling, dangerous, deeply engaging and transformative.

So when I started talking with Maestro Jung-Ho Pak 3 years ago about a commission to create a work about Southern California, the place and the community — surfing had to be center.

(No I don't surf beyond occasional boogie boarding — I'm too much of an intellectual nerd and that much intense physical engagement frankly scares me — but I am fascinated by the practice.)

It's important for me to compose honest, sincere music that connects with the music that is produced spontaneously by our culture. I hate the term "pop" music because for many it has pejorative undertones — implying that it is intrinsically superficial, lacking in depth or subtlety. The reality is that the body of music with wide appeal (i.e. "pop") is diverse — from forgettable ditties to sublime masterpieces. I feel that when a tune reaches iconic status — when it enters our lexicon of discourse — then it is giving voice to something that resonates strongly with us, something that speaks to and for us, reveals who we are without pretense.

Like much of my recent work, "Surf" has one foot in classical and the other in rock. Doing a rock piece for orchestra can be an extremely cheesy affair — destroying the rawness of rock & the nuance of classical and leaving one with a saccharine hangover. But my underlying intention was to create a work that draws from folk influences and infuses them with additional layers, in the tradition of Mahler. It took a lot of work but I am proud of this piece — and to get it right I recomposed it over 230 times, until it finally passed muster with the conductor.

But what flavor of rock would be right for this? In the post WWII, pre-hippie days, surfing had music associated with it, think Dick Dale's "Miserlou," the Surfaris "Wipeout," the Chantay's "Pipeline" or the Beach Boys "Surfin' USA." This was music that I had experienced as a middle-schooler playing keyboard in rock bands far from the ocean in Madison, Wisconsin.

I remembered something real, vivid and beautifully naive about that music — something rebellious, freewheeling and reckless, a sense of wild abandon, a joyfulness and exuberance, a celebration of life — that correlated with my adult observations and so I spent hours revisiting that body of work to see if I might find there a conduit through which my new classical work might connect with the vernacular.

The result is "Surf," my wild ride for orchestra and two soloists, featuring violinist Lindsay Deutsch, and my bandmate Todd Rewoldt in the SWARMIUS ensemble.

Great music is not essentially about harmonic sophistication, but about the chords it strikes within. I'm hoping I can strike a few good ones with "Surf".

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