

Lisa Bielawa

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Note

Premiere: December 2006-April 2009
Duration: 4'-6' each
Instrumentation: solo instruments

Over the course of my three-year residency with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (2006-2009), I composed 15 short solo pieces expressly for individual members of the orchestra. These “Synopsises” served several functions: they enhanced my familiarity with the players themselves; they provided compositional material for the larger pieces I was writing over these three years (*Chance Encounter*, *Double Violin Concerto*, and the concerto for orchestra *In medias res*); and they generated a set of virtuoso solo pieces for a broad range of instruments, in the spirit of Berio’s “Sequenzas.”

Ernest Hemingway penned a famous six-word story (“For sale, baby shoes: never used.”) of which he was very proud. In honor of Hemingway – master of the diminutive form – I gave each of these diminutive pieces a six-word subtitle.

Synopsis #1: It’s Over (But It Was Fun) – 5 min.

for Sarah Bob, solo piano

Some adventures are not meant to last. This piece surges forward joyfully, clunkily, like a jerry-built go-kart, not designed for long-distance travel. Its polymetric rhythms and melodies eventually showed up in the final minutes of *In medias res*.

Synopsis #2: In the Eye of the Beholder – 4 min.

for Aaron Trant, unpitched percussion

In the Eye of the Beholder is the result of a conversation Aaron and I had regarding various composers’ ideas about unpitched percussion, and the different schools of thought about the beautiful and the ugly in percussive sound. It is one of the more open-scored of the synopsises, since Aaron is a wonderfully skilled improviser and composer himself. Its rhythmic canons ended up in the first movement of the *Double Violin Concerto*.

Synopsis #3: I Think We Should Tell Her – 4 min.

for Sarah Brady, solo flute

There are all kinds of things one might need to tell her. But the urgency, rather than the content, is paramount in this piece. There’s always a time when we realize, in our discussions with ourselves, that something simply needs to be said. But when there’s so much pressure to tell someone something, isn’t that when we have the most trouble blurting it out? Maybe when she hears this piece she will finally know. This piece provided material for the flute solo in *Chance Encounter*.

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Synopsis #4: I'm Not That Kind of Lawyer – 5 min.

for Tony D'Amico, solo double bass

Tony professes a distinct dislike and mistrust of lawyers. I would allow that some diplomacy is in order – it depends on what kind of lawyer you are, no? In any case, a lawyer I met once did in fact say “I’m not that kind of lawyer” to me. I thought Tony and I could explore what that means, on the double bass of course. One compositional technique I must admit I have always admired in lawyers is the way they sometimes just remain silent and let others talk themselves into a corner, their words echoing in the dry, unforgiving room. Silence can be deadly. Material from this synopsis was combined with material from *Synopsis #9* in the first movement of *In medias res*.

Synopsis #5: He Figures Out What Clouds Mean – 4 min.

for Terry Everson, solo trumpet

Terry’s playing has so many colors and characters - so many of them lyrical and, by standard expectations, un-trumpet-like - that it reminds me of the inexhaustible variety of cloud forms – big fluffy ones, long thin ones, pinkish transparent ones, threatening grey ones. All floating overhead like a strange but noble message from the gods. If any instrument can figure out what clouds mean, it’s the trumpet. This synopsis provided harmonic material for the “Drama/Self-Pity” section of *Chance Encounter*.

Synopsis #6: Why Did You Lie to Me? – 6 min.

for Rafael Popper-Keizer

Rafi is a passionate player with the kind of singing cello tone that reminds you to yearn. Yearning is a question that may or may not be rhetorical: Do I really want to know why you lied to me? Am I expecting a number of logical explanations? Am I willing to hear your answer? What if it’s not true? What other things might you have lied about? Am I all alone here, now that I can’t believe you? I remember a time, before you lied. Things made sense back then; now there is just this yearning.

Parts of this lyrical little piece found their way into all three of the larger works: the Prologue of *Chance Encounter*, the last movement of the *Double Violin Concerto*, and the cello section solo in the first movement of *In medias res*.

Synopsis #7: Where’s the Guy with the Directions? – 4 min.

for Charles Dimmick, solo violin

This piece is directly connected to *Chance Encounter*, which uses speech fragments I overheard in public spaces. In fact, its subtitle is one of these overheard fragments, and the material appears in the violin solo of the larger work. One of the things I discovered in the eavesdropping process is that most people are rather lost most of the time, in one way or another. I, on the other hand, get asked for directions even in foreign countries (What – am I wearing a sign or something?). There’s a kind of joyful aimlessness about people in public spaces, on their cell phones, trying to figure out where they’re going. To an objective observer, it feels like people are in a big hurry to go nowhere in particular.

Synopsis #8: Most Rumors About Him Are True – 4 min.

for Rachel Braude, solo piccolo

It is well-known that rumors about him are many, and so Rachel Braude and I are delighted to offer the results of our sociological research into the matter, in the form of this little piece. Rachel and I collected findings, compared them to other findings, tested them against empirical evidence and applied various algorithms of emotional logic. Although our general finding is summarized in the title, the specifics of our hair-splitting research are encoded in the piece itself. Although they were not involved in the experimental process itself, I’d like to acknowledge my Radcliffe Institute colleagues in the sciences for their influence in the area of methodology. *Synopsis #8* could be considered an early sketch for sections of the second and third movements of the *Double Violin Concerto*.

Synopsis #9: I Don’t Even Play the Bassoon – 5 min.

for Kate Vincent, solo viola

Without revealing too much of my private life, I can confess that *Synopsis #9: I Don’t Even Play the*

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Bassoon is directly related to a recurring anxiety dream I have. While I was writing this viola synopsis for Kate Vincent, I realized that the uncanny sense of the absurd that seemed to have taken over my mood had partly to do with the fact that we were in rehearsals for Michael Gandolfi's Bassoon Concerto, and I was having a *déjà-vu*. For some strange reason, Kate understood this and has been able to empathize. This has been helpful. Material from this piece combines with material from *Synopsis #4* in the first movement of *In medias res*.

Synopsis #10: I Know This Room So Well – 4 min.

for Jennifer Slowik, solo English horn

While working on this synopsis, I found myself looking back to an opera I never finished around 15 years ago. I was working with the gifted playwright Erik Ehn, and we completed a lyrical aria for our eponymous heroine Vireo, a 14-year-old girl visionary whose adolescence spans several centuries. She eventually gets thrown in jail as a witch, where she sings an aria about how happy and comfortable she is there. Erik gives her these words: "If in the dark a chair has moved, I can move around it. I know the room so well." In this little English horn piece I dip back into that aria, and into those feelings of comfort and familiarity we all have in our various jails, virtual and real.

Synopsis #11: It Takes One To Know One – 5 min.

for Bob Schulz, drumset and spoken voice

The 'libretto' for *Chance Encounter* was organized into categorical aria-songs – *Nostalgia, Drama/Self-pity, Aimlessness*, etc. The texts for *Synopsis #11* are an exploration into one of the categories I didn't use in the larger piece: *Xenophobia/Mistrust/Malevolence*. I decided that this category had just been waiting for the right combination of personality, instrument and voice – enter Bob. This little piece opens up to a high degree of improvisation at some points, to leave some room for Bob's unique dramatic angle on these important subjects.

The musical material of *Synopsis #11* appears in an expansive percussion section cadenza at the end of *In medias res*.

Synopsis #12: What I Did Over Summer Vacation – 5 min.

For Michael Norsworthy, solo clarinet

This Synopsis leaves some room for the performer to make structural decisions about what we hear. I guess I figured – hey, it's his vacation. He knows better than I do what he actually did. So I gave him a bunch of 'events' – musical interjections – from which he can choose, depending on what vacation activities he is remembering. Apparently there are a few things he did more than once on his vacation.

Synopsis #13: Thy Sting is Not So Sharp – 4 min.

for Gabby Diaz, solo violin

This subtitle is taken from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Gabby (by nature a happy person) and I share a particular affinity for the aching, yearning side of artistic expression. I wanted to write her something that she could really ache through, so I turned to Shakespeare, who really knows how to grab your soul. One thing I learned from him – a useful piece of wisdom that can help an artist in any medium! – is that in all tragedy there is an element of comedy, and vice versa. *As You Like It* is, I suppose, technically a comedy, but it is rife with achings, yearnings, poignancies. In it the character Amiens, one of the Lords of the Duke, is asked to offer a song to comfort and entertain, but the words he sings takes us to one of Shakespeare's darkest depictions of the human soul:

Blow, blow thou winter wind,

Thou art not so unkind

As man's ingratitude:

Thy tooth is not so keen,

Because thou art not seen,

Although thy breath be rude.

Heigh-ho, sing heigh-ho, unto the green holly.

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Most friendship is faining, most loving mere folly:
Then, heigh-ho, the holly,
This life is most jolly.

Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky
That dost not bite so nigh
 As benefits forgot:
Though thou the waters warp,
Thy Sting is Not So Sharp
 As friend rememb' red not.
Heigh-ho, sing, &c.

Synopsis #14: No, No, No – Put That Down – 4 min.
for Hans Bohn, solo trombone

My first meeting with trombonist Hans Bohn consisted of a series of comical conversational snapshots of his life as father of three in a seemingly exuberantly-spirited household. I left the meeting thinking that Hans must be a cool dad. So I wrote *Synopsis #14: No, No, No – Put That Down* as a vehicle for him to share his dad-ness with us. The piece ended up providing the high-energy orchestral tutti at the very end of *In medias res*.

Synopses #15: Two Days After You Left I... - 6 min.
for Ina Zdorovetchi, solo harp

Finally, because all endings are also beginnings, I found myself musing on the future when I wrote Ina's *Synopses #15: Two Days After You Left I...* Although this title is actually a quote from a poignant letter that was written to me, I felt it captured the feeling of being on the brink of an unknown future, after a beautiful shared time of togetherness. Finishing the Synopsis cycle was a bittersweet accomplishment, since it represented the close of an entire compositional chapter of my life. This last synopsis inhabits *In medias res* throughout.

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