

Putting it all together

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

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When a group has a trombonist, a French hornist and a pianist, finding good music to play can be tough.

“We always work with composers who are trailblazers,” says Some Assembly Required’s hornist Justin Stanley. “They’re always doing things that nobody has done before. We commission works, and we arrange things for our instruments. And we always bring on guest artists.”

All of those things will happen during SAR’s next concerts, Feb. 9 in Salem at Old Town Hall, a presentation of Salem Classical, and on Feb. 11 at All Newton Music School.

The programs include a world premiere, “Salt Veins,” commissioned from composer Tyler Kline. Arranged works by Franz Schreker, Astor Piazzolla and Jennifer Higdon. And a fluid work, allowing for a flexible variety of instruments, by Frederic Rzewski.

Stanley is joined by trombonist Justin Croushore and pianist Cholong Park as the core members of SAR. For these performances, the trio is joined by violinist Emilie Campanelli, clarinetist Wolcott Humphrey, and cellist Minjin Chung.

The shifting instrumentation and far-ranging repertory makes for adventurous concerts. Like Kline’s “Salt Veins,” which gets its first performances this weekend.

“Tyler’s music can get a little out there,” Stanley says. “We talked about what we wanted out of the piece, but mainly we told him not to take away all of our lip strength for the rest of the concert”—something you wouldn’t normally think about, unless you had a trombonist and a French hornist on the program.

“The rhythm is what’s modern about the piece,” Stanley says of “Salt Veins.” “The texture invokes the ocean waves, and spray.”

Stanley was instrumental in bringing Schreker's "Der Wind" to this program. Schreker, a contemporary of Schoenberg, uses all five players (not including Croushore) in "Der Wind." The piece plays as one continuous movement, but shifts through multiple moods—often characterized as a "montage."

"You almost never hear a piece with this instrumentation," Stanley says. "Actually, we're not even certain if it was written for these instruments. The original—it was composed for a dance group—was lost, and this version came down to us. It's really beautiful, one of the only chamber works he wrote."

Croushore does get his moment—and you can't say that often about trombonists—with Rzewski's "Moonrise with Memories."

"Even in our group," Croushore says, "my part is usually collaborative."

But in "Moonrise with Memories" the trombone—actually the bass trombone for this piece—is far from collaborative. Rzewski conceived the work as a kind of opposite: instead of the melody being up high, and the lower instruments supporting it, in "Moonrise" the melody sits in the bass trombone, and the upper instruments support.

And the instrumentation can change. Rzewski leaves it up to the performers, asking only that six instruments in the soprano range support the trombone. And in the middle movement, a spoken word section—meant for untrained voices, reciting Langston Hughes' short poem "World War II"—interrupts the playing.

If that doesn't sound strange enough, Rzewski based the work on Colin Turnbull's book about Pygmy culture, "The Forest People," even though he knew little about Pygmy music. He just imagined it.

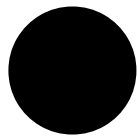
"The piece has a bit of an unrefined character, and we try to bring that out in performance," Croushore says. "You can hear this blues element, in the rhythmic uncertainty. In the beginning, the accompanying parts are high pitched, and the tempo is quick, while the bass trombone is slow and dramatic."

"The middle movement is definitely the climax, with the spoken part. I'm trying to get everyone in the group to speak, but some of them are shyer than others."

It doesn't sound like anyone could be shy in a program like this, so we'll have to see.

Some Assembly Required performs music of Rzewski, Schreker, Piazzolla, Higdon and a world premiere by Tyler Kline in Salem on Friday, Feb. 9, at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, Feb. 11, at 2:00 p.m. For tickets (\$10) and information in Salem visit www.salemclassical.com or call 781-696-0532. For the Newton program (free) visit www.someassemblyrequiredensemble.com.

Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow @PowersKeith; email to keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com



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Entertainment & Life

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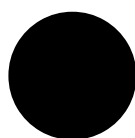
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