

For The BSO, Composer Jörg Widmann's 'Partita' Offers Connection And Surprise

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By [Keith Powers](#) 



It's a long-distance affair — stretching across centuries. Music tributes are common; Jörg Widmann's "Partita," getting its American premiere in Symphony Hall with the [Boston Symphony Orchestra](#) this week, runs deeper.

"It's a declaration of love — for the music of Mendelssohn. And of Bach," says the German composer, calling from Amsterdam. "The whole concept of 'Partita' is to link the music of those two."



Composer Jörg Widmann. (Courtesy Marco Borggreve)

It shows up mysteriously, in the details. A horn figure that opens the third movement — all five movements begin with winds or horns — suggests one of these tunes that you're sure you know, but just cannot place. That was intentional.

"You've heard this — but maybe not? It's an early clarinet sonata, by

Mendelssohn,” Widmann says. “But it’s an illusion. I didn’t want it to be obvious. It’s completely new music, except that the piano part is now in the celeste. I’m much more interested in what the modern thing is about than what the reference is.”

The “modern thing,” as Widmann puts it, is quite different. “An orchestra of this size is probably five times as big as Bach’s orchestra,” he says, referring to the instrumental forces that he calls for in “Partita.” Widmann nearly doubles the stringed instruments that Bach might have used, with extensive percussion, celeste and harpsichord as well.

If you’re expecting a noise fest, think again. “Partita” has a large orchestra onstage, but for blend and color. By the time any huge crescendo gets reached — and one does, in the finale of the first movement, in the fourth movement Sarabande, and at the conclusion — listeners have been lulled into thinking they were hearing chamber music.

Here’s audio of the entire world premiere of “Partita,” from a March 8 concert at the Gewandhaus, with Andris Nelsons conducting:

“It’s a study in instrumentation, of being close, or distant, in several ways,” Widmann says. “You feel far away in time, and then it comes closer.”

“Partita” offers another surprise — its duration. At 35 minutes, it’s twice as long as most contemporary commissions. “It’s true: Most new pieces are 15 to 20 minutes — so that it doesn’t hurt anyone too much,” he says, tongue firmly in his cheek. “For me, a piece searches for its own form. If it needs to be longer or shorter, it becomes longer or shorter. I was happy with the ideas. It kept growing and growing, and I couldn’t stop it even if I tried.”

The concert also includes an appearance by Yo-Yo Ma, making it one of the most sought-after tickets on the subscription season. Ma performs Strauss’ “Don Quixote,” seen here in a 2004 performance with the Philadelphia Orchestra at Carnegie Hall:



American audiences may not be that familiar with Widmann, although his piano concerto “Trauermarsch” was performed by the BSO and soloist Yefim Bronfman [last season](#). But in his home in Berlin, it’s likely he gets stopped in the streets by strangers.

The 44-year-old composer has five string quartets, premiered by groups like the Arditti and Hagen quartets. Orchestral premieres have been led by Pierre Boulez, Kent Nagano and Daniel Barenboim. His oratorio “ARCHE” was performed at the opening of Hamburg’s Elbphilharmonie last year. Here’s a taste of his dramatic “Hunt” quartet — part theater, part film, part music — realized by the Ragazze Quartet:



Widmann’s presence in Boston is an extension of his presence in Leipzig. He is composer-in-residence (Gewandhauskomponist) there for this 275th anniversary season, which features not only “Partita,” but an appearance in one of his other musical roles — as a clarinetist, performing the Elliot Carter concerto.

The relationship makes Widmann a modern representative of the Gewandhaus/Boston Symphony connection. As part of [the exchange](#), Gewandhaus performs works with strong BSO ties — Copland, Bernstein, Stravinsky, Carter — and the BSO in turn will highlight pieces by Schumann, Mendelssohn (who once conducted Gewandhaus) and Bach. Widmann — along with American composer Sean Shepherd — will update that history.

His history with the Gewandhaus maestro — you’ve heard of Andris Nelsons — is the strongest part of his relationship between the two orchestras.

“Both cities can be happy to have Andris Nelsons,” he says. “His presence and enthusiasm is so clear. It’s not about him. It’s about the music. It doesn’t make any difference to him — classical, romantic or modern — he makes it music. The audience can believe him. You know what he’s thinking — you may like it or not like it — but it’s honest.”

The [Boston Symphony Orchestra](#), with Andris Nelsons conducting, performs Jörg Widmann’s “Partita” March 29 through April 3 at Symphony Hall.

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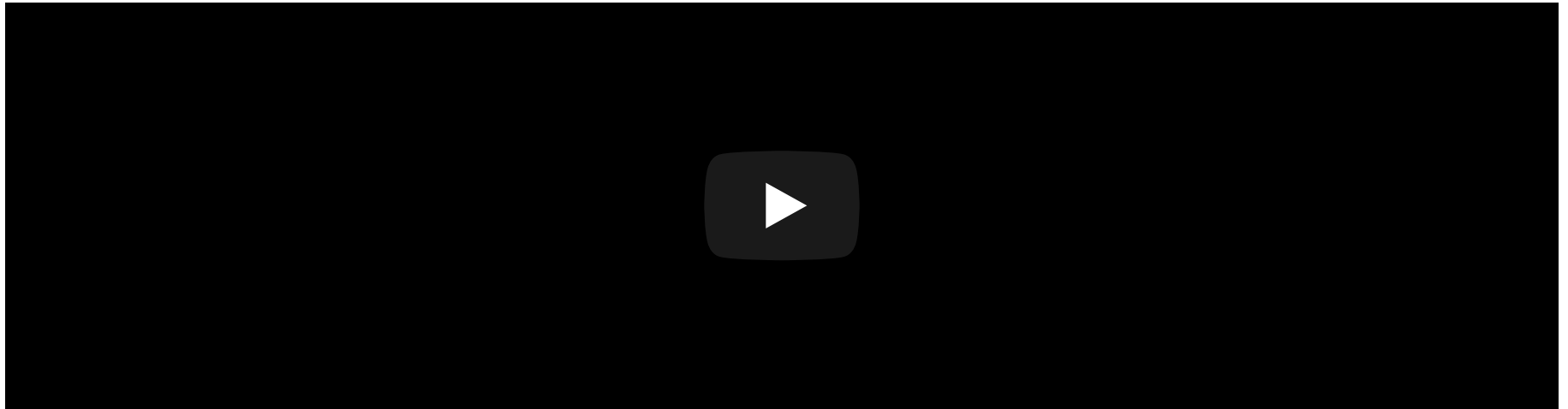
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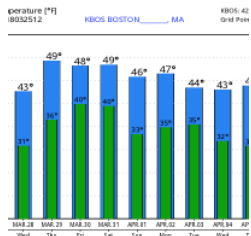
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