



Entertainment

Houston Symphony principal trombonist Allen Barnhill is the soloist for *Solstice* for trombone and orchestra.

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A trombonist takes the spotlight

The Houston Symphony's Allen Barnhill to be front and center as soloist for a new work

By CHARLES WARD

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Sports teams have their bench warmers and political parties their backbenchers.

But the four low-brass players who wait patiently for their turns in Houston Symphony performances don't just fill space along a side wall of the Jones Hall orchestra shell.

In many great symphonic works, the trombones and tuba provide the sonic meat and muscle — the foundation of sound that allows trumpets to blaze at the top or violins to soar above it.

Solo turns are short and rare. Their work is more that of the football linemen who push the pile forward or the representatives whose votes are crucial to passing legislation.

So it will be unusual to have principal trombonist Allen Barnhill out front and center this weekend to premiere *Solstice* for trombone and orchestra by Cindy McTee of the University of North Texas in Denton.

Barnhill disavows too much nervousness about the upcoming performances.

But the ambience is very different from sitting among colleagues.

"The feeling you get when 2,000 people are suddenly focusing their attention on you is tangible, electric, and it can be scary. I think that's where stage fright comes from," he says.

"But with practice it can be enjoyable, rewarding and even addicting. I think many performing artists are addicted to that — being front and center to the performance.

"So the way I have to prepare is to imagine those people and the situation — or to practice after I've done push-ups or run around the block and my pulse is elevated."

Solstice will be the first work Barnhill has premiered. The performances also will be his first spotlight solos since 1996, when he played a concerto by Paul Creston.

RESOURCES

Houston Symphony premieres trombone concerto

When: 8 p.m. Thursday and Saturday, 2:30 p.m. Sunday

Where: Jones Hall, 615 Louisiana

Tickets: \$26-\$103; 713-224-7575

Also soloing on the program will be opera star and Rice University professor Susanne Mentzer in Gustav Mahler's *Rückert Lieder*. Houston Symphony music director Hans Graf will lead symphonies of Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Mozart.

Solstice is the latest piece commissioned by the Houston Symphony for its principal musicians. Violinists have scads of concertos to play. Piccolo players and bassoonists — and trombonists — do not.

During several months last year, e-mails flowed constantly as McTee sorted out her ideas about the work. She would send small nuggets of music in written form or as electronic files for Barnhill to evaluate. The process continued until she had completed the work. Then she came to Houston in October to hear him play the piece and make final adjustments.

The first music McTee finished was the atmospheric middle movement, which Barnhill liked. But, he told McTee, "I wanted some primal grunts, some high, rapid-fire Morse-code licks, and some glissandi. I needed to exploit the trombone in a way that would also somewhat satisfy the male beast that is in me — or most trombone players.

"She took those ideas and then crafted them in a way that was totally different from what I had in mind," he says. "She made really jazzy, fun, dazzling, fast music in the outer movements.

"It is trombonistic, but it is very difficult. It's not like anything I've played before. It sounds kind of improvisatory, like a virtuosic jazz player getting around on the horn."

McTee, 54 and a native of Tacoma, Wash., writes music that an audience can like. After the symphony played her *Circuits* (1990) at the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion in 2000, I noted that the piece was a "charging, churning celebration of the musical and cultural energy of modern-day America. ... (It) aptly illustrated the electric, almost convulsive nature of American society near the start of the 21st century."

After listening to her sonically primitive "virtual" version of *Solstice*, I think it's more winning music. The two outer movements are somewhat like *Circuits*, McTee says. The middle movement is an example of "making grand use of simple things," Barnhill says.

In *Solstice*, McTee has sought to find a musical equivalent to shadow and light, or the more general theme of reconciling opposites. She expresses that by exploring the tensions between dissonance and consonance.

That is particularly noticeable in the middle movement, where McTee uses chords that sound like they're straight out of American jazz, even if she had something different in mind.

"I really like that sound," Barnhill says. "To me it's human, bluesy, American. It's a certain manifestation of the solo of jazz greats, done in a different way."

When McTee finished *Solstice*, she created two "virtual" versions of the complete piece, a practice that about half of working composers now use, she said. One was without the solo so Barnhill could practice with a simulated orchestra.

Barnhill also asked McTee to create versions at three-quarter and seven-eighth speeds so he could get the notes better in his fingers and mind, just as football players do "reps" to get the timing of plays right.

Barnhill, 52, was born in North Carolina, attended Eastman School of Music and came to the Houston Symphony in 1977. He became principal trombonist in 1982.

He's a lanky, good-natured person with an easy laugh. He's very much a family man, once

coaching a Little League team for his son Joshua, now 12, and frequently taking the family, including daughter Julia, 18, and wife Kathy to area lakes for water-skiing.

His upcoming star turn aside, fundamentally, Barnhill says, he's happy with his niche along the side wall.

"I don't want to pooh-pooh this event, but I'm content in the back row."

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