



There is an image of Christopher Rouse that, once envisioned, is hard to forget. A former pupil, now an important composer in his own right, went to Rouse's home for a lesson. He had to knock hard, as Rouse was composing with rock music blasting and a large bowl of M&Ms at hand.

Rouse is not a frivolous composer, as even the briefest hearing of these three deeply serious orchestral works in this collection makes obvious. He is a master of the orchestra. His frame of musical reference is sophisticated. But he also knows, and his art dramatizes, the world he lives in.

The three Rouse scores here are not programmatic, but they are loaded. They are about something, although it is not always easy to put one's finger on exactly what it is they are about. The frightening *Gorgon* and the unanswerable *Iscariot* have provocative titles. The elegiac *Trombone Concerto* comes with a loaded musical quotation, the "credo" theme from Leonard Bernstein's *Kaddish* Symphony.

Any attempt to categorize Rouse leads to contradictions. His career, so far, divides in two. The early works are exceedingly loud, fast and raucous. The more recent works are exceeding slow and anguished. He is gregarious, friendly, self-deprecating, funny. His music, especially the two symphonies and several concertos of the past decade, often dwell on death. He loves popular culture: his students know him, in part, for his breakthrough college classes in the history of rock; his friends know not to call during his favorite soap opera; his kids know that Disneyland is a magic word. But he also identifies with some of the most deeply tragic and mystical art of our century. His music would not be the way it is without Led Zeppelin, perhaps, but it also would not be the way it is without the examples of Mahler, Shostakovich and Górecki.

Like most American composers, Rouse's background is varied. Born in 1949 in Baltimore, he studied composition at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and Cornell University with composers ranging from Karel Husa to George Crumb. Like most American kids of his generation, he grew up on rock and comic books, bopped along to Carmina Burana, and was transfixed by the obsessive hypnotic rhythms of the '60s. Those qualities find their way into *Gorgon*, which was commissioned by the Rochester Philharmonic in 1984. It comes near the end of his phase of writing controversial music that exploded with the volume and drive of rock. Rouse, who says he loved

mythology in his youth for its stories, characters and the moral points at the end, describes *Gorgon* as "a work of exorcistic rage, an attempt in music to heal by facing that which seems unfaceable." In Greek myth, the Gorgons were winged women with snakes for hair, so hideous that anyone who looked upon them would turn into stone. Most famous was Medusa, who was mortal and killed by Perseus, but just as horrid were her Gorgon sisters Stheno and Euryale.

Written in three sections (one for each Gorgon) separated by brief percussion "Perseus Spells" (Perseus, of course, was Medusa's killer) *Gorgon* is an attempt to take Rouse's attraction towards fast, loud and wild music to its terrifying ultimate. Like a roller-coaster ride or violent popular films, it is for thrill-seekers; it asks us to confront our fears, which, in a concert hall, may well be of loud and violent music and the rebelliousness that it represents. But the effect is of cathartic exhilaration, the whopping excitement that is natural after any too-fast ride, along with, more importantly, the self-awareness that can follow any dance with danger.

The slow, somber, lightly-scored *Iscariot* (written in 1989, premiered by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and conducted by and dedicated to John Adams) could be heard as Gorgon's antithesis - reflective, unsure, a little dazed. Without climax or resolution, it

seems to pose an unanswerable question and, in fact, takes its sound and shape from Charles Ives' *Unanswered Question* - here a series of hymn-like string strophes interrupted by antistrophes that feature the celesta and other instruments.

Rouse is cryptic about *Iscariot*, which he calls his most autobiographical piece in the sense that it was written "to purge certain emotional memories from my system." There is no religious significance to the title, other than the fact that it is a symbol of betrayal. Numerology is employed in the derivation of the material, but Rouse won't say what it is. In the final strophe, the strings coalesce to quote Bach's chorale, *Es ist genug* ("It is enough"), which Berg had also quoted in his valedictory Violin Concerto, and which has come to symbolize suffering that has gone so far that redemption simply must be waiting in the wings.

Commissioned by the New York Philharmonic for its 150th anniversary, Rouse's *Trombone Concerto* had its premiere in 1992, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music the following year. It is dedicated to the memory of Leonard Bernstein, who died in 1990 when Rouse began working on the piece, as did Aaron Copland later the same year. Although a purely abstract work, Rouse explains that the loss of these composers gives the work its elegiac quality. "My *Trombone Concerto* is not meant primarily

as a display vehicle, nor is it intended to be the sort of lightweight work often associated with concerti for wind instruments," he writes in the score. "Rather, it was my hope to compose a work of substance, one which would allow the solo trombonist to participate in a statement of seriousness and, I hope, meaning."

The concerto is in three unbroken movements and begins in the profoundest depths.

When the trombone emerges (under rumblings of timpani, bass drum and tamtam) it does so putting notes together practically one at time. As if finding one's voice again out of the depths of grief, it rises into more comfortable range and phrases begin to connect into eloquent lyricism. Strings console and lift the soloist to song, but as the line rises higher it ultimately shatters, falling back down to its forlorn beginning. A stuttering cadenza breaks the mood leading to a resolute scherzo. The trombone hints at what will later prove to be a quote from Bernstein's Third Symphony, *Kaddish*. Rouse describes this theme, the "credo" theme of the symphony, as representing, for him, the quality in both Bernstein's music and, in Mahler's before him, of always striving for an elusive God. "I never sensed that Bernstein's faith was completely there," Rouse explains. "But he always seemed to be desperately trying to believe, trying to force himself to believe, as though by saying 'I believe' strongly enough, he could make it so." The climax of the scherzo is a Mahlerian eruption that again consigns the trombone to a dysfunctional cadenza.

The third movement begins with great lyrical solemnity in comforting hymn-like music in the strings, supported by bassoon and quiet timpani. In a series of variations in the manner of a funeral march, the trombone appears to have found an assured lyricism, as a solo trumpet memorializes Copland. But again the trombone becomes agitated, and gradually the full orchestra joins in, leading to the last great climax. From its shards (drum rolls and a trailing descent in the horn choir) the soloist rises a last time, calmly intoning the beautiful Bernstein "Kaddish." At last at peace, the trombone sinks back to the hole of the low notes of its beginning, as the timpani rustle once more.

-Mark Swed-

Christopher Rouse was born February 15, 1949 in Baltimore, Maryland. He is a composer of mostly orchestral and chamber works that have been performed throughout the world. He began composing around age seven and studied drumkit and guitar as a child. He studied composition with Richard Hoffmann at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music from 1967-71, where he earned his BMus. He had private studies with [George Crumb](#) in Philadelphia from 1971-73 and studied composition with [Karel Husa](#) at Cornell University from 1973-77 and there earned his MFA and DMA. His honors include two

fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1976, 1980), a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation (1980), the League of Composers/ISCM Prize (1981, for *The Infernal Machine*), the Kennedy Center Friedheim Award (1988, for *Symphony No. 1*), and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1990). He has also received the Pulitzer Prize (1993, for *Trombone Concerto*) the Academy Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1993) and the Koussevitzky Foundation Award (1996). More recently, he received the Grammy Award for Best Contemporary Composition (2002, for the recording of *Concert de Gaudi*) and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2002). In addition, he served as composer-in-residence to the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra from 1986-89 and at Tanglewood in 1997, the Helsinki Biennale in 1997 and the Pacific Music Festival in Sapporo in 1998. He has served as composer-in-residence at the Aspen Music Festival since 1999 and was featured as Composer of the Year by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in 2004-05. Mr. Rouse taught composition as a fellow at the University of Michigan from 1978-81 and at the Eastman School of Music from 1981-2002. He taught composition part-time at the Juilliard School of Music from 1997-2002 and has taught there full-time since 2002.

Marin Alsop recently made history with her appointment as Music Director of the Baltimore Symphony beginning in 2007/8. She will be the first woman to head a major

American orchestra, which mirrors her ongoing success in the U.K. as Principal Conductor of the [Bournemouth Symphony](#) since 2002. She has also just been named a 2005 MacArthur Fellow, the first conductor ever to receive this most prestigious American award. Ms. Alsop is a regular guest conductor with the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, Chicago Symphony and Los Angeles Philharmonic. She is also one of the few conductors to appear every season with both the London Symphony and the London Philharmonic orchestras and has appeared as a guest conductor with many other distinguished orchestras worldwide, including the Orchestre de Paris, Bavarian Radio Symphony, Pittsburgh Symphony, Tokyo Philharmonic. Her 2005-06 season includes debuts with the Royal Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Gurzenich Cologne, Tonhalle Zurich and the Boston Symphony. Ms. Alsop made her debut with the Opera Theater of St. Louis conducting John Adams' Nixon in China and conducted a fully staged production of Bernstein's CANDIDE with the New York Philharmonic in 2004, which was nominated for an Emmy Award in 2005. After a highly successful 12 year tenure as Music Director of the [Colorado Symphony](#) Ms. Alsop continues her association as Conductor Laureate; she also continues in her 14th season as Music Director of the highly acclaimed [Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music](#) in California. She has also held the position of Principal Guest Conductor of both the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and the City of London Sinfonia.

Joseph Alessi was appointed Principal Trombone of the New York Philharmonic in the spring of 1985. He began musical studies in his native California with his father, Joseph Alessi, Sr. As a high school student in San Rafael, California, and was a soloist with the San Francisco Symphony before continuing his musical training at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music. Prior to joining the Philharmonic, Mr. Alessi was second trombone of The Philadelphia Orchestra for four seasons, and principal trombone of L'Orchestre symphonique de Montreal for one season. In addition, he has performed as guest principal trombonist with the London Symphony Orchestra in Carnegie Hall led by Pierre Boulez. Mr. Alessi is an active soloist, recitalist, and chamber music performer. In April 1990 he made his solo debut with the New York Philharmonic, performing Creston's Fantasy for Trombone, and in 1992 premiered Christopher Rouse's Pulitzer Prize-winning Trombone Concerto with the Philharmonic, which commissioned the work for its 150th anniversary celebration. His most recent appearance with the Orchestra as soloist was in performances of James Pugh's Trombone Concerto in March of 2000. Mr. Alessi has been a guest soloist with the Lincoln Symphony, National Repertory Orchestra, Colorado Symphony Orchestra, Syracuse Symphony Orchestra, Virginia Symphony, Alabama Symphony Orchestra, Santa Barbara Symphony, South Dakota Symphony, New Japan Philharmonic, Seoul Philharmonic, Orchestra of Teatro Massimo

Bellini in Catania, Sicily, Mannheim National Theater Orchestra, National Symphony of Taiwan, Puerto Rico Symphony, and the Hague Philharmonic. In 2007 he will make his solo debuts with the Helsinki Philharmonic and the Hartford Symphony. Mr. Alessi has also participated in numerous festivals, including the Festivale Musica di Camera in Protogruaro, Italy; Cabrillo Music Festival; Swiss Brass Week; and Lieksa Brass Week in Finland. He was featured in the 1997 International Trombone Festival in Feldkirch, Austria, and the International Meeting of Brass Instruments in Lille, France. He is a founding member of the Summit Brass ensemble at the Rafael Mendez Brass Institute in Tempe, Arizona. In 2002 Mr. Alessi was awarded an International Trombone Association Award for his contributions to the world of trombone music and trombone playing.

Christopher Rouse

Colorado Symphony Orchestra
Marin Alsop, conductor
Joseph Alessi, trombone solo

TROMBONE CONCERTO

- 1. Movement I 11:07
- 2. Movement II 7:07
- 3. Movement III 11:35

GORGON

- 4. I. Stheno 5:37
- 5. Perseus Spell I 3:44
- 6. II. Euryale 4:58
- 7. Perseus Spell II 3:47
- 8. III. Medusa 5:13

- 9. ISCARIOT 14:18

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Trombone Concerto
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