

big part of the fun was watching the performers pull it off.”³ Heggie shares, “To me, everything I write is in service to a drama of some kind, whether it’s an internal, psychological drama or physical drama. It’s lyrical and theatrical.”⁴ In light of this theatrical imperative, and considering the limits of the audio recording, there is too little musical distinction between the two choirs, making it more difficult to hear the drama play out. All in all, the theatrical component is left too much to the imagination. And yet, in relying on one’s ears to convey the drama of the piece, listeners are inevitably placed in the position of Nora herself who (ostensibly) hears, but can’t see, the voices of the radio and the voices in her mind.

The album includes three other compositions for chorus and mezzo-soprano: The first is *Patterns*, a piece composed for alto soloist and girls’ choir, and written specifically for Frederica von Stade and the San Francisco Girl’s Chorus on a text by Amy Lowell. On this recording, the mezzo solo is sung by the glorious Susan Graham, whose capacity to evoke the pathos and longing of the poem is, in my opinion, unparalleled. “I Shall Not Live in Vain” was written for Renee Fleming in 1995 to a poem by Emily Dickinson and is performed poignantly here by Graham. Two arias from Heggie’s now canonized opera *Dead Man Walking* (2000) conclude the recording: “He Will Gather Us Around,” a spiritual number from the opera sung here first by Graham and then in a haunting 2002 choral arrangement, which highlights both Heggie’s gift for choral writing as well as the talents of the John Alexander Singers. His choral repertoire, sung and recorded beautifully on this disc, is Heggie at his best.

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Andrew Norman, *Play; Try*. Boston Modern Orchestra Project, conducted by Gil Rose. BMOP/sound 1040, 2014, CD.

Gil Rose and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP) offer an exciting recording of two pieces sweeping both new music and mainstream classical circles: Andrew Norman’s *Try* (2011), and *Play* (2013, unrevised edition). *Play* earned Norman the 2017 Grawemeyer Award, a prestigious prize from the University of Louisville typically awarded to older composers. Included with the CD are liner notes featuring profiles of Rose, BMOP, and Norman, as well as extensive commentary from both Norman and fellow University of Southern California alumnus Daniel Stephen Johnson. This dual commentary offers a sample of a common contradiction between fans’ perceptions of Norman’s work and his own descriptions. Norman typically second guesses his pieces, painting a picture of struggle

³ Timothy Mangan, “Heggie’s *The Radio Hour Works*,” *The Orange County Register*, 19 May 2014.

⁴ John Boyer, “Heggie’s Songs,” *American Record Guide* 63, no. 1 (January/February 2000), 108.

and revisions. In contrast, outsiders praise “his lovely and polished writing with sincere admiration,” to quote Johnson’s liner notes.¹ The notes supply useful perspectives to those looking for thoughtful commentary, especially in an educational setting. BMOP’s recording arm, BMOP/sound, has adopted this approach in many recordings, offering detailed prose about contemporary music at a time when such writing has declined in more traditional venues such as newspapers.

Gil Rose and the orchestra perform Norman’s music with verve and precision. The orchestra sounds crisp, expressive, and well rehearsed. Intonation—often a challenge in contemporary music as busy as these works—is generally very good. Furthermore, the performance is expressive: melodies have shape and direction. Attacks are precise, and even the busiest sections sparkle with clarity. Norman writes well for the orchestra, but it is all too easy to imagine a rendition of these pieces that lacks the energy heard here.

Norman’s and Johnson’s respective assessments of the music as both labored and pristine are accurate. Norman’s style, evident in earlier works such as *The Companion Guide to Rome* (2010), features sudden textural or melodic shifts, although the effect in *Try* and *Play* is even more exaggerated. Each piece feels at times disjunct, illustrating Norman’s interest in juxtaposing seemingly unrelated material in a manner he describes as akin to film editing or action in a video game. It is noisy music. At the same time, repeated listenings reveal thoughtful connections. Smaller sections develop motifs, and the movements of *Play* are connected by memorable recurring themes (a trumpet motif ending *Play*’s first movement and beginning the second, for example). Absent is the popular post-minimal style heard in music by composers such as Judd Greenstein, David Lang, or Norman’s former Yale classmate Chris Cerrone. The resulting music has been best described by musicologist William Robin as “a hyper-kinetic, post-Romantic style.”² *Try* and *Play* combine erratic gestures with a sense of thematic development, all using pitch material that teases tonality with near cadences and scalar patterns.

The first piece on the CD, *Try*, immediately establishes Norman’s style. *Try* is scored for chamber orchestra with two percussionists. In general, Norman employs subsections of the ensemble; the entire ensemble never plays a *tutti* melody. A three-note descending gesture in the piano is immediately interrupted by loud brass, string glissandi, percussion, and high woodwinds. According to Norman, the title is meant to describe this motivic fragmentation: “It does things over and over, trying them out in as many different ways as it can.” He continues, “after ten minutes of increasingly frantic trying, it finds one small, unlikely bit of musical material it likes enough to repeat and polish and hone until it finally (fingers crossed) gets it right.”³ That bit of material is a simple descending line in the piano, a gesture that surfaces occasionally throughout the piece, prior to the extended solo at the end. The descending line gradually transforms into a chord before the piece ends

¹ Daniel Stephen Johnson, liner notes to *Play*, Andrew Norman, BMOP/sound 1040, CD, 2014.

² William Robin, “Andrew Norman on Loving ‘Star Wars’ and Pushing Musical Boundaries,” *New York Times*, 25 November 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/arts/music/andrew-norman-on-loving-star-wars-and-pushing-musical-boundaries.html?_r=0.

³ Andrew Norman, “Music, Try,” <http://andrewnormanmusic.com/archives/196>.

quietly. Norman has suggested that the conclusion was intended to contrast with the brash endings commonly heard in new music designed to appeal to orchestras with ostensibly conservative audiences. Such pieces are designed to sell. They often end with large gestures, full orchestrations, and loud dynamics, as if intended to literally force the audience to its feet. *Try*, in contrast, offers a more meditative conclusion that Norman acknowledges may “lose some people. But to me that . . . is worth it. . . . [M]aybe we’ll leave it kind of more open-ended, and then too bad if the applause isn’t quite as loud, but whatever.”⁴

Like *Try*, *Play* explodes into the ears with dense textures. The percussion kicks off a series of rapid gestures: sustained tones a second apart in the winds, muted trumpets play against low brass, and string glissandi quickly succeed one another. The effect resembles opening a door onto a bright, busy world of constant motion, all of which seems equally important. This cluster of gestures repeats throughout the piece several times, cycling through various loud motifs and occasionally settling on unisons. Next, woodwinds play ascending lines that accompany a string melody, a moment reminiscent of both Claude Debussy and John Williams (the film composer is one of Norman’s acknowledged influences). The impact of other composers is also audible: John Adams-like repeated brass motifs, scalar patterns reminiscent of neoclassical Stravinsky, and motifs that seem to land on single notes *à la* Lutosławski’s earlier orchestral works all occur within the first three minutes. In some ways, Norman’s *Play* suggests the more conventional kind of new-music-for-large-orchestra tropes that *Try* avoids, particularly in its first movement. The piece doesn’t stop there, however, and that is what makes it especially interesting.

Play’s second movement, in contrast to the first, spends much more time on far fewer motifs, although material from the first movement occasionally interrupts the textures. This movement explores softer dynamics, thinner textures, and repeated patterns. The effect is relaxing, offering much needed contrast to the “hyperkinetic” energy of the first movement. Several themes return in the third movement, notably a violin solo that sounds almost like something from a Vivaldi concerto. With expanding orchestration and the return of the scalar patterns from earlier movements, the piece builds to a sudden shift in pitch, rising a half step. In a surprising turn, the piece ends quietly. The effect is riveting, and gives the impression of a mature thoughtfulness. With this subdued finale, Norman seems to deliver once again on his promises of more “open-ended” conclusions.

Play and *Try* have each received a great deal of attention as well as repeated performances by major orchestras including the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the New York Philharmonic. This recording provides a strong support for such lavish praise. One caveat: the audio-only versions of this music omit the visual gestures Norman enjoys weaving into his works. There is also a revised 2016 version of *Play* that has yet to be recorded. Nevertheless, the music sustains the listener’s attention and rewards repeated hearings.

John Pippen

⁴ Andrew Norman, interview by Maura Valenti, 4 January 2013, transcript.