Montage

Art, books, diverse creations

Jonathan Bailey Holland

A Composed Response

Jonathan Bailey Holland's meditations through music

by JENNIFER MCFARLAND FLINT

ONE MORNING in the spring of 2015, the composer Jonathan Bailey Holland, Ph.D. '00, was riding the bus to Boston's Berklee College of Music, where he's chair of composition, contemporary music, and core studies. He had recently been commissioned to write a new work for the Radius Ensemble, a local chamber group, and ideas for the piece tumbled through his mind. Also weighing heavily on him was the crescendo of news stories about police brutality against African Americans. Holland had challenged himself to watch the bystander and dash-cam videos of some of these events in their entirety. Bent over his phone, playing footage of Eric Garner's last moments on a Staten Island sidewalk, Holland eventually had to stop and look up. "The visceral quality of it...," he recalls. "It's difficult to take in."

With each repeat view and each new tragedy in the headlines, he felt increasingly entangled. "Simply because of who I am and what I look like, I could easily be on the other side of these stories," he continues. "Suddenly the music couldn't be about anything but that psychological space."

The resulting work, "Synchrony," explores the idea of duality, or two realities existing at once—for example, the Black Lives Matter movement taking shape during the country's first black presidency, when "the notion of a post-racial America was thrown around," says Holland. The score is written for violin, cello, oboe, bassoon, and piano—an unusual combination but beautiful in its symmetry, says Jennifer Montbach '95, Radius Ensemble's artistic di-

Photograph by Robert Torres

rector. "There are two stringed instruments and two double reeds. Plus, with the similar ranges of oboe and violin, cello and bassoon, you have two pairs of instruments that cover an entire timbral range, top to bottom. Piano is the anchor." The piece opens with the gentle tonal sounds of the double reeds, and the music builds almost ceremonially as the others join in. Throughout, Holland expresses duality through musical devices: call and response, repetition, dissonance, instrumentation, and so-called "extended techniques"—unconventional ways of using an instrument.

Holland decided to add documentary voices to underscore the idea of juxtaposition—of hope and despair, harmony and discord. About two minutes in, President Obama's voice intones over the music, "We, the people, still believe that every citizen deserves a basic measure of security and dignity." From there the score becomes fraught with tension, and Eric Garner is heard repeating "I can't breathe" through the chokehold of a New York City police officer. "There's a very specific rhythm to how he says it, so I had the musicians pick up on the rhythm, which they keep up even after the audio clip ends," Holland explains. The oboist and bassoonist remove their reeds and breathe into their instruments in that same pattern; the pianist reaches into the instrument to dampen the strings, hammering out the rhythm to produce a dull, percussive sound without pitch. These extended techniques create a sound that's both percussive and breathy, like the wheeze and punch patterns of a hospital respirator.

Then comes a second set of voices. First, actress Cicely Tyson is heard addressing the young women in the audience of the Black Girls Rock awards ceremony: "The moment anyone tries to demean or degrade you in any way, you have to know how great you are. No one is going to bother to put you down if you are not a threat to them." Her words are countered by audio from the dash-cam footage of the arrest of Sandra Bland. The instruments respond with gnashing sounds, and the piece ultimately closes in a decrescendo of dissonant whole notes. This unresolved conclusion represents Holland's view of the national conversation about race.

Reacting to the world around him in this way is one of the artist's responsibilities, he says, but it's also impossible for him *not* to. "Dream Elegy," a somber orchestral piece that he wrote around the same time as "Synchrony," came from a similar psychological space, sparked by the senseless deaths of Tamir Rice and Michael Brown. "I had to write [it] as a meditation," he says, "as a way of using my art to work through the weight of all of those events."

Holland, who grew up in Flint, Michigan, and earned his bachelor's at the Curtis Institute of Music and his Harvard doctorate in composition, didn't take this approach from the outset. Early in his career, he had hang-ups about "who I was supposed to be as a classical composer," he says. "I didn't want people to expect a certain kind of music because I'm a black composer, I wanted

OPEN BOOK

Robotic Healthcare

A former physician, now associate clinical professor of medicine at University of California, San Francisco, Victoria Sweet, G '73, is appalled by the depersonalization of healthcare in its technological, institutional manifestations. In *Slow Medicine: The Way to Healing* (Riverhead, $27), she recounts what transpired when her father suffered a grand mal seizure and was hospitalized—on the incorrect impression that it was his first such incident and that he might have suffered a stroke. From the introduction:

I'd known that healthcare was getting ever more bureaucratic; that doctors and nurses…were spending more and more of their time in front of a computer screen entering health-care data. I'd experienced it myself. But until that week, I had no idea how bad it had become. If I, as a physician, couldn't get appropriate care for a family member in a lovely community hospital with well-trained staff—who could?

What had happened to medicine and nursing? I asked myself.

To find out, I ordered up Father's electronic health records and went over his near-death experience.

The document was 812 pages long and took me four hours to read. It began not with the doctors' notes but with hundreds of pages of pharmacy orders; then hundreds of pages of nursing notes, which were simply boxes checked. Only the doctors' notes were narrative, and mostly they were cut-and-paste. No wonder no one could figure out what was really going on. Still, to be fair, although I found mistakes in the records, Father had, after all, gotten discharged….I had to admit, judging by those electronic health records, his stay in the hospital looked 100 percent quality-assured.

There was just something missing. And it was hard to put my finger on it.

Everything looked so good in the computer, and yet what Father had gotten was not Medicine but Healthcare—Medicine without a soul.

What do I mean by "soul"?

I mean what Father did not get.

Presence. Attention. Judgment.

Kindness.

Above all, responsibility. No one took responsibility for the story. The essence of Medicine is story—finding the right story.…Healthcare, on the other hand, deconstructs story into thousands of tiny pieces…for which no one is responsible.

A robot doctor could have cared for my father just as well.

ISTOCK

people to come to my music without any preconceived ideas about what the music was going to be." At some point, he stopped worrying about how to manage audience perceptions. Soon after this realization, he completed a 2003 commission for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, influenced by Motown, R&B, soul, and other popular music genres he'd always listened to. It was, he thinks, the first time he consciously decided to let that side of him come out clearly in his music. He wrote what felt true.

Today, Holland tries to convey the same message to his composition students: "If I'm not telling you who I am in a genuine way, I'm not sure why you'd want to listen to what I have to say," he reasons. Without that, he says, "Who cares what I'm writing?"

Sketch Artist

Colin Jost writes jokes for page, stage, and camera.

by OSET BABÜR

A WRITER'S STYLE isn't always neatly captured in a single piece of work, but with Colin Jost '04, his "Mocktails," a collection of cartoons scribbled on cocktail napkins, are especially telling. A JetBlue plane feels blue, lamenting that it misses its friends; a piece of jerk chicken rattles off some uncouth remarks. This brand of droll wordplay is Jost's bread and butter. It comes through in his stand-up performances ("I went to Party City the other day, and it was totally dead," he joked during a show in Boston this fall) as well as in his contributions to *The New Yorker*'s humor section, Shouts and Murmurs—"Oh, *droit moral*? It means 'droid morals.' Like it's such an obvious moral question that even a robot would know the answer."

Jost has been writing comedy since his first year with the Harvard Lampoon, and performing stand-up comedy for more than a decade. But transitioning between writing comedy and performing comedy isn't simple—and what's more, he says, writing for stage, screen, and print all require different techniques. "With stand-up, the rhythm really differs," he explains. "I'll try a sketch during a stand-up show, and it'll work on stage, and I'll think, 'Oh, this will be great to do on *SNL*,' and I'll try it at dress rehearsal and it will just not work at all. There's this special rhythm to being either at a club or theater."

When developing a sketch for *SNL*, Jost often starts by thinking of a voice, and then deciding which actor could most naturally embody it. He created the character Drunk Uncle, for example—meant to "sound like an uncle pretty much everyone has"—by working with cast member Bobby Moynihan. Drunk Uncle makes comments ranging from cringe-worthy to downright racist, almost always circling back to how America just isn't the country it used to be, While dreaming him up, Jost and Moynihan thought about the character's family, his pleasures, and his grievances, and slowly, his personality began to develop: sloppy, brash, old-fashioned.

This technique is key to creating strong SNL characters, but Jost has found that it actually hampers his ability to write the kind of humor that appears only on the page. Early in his career, he had been keen to contribute Shouts and Murmurs because the columns struck him as similar to what he'd done for the *Lampoon*. But after years of working on the show, he found it difficult to switch back to magazines. "If I had someone's voice in mind for a character that I was writing, other people didn't necessarily hear the same voice," he says.

These days, Jost is best known for co-anchoring *SNL*'s Weekend Update, a segment that parodies a traditional news desk. It's a big seat to fill: previous hosts have included Chevy

Colin Jost (left) with his co-host, Michael Che, at the Weekend Update desk for *Saturday Night Live*

Photograph by Will Heath/NBC/NBCU Photo Bank via Getty Images