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Where on Earth (or Elsewhere) Does It Come From? Considering Three Pieces of Truly Unearthly Music

By [David Patrick Stearns](#)

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That silly, corny scene in the 1938 movie musical *The Great Waltz* remains strangely captivating. In the black-and-white netherworlds of MGM, composer Johann Strauss is riding in a carriage through the Vienna woods, listening to shepherds pipe and birds sing. Instantaneously, those elements converge in his head; a smashing new waltz is born. The scene ends as Strauss and his girlfriend boisterously sing the completed waltz before the carriage ride has ended.

OK, that's the Hollywood version. We all know composing isn't that easy. But in looking to bird calls and other parts of the natural world for fresh ways of making music, composers time and again end up bringing in something much greater: a wild-card element that's arguably beyond their experience, or for that matter, beyond human experience. Does this arise from observation? Or does such music come from — shudder — someplace else?

Three recent instances — Charles Ives's unfinished *Universe Symphony* (completed by scholar Johnny Reinhard), German composer Thilo Thomas Krigar's attempts to find compositional parallels in DNA patterns, and John Adams's forthcoming opera, *Doctor Atomic* — make you wonder.

Most music has to have at least some conscious observation, the sort Strauss enjoyed in the Vienna woods. But how could Brooklynite Aaron Copland have simply observed America's heartland with a depth that allowed him to create a mode of musical expression that encapsulated it? When I once asked him where his inspiration came from, he grinned and said, "Heaven!" (I have to assume he was serious.)

Stravinsky, in definite seriousness, claimed to be the mere vehicle through which *The Rite of Spring* was written. No less than Leonard Bernstein believed Mahler unconsciously foresaw 20th-century horrors. I can agree, considering that Mahler's brutal Symphony No. 6 and black-on-black Symphony No. 7 were both written well before World War I — and during the happiest period of his life.

Among the current cases, Krigar, the DNA guy, is the most analytical. Inspired by this ultra-micro world, he chose percussion to represent the function of amino acids, he says, while synthesized proteins inspired longer musical lines. You'd think that such a rigorous-sounding system would leave little room for intuitive wild cards. But compositional templates, as arbitrary as they seem, present possibilities that composers wouldn't necessarily devise on their own. Paradoxically, extreme systemization can let in the chaos of the cosmos.

DNA in Concert
der Fluss der genetischen Information als „Sinfonie des Lebens“
Thilo Thomas Krigar mit den PYTHAGORAS STRINGS + Elektronik
Sa 28.5. (UA) + So. 29.5.2005 jeweils um 20.30 Uhr TESLA im Podewils'schen Palais

Krigar's music is engrossing, even entertaining, with diverse instruments busily and purposefully going about their business in a collage of melodic lines that defy conventional musical logic yet still, somehow, belong in the same sound-frame. Imagine Philip Glass fused with progressive jazz. The music doesn't seem consciously organized at all. It's like looking through a microscope and somehow hearing random cellular activity as well as seeing it. The music isn't commercially available, but the composer's activities can be monitored on the Web site www.dna-in-concert.de.

Intuitively speaking, the Ives *Universe Symphony* is far more strange. Ives attempted "to paint the creation, the mysterious beginnings of things," in this piece, which means there are none of his jokey quotations of popular songs. The music is uncompromisingly severe and was meant to be; scholar Reinhard swears he added no new notes to Ives's manuscripts. What I hear resembles what Ives couldn't have heard in the years he worked on the piece (ending in 1928): noise from outer space.



Such noise, which has been recorded in recent decades, is hardly sweet or rarefied. It's rough, nasty stuff, a lot of industrial droning, which is exactly what runs throughout Ives's symphony. Through purely instrumental means, Ives creates textures of sound that unfold gradually without any typical contour — no peaks or valleys, but with little explosions of percussion, long-held notes in micro-tonal harmonies — never resolving, sometimes pulsating, wafting away and reappearing. (The disc can be purchased at www.stereosociety.com.)



After that, Adams's new opera about the creation of the first atom bomb, *Doctor Atomic*, is a relief. The Ives symphony may never have an audience, but *Doctor Atomic*, which premieres October 1 in San Francisco, is considerably less remote, dealing mostly with the thoughts, feelings and lives of real-life scientists masterminding the bomb's development in the New Mexico desert.

Adams is an old hand at bringing inner life to historic characters, but he departs from his past operas in moments when the music goes particularly crazy (at least to judge from the rough, MIDI synthesizer version). In the final, 5 a.m. countdown to the first A-bomb test, Adams projects a sense of the world coming apart, of the heavens being torn open, with the violin section running hysterically up and down scales while a wordless chorus howls and screams from separate harmonic dimensions.

Clearly, Adams is playing with more than fire. Unlike many composers whose music becomes more civilized as they get older, Adams has more and more frisson, which may cost him some of his popularity. But by tapping into something far beyond himself, he assures his artistic immortality. Art built on observation may engage people for a while, but intuition ignites a chain reaction that stops only at the end of civilization.

Online extra: Listen to selections from *Doctor Atomic* and *Universe Symphony* at <http://go.philly.com/sounds>

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