**The Owen Hartford Retrospective Concert: A Report**

By Mark Davis and Robert A. Margo

A concert to honor the many contributions of Owen Hartford to the literature for plucked strings was held on Saturday, April 13, 2019, at the First Parish Milton Unitarian Universalist church, in Milton, Massachusetts. Six ensembles participated in the concert: Enigmatica – Ensemble Plectrophonic, led by Marilyn Mair; the Al Fresco Quartet; the Mair-(Charles) Moser-(Robert) Martel Trio; L’Esperance Mandolin Ensemble, led by Josh Bell; the Gloucester Hornpipe & Clog Society; the New American Mandolin Ensemble and the Providence Mandolin Orchestra (PMO), both led by Mark Davis. A long-time member of the PMO and its resident composer for many years, Hartford recently retired from the group. It seemed fitting to acknowledge the transition by organizing a retrospective concert of Hartford’s composition, which have been a mainstay of the PMO’s repertoire for many years and which have been performed by other groups in the United States, Australia, Europe, and Japan.

A native of California, Hartford studied violin and piano as a child, later taking up the mandolin. He was a member of the Berkeley (CA) Mandolin Ensemble for several years, when he met Mark Davis, who was visiting his cousin, Liz Lamsen, the director of the group. When Hartford moved permanently to Massachusetts in the early 1990s he contacted Davis and joined the PMO. A general appetite for composition whetted by his experience with the Berkeley group, along with Davis’s interest in fostering new compositions for mandolin ensemble led Hartford to viewing the PMO as his compositional “laboratory”, as he put it in remarks at the concert. Without question the relationship between Hartford and the PMO was mutually satisfactory. All told, Hartford has performed 21 works for mandolin ensemble, including a chamber opera (“The Frog Prince”), making him one of the most prolific American composers for mandolin ensemble over the past several decades.

While it was not possible to play Hartford’s entire catalog in a single concert, the program included a representative sample of his mandolin compositions as well as those for the popular folk group, the Gloucester Hornpipe & Clog Society, of which he was a founding member. One of the works on the program, “Carousel” (in two movements), was given its world premiere by the New American Mandolin Ensemble, whom Hartford had in mind when he wrote the piece. Two of the pieces – “Urban Sketches” and “Carousel” – were prize-winners in the “Concurso Internacional de Composicion para formaciones de Plectro Jose Fernadez Rosas” (International Plectrum Composition Competition ‘Jose Fernandez Rosas’) held in Logrono, Spain, in 2012 and 2014, respectively. “History of a Texas Wildflower” was a prizewinner in a composition contest held by the Austin Mandolin Orchestra, who premiered it at the Classical Mandolin Society of America’s Austin convention in 2015. The first and third movements of “Gretel Dreaming” were presented in their original form (voice and piano), and the second in an instrumental version for trio (two mandolins and guitar). Originally composed for mandolin orchestra, “Rondo Bachanal” was performed in a version for mandolin quartet (M1, M2, mandola, mandocello).

The full program was as follows:

Cornflakes 14 (1998)

Grooves #1 (2006)

Enigmatica—Ensemble Plectrophonic

Rondo Bachanal (1995, rev 2010)

Al Fresco Quartet

Gretel Dreaming Song Cycle (2007) with lyrics by Betsey Hartford Afternoon – Evening - Morning

Alice Goodwin-Brown, Soprano; Jonathan Roberts, Piano;

Mair-Moser-Martel Trio (movement #2 only)

Overture to “The Frog Prince” (2000)

Family Squabble (1995)

L’Esperance Mandolin Ensemble

Country Bicycle (1979)

Wistful Waltz (1982)

Jamaica Plain Rag (1981)

Gloucester Hornpipe & Clog Society

Carousel I - II\* (2014)

Urban Sketches\*\* (2012)

Circuits – Underground – Walkabout -Fast Lane

New American Mandolin Ensemble

History of a Texas Wildflower (2014)

Twinkle, Twinkle Little Samba (2002)

Latin Sketches (2005)

Providence Mandolin Orchestra

The audience was large and each group gave excellent, moving performances of the works they had prepared. The atmosphere was warm and festive during the concert and at the reception afterwards – all in all, a fitting tribute to Hartford.

For the benefit of other mandolin groups, the following table lists Hartford’s various compositions for mandolin ensemble. The required ensemble instruments are M1, M2, mandola, mandocello, classical guitar, and bass.[[1]](#footnote-1) Any additional instrumentation is listed in the table. Although Hartford had the mandola in C (tuned CGDA) in mind when he wrote the mandola parts, these can be played successfully on the mandola in G (tuned GDAE). There are YouTube performances of about half of the works (e.g. search “Owen Hartford Family Squabble”). “Rondo Bacchanal” and “Family Squabble” are recorded on the PMO’s CD “Song Without Words’ (1995). “Urban Sketches” is published by MundoPlectro (Spain) and can be ordered from the United States by sending an email to [info@mundoplectro.com](mailto:info@mundoplectro.com). All other works are unpublished; contact Owen Hartford ([hartfordo@earthlink.net](mailto:hartfordo@earthlink.net)) for information about obtaining scores and parts. All works are copyright.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Title | Composition Date | Number of Movements | Approximate Length (Minutes: Seconds) | Additional Instrumentation? | YouTube Video |
| Carousel I - II | 2014 | 2 | 8:00 | NA | Yes |
| Construction I | 2000 | 1 | 3:30 | NA | No |
| Cornflakes 14 | 1998 | 1 | 4:00 | NA | Yes |
| Elegy for Jeffrey | 2001 | 1 | 3:00 | Harmonica, M1b, M2b | No |
| Family Squabble | 1995 | 1 | 2:00 | NA | Yes |
| Fresh Cream | 2003 | 1 | 3:20 | Accordion or Harmonica solo | No |
| Frog Prince (mini-opera) | 2000 | NA | 30:00 | Accordion, voice | Yes |
| Overture to the Frog Prince | 2000 | 1 | 8:00 | Accordion | Yes |
| Gretel Dreaming | 2007 | 3 | 10:00 | Solo voice or violin | Yes |
| Grooves #1 | 2006 | 1 | 5:00 | NA | Yes |
| Grooves #2 | 2007 | 1 | 5:00 | NA | Yes |
| Grooves #3 | 2015 | 1 | 4:30 | NA | No |
| History of a Texas Wildflower | 2014 | 1 | 1:00 | NA | Yes |
| Latin Sketches | 2005 | 1 | 7:40 | NA | Yes |
| Neponset Valley Suite | 2011 | 3 | 10:00 | NA | Yes |
| Rondo Bachanal | 1995 (rev. 2010) | 1 | 3:20 | NA | Yes |
| Solace | 2012 | 1 | 5:00 | Solo mandolin | Yes |
| Sunday Headlines | 2013 | 5 | 9:30 | NA | Yes |
| Sunday Walk | 2008 | 1 | 3:00 | NA | No |
| Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Samba | 2002 | 1 | 3:00 | NA | Yes |
| Urban Sketches | 2012 | 4 | 7:45 | Guitar 2 | Yes |

NA: not applicable

1. The published version of “Urban Sketches” substitutes Guitar 2 for mandocello. A mandocello part can be obtained by writing to Owen Hartford at the email address in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)