

Christoph Schlüren: What are the main goals you are pursuing with this orchestra?

John-Edward Kelly: There are mainly two goals, both of which have arisen from my own personal experiences as a musician. The first has to do with my continuing observation that many truly substantial composers scarcely have an opportunity to hear their orchestral works performed at the highest artistic level. This is most often due to circumstances having nothing whatsoever to do with music, mostly that there happens to be a more famous horse on the field. Not *better*, also not *more interesting*, just more famous! For over 30 years I observed again and again that this has caused much impressive music to collect dust behind the apron of anonymity, and I wanted to do something about it. The second has to do with my great concern for the future of art music in general, and specifically contemporary art music. For a long time now, it seems as if the “contemporary music scene” has either snobbishly looked down upon “uneducated” listeners – “*we are so intelligent that normal people cannot possibly understand what we are doing*” – or tried to attract their interest with an over-simplified, primitive “modern pop music”. I find both approaches insulting to the listener, and I believe there is better solution. Those who love Beethoven and Schubert can also learn to love the genuine art music of our time, but they need a *bridge* to take the step from known to unknown musical worlds. The Arcos Orchestra wants to provide that bridge by performing not only contemporary music at the highest possible level, but also classical, historic works that help to open the ears of listeners of good will.

Christoph Schlüren: How do you create your programs?

John-Edward Kelly: There are two main considerations: (1) which interesting composers or works do we wish to perform, and (2) with which program composition can we best prepare the listener’s path to unknown musical languages. The answers are a little different for each concert, of course, but we have been very successful in creating programs that open the door to unknown music for listeners who – for whatever reasons – had previously rejected contemporary music. The most important thing is that the music springs from the heart of a composer and speaks to the heart of the musicians, so that it can be conveyed to the hearts of the listeners. Of course it is also beneficial when the works of the program share some contextual or qualitative relationship, whether aesthetic, compositional or historic.

Christoph Schlüren: What are the criteria for the choice of composers?

John-Edward Kelly: Only “heard music” has ever interested me, i.e. music that is not primarily constructed out of theories, but rather has been experienced in all detail in the quiet inner music life of a composer. If music has not been imagined by the composer, in all likelihood I will not be able to imagine it either – and even if I could, why would I want to? The result could be nothing more than an amorphous sonic soup – by definition a stillborn music. It is amazing how little contemporary music is actually “heard” by composers in this sense, so the choice for our programs is already limited by this aspect. If we add considerations of aesthetic preference and compositional quality, the matter is pretty much settled. I have given the world premières of hundreds of works and worked together with hundreds of composers, and yet only the music of a handful of composers has deeply impressed and touched me – and therefore profoundly interests me. A few are famous, others not at all, but that is no criterion whatsoever for me.

Christoph Schlüren: Is there a special reason that the music of Anders Eliasson was your first focus?

John-Edward Kelly: A prominent Swedish composer drew my attention to Anders Eliasson nearly 30 years ago with the comment, “He is the greatest composer in Sweden”. The more I study his music and scores, the more I’m inclined to replace “in Sweden” with “of our time”. Our musicians immediately fell in love with his deeply touching, unique musical world. We could not have found a better first Composer-in-Residence.

Christoph Schlüren: How have you recruited your musicians?

John-Edward Kelly: We seek musicians who are uncompromising in their musical attitudes, and in New York – the richest source of musicians in America – Arcos has become a magnet for outstanding young players. It is not really possible to speak of “recruiting” however: the musicians find one another, become enthusiastic and integrated into the working style, and very often remain as long-term members of the orchestra. Many have remained from the very beginning, when we had almost nothing to offer. We are very proud of that.

Christoph Schlüren: How is it possible to reach such outstanding quality on such a humble budget?

John-Edward Kelly: We have found musicians who greatly love music and are unwilling to accept compromises. When something isn't working well, we rehearse until it does – and usually I needn't "demand" that we continue: the musicians demand it of themselves. From the very beginning we have had the policy of paying all musicians the same – strings, concertmaster, conductor and extras – both out of principle and due to our humble budget. Our people know that, and it contributes greatly to a sense of mutual respect. We have no "stars", so everyone can shine! It also helps that we have musicians from all corners of the world: America, Canada, China, France, Israel, Korea, Serbia, South Africa, among others.

Christoph Schlüren: Are there historical musical personalities you have been inspired by in terms of rehearsal techniques, communication or sound ideals?

John-Edward Kelly: Mostly ideals that have ripened in my soul for decades and have been polished by disappointments. Naturally there are historical musicians who have had a great meaning in my life: I speak often of Adolf Busch and his high ideals, and also Rudolf Serkin and George Szell, the first conductor I ever heard in concert. Theirs was a generation for which music seemed to have a deeper, somehow more essential meaning than is usually the case today.

Christoph Schlüren: Do you think such a project, brought from nothing to first-class quality in the shortest time, would be possible in another place such as Europe?

John-Edward Kelly: Certainly possible, but probably more difficult. Through my 27-year absence from the United States I feel qualified to say that America has changed greatly. One thing did not change during that time, however: America is a nation of idealists. Perhaps there are fewer than there once were, but in exchange they are stronger and have more conviction. Idealism is the mainspring of our orchestra, and for that reason New York is the perfect location for Arcos.

Christoph Schlüren: In the best sense, what is the goal of the orchestra? Where do you want to arrive?

John-Edward Kelly: We want to serve music and let music educate and better us.

Christoph Schlüren: Which composers of the 20th Century are the most important for you?

John-Edward Kelly: The original name of the orchestra was "Bartók Chamber Orchestra", which already says a lot. For me personally there are a few others: Britten, Lutosławski, Janáček, Varése, and in a very special way Hindemith and Martin, who in my opinion are still greatly underestimated. I also have a great affinity for Carl Ruggles, and Kodály had something very special that – at least in my opinion – is yet to be fully discovered. At the end of the 20th Century my dear friend Tristan Keuris reached his artistic heights; I am still convinced that he will be recognized one day as one of the great composers of the 20th Century.

Christoph Schlüren: What is your opinion of the "modern avant-garde", as it is favored in the subsidized European scene?

John-Edward Kelly: Hmm... It is not by chance that so-called contemporary music has become the most unpopular music of history: that stature has been hard earned! Allow me to quote Tristan Keuris: "Music theory sounds terrible!" "Interesting" alone is a long way from "musical", and at the end of the day living people want to hear living music and singing musicality, not experimentation and construction.

Christoph Schlüren: Is an expansion beyond string orchestra envisioned for the future?

John-Edward Kelly: We already have! However we did not begin with a full orchestra in order to assure that the heart of the orchestra – the strings – function and sing well together first.

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(Translated from the German original)