

## The Cerebral Onstage, Not Without Wit

★ **WUORINEN AT 70** (Sunday and Monday) In recent years James Levine has become a high-profile champion of the composer Charles Wuorinen. He conducts this complex, modernist composer's work with technical command, palpable involvement and textural lucidity. On Sunday and Monday evenings, for a Works & Process program at the Guggenheim Museum, Mr. Levine will conduct a roster of musicians including members of the Brentano String Quartet and the pianist Sarah Rothenberg in "Ashberyana," Mr. Wuorinen's setting of John Ashbery's poetry. Ms. Rothenberg will also lead a discussion with the composer. At 7:30 p.m., Peter B. Lewis Theater, Sackler Center for Arts Education, Guggenheim Music, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street, (212) 423-3587, guggenheim.org; \$30; \$25 for members; \$10 for students. (Tommasini)

The first thing a visitor to the composer Charles Wuorinen's Web site sees is a colorful caricature of Mr. Wuorinen by Arnold Roth. Mr. Wuorinen, bearded, balding, with a huge cranium and wearing a jacket lined with musical staves, is at work on a score, looking amused. His pen, linked to richly colored clouds

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MUSIC REVIEW

by a bright rainbow, has notes spilling out of its point onto the table beside his sheaf of manuscript paper.

The picture, at charleswuorinen.com, says a lot about Mr. Wuorinen, a composer whose music and program notes can seem brainy and abstruse but who is actually fairly personable and says he wants people to enjoy his work. Listen without worrying about the music's theoretical underpinnings and you hear writing that is as vigorous and kaleidoscopic as the Roth drawing suggests.

Mr. Wuorinen has a sense of humor about it too. During an onstage conversation on Sunday evening at the Guggenheim Museum, where Mr. Wuorinen was the focus of a Works and Process concert in honor of his 70th birthday, he said that "when I perform my own music, I curse the composer for the difficulties."

He had had an opportunity to do that only a few minutes earlier, having opened the program with a graceful, focused account of his "Praegustatum for James Levine." Not that this 2005 work taxed his technique. A brief, densely packed rumination on a fragment from his Eighth Symphony (2006), which was composed for Mr. Levine, "Praegustatum" is easygoing by Mr. Wuorinen's standards.

He left the thornier works to others. Linda Hall and Howard Watkins, pianists, gave an energetic performance of the hard-driven, sharply rhythmic "Mission of Virgil." This 1993 ballet score went unstaged until the Guggenheim commissioned Sean Curran to choreograph it for these performances. (There was a repeat on Monday.)

Mr. Wuorinen's inspiration was a set of William Blake illustrations for Dante's "Inferno," and if the score is neither pictorial nor narrative, it conveys the fearsome power of Dante's (and Blake's) vision. Mr. Curran's use of movement, though often abstract, was an eloquent link between Dante's imagery and Mr. Wuorinen's music.

The vivid "Ashberyana"

The next Works and Process program, "Genes and Jazz," includes performances by the Jacob Varmus Quintet and discussions be-



RACHEL PAPO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

James Levine, right, conducting the Brentano String Quartet Sunday evening, with the baritone Leon Williams singing.

### Works and Process

Guggenheim Museum

(2004), a setting of four poems by John Ashbery for baritone, string quartet, piano and trombone, gave a fuller account of Mr. Wuorinen's sense of color. The poetry is set with striking directness, and Leon Williams's rich, appealing baritone served it well. The

instrumental writing, in contrast to the simplicity of the vocal line provides a complex, lively and often humorous commentary.

The ensemble, conducted by Mr. Levine, included the Brentano String Quartet; James Pugh, trombonist; and Sarah Rothenberg, pianist. Ms. Rothenberg also moderated the discussions with Mr. Wuorinen, Mr. Levine and Mr. Curran.

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