

Joseph Schwantner – Full Biography



Born in Chicago in 1943, Joseph Schwantner received his musical and academic training at the Chicago Conservatory and Northwestern University. While developing a profile as a leading American composer, he also served on the faculties of The Juilliard School, Eastman School of Music and the Yale School of Music, simultaneously establishing himself as a sought-after composition instructor.

Schwantner's compositional career has been marked by numerous distinctions and awards. His early accolades include three BMI Student Composer Awards, the Beams Prize, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, and many other awards, grants and fellowships. In 1979 his orchestral composition *Aftertones of Infinity* won the Pulitzer Prize. In 1985 his life and music were the focus of a television documentary entitled *Soundings*, produced by WGBH in Boston for national broadcast. That same year his work, *Magabunda* "Four Poems of Agueda Pizarro," recorded on Nonesuch Records by the Saint Louis Symphony, was nominated for a 1985 Grammy Award in the category "Best New Classical Composition," and his *A Sudden Rainbow*, also recorded on Nonesuch by the Saint Louis Symphony, received a 1987 Grammy nomination for "Best Classical Composition." Schwantner is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Schwantner's Percussion Concerto, among the most often performed of contemporary concert works, was commissioned for the 150th anniversary season of the New York Philharmonic. He has also been commissioned by numerous other leading orchestras and organizations, including the National Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, San Diego Symphony, Chamber Music America, Fromm Music Foundation, Naumburg Foundation, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, among many others.

Schwantner has enjoyed particular success in the orchestral world. After winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Aftertones of Infinity*, Schwantner composed *New Morning for the World: Daybreak of Freedom* on words from Martin Luther King, Jr. for narrator and orchestra, which has since entered the standard repertory of orchestras nationwide. His Percussion Concerto has garnered over one hundred performances since its 1995 premiere and is one of the most performed concert works of the past decade. His music is noted for its deft implementation of luminous color and fluctuating rhythms in a dramatic and unique style, heard in such signature works as the Percussion Concerto, *New Morning for the World*, and *Magabunda*, among others. Schwantner's recent work, *Morning's Embrace*, was commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra and premiered at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, on February 23, 2006. *The Washington Post* praised its "delicate timbres" and "unique and original" sound. His music has been championed by such conductors as Leonard Slatkin,

Marin Alsop, Andrew Litton, Hugh Wolff and artists including Evelyn Glennie, Sharon Isbin and Anne Akiko Meyers, among many others.

In January 2007, the League of American Orchestras and Meet The Composer announced that Schwantner had been selected as the composer for the second cycle of the nation's largest commissioning consortium of orchestras: Ford Made in America. Schwantner's new work, entitled *Chasing Light...*, will receive its world premiere with the Reno Chamber Orchestra in September 2008.

Other recent projects for the composer include the world premiere by eighth blackbird in October 2006 of *Rhiannon's Blackbirds*, which the group commissioned and included on their nine-month United States tour during the 2006-07 season. Schwantner composed a new flute quartet for the 25th anniversary season of Flute Force in 2007, and, further on, he will write a Concerto for Percussion Section, Timpani and Orchestra for the Percussive Arts Society and the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, for the Society's 50th anniversary.

Joseph Schwantner's music is published by Schott Helicon Music Corporation.

Joseph Schwantner – Brief Biography



Known for his dramatic and unique style and as a gifted orchestral colorist, Joseph Schwantner is one of the most prominent American composers today. He received his musical and academic training at the Chicago Conservatory and Northwestern University and has served on the faculties of The Juilliard School, Eastman School of Music, and the Yale School of Music, simultaneously establishing himself as a sought-after composition instructor. Schwantner's compositional career has been marked by many awards, grants, and fellowships, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1979 for his orchestral composition *Aftertones of Infinity* and several Grammy nominations. Among his many commissions is his Percussion Concerto, which

was commissioned for the 150th anniversary season of the New York Philharmonic and is one of the most performed concert works of the past decade. Schwantner is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Press Quotes

...and the mountains rising nowhere

The writing [in *...and the mountains rising nowhere*] is first-rate for every instrument and the listener is drained by the emotional experience of hearing the work...most of all, extreme gratitude to Professor Schwantner for his invaluable contribution to the highest quality literature for the wind ensemble.

— Jerry Gardner, *Notes*

Aftertones of Infinity

[*Aftertones of Infinity*]'s structure is a high-vaulted arch, studded with orchestral jewels of light – the whole firmament periodically bursting into supernovic flame, only to melt into eternity again, like Neptune in Holst's *The Planets*.

— Bret Johnson, *Tempo*

Music of Amber

Joseph Schwantner's adventurous *Music of Amber*...blended wildly colorful sonorities with an almost primal sense of drama into a work of uncommon imagination and visceral power.

— Stephen Brookes, *The Washington Post*

[*Music of Amber*] is a masterpiece of constantly shifting subtle and vivid textures, which the players blended and balanced impressively.

— Joseph McLellan, *The Washington Post*

Percussion Concerto

For nearly four minutes on Friday night, the audience in Avery Fisher Hall stood and cheered a composition's world premiere: not a standard response in contemporary musical life. At least some of the enthusiasm for Joseph Schwantner's half-hour Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra could be attributed to the fact that the composition had none of the medicinal quality audiences have long associated with new music...There are echoes of Wagner and Philip Glass, as well as suggestions of suspense cinema. There was always enough sonic inventiveness to keep the ears busy.

— Edward Rothstein, *The New York Times*

At the concert's center was the hugely appealing 1994 Percussion Concerto by American composer Joseph Schwantner, a dazzling display of infectious rhythms and kaleidoscopic tonal color. Ably assisted by the symphony's percussionists, soloist Colin Currie commanded a vast battery of percussion, deftly moving from one set of instruments to another and, with keen attention to conductor Carlos Kalmar, maintaining tight, ensemble with the orchestra.

— James McQuillen, *Oregonian*

The 2005 all-Schwantner chamber music recording on Naxos

If there's any more gorgeous “contemporary” music than Joseph Schwantner's, I've yet to hear it...for sheer beauty of sound it's unsurpassed. The blurb on the back of this Naxos box mentions its “luminous, bewitching” aural quality and I agree completely. One could also add that Schwantner has a canny theatrical sense—his music is always at some level dramatic, never abstract—and that his characteristic idiom, a blending of modal melody with both enriched triadic and highly chromatic harmonies, minimalist ostinatos, and prismatic, floridly ornamented scorings, is used with so much skill and resourcefulness that the listener never notices how disparate are the elements thus unified. Everything works to create the desired sensuous and emotional effusion.

— Mark Lehman, *American Record Guide*

The 2005 all-Schwantner orchestral music recording on Hyperion

Even if you think you hate contemporary music, these enchanting works may change your mind. Dr. Schwantner...is an unashamed voluptuary, luxuriating in orchestral colors and textures. His music is undeniably modern, but he's not afraid of sheer aural beauty, or of bits of tune, and he uses traditional harmonic tensions and resolutions to fine effect.

— Scott Cantrell, *The Dallas Morning News*

Discography

...and the mountains rising nowhere

North Texas Wind Symphony
GIA Publications CD 657

...and the mountains rising nowhere

North Texas Wind Symphony
Klavier Records KCD 11079

...and the mountains rising nowhere

Eastman Wind Ensemble
Sony Records SK 47198

Aftertones of Infinity

Juilliard Orchestra/Leonard Slatkin
New World Records NW 381-2

Angelfire

Anne Akiko Meyers, violin
Dallas Symphony/Andrew Litton
Hyperion CD A67493

Beyond Autumn

Gregory Hustis, horn
Dallas Symphony/Andrew Litton
Hyperion CD A67493

Black Anemones

Dawn Upshaw, soprano
Margo Garrett, piano
Nonesuch Records 7559-79364-2 CD

Black Anemones

Alexa Still, flute
Stephen Gosling, piano
Koch International Classics KIC 7658

Black Anemones

Rebecca Henderson, oboe
Timothy Lovelace, piano
Boston Records BR 1057

Canticle of the Evening Bells

Ensemble 21
Summit Records DCDS 173

Consortium

Boston Musica Viva
Delos DCD 1011

Distant Runes and Incantations

Holst-Sinfonietta/Klaus Simon
Naxos CD 8.559206

Distant Runes and Incantations

Orchestra 2001/James Freeman
CRI CD 723

Elixir

21st Century Consort
innova 633

From a Dark Millennium

North Texas Wind Symphony
Klavier Records KCD 11089

From a Dark Millennium

North Texas Wind Symphony
GIA Publications CD 657

From a Dark Millennium

Ithaca College Wind Ensemble
Mark Records MCBS-35891

From Afar...

Sharon Isbin, guitar
Saint Paul Chamber Orch./Hugh Wolf
Virgin Classics
CDC-7243-5-55083-2-4

In Aeternum

Boston Musica Viva
Delos DCD 1011

in evening's stillness...

North Texas Wind Symphony
Klavier Records KCD 11084

in evening's stillness...

North Texas Wind Symphony
GIA Publications CD 657

Music of Amber

Holst-Sinfonietta/Klaus Simon
Naxos CD 8.559206

Music of Amber

New York New Music Ensemble
Gun-Mar Records GM2028CD

New Morning for the World

National Symphony/Leonard Slatkin
BMG Classics/RCA Red Seal
CD 09026-68692-2

New Morning for the World

Raymond Bazemore, narrator
Oregon Symphony/James DePriest
Koch International Classics
CD 3-7293-2H1

Percussion Concerto

Michael Burritt, percussion
University of Calgary Wind Ensemble
Albany Records CD Troy 999

Percussion Concerto

North Texas Wind Symphony
GIA Publications CD 657

Percussion Concerto

Evelyn Glennie, percussion
National Symphony/Leonard Slatkin
BMG Classics/RCA Red Seal
CD 09026-68692-2

A Play of Shadows

Solisti New York
New World Records NWR-80403-2

Recoil

North Texas Wind Symphony
GIA Publications CD 657

September Canticle

James Diaz, organ
Dallas Symphony/Andrew Litton
Hyperion CD A67493

Soaring

Alexa Still, flute
Stephen Gosling, piano
Koch International Classics KIC 7658

Soaring

Holst-Sinfonietta/Klaus Simon
Naxos CD 8.559206

Soaring

Alejandro Escuer, flute
Quindecim Recordings QP 071

Sparrows

Holst-Sinfonietta/Klaus Simon
Naxos CD 8.559206

Sparrows

Lucy Shelton, soprano
21st Century Consort
innova 606

A Sudden Rainbow

Dallas Symphony/Andrew Litton
Hyperion CD A67493

Two Poems of Aguedo Pizarro

Holst-Sinfonietta/Klaus Simon
Naxos CD 8.559206

Veiled Autumn

Tamara Anna Cisłowska, piano
Artworks Recorded Music SAW 010

Velocities

Johan Bridger, percussion
Caprice CAP 21735

Velocities

Fillipo Lattanzi, percussion
DAD Records

Velocities

Evelyn Glennie, percussion
National Symphony/Leonard Slatkin
BMG Classics/RCA Red Seal
CD 09026-68692-2

Program Note: *Chasing Light...*

One of the special pleasures of living in rural New Hampshire is experiencing the often brilliant and intense early morning sunrises, reminding one of Thoreau's words, "Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me" (Walden). *Chasing Light...* draws its spirit, energy and inspiration from the celebration of vibrant colors and light that penetrate the morning mist as it wafts through the trees in the high New England hills. Like a delicate dance, those images intersected with a brief original poem that helped fire my musical imagination.

Chasing Light...

Beneath the sickle moon,
sunrise ignites daybreak's veil

Calliope's rainbowed song
cradles heaven's arc

piercing shadowy pines,
a kaleidoscope blooms

morning's embrace
confronts the dawn

The four-movement work, about eighteen minutes in duration, proceeds from one movement to the next without pause. Each movement's subtitle is associated with a pair of lines from the poem.

Mvt. I: "Sunrise Ignites Daybreak's Veil" (Con forza, feroce con bravura) opens with an introduction containing three forceful and diverse ideas presented by full orchestra: (1) a low rhythmic and percussive pedal point on "F" followed by (2) a three-note triplet figure in the brass overlaid by (3) a rapid swirling cascade of arch-like upper woodwind phrases cast in a stretto-like texture. These primary elements form the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic materials developed in the work.

Following the introduction, the strings present a theme derived from the pedal point rhythmic gesture and the brass three-note figure leading to an extended series of upward thrusting six-note sonorities and a long increasing assertive line (first brass, then later strings and woodwinds) partitioned into two parts. The movement ends with a return to the introductory material and a sustained pitch on "G" providing a link to the next movement.

Mvt. II: "Calliope's Rainbowed Song" (lontano) The rapid arched woodwind phrases in the introduction to the first movement, occur in a variety of divergent contexts throughout the work, not only as small scale gestures but in larger, more extended designs. Cast in a major arch-like palindrome form, this movement begins softly, first with solo clarinet followed by a repeated piano sonority that forms the structure of a theme played by solo flute. Gradually, this theme builds to an exuberant midpoint,

followed by sections that appear in reverse order finally ending quietly and gently with solo clarinet and a high ethereal violin harmonic on “A” that carries over to the third movement.

Mvt. III: “A Kaleidoscope Blooms” (*lacrimoso*) a slow expressive and elegiac movement for oboe (for Andrea Lenz, principal oboe of the Reno Chamber Orchestra), opens with a low, dark, repeated pedal played by piano, contrabass and tam-tam. Sudden rapid woodwind gestures contrast and frame a succession of gradually ascending oboe phrases that accumulate ever-greater urgency as the music approaches its maximum intensity at the end.

Mvt. IV: “Morning’s Embrace Confronts the Dawn” (*lontano...leggiero*) The rapid and aggressive woodwind phrases in the first movement now emerge in delicate and shimmering string textures. These earlier elements prepare for a stately but urgent chorale theme that builds forcefully to the palindromic music of the third movement, the introductory materials of the first, and a final climactic conclusion.

— Joseph Schwantner, Spring 2008