

Timo Andres

The US composer and pianist doesn't shy away from pushing both his own and others' musical ideas to extremes, he positively embraces the notion, finds Pwyll ap Siôn

Composer, pianist, arranger, writer, teacher – Timo Andres is in many respects the complete musician. Whether he's composing pieces for himself or other pianists to play, championing the works of established names like John Adams and Philip Glass or those of up-and-coming composers such as Christopher Cerrone, Nathan Felix, Eric Shanfield and Gabriella Smith, arranging and orchestrating Sufjan Stevens songs for Broadway or writing insightful essays on Louis Andriessen, Steve Reich and Brad Mehldau, for Andres all these activities are inextricably linked. As he tells me: 'Whether it's writing about music, or teaching composition, or working on Broadway as an orchestrator – all the things I do are different facets of the same ways of thinking about music and engaging with it. That's something that I've always wanted to do: to try to engage with music from as many different directions as possible.'

This openness and willingness to engage with music on many different levels is clearly communicated in Andres's compositions. He first studied at Juilliard Pre-College with Eric Ewazen before completing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at Yale, where his composition teachers included Ingram Marshall, Martin Bresnick, Aaron Jay Kernis and Christopher Theofanidis, and as a result, one hears echoes of all kinds of influences in his music – from jazz to minimalism, ambient music and beyond. Nevertheless, the Western classical tradition remains the cornerstone of his compositional aesthetic and approach.

Andres was born in California and raised in rural Connecticut. His father took the young Timothy (as he was then known) to several piano recitals by Richard Goode in nearby Litchfield and to the Yale Summer School of Music in Norfolk to hear concerts of chamber music, and his paternal grandfather owned a sizeable collection of classical recordings

ANDRES FACTS

Birth October 10, 1985, Palo Alto, California, as Timothy Andres
Music studies Juilliard Pre-College (1999-2003), bachelor's and master's degrees at Yale School of Music (2003-09)
Breakthrough work *Shy and Mighty* (2005-07) for two pianos
Awards 2016: selected by Glenn Gould Prize winner Philip Glass for Glenn Gould Protegé Prize; Pulitzer Prize nominee for *The Blind Banister*. 2021: Grammy nominated (Best Classical Compendium) for *The Arching Path*, an album of music by Christopher Cerrone on which he plays the piano. 2024: Tony Award nomination (Best Orchestrations) for orchestrations and arrangements of Sufjan Stevens's songs for the Broadway dance-musical *Illinois*
Teaching appointment Composition faculty at Mannes School of Music at The New School, New York, since 2018



Timo Andres: composer, and in many respects the complete musician

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that included early modernists such as Stravinsky and Bartók. From Bach to Barber and from Chopin to Carter, the European and American art music tradition exerted a strong hold over Andres, but its presence is as much *sensed* as it is heard. These sonic echoes lurk around the edges, amid the interstices and in the shadows of his music: echoes of Beethoven in the piano concerto *The Blind Banister* (2015), of Schumann in the Piano Quintet (2012), of Ives (a recurring influence) in *Some Connecticut Gospel* (2008) for chamber ensemble, or of Ravel in *Old Ground* (2017) and *Clear and Cold* (2013), both for solo piano. (The last, based on Ravel's *Une barque sur l'océan*, was recorded by George Xiaoyuan Fu in 2022 for his 'Mirrors' album.)

By his own admission, Andres's approach resembles the idea of repurposing loose chunks of masonry from the rubble of music history, and it's significant that his most recent piano concerto, premiered earlier this year by Aaron Diehl and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, conducted by John Adams, is called *Made of Tunes* (2023). The various 'tunes' in Andres's works encompass ornamental Baroque-like patterns in his cello concerto *Upstate Obscura* (2017), Classical-style figurations in *The Blind Banister* and Romantic-type gestures in the Schumann-inspired *It Takes a Long Time to Become a Good Composer* (2010) for solo piano.

The impression gained is one of familiar objects and artefacts assembled from an imaginary museum of musical works which suddenly find themselves placed in strange and

unfamiliar contexts. *Upstate Obscura* is especially revealing in this respect. The work's starting point is American artist John Vanderlyn's sweeping large-scale semicircular depiction of the palace and gardens of Versailles, completed in 1819. The engulfing panoramic sweep of the all-encompassing painting induces in the viewer a strange sense of being part of – and yet apart from – the scene itself and its surroundings, and Andres's music creates a similar impression. Andres also presents his music's bemused separation from – and playful engagement with – the European tradition as an important aspect of its Americanness.

This sprawling music-historical playground of compositional invention and reinvention can be both reassuring and unsettling. It calls to mind art critic Linda Hutcheon's notion of 'transgressive irony', whereby quotation signifies critical distance. In fact, very few instances of direct quotation appear in Andres's music, the exceptions being his clever and quirky remake of Mozart's *Coronation Concerto* and the *Paraphrase on Themes of Brian Eno* for chamber orchestra (both 2010). As pianist David Kaplan has observed, Andres's music wears its influences easily on the surface without ever sounding derivative. And as Andres tells me, 'I try to lay out my cards on the table with whatever I do. I don't see any point in being coy about anything. There are plenty of composers out there who will obfuscate and be wilfully abstruse. I don't need to do that. I want to communicate with people. That's what I'm interested in. That's why I became a musician.'

For Andres, the compositional process functions as a mechanism for the transformation and development of musical material in much the same way as it did for Bach, Haydn, Brahms, Bartók, Carter and Ligeti, and does for Adams and Thomas Adès. Andres has even been called a 'modern modernist' by one critic, though perhaps 'postmodern modernist' would be closer to the mark.

The seed of this aesthetic is heard in Andres's breakthrough work, *Shy and Mighty* (2005-07) for two pianos, whose 10 self-contained movements circle impulsively around the music-historical block. Both pianos jostle for position in the pulsing opening rhythms of 'Antennae', where Steve Reich-style patterns are fused with a horn riff straight from a James Brown song that appears to be echoing from a distant hall. 'Trip by Train' accelerates into turbocharged Adams (think *Grand Pianola Music* on steroids), while 'Die Spieluhr' resembles music-box Mahler. Shades of Messiaen's *Vision de l'Amen* waft by in 'Flirtation Ave', and the suite concludes with an Ives-style pavane that incongruously juxtaposes gospel with New Complexity.

More recent works have attempted to expand and extend this principle across wider and more varied musical landscapes. One example is *Everything Happens So Much* (2016) for full orchestra, commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and premiered in 2016. Here, a rhythmic grip controlling unfolding cascades of contrary-motion lines in the woodwind in the opening section buckles under the pressure brought on by opposing countermelodies and metres, resulting in a complex dialogue of interweaving patterns and processes. A recording of the first performance is included on the 'Boston Symphony Commissions' album, with Andris Nelsons conducting (Naxos, released 2019).

In *Everything Happens So Much* and the second movement of *The Blind Banister*, Andres plays around with the limits of a musical idea until it reaches breaking point. During these moments, the music's cool surface veneer, animated by clarity, lucidity, transparency and logic, collapses under the weight of

THE SOUNDS OF ANDRES

Works that range in scale from solo piano to orchestral



'The Blind Banister'

Inbal Segev vc Timo Andres pf Metropolis Ens / Andrew Cyr
Nonesuch (5/24)

Just as painters and architects use perspective to create a sense of space and scale, Andres

does something similar by stretching the musical material to its very limits in his piano concerto *The Blind Banister* (2015). More nostalgic and reflective qualities imbue the cello concerto *Upstate Obscura* (2017), while Andres's symphonic treatment of solo piano in *Colorful History* (2021) is textbook Charles Ives.



'Home Stretch'

Timo Andres pf Metropolis Ensemble / Andrew Cyr
Nonesuch (9/13)

Hints of John Adams's *Road Movies* (1995) and *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* (1986) can be heard

in Andres's impressive single-movement piano concerto *Home Stretch* (2008), which appears alongside his clever and quirky reworking of Mozart's *Coronation Concerto* and his 19th-century-style orchestral paraphrase of music by Brian Eno (both 2010). This is Andres at his most inventively irreverent and economical.



'Shy and Mighty'

Timo Andres, David Kaplan pfs
Nonesuch

Shy and Mighty (2005-07) for two pianos offers an ideal introduction to Andres's early post-minimal style. As its title suggests, this dynamic and colourful 10-movement, hour-long suite (recorded here in 2009) is full of unexpected contrasts and jarring juxtapositions. Alex Ross hailed its impact as having been rarely felt in American music since John Adams.

its own internal structures, devoured as if from the inside out by a voracious and irrepressible force.

This fascination with pushing music to various kinds of extremes has preoccupied Andres for some time and is linked to the notion that when it comes to musical economy, there's always a temptation to push an idea to its logical breaking point. Andres cites *Four Organs* by Reich – with whom he performed the work at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2014 (alongside Glass and Nico Muhly) – as one of his all-time favourite examples of this extreme approach, although he concedes that his music does not apply itself to a linear process with quite the same level of total devotion.

It would nevertheless be misleading to view Andres's music as being all about the logical construction (and deconstruction) of its internal methods and processes. Strong extramusical elements function in equally important ways, as seen in the colourful titles of many of his works. In fact, these procedural end points or teleological destinations sometimes give way to expressive and lyrical moments, such as the calm atmosphere that imbues the end of *At the River* (2011) for solo piano, or the final section of *The Great Span* (2023) for piano quintet, which luxuriates in a warm tonal glow evoking the spirit of jazz legend Bill Evans. In *Upstate Obscura*'s first movement, plangent cello lines are supported by gently rocking strings to impart a Copland-like sense of place, whereas the work's final movement, 'Vanishing Point', does not so much launch into outer space – as happens in *The Blind Banister* – as fade gently into the distance, as its title suggests. **G**