

Kevin Puts

Concerto for Orchestra, Silent Night Elegy, Virelai

Stéphane Denève
St. Louis Symphony Orchestra



A WORD FROM COMPOSER KEVIN PUTS



When Stéphane Denève and I first talked by phone sometime in 2018 to discuss the commissioning of *Virelai* for the opening concert of his tenure as Music Director of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, it was clear after an hour of excitedly interrupting each other's musings on contemporary style, harmony, and our mutual love of John Williams that this would be the first of many such conversations. I often lecture my students on the importance of finding one's "people" over the long arc of a composer's career: write the music you care most earnestly about and, if you strive to do it well, a supportive network of musicians might coalesce around your work. For me, Stéphane is primary among these. All three works represented here were fueled by our musical kinship. And as a native of St. Louis, it is especially meaningful to hear my work endorsed so expertly by the great musicians of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, an orchestra which I have known since my earliest years.

A WORD FROM CONDUCTOR STÉPHANE DENÈVE, MUSIC DIRECTOR OF THE ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Discovering during our first conversations that Kevin and I share a particular love for John Williams, for Björk's album *Vespertine*, for the vocal music of Bach and Mozart, for French wine, for St. Louis – a city where he was born and where I live today – and its famed orchestra, were but a few moments that created our friendship. It was a particular joy that Kevin agreed then to write a piece for my first concert as Music Director of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. *Virelai* is a kind of brief American version of Ravel's *Boléro*, repeating a quote from Guillaume de Machaut with a similar clever and irresistible orchestral crescendo. Sharing also a profound love for opera, it became very natural to perform and record his moving suite from

Silent Night, his brilliant first opera, expressing so powerfully the fascinating truce which happened between World War I opponents at Christmas 1917. As a next step, our friendship organically called for a major commission, which came to fruition as the extremely virtuosic Concerto for Orchestra. This symphonic tour de force proves that a wondrously crafted music of our time can touch the heart as well as the mind.

CONCERTO FOR ORCHESTRA

Concerto for Orchestra grew out of my friendship with conductor Stéphane Denève. It is dedicated both to him and to the musicians of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, for whom I have developed great admiration since their first performance of my music in 2004.

The creative entry point for me was the discovery of young Amanda Gorman's beautiful poem "Hymn for the Hurting," written in response to the horrific school shooting – an occurrence now routine in our country – in Uvalde, Texas, in May 2022. The concerto's opening music – recalled briefly at various places throughout the piece – is my immediate musical reaction to it.

The title of the second movement, "Caccia," is a reference to the fourteenth-century musical form depicting the hunt or the chase and flows directly from this opening hymn. It continues the opening movement's focus on the various groups of instruments in the orchestra, beginning with the oboes and punctuated at all times by the orchestra's three percussionists

who play identical collections of six drums. "Music Box with Arietta," by contrast, explores the gentler side of the percussion section, led here by cascading gestures played by the harp and celesta, giving way to a lyrical counterpoint of woodwinds.

"Toccata" is a quick exchange between the strings, the winds, and the percussion. Eventually the brass section asserts itself, cutting across these exchanges with brash, angular lines. A brief refrain of the opening movement leads to a gentle "Sicilienne" featuring nearly all instruments in the orchestra in lyrical ways, perhaps most prominently the piano. Another refrain introduces the final movement, another "Caccia," this one containing a brief quotation from the Mozart opera which inspired it.

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SILENT NIGHT ELEGY

Silent Night is Kevin Puts' first opera. It adapts *Joyeux Noël*, the award-winning 2005 film that tells the story of the spontaneous ceasefires that took place along the Western Front on the first Christmas Eve of World War I.

The opera premiered in 2011 and has since traveled around the world, garnering popular acclaim and winning Puts the Pulitzer Prize for Music. Afterward, Puts said he'd been regularly asked for a purely orchestral work based on the opera's music. Although Puts was inspired by the success of Benjamin Britten's *Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes*, he felt "that a single-movement 'essay' – rather than a suite of separate movements – would work better."

Silent Night Elegy more or less follows the narrative of the opera itself. The five sections are performed without a break. Puts has written the following description of each section:

Introduction: An introduction, featuring solo horn and solo cello, introduces the primary thematic material of the opera. This is followed by a contrapuntal layering of the battle songs sung by the three armies (French, German, and Scottish) in the opera's Prologue, anchored by a military snare drum.

The Battle: Music from the Prologue leads directly to the cataclysmic battle scene, which occurs near the beginning of Act I.

Aftermath and Burial: A sense of confusion, sadness, and disarray follow until a lonely solo flute, accompanied by the harp, emerges from the haze and introduces the music of the Act II burial scene. In this scene – which culminates in a bagpipe melody – the soldiers have agreed to extend the ceasefire to allow time to bury the bodies strewn about in No-Man's-Land.

The Generals' Rage: The generals of all three armies receive word of the unofficial celebrations. They are incensed and order the soldiers transferred to areas on the front where the fighting is most fierce.

Sleep: In our first discussion about the opera, Mark Campbell [the librettist] mentioned a possible scene in which all three armies drift off to sleep on the evening after the great battle, singing in their three languages about home as snow gradually begins to fall. This became a chorus in Act I, and the *Elegy* closes with this prayerful music.

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VIRELAI (AFTER GUILLAUME DE MACHAUT)

Virelai was commissioned to mark the start of French-born conductor Stéphane Denève's Music Directorship of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. For inspiration, Puts turned to a melody he first heard as a student by another French musician: fourteenth-century composer Guillaume de Machaut's "Dame, a vous sans retollir."

Machaut was the most famous poet and musician of his time. "Dame" is a virelai, a form of poetry that was just coming into fashion. The poem begins, "Lady, I give you my whole heart, thought, and desire. Your worth surpasses goodness, your beauty dries up all others, and your glance cures every ill."

To create the thrumming texture of *Virelai*, Puts fleshed out Machaut's melody with harmony and rhythm. "Machaut would not have imagined accompanying chords or harmonies," he said, "because harmony as we know it did not exist yet!"

Puts also turned to Ravel's *Boléro* for inspiration. Like Ravel, Puts' music very gradually grows in volume and intensity. However, he decided to break into this incremental growth, splintering the melody in a more broadly phrased central section.

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KEVIN PUTS

COMPOSER



Pulitzer Prize and Grammy®-winning composer Kevin Puts has established himself as one of America's leading composers. He has been commissioned and performed by leading organizations, including the Metropolitan Opera, Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, Carnegie Hall, Opera Philadelphia, Minnesota Opera, and many more, and has collaborated with world-class artists such as Renée Fleming, Joshua Bell, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, and Marin Alsop, among others.

In March 2022 Puts' fourth opera, *The Hours*, had its world premiere on the concert stage by the Philadelphia Orchestra under the baton of Yannick Nézet-Séguin. *The Hours* premiered to sold-out houses at the Metropolitan Opera in

November 2022 starring Renée Fleming, Kelli O'Hara, and Joyce DiDonato and was called "a stunning triumph" by *Variety Magazine*. The opera's revival in May 2024 played to packed houses and marked the first instance in the Metropolitan Opera's history of a work returning the season after its premiere. His multi-media song cycle *The Brightness of Light* featured Renée Fleming and Rod Gilfry at its Tanglewood premiere with Andris Nelsons and the Boston Symphony and has been presented by over twenty orchestras. Puts' triple concerto *Contact* had its world-premiere in March 2022. A recording of the piece by the Philadelphia Orchestra and conductor Xian Zhang was released on the Deutsche Grammophon album "Letters for the Future" and was awarded "Best Contemporary Classical Composition" at the 2023 Grammy® Awards. Puts was named Musical America's Composer of the Year in 2024.

Puts' breakthrough opera *Silent Night* – for which he was awarded the 2012 Pulitzer Prize – was heralded as "remarkable" (*The New York Times*). Since 2006, he has been a member of the Composition Faculty at the Peabody Institute. He has also served as Distinguished Visiting Composer at the Juilliard School as well as Director of the Minnesota Orchestra Composer's Institute.

STÉPHANE DENÈVE

CONDUCTOR



Known for his visionary storytelling and heartfelt interpretations, Stéphane Denève, The Joseph and Emily Rauh Pulitzer Music Director, joined the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in September 2019, having served as Music Director designate during the 2018/19 season.

Denève has shaped his tenure around creating extraordinary musical experiences that give an authentic voice to music. An expert with repertoire across genre and time, he has cultivated specific recognition for his interpretation of French, American, vocal, and operatic music. Through thoughtful and innovative programming, he maintains an enthusiasm for music and composers of today.

A gifted communicator and educator, he is committed to inspiring the next generation of musicians and listeners, as well as nurturing the SLSO's role as a creative leader for the St. Louis community and making orchestral music accessible to all.

Recognized internationally for the exceptional quality of his performances and programming, he regularly appears at major concert venues with the world's greatest orchestras and soloists. In addition to his role in St. Louis, he is the Artistic Director of the New World Symphony (Miami) and the Principal Guest Conductor of the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic. He has held leadership positions at the Brussels Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

As a recording artist, he has won critical acclaim for his recordings of the works of Poulenc, Debussy, Ravel, Roussel, Franck, and Connesson. He is a triple winner of the Diapason d'or of the Year and has been shortlisted for Gramophone's Artist of the Year Award. His inaugural album with the SLSO, featuring the music of Leonard Bernstein and John Williams with violinist James Ehnes, earned critical acclaim.

ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA



Celebrated as one of today's most exciting and enduring orchestras, the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra is the second-oldest orchestra in the US, founded in 1880. Stéphane Denève has served as The Joseph and Emily Rauh Pulitzer Music Director since 2019. Widely considered one of the leading American orchestras, the Grammy® Award-winning SLSO maintains its commitment to artistic excellence, educational impact, and community collaborations – all in service to its mission of enriching lives through the power of music.

The core of the SLSO's artistic foundation is its dynamic partnership with Denève, whose energetic musicianship, visionary storytelling, and collaborative spirit have created stronger connections with local and visiting artists, as well as advanced the SLSO's role as a leader in music education. The SLSO musical family also includes two resident choruses: the St. Louis Symphony Chorus, founded in 1976, performs choral-orchestral music from the Baroque era to today; and the St. Louis Symphony IN UNISON Chorus, founded in 1994, focuses on the performance and preservation of music from the African diaspora. The St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra, founded by Conductor Laureate Leonard Slatkin in 1970, is the region's premier training orchestra for high school and college students.

The SLSO has aligned its mission to make music more accessible, while fostering a culture welcoming to all. Building on its momentum, the SLSO serves as a convener of individuals, creators, and ideas, and is committed to building community through compelling and inclusive musical experiences. For more information, visit slo.org.

ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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Natalie Lee ^{*C}

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Michael Romans ^{*C}

Jecoliah Wang ^{*SV}

Brian Allen ^{*V}

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Kristin Ahlstrom
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Eva Kozma
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Rebecca Boyer Hall ^{SV}

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Wendy Rosen ^{SV}

Ling Ling Guan ^S

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Cally Banham

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^S Silent Night Elegy

^V Virelai

* Non-member

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ST. LOUIS
SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA



Kevin Puts

Concerto for Orchestra, Silent Night Elegy, Virelai

World premiere recordings

Stéphane Denève

Conductor

**St. Louis Symphony
Orchestra**

KEVIN PUTS (b. 1972)

Concerto for Orchestra

1. Hymn for the Hurting 1:29
2. Caccia No. 1 2:39
3. Music Box with Arietta 1:37
4. Toccata 2:01
5. Sicilienne 9:55
6. Ecco la Marcia? (Caccia No. 2) 5:18
7. **Silent Night Elegy** 23:37
Introduction – The Battle – Aftermath and Burial –
The Generals' Rage – Sleep
8. **Virelai (after Guillaume de Machaut)** 3:48

Total Running Time

50:40