



SEAN HICKEY

Sapiens:

A Brief History of Humankind
for the piano

VLADIMIR RUMYANTSEV

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Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*, first published in 2011 in Hebrew, and in 2014 in English, is justifiably one of the most celebrated books of our time. With its audacious subtitle, the book attempts to explain and explore why our particular species has thrived while most others have perished, and how we are set apart from all others due to our ability and desire to understand and give meaning to things that do not necessarily exist – such as the shared myths of language, money, religion, love, political boundaries and a host of things not truly tangible but with which we have developed a shared understanding.

Almost immediately after I began the book I would start to sketch out some ideas for an extensive piece of music, some dealing with its broadest concepts. This proved to be ineffective, but the idea for a piece stayed with me for a year, eventually taking shape, like many of my works, only during its composition. In no way have I tried to create a chapter by chapter illustration of the book nor of humankind (!), nor have I closely followed its overall outline or timeline. What I have attempted is a humble musical response to human signposts, concepts, myths or ideas that we as a species have carried with us, developing along the way these past couple hundred thousand or so years, breadcrumbs on the path of humanity.

I have composed several works for solo piano, and a great number for instruments with piano, or for the piano in chamber music combinations. I have not, however, ever truly been comfortable with the instrument and have always been intimidated by composing for it. Decades after I first began playing, I can only play some rather rudimentary things. But as my initial ideas took on some shape the thought of exploring a musical homage to humankind on one of humanity's great inventions began to appeal, and then, become necessary. I imagined the modern piano as a sort of meta-instrument, present at the dawns of humankind, the cognitive and agricultural revolutions, and some of the most notable inflection points of our troubled and triumphant history. A voyeur. A scribe. A portrait painter applying a brush across the millennia of our existence.

The piece begins not on the piano, but *at* the piano, with a single human breath, as I imagine the first music to have been, somewhere near the dawn of our species. If it is, like most, intended to die off one day, I imagine the very last music to sound more or less the same.

Pre-History – *Sapiens* begins as a mythical origin story, a single, sharp exhalation breathed into the instrument's strings, made resonant by the sostenuto pedal's imitation of a cave. This is followed by a morse-like rhythm – short, long, long – beaten on the sides and bottom of the piano. Scraped string and keyed clusters give way to a single resonant note in the bottom range, a C. The rhythm and that pitch will be found in several places across the entire piece. For a while, this C is the only pitch heard, though it will rise from the bottom to the middle of the range, where a sustained, chromatic six-note motive is introduced, interspersed with single tones in the extreme ranges of the instrument, and strange segments of melody separated by six octaves. The section leads into the next with three repeated, enigmatic chords: short, long, long.

Lascaux – Marked *cavernous, yet contained*, the section begins with a four-note sustained motive as if the composer is grasping for something in the dark. The short/long/long rhythm makes an appearance, this time as strange chords that fall off into an abyss. Eventually, a more confident tempo is established as the section finds a suitable shape. But it is dashed by unpredictable rhythms and insistent stabs of chords in their extreme ranges. The music here, wishing to take a recognizable form, devolves into roiling but barely audible sounds which fade to near nothingness, the voices of time made nearly silent and covered in darkness.

Lascaux of course refers to the cave in France that contains some of the most notable examples of paleolithic art, stunning in its realism some 17,000 years since it was made under the light of a torch, a notable signpost in the development of our species.

Fertile Crescent – One of the greatest developments in human history was and is our ability to grow and cultivate food, a relatively recent development that led to our species' largest population explosion. The first extensive region to produce enough to feed its resident populations spanned the lower Nile Valley, up through modern-day eastern Turkey, then down the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to the far edge of the Persian Gulf.

A sustained, five-note motive begins the section. What follows is a rolling bottom-to-top arc of a melody in 12/8, running from the lowest octaves to highest. Other rounded, mechanistic figures appear but retreat into an echo. The mid-section of the piece consists of a single chord in the bass, followed by a series of crotchet chords that slowly build up in pitch, volume and length of measure, before reaching a loud and sustained E, which repeats in a compressed rhythm. At this point, the entire section is played backwards and upside-down, a palindrome in retrograde, eventually settling on the five-note motive from the start of the movement, flashing back to small fragments from earlier, perhaps recalling a memory.

Jericho – It’s both a convenient truth and probable fiction that no wall has ever stood for long, including the biblical Jericho. Upon the very notion of the wall, I attempted to construct a dry, brittle imposing structure, repelling the unknown outside and keeping fast the occupants within. A pounding low-register barrage meets a fusillade that rises from a shaky foundation. A brief bi-tonal melodic section perhaps demonstrates an unsteady peace before the bricks are loosened, mortar is dislodged, and through a deafening din an eleven-stroke battering fulfills its intention; the biblical walls eventually tumble down.

Mean Temperament – This is of course a title with a double meaning; an indictment against our nature and a celebration of music’s innate ability to cut against it, rile a crowd, soothe a savage beast. After a very short and confused beginning, the work proceeds to repeat each of the available iterations of a single note, C, that exists on the piano. With only a couple of exceptions, the entire section is a bit of variation on, and homage to, a single pitch.

Double Helix – One of the most extraordinary innovations in history is the discovery of DNA and the unlocking of the genome, which of course provides as many ethical questions as it does potential responses to the existential problems of death, disease, longevity and more. The fragile DNA molecule is a double helix of nucleotides. The movement weaves together two disparate strands, with each hand playing in a different key, and which centers upon a rigorous and challenging fugue.

Confirmation Bias – This section was not at all a part of my original planning. It is inspired by one of the most enduring of human traits, or lack of more accurately: the innate ability to ignore facts in favor of what one already chooses to believe. Once I had the idea, this movement would write itself.

The music reflects this. Nearly every measure has the same falling half-step octaves -Gb, F – that tumble into an enigmatic chord. Around this obstinate motive, all manner of other music – at first simple but growing increasingly complex – tries to have its say. But the falling motive tolls incessantly despite various tempo changes, registers and textures, all of which try to bury it, and all to no avail. Bias tolls for thee.

Commonwealth – Marked “broad, stoic, with hope”, a series of slow, whole-note chords are established at the beginning of this final section, starting almost imperceptibly and increasing to deafening volume. From the final sustained chord, a plaintive melody emerges. It will be developed throughout the section, twisted and modified, but with its C Major center asserting itself as the music progresses. A series of stark and thundering chords leads chromatically down to a broad, widely-spaced C Major chord, over which a faint echo of prior music may be heard in the upper range. Some may note at least one quotation of another motive from another composer, a note of defiance in a world full of brutality and suffering. *Sapiens* ends with the top note of the piano, sounding or tolling, perhaps to infinity.

Sean Hickey

Hickey is for real and the music offers much to the symphonic enthusiast. Give this one your ears!

– GappleGate Reviews

...behind this scaffolding is a very personal artistic response to the huge breadth of music that was created in the 20th century when every tradition was challenged. In its reconciliation of these seeming polarities, it is very much music of our own time.

– New Music Box



Born in Detroit, Michigan in 1970, Sean Hickey's earliest music education began at age 12 with an electric guitar, a Peavey amp, and a stack of Van Halen records, the early ones of course. He studied jazz guitar at Oakland University, later graduating with a degree in composition and theory from Wayne State University. His primary instructors were James Hartway, James Lentini and Leslie Bassett.

After moving to New York, Sean pursued further studies with Justin Dello Joio and Gloria Coates. His works include a symphony (*'Olympus Mons'*), concertos for clarinet, cello, mandolin and recorder, two string trios, three string quartets, sonatas for flute and viola, a woodwind quintet and trio, numerous pieces for solo instruments, church, theater and orchestral music. Sean is also active as an arranger, contributing arrangements for various artists and ensembles in the pop and jazz music spheres. Hickey has been awarded numerous grants from the New York Department of Cultural Affairs as well as Composer Assistance Grants from the American Music Center to mount concerts of his work. He has fulfilled commissions for Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the St. Petersburg Symphony, New York's One World Symphony and North/South Consonance, the Adesso Choral Society, the Spain-based piano/accordion duo An-Tifon, 60x60, recorder virtuoso Michala Petri, and the saxophonist Timothy McAllister. His recording of chamber and orchestral works for Naxos American Classics, *Left at the Fork in the Road*, released in November

2005, broke the Billboard Top 100 Classical Chart upon release. Subsequent releases on the Delos label, *Concertos* and *Cursive*, feature his concertos for cello and clarinet, as well as numerous solo and chamber works. His music may also be found on *Our Recordings*, *Parma*, *Affetto*, *Prospero*, *Marquis* and other labels.

His principal instruments are guitar and piano. Other commissions include works for recorder virtuoso Michala Petri, cellist Dmitry Kouzov, pianists Xiayin Wang, Lara Downes, Carolyn Enger and Allison Brewster-Franzetti, clarinetists David Gould and Alexander Fiterstein, flutists Stefan Hoskuldsson and Marisa Canales, mandolinist Avi Avital, and violinists Ilya Gringolts and Yulia Sakharova. He is a recipient of eleven consecutive ASCAP awards and was named a semi-finalist in the Auros 2001-2002 Composition Competition, also winning second prize as a student in the 1990 State Awards in the former Yugoslavia. Recent years have seen numerous performances in New York, San Francisco, Detroit, Washington, Philadelphia, Vancouver, Russia, Spain, Portugal, England, Ireland, Indonesia and Brazil. Festival appearances include Cabrillo, the Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival and the New York Chamber Music Festival, the last of which he was part of the 10th anniversary remembrances of September 11th, 2001 with the memorial piece, *The Birds of Barclay Street*. He is an ASCAP member and was composer-in-residence for two years at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan and the Metro Chamber Orchestra in New York. The orchestral work, *Hitherto*, for the Whatcom Symphony Orchestra led by Yaniv Attar, met with great acclaim. His concerto, *A Pacifying Weapon*, was premiered and recorded by recorder soloist Michala Petri in Copenhagen. His works are published by Cantabile Publishing,

Gems Music, and Wolfhead Music internationally, and Muzyka in Russia. He also regularly lectures on his music, new media, and entrepreneurship for composers and musicians, and has appeared at Peabody, UCLA, New York University, The Royal Academy of Music, Danube University, Wayne State University, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and several others. Sean is the CEO of PENTATONE, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and one of the largest independent classical labels globally. Sean was the Senior Vice-President of Sales and Business Development for Naxos of America, the largest classical music label and distributor in the world. His work there encompassed the vast majority of classical music recordings released in the 21st century, overseeing sales and marketing for thousands of artists throughout the Americas, and representing Naxos as the leading label, distributor and classical music group.. Several of his recording and concert reviews may be found in the pages of *New Music Connoisseur*, *21st Century Music*, *Modern Dance* and numerous other publications. He is also a principal contributor to the *Omnibus Guide to Classical Music on CD*, has contributed liner notes to dozens of classical recordings and is a voting member and committee chair of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. His travel and adventure pieces have appeared in *Transitions Abroad*, the *Burlington Free Press*, *Trailworks*, *Trailsource*, *Orlando Weekly*, *ITN*, *Babylon Travel* and elsewhere. *Otra Dia*, a book of the writer's travels in Peru, was published by Cantabile Press. www.seanhickey.com

Vladimir Rumyantsev

With an innate aptitude for the piano's vast repertoire, Vladimir Rumyantsev stands out for his exceptional virtuosity. As proclaimed by the Moscow Times, this virtuosity feels like a natural gift, enabling him to articulate compositions of profound intricacy with ease and flair. His illustrious career has seen him illuminate stages at the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall, Steinway Hall in New York, Great Guild in Riga, Latvia, Moscow Philharmonic Hall, Dzintari Concert Hall in Latvia, and the Frick Museum in New York, among others. In 2002, he embarked on a notable tour across China.

A prodigious talent, Rumyantsev clinched the first prize at Moscow's Glinka competition at the tender age of seven and the first prize at the International Television Competition



of Young Musicians “The Nutcracker”. His winning streak did not wane; accolades from every competition he graced—including the International Piano Competition in Moscow, where he was honored with the President’s Award, the Alfred Schnittke International Piano Competition, the Ricard Viñes International Piano Competition, and more—bear testament to his prowess. Further adding to his accolades, during his tenure at Mannes, he was the triumphant winner of the 2015 Concerto Competition. He is also a winner of the 2023 Concerto Competition at The Hartt School.

Festivals across the globe have witnessed his brilliance. From the Baltic Sea Festival in Stockholm to the Ballet Russes in Boston, the Golden Mask Festival in Moscow, the Bermuda Piano Festival, The Art of Piano Duo in Boston, IKIF in New York, Mannes Summer Piano Festival in New York, and many more, Rumyantsev’s presence has been a hallmark of excellence. His riveting renditions of Shostakovich and Stravinsky Concertos spurred a cherished collaboration with the Mariinsky Ballet, leading to celebrated performances under maestros Valery Gergiev and Boris Gruzin at iconic venues like Covent Garden, the Mariinsky Theatre, Cardiff Opera House, and the Gergiev Festival in Mikkeli.

Rumyantsev’s foundational training was under the guidance of Mikhail Khokhlov at the Gnssin Moscow Special School for Music. This was followed by advanced training at the Moscow Conservatory with luminary Sergey Dorensky and eminent mentors such as Alexander Bakhchiev, Elena Sorokina, Nikolai Lugansky, Pavel Nersessian, and others. His academic pursuit led him

to the Mannes School of Music in New York, where he achieved Masters and Professional Studies degrees under the tutelage of Prof. Pavlina Dokovska.

Currently, Rumyantsev's vibrant journey encompasses solo and chamber concerts, CD recording endeavors, a pursuit of his DMA at The Hartt School with mentor Jose Santana, and treasured collaborations with theaters. As a sought-after soloist and chamber musician, his artistry continues to enthrall audiences worldwide.

Sapiens would not have been remotely possible but for the selfless support of a great many people, starting with my wife Catherine and daughter Sarah. To Yuval Noah Harari, who I consider to be perhaps the most stimulating thinker of our time, I owe an incalculable debt of gratitude for the inspiration and for every published word, all of which I believe I have read. Thanks to the folks at Sapienship for their blessing in composing a work inspired by the book, and to the folks at Harper Collins as well.

Extra special thanks go to my dear friends, Eleonor Bindman and Eli Gottesdiener, who were among the first to grasp my vision, provided the encouragement and support to tackle it, and for helping realize both the recording and the piece's composition. Thanks also to the both of them for allowing Vladimir to test drive the work fully in their Brooklyn home.

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Inspired by the book of the same name by Yuval
Noah Harari

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