



AMERICAN CLASSICS



# CHRISTOPHER ROUSE

## Symphony No. 5

Supplica • Concerto for Orchestra

Nashville Symphony  
Giancarlo Guerrero



## Christopher Rouse (1949–2019)

### Symphony No. 5 • Supplica • Concerto for Orchestra

Few contemporary American composers have been as significant as Christopher Rouse in revitalizing the appeal of orchestral music. His imaginative approach to the concerto and the symphony has resulted in a substantial body of works that made him one of the most frequently performed living composers during his own lifetime, and his *oeuvre* continues to show staying power following his death in September 2019.

Rouse grew up in his native Baltimore during the 1960s, when rock 'n' roll was blossoming into a kind of Renaissance phase. Traditional orchestral music, in contrast, was considered a dead end by many composers embarking on a career. Rouse made his name by turning that perception around, filling concert halls with the sounds of contemporary music that audiences wanted to hear. After earning degrees at Oberlin College and Cornell University, he studied privately with George Crumb. Rouse himself went on to become a prominent educator, teaching composition at the Eastman School of Music and The Juilliard School, where he mentored composers including Nico Muhly and Kevin Puts.

Several of Rouse's works engage with musical icons. His Pulitzer Prize-winning *Trombone Concerto*, for example, was written in 1991 to commemorate Leonard Bernstein. Completed in 2015, his *Symphony No. 5* was commissioned by the Dallas Symphony, the Nashville Symphony and the Aspen Music Festival. In this work, Rouse makes his own relationship with the orchestral tradition a thematic focus, coming to terms with his sense of what it means to be a successor to the great composers of the past.

"The first piece of 'classical music' I remember hearing," he wrote, "was Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. I was six years old and had been listening to a great deal of early, new-at-the-time rock 'n' roll; my mother said, 'That's fine, but you might like this as well.' It was a recording of the Beethoven symphony, and I remember thinking that a whole new world was opening up to me. I decided that I wanted to become a composer.

So when it came time for me to compose my own *Fifth Symphony*, my thoughts returned fondly to that time, and I resolved to tip my cap to Beethoven's mighty symphony. However, I wouldn't want to overstate the relationship. The opening of my symphony revisits the famous four-note rhythm of Beethoven's, but the notes are quite different, and things take a different turn after a few bars.

One of Beethoven's most radical decisions in his *Fifth Symphony* was to return to the music of the *scherzo* in the midst of his finale, and this led me to ponder the structure of my own piece. The first and last movements – both allegros – are discrete entities, but the 'slow movement' gives way to the *scherzo*, after which the slow movement returns and the *scherzo* once again succeeds it. This results in the blurring of lines between movements in the traditional sense.

As is often the case in my music, the language ranges freely – but I hope in an integrated way – between a dissonant language and a more consonant one. There is no programmatic element to the work, though I do hope to transport the listener through a series of emotional states, from turbulence to serenity."

The single-movement *Supplica* originated as a commission from the Pittsburgh and Pacific Symphony Orchestras. Rouse completed it in 2013, a few months after his *Fourth Symphony*. The composer felt an "inner compulsion to write" both works, yet was reluctant to disclose whatever personal significance *Supplica* held for him. Even on first encounter, it's difficult not to be drawn into the intimacy and passion of this music, which unfolds somewhat like the slow movement from a lost Bruckner or Mahler symphony. The sound world here is pared down to include only horns, brass, harp and strings, which makes an especially notable difference for listeners accustomed to other scores by this wizard of the

orchestra. Rouse's title is the Italian word for "entreaty" or "supplication," and the music indeed conveys the intense concentration and directed emotion of a prayerful plea.

The opening string and harp sonorities evoke an air of mystery, but one concerning a matter of vital importance. Rouse elicits wonderful shades on the dark end of the spectrum with his mournful harmonies. A shift happens near the center as the strings give vent to an aggressive outburst, tinged with dissonance and joined by full-throttle brass. But the protest fades out, only to build with slow deliberation. The string outburst recurs, as if the music has been stopped in its tracks by some unyielding force. *Supplica* ends in a state of elegiac resignation, with a long, drawn-out chord – clearly the endpoint of this meditative encounter and yet inconclusive, unresolved.

Starting with his *Contrabass Concerto* of 1985, Rouse returned frequently to this genre as a kind of archetype, writing concertos for a vast spectrum of instruments: violin, flute, cello, percussion, piano, guitar, oboe, trumpet, organ, and bassoon. The Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music commissioned his *Concerto for Orchestra*, which premiered in 2008. A collective concerto might sound like an oxymoron because we've been exposed so often to the Romantic legacy of the concerto as the Individual (superhuman soloist) versus Society (the orchestra). Bartók's great *Concerto for Orchestra* of 1943 opened the door to new ways of thinking about the concerto for later 20th-century composers and beyond – an antidote to this paradigm.

As in his *Fifth Symphony*, Rouse frequently addressed his own relationship with the classical tradition as a theme of his music, and in the *Concerto for Orchestra*, he in a sense

grappled with the paradigm of the concerto genre itself. This music could be heard as a "hyper-concerto," in that the orchestra musicians themselves become the soloists in lieu of a single soloist who serves as the center of attention. Rouse wrote that "each is given passages requiring everything from singing lyricism to challenging virtuosity, and this work is essentially 'about' allowing each player a chance to shine." The virtuosity required is intense, but the whole is much more than the sum of many solo excellences: it is the indefinable, symphonic synergy of the full orchestra.

Rouse observed that he wanted to move away from the standard concerto format and use a different kind of formal construction. The work is divided into "connected halves (the term being used loosely)," he wrote. The first half is cast in five relatively short sections of alternating tempos – fast, slow, fast, slow, fast. The fast subparts involve the same musical material and continue to develop it, but the slow ones introduce different material. For the concerto's second half, Rouse envisaged just two sections, slow and fast, where each is "meant to represent a sort of 'full blossoming' of the related ideas from their counterparts earlier on."

The result is a wonderfully colorful and dramatic sequence of contrast and juxtaposition that mingles virtuosity, orchestral lyricism and progressive symphonic development of ideas – all held in a thrilling balance. Rose hoped "to draw the listener in more and more as the work progresse[s], with the final allegro building to a frenzied, almost hysterical, climax."

Thomas May

Without music my life would have had no meaning. It has not only informed my life or enriched my life; it has GIVEN me life and a reason for living. I'll never be able to explain why these vibrating frequencies have the power to transport us to levels of consciousness that defy words – I simply accept the fact that music has this miraculous power for me and for myriad other people I have known.

My hope has been to do for my listeners what Beethoven and Berlioz and Bruckner and Ibert and all of those others who worked – and still do – for me. I've wished to 'pay it forward' by inviting listeners to call on me to enter their hearts and their lives and to allow me the honor of accompanying them on their road through life. If summoned I will try to be of use: to sing you a song, to paint you a picture, to tell you a story. Perhaps we can take a journey together. A caveat: I may sometimes take you to places you'll find it difficult to go, but my goal will always be at journey's end to provide you with solace and strength.

– Christopher Rouse

## Nashville Symphony



One of Tennessee's largest and longest-running nonprofit performing arts organizations, the Nashville Symphony has been an integral part of the Music City sound since 1946. Led by music director Giancarlo Guerrero and president and CEO Alan D. Valentine, the 83-member ensemble performs more than 160 concerts annually, with a focus on contemporary American orchestral music through collaborations with composers including Jennifer Higdon, Terry Riley, Aaron Jay Kernis, Michael Daugherty, John Harbison, Jonathan Leshnoff, and the late Christopher Rouse. The orchestra is equally renowned for its commissioning and recording projects with Nashville-based artists including bassist Edgar Meyer, banjoist Béla Fleck, singer-songwriter Ben Folds, electric bassist Victor Wooten, and composer Kip Winger. The Nashville Symphony is one of the most active recording orchestras in the US, with more than 30 releases. Together, these recordings have earned a total of 25 GRAMMY Award nominations and 13 GRAMMY Awards, including two for Best Orchestral Performance. Schermerhorn Symphony Center is home to the Nashville Symphony and widely regarded as one of the finest concert halls in the US.

[nashvillesymphony.org](http://nashvillesymphony.org)

## Giancarlo Guerrero

Photo: Łukasz Rajchert



Six-time GRAMMY Award-winning conductor Giancarlo Guerrero is music director of the Nashville Symphony and the NFM Wrocław Philharmonic in Poland, as well as principal guest conductor of the Gulbenkian Orchestra in Lisbon, Portugal. He has championed contemporary American music through numerous commissions, recordings and performances with the Nashville Symphony, presenting eleven world premieres of works by Jonathan Leshnoff, Michael Daugherty, Terry Riley, and others. As part of this commitment, he helped guide the creation of Nashville Symphony's Composer Lab & Workshop initiative. In North America, Guerrero has appeared with the orchestras of Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Toronto, and the National Symphony Orchestra. He has developed a strong international profile working with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Brussels Philharmonic, Deutsche Radio Philharmonie, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra, and the London Philharmonic Orchestra. An advocate for music education, he works with the Curtis Institute of Music, Colburn School, the National Youth Orchestra (NYO2) in New York, and the Nashville Symphony's Accelerando program, which provides intensive music education to promising young students from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

[giancarlo-guerrero.com](http://giancarlo-guerrero.com)

Christopher  
**ROUSE**  
(1949–2019)

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|---|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| ❶ | <b>Symphony No. 5 (2015)*</b>         | <b>30:00</b> |
| ❷ | <b>Supplica (2013)</b>                | <b>12:19</b> |
| ❸ | <b>Concerto for Orchestra (2008)*</b> | <b>29:02</b> |

**\*WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

**Nashville Symphony**  
**Giancarlo Guerrero**

Recorded: 5–8 October 2017 ❶ and 11–13 April 2019 ❷ ❸  
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Center, Nashville, TN, USA

Producer: Tim Handley

Engineers: Gary Call ❶, Trevor Wilkinson ❷ ❸

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**AMERICAN CLASSICS**

Few contemporary artists have been as significant as Pulitzer Prize and GRAMMY Award winner Christopher Rouse, whose imaginative approach made him one of the most frequently performed composers during his lifetime. The *Concerto for Orchestra* is a ‘hyper-concerto’ that gives each player a chance to shine, while the mournful intimacy and passion of *Supplica* unfolds somewhat like the slow movement of a Bruckner or Mahler symphony. Rouse’s *Fifth Symphony* fondly recalls Beethoven’s mighty *Fifth* but blurs the lines between tradition and modernity, transporting the listener from turbulence to serenity. It was described as “brilliant, exciting and at times hauntingly beautiful” in *The Dallas Morning News*.

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Playing  
Time:  
**71:32**