

ARTS

Film composer
Elliot Goldenthal's
first symphony will get
its world premiere at
the Pacific Symphony's
American Composers
Festival in Costa Mesa.

BY TIMOTHY MANGAN
CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Elliot Goldenthal, the acclaimed film composer who turned 60 on Friday, recently finished writing his first symphony.

There are several unusual things about the work, but perhaps the most unusual is that he wrote it for free.

As Goldenthal describes it, the chance to write a symphony was an offer he couldn't refuse. Or a journey he couldn't resist. It was recording producer Richard Guérin, curator of the Pacific Symphony's American Composers Festival this year, who approached him about it.

"This opportunity came up and it's like, 'Uh, hey, do you want to take a trip to Antarctica?' " Goldenthal said, speaking metaphorically. " 'It's a scientific expedition, do you want to go? There's no money, but do you want to do it?' OK, yeah. Sometimes you do things for love: Monetary considerations weren't the first priority."

Speaking on the phone recently from his part-time home in the Yucatan, Goldenthal said the new symphony has no title per se, and no number. It is just called *Symphony in G-sharp minor*. The key is uncommon, for a symphony at least. A quick online search revealed that there are no canonic symphonies written in the key. Otherwise, the best-

SEE GOLDENTHAL • PAGE 3

Elliot Goldenthal says composing a symphony was a liberating experience.

MARCO GUERRA

A story
**WITHOUT
PICTURES**



MARCO GUERRA

Film composer Elliot Goldenthal won an Academy Award for his score for "Frida," and he was nominated for his work on "Interview With the Vampire" and "Michael Collins."

GOLDENTHAL: Premiere

FROM PAGE 1

known piece (and that not much at all) is Russian composer Nikolai Myaskovsky's Symphony No. 17, written in 1937.

In five sharps, G-sharp minor can present certain difficulties for an orchestra, but it's comfortable for Goldenthal. He says that when he was growing up, his family had a spinet piano that had a G sharp with "a certain resonance that was unlike any other note on the piano; it was just that piano. I was completely fascinated with that sound." As a result, the first pieces he started to compose were in G sharp, both minor and major.

FORMAL CHALLENGE

Conductor Carl St.Clair and the Pacific Symphony will give the world premiere of Goldenthal's symphony Thursday as part of their annual event devoted to American music, this one focused specifically on concert music composed by Hollywood film composers.

The program will include performances of "Tributes! For Seiji" by John Williams, written to celebrate the 25th anniversary of conductor Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony; "Mythic Gardens" by Howard Shore, a cello concerto written for Sophie Shao, who plays it here; and "Flight" by James Horner, written to be performed live as accompaniment to an aerobic show.

None of the composers is new to the concert stage, including Goldenthal, who has composed, among other works, an opera, "Grendel," for Los Angeles Opera in 2006 (it became a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize); and "Fire Water Paper: A Vietnam Oratorio" for the Pacific Symphony in 1996.

Many, if not most, film composers have written music for concert performance, of course. Their concert pieces have rarely met with much success, however, for a variety of reasons, among them a bias against film composers, who make a good living writing "commercial" music as opposed to answering to their own muse and starving.

But film composers face more than just bias. In



FILE PHOTO: THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Goldenthal, left, and his longtime companion, director and screenwriter Julie Taymor, pose with actors Russell Brand and Helen Mirren at the 2010 premiere of "The Tempest" in New York.

writing concert music, they face a challenge not encountered when writing for film, namely, form, or musical architecture. The architecture of a film score is dictated by the film itself, the images, the lengths of scenes, dialogue, the situations, etc. The architecture of a concert work is usually based on something more abstract: the musical content itself. The piece must accomplish everything on its own. But much of the concert music written by film composers doesn't "work" in a manner that is effective when performed on stage and without the benefit of synchronous images.

"I don't want to disagree with you," Goldenthal says in response, "but rather I want to be supportive of cinematic composers that have another gift, not form per se. But they're very, very gifted in melody and that's a strong thing. Per-

haps Bellini didn't have the formal capacity that a Wagner had or a Mozart had, but certainly Bellini's melodies are just gorgeous. And I can go on and

on with various other examples. You know, Tchaikovsky is perfect, but George Gershwin, for example, didn't have the greatest formal grip on things, but the charm and the swagger of the music is just unbeatable."

ON HIS OWN

Goldenthal - who was nominated for an Academy Award for his scores for "Interview With the Vampire" and "Michael Collins" and won one for his score for "Frida," a film directed by his longtime companion, Julie Taymor - actually grappled with a filmic demand in his symphony: It had to come in at 22 minutes. Other than some by Haydn and perhaps one by Sibelius, Goldenthal said, there aren't many symphonies that are that

short.

"It was a challenge" making it that length, he said. "Because I tend to be expansive, and develop ideas in a slow disclosure kind of way." He spent a lot of time cutting down the finale to size.

The piece is in two movements, the first slowly evolving and expansive, about 14 minutes in length, but "it feels longer. It feels like you had a languorous experience with the notes."

The second movement is a contrast - it's "very dense, it's compact, in terms of its brass writing, string writing and percussion entrances near the end. And the notes are jagged and there are a lot of rhythmic shifts. If it was twice as long, it would create ear fatigue." But since it's only eight or nine minutes, he said, an audience can comfortably manage it.

Goldenthal added that the new symphony has a concerto for orchestra feel, as well, but not in the virtuosic sense. He wants the audience to feel "the power and persuasiveness" of the sections of the orchestra and of individual instruments, "just the sonority of a harp and a bassoon or various sections being featured in the orchestra, as opposed to blocks of orchestral sound." A "trialogue" between three percussionists breaks out at one point; Goldenthal hopes to position them antiphonally in Segerstrom Concert Hall.

As for the general musical style of the symphony he says it's not much different from his score to "Alien 3" or most of his other film scores.

In all, Goldenthal says composing the symphony was a "liberating" experience, worth writing for no fee.

"In Movieland, you're one cog in this big machine - the editing, the sound effects, and all the performances, the director's vision," he said. Composing a symphony, you're on your own, no compromising, no collaboration, "in the service" of the music alone.

"It's really an enjoyable thing."

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FILE PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Goldenthal is flanked by director Mira Nair, left, and Taymor at last year's New York Foundation for the Arts Hall of Fame induction ceremony.