



**BMOP**  
*sound*

**DEREK BERMEL: VOICES**  
DUST DANCES | THRACIAN ECHOES | ELIXIR

**DEREK BERMEL** b. 1967

DUST DANCES

THRACIAN ECHOES

ELIXIR

VOICES, FOR SOLO CLARINET AND ORCHESTRA

**DEREK BERMEL** clarinet

**BOSTON MODERN ORCHESTRA PROJECT**

GIL ROSE, CONDUCTOR

[1] **DUST DANCES** (1994) 9:26

[2] **THRACIAN ECHOES** (2002) 19:23

[3] **ELIXIR** (2006) 7:21

**VOICES, FOR SOLO CLARINET  
AND ORCHESTRA** (1997)

[4] I. Id 6:43

[5] II. She Moved Thru the Fair 5:46

[6] III. Jamm on Toast 6:12

**TOTAL** 54:54

**By Derek Bermel**

From an early age, I was obsessed with the orchestra. During my preteen years I would return from the public library with armfuls of LP records—Stravinsky, Bartok, Debussy, Berg, Mussorgsky, Ravel, Copland, Britten, Webern, Messiaen, Ives. During the same period my knowledge of jazz was deepening. When my grandmother bought me a beat-up piano for \$300 (she overpaid), I immediately began to reenact the works of Thelonious Monk and Bill Evans. It would take a decade—and three more orchestral attempts—before I developed sufficient technique to make a clear personal statement that melded my love for the orchestra and for jazz.

This synthesis came in the form of *Dust Dances*, based on my four months spent in Northwest Ghana in 1992, learning to play the Dargara *gyil*—a 14-key xylophone, ancestor of the Western marimba. I was already familiar with jazz's European harmonic heritage, but through studying West African music I delved more deeply into its African rhythmic and melodic roots. In writing *Dust Dances*, my intention was to turn the orchestra into a gigantic *gyil*, using rhythm and color—rather than harmony—to establish the architecture of the piece. I was lucky enough to get a reading with the American Composers Orchestra, and it was via this opportunity, with Paul Dunkel as conductor, that *Dust Dances* first came to life.

In 1996, I returned from Amsterdam to New York with an exciting new commission from ACO. For several years I had been exploring ways in which the myriad of sounds made by the human voice—speaking, singing, laughing, shouting, mumbling, wailing, singing, and many others—could be notated and performed in chamber music. I decided to pursue this

idea in the orchestral realm by writing myself a clarinet concerto. My thoughts immediately turned to two of my favorite musicians, bass clarinetist Eric Dolphy and bassist Charles Mingus. Their conversational rapport inspired the first movement—called “Id”—and the rest of the concerto followed from there. I dedicated *Voices* to my father, who taught me an enormous amount about theatre. The outer movements more fully embrace my jazz background—using techniques including glissandi, growl tones, and flutter tongue—with a nod to the bittersweet “keening” of Irish folksong in the middle movement.

Another tradition that had always fascinated me was Bulgarian folk music. In August 2001, I traveled to Plovdiv, Bulgaria, where I spent six months learning the Thracian folk style with clarinetist Nikola Iliev. Each day I spent hours transcribing and memorizing the songs in different keys. Several months later, during a residency at the American Academy in Rome, I began to sketch *Thracian Echoes*, a commission from the Westchester Philharmonic. I set out to meld the tension of the tight, soulful harmonies of Bulgarian choral songs with the infectious rhythmic energy of the instrumental music, a juxtaposition of mournful and manic. The melodies seemed to contain echoes within the phrases themselves, as though a sort of nostalgia was present even in their primary iterations; this hypnotic quality served as a starting point for the piece. The work is dedicated to my mother, from whom I get my love for melody, and for song in general.

A few years later, the composer John Adams asked if I would write a short piece for a concert he was conducting with ACO. This generous gesture led to *Elixir*, commissioned by Betty Freeman. I had been studying scores of Gérard Grisey, especially *Les espaces acoustiques*, and I strove to incorporate some of his spectral techniques into a sensual piece that involved instruments dispersed throughout the hall. The theremin was an afterthought, but its distant quality proved to be the magical seductive ingredient in the sonic potion.

The orchestra continues to hold a great attraction for me because it is an unusual example of collective humanity in our digital era; it is, after all, the largest musical community. Each of the works on this disc addresses the daunting challenge of sharing a particular concept or experience with seventy or eighty musicians; playing in—and writing for—orchestra demands neighborliness, an acute awareness of other beings, an embrace of timbral diversity, a wide expressive range, a sensitivity to nuances of color and texture. The orchestra's very improbability as a mode of contemporary expression demands transformation—physically, psychologically, and spiritually—an essential component of the compositional process.

I recognize that, as I attempt to render my fanciful dreams to an audience, something vital will surely be lost in translation. However, nestled within this very “failure” is the seed of creation; from it grows an abstract piece of music that transcends my original intentions to become an independent, breathing entity. In this way, the orchestra continues to be a magical starting point for my impossible dreams. As Samuel Beckett wrote, “Fail again. Fail better.” I embrace that compelling, unending quest.

*DUST DANCES* was written in 1994 and premiered by the Norwalk Symphony Orchestra in May 1998. The work is scored for full symphony orchestra.

*THRACIAN ECHOES* was commissioned and premiered by the Westchester Philharmonic in November 2002. The piece is scored for full symphony orchestra.

*ELIXIR* was commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra with support from Betty Freeman, and co-commissioned by the Westchester Philharmonic.

It received its world premiere in May 2006 and is scored for full symphony orchestra, two harps, and theremin.

*VOICES* was commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra. The work was premiered with the ACO at Carnegie Hall in May 1998 with the composer as soloist. It is a three-movement work scored for clarinet and orchestra.

### By Richard Scheinin

For Derek Bermel, the human voice is the doorway to composition. His music is filled with moans, groans, murmurs, and sighs. Choruses of wah-wahing trombones are everywhere and it's easy to hear the gospel and soul influences in the works of this singular composer, surely the only one on the contemporary scene who has transcribed Stevie Wonder's outrageously melismatic vocals on “Songs in the Key of Life,” (one of Bermel's favorite albums).

But as much as Bermel's music mimics the voice, literally, and at times in wildly humorous ways, he also goes beyond that to communicate in a much broader sense: he *composes* in the key of life. Drawing on the most unlikely source materials—the sighs and moans

of jazz or soul; the ornamental inflections that pepper Bulgarian folk songs and Irish ballads; the dancing, buzzing modalisms of the West African *gyil* xylophone—he lifts them up, turns and inspects them, answers them from a distance, varies them, and builds up thickening textures, line upon line, echoing and transforming all of it, before reducing the storm, often, to a spare, iridescent haze. And another thing: Bermel recognizes a good tune and knows how to write one.

Born in 1967 and raised in Manhattan and nearby New Rochelle, Bermel has assimilated influences from Monk to Messiaen; from Dolphy to Debussy; from the Beatles to Bartok; and from Richard Rodgers to the rapper Rakim. Now living in Brooklyn, he is the singer, keyboardist, and percussionist in the New York-based rock band Peace by Piece, while serving as music director of the Dutch-American arts group TONK. He has studied the *gyil*—a Lobi xylophone—in Ghana with Ngmen Baaru, a master player, and clarinet in Bulgaria with Nikola Iliev, a legendary virtuoso in the Thracian folk tradition. On the classical side, his composition teachers include Henri Dutilleux and Louis Andriessen, as well as Andre Hajdu (who helped fuel his interest in Jewish and Arabic folk music) and William Bolcom (with whom he shares a love of jazz). If that isn't enough, Bermel the composer has a parallel career as a clarinet recitalist and soloist; just listen to his remarkable performance here on *Voices*, his clarinet concerto. Bermel uses his instrument to hiccup and howl, growl and guffaw, but also to “sing” as sweetly as an Irish tenor.

The four orchestral works on this CD comprise a journey, spanning the better part of two decades and mining Bermel's worldwide source materials. Probably because he understands those materials on a basic level as *song*, all four compositions have a freshness about them, an improvisatory spirit and a closeness to the vernacular that is unique. Yes, this is classical music with all its requisite structure and development. But just as Haydn and Mahler built folk songs into their compositions, Bermel melds the popular music he knows and loves into his works. In a musical landscape populated by composers who don't know how to communicate, Bermel boldly stands out.

*Dust Dances* (1994) opens this CD with a physical blast: Dust clouds are flying in the parched streets of a Ghanaian village as a circle of drummers and *gyil* masters create what sounds like a stampede of rhythm and song [1]. At least that's how I imagine it: Bermel composed the piece after returning from a summer studying the *gyil* in northern Ghana in 1992 and his music seems fired by the experience.

The *gyil* has 14 (sometimes 18) keys of mahogany, each bound to a wooden frame and each with its own gourd resonator. It resembles a marimba and produces a pentatonic scale, with several of the notes falling, like blue notes, in the cracks between the pitches of the Western chromatic scale. Bermel has punched up the harmonic structure, while weaving a sashaying dance beat through much of the piece. Essentially, in his re-imagining of traditional celebration songs and funeral songs, he has transformed the orchestra into a gigantic *gyil*. The wafting of colors, the spinning of rhythm, texture and mood, the choreographed through-line of events: Bermel's moving parts are many. There are huge lumbering gestures and delicate night sounds; parties and funerals; moments of shimmering stasis that give way to *clave*. And I swear I see elephants on the horizon with each swaggering blast of trombones. It's as if Bermel has waved a magic wand over the Ghanaian landscape, creating this vivid portrait in sound. It feels alive.

The impact of these particular performances won't be denied; conductor Gil Rose and BMOP are working from inside the notes, releasing the dusty heat and beauty of Ghana. In *Thracian Echoes* (2002), they seem to be stationed somewhere in the Rodopi Mountains of Bulgaria, high on a peak, where, from the work's opening gesture, a glissed ascent of a whole tone, they release clouds of sadness into the fogs of history [2]. Bermel visited this region in 2001 to study with clarinetist Iliev in the city of Plovdiv, then traveled west to Sofia to research the close harmonies of choral songs.

With *Thracian Echoes*, Bermel has said he aims to “fuse the mournful with the manic aspects of the Bulgarian spirit.” Its 19-plus minutes are saturated with grief and mem-

ory. In fact, as melodies rise and transform themselves, they carry their own echoes or footsteps, retracing what has only just occurred. Unfolding as an incantation, the music moves step by step and inevitably toward the dance—breakouts of infectious Balkan melody and groove. Now the orchestra has become a giant village band, though Bermel isn't purely imitative of folk tradition. He mixes in woozy, comical low strings or tips his hat to Stravinsky earth-songs and Mingus moods. There are even flowerings of Gershwin: a "Rhapsody in Thrace" of sorts with cameo for clarinet, here affectingly played by BMOP's Michael Norsworthy. It all feels authentic, because this spirited work (premiered by the Westchester Philharmonic in November 2002) carries its own echoes of the composer's musical memories and inspirations.

For the short, potent *Elixir* (2006), Bermel lists as inspirations composers Meredith Monk and Toru Takemitsu, as well as Olivier Messiaen and his spectralist protégé Gérard Grisey; also, John Lennon, the Magnetic Fields, and jazz singer Cassandra Wilson, whose earthy sophistication seems a good model for what transpires here [3].

Because while this work is gloriously rarified—Bermel calls it a "spectral love potion"—it has a spare, soulful essence. I can imagine Bermel picking out the chords at his piano, maybe going into a bit of a trance as he coaxes his harmonies along. Listen to the way they rise up and repeat throughout their orchestration, sensuously marked out by electric bass, quarter-tone partials in the strings, and the quiet, heavenly doubling of melody by the theremin. Commissioned by Betty Freeman for Bermel's Music Alive residency with the American Composers Orchestra, *Elixir* was premiered at Carnegie Hall in May 2006, with Steven Sloane conducting. The score calls for antiphonal wind choirs in the balconies, providing call-and-response counterpoint to the main action on stage. But for all its concert-hall logistics, the piece is a heart-song, carrying Bermel's love of spirituals and the incense-tinged jazz of the late '60s.

Finally, there is *Voices* (1997), the clarinet concerto, also commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra (with support from the Mary Flagler Cary Trust), which premiered the piece in May 1998 at Carnegie Hall with Bermel as soloist and Tan Dun conducting.

A summation of Bermel's expansive talents and musical interests, it unfolds in three movements. "Id," the first, is steeped in Bermel's love of African-American vocal expression—specifically, the improvised "conversations" that woodwind genius Eric Dolphy recorded with bassist Charles Mingus in the early '60s [4]. With this foundation, Bermel confabulates a world from sliding pitches—a street-corner conversation comprised of voice-like squawks, murmurs, shouts, growls, and guffaws, with all sections of the orchestra pitching in.

"Id" segues to the second movement, "She Moved Thru the Fair," inspired by the traditional Irish song of that name [5]. And here we enter a gentler world, lyrical and softly ululating, like a set of *uilleann* pipes. His clarinet lines, rich with grace-note embellishments, convey the "keening" quality of so many Irish singers. It's more heart-song, this movement, set amidst a billowing orchestration that is almost cinematic.

Finally, there is "Jamm on Toast," which finds the drummer's ride cymbal leading the orchestra through a funk jam-out [6]. Bermel's cadenza, with its greasy virtuosity, is an astonishment. Filled with jubilant, clashing voices, this, again, is a *physical* piece: The score asks the musicians to play "Phat and juicy," which must be a first in the classical repertory. Conductor Rose and BMOP carry out the composer's instructions to the max, winding up with a massed, fatback shout.



**Derek Bermel** has been described by *The Toronto Star* as “an eclectic with wide open ears,” the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* as “one of America’s finest young composers,” and has been widely hailed for his creativity, theatricality, and virtuosity. Bermel’s works draw from a rich variety of musical genres, including classical, jazz, pop, rock, blues, and gospel. Hands-on experience with music of cultures around the world has become part of the fabric and force of his compositional language.

From 2006 to 2009, Bermel served as the Music Alive Composer-in-Residence with the American Composers Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, and also received commissions from the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, the National Symphony Orchestra, the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, the Pacific Symphony Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Westchester Philharmonic, the New York Youth Symphony, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, WNYC Radio, eighth blackbird, the Guarneri String Quartet, Music from China, De Erepijs (Netherlands), Jazz Xchange (UK), Figura (Denmark), electric guitarist Wiek Hijmans, cellist Fred Sherry, and pianists Christopher Taylor and Andy Russo, among others. His many awards include the Alpert Award in the Arts, the Rome Prize, Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellowships, the Trailblazer Award from the American Music Center, the Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Paul Boylan Award from the University of Michigan, the Quinto Maganini Award, the Harvey Gaul Prize, the Lily Boulanger Award, the Brian Israel Prize, and residencies at the Tanglewood Music Festival, the Aspen Music Festival, The Banff Center, Bellagio, Copland House, Sacatar, Yaddo, and the Civitella Ranieri Center.

In 2006, Bermel performed as soloist alongside Wynton Marsalis in his *Migration Series*, a work commissioned by the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra and ACO. He also appeared as clarinet soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic in conductor/composer John Adams’ *Gnarly Buttons*, and as soloist in his own concerto *Voices* at the Beijing Modern Music Festival. The Philharmonia Orchestra also produced an all-Bermel concert as part of its Music of Today series at Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. Highlights during the 2008 season included the Pittsburgh Symphony’s premiere of *The Good Life* for chorus and orchestra, *Golden Motors*, a music-theatre collaboration with librettist/lyricist Wendy S. Walters, and a return to Carnegie Hall for two premieres: a Koussevitzky Commission for ACO conducted by Maestro Dennis Russell Davies, and as soloist in the world premiere of Fang Man’s clarinet concerto. In 2009, Bermel served as Composer-in-Residence with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. A CD of his large ensemble works was released in fall of 2009 by the group Alarm Will Sound.

Bermel has collaborated with artists in a wide variety of genres, including playwright Will Eno, filmmaker Kevin Jerome Everson, installation artist Shimon Attie, landscape architect Andy Cao, choreographer Sheron Wray, performance artist Kim Jones, composer David Reid, poets Wendy S. Walters, Mark Halliday, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Albert Bermel. As an educator, he founded the groundbreaking Making Score program for young composers at the New York Youth Symphony, and regularly leads masterclasses at universities, conservatories, and concert venues worldwide. Bermel holds B.A. and D.M.A. degrees from Yale University and the University of Michigan. His music is published by Peermusic (North/South America & Asia) and Faber Music (Europe & Australia).



LIZ LINDER

**Gil Rose** is recognized as one of a new generation of American conductors shaping the future of classical music. His orchestral and operatic performances and recordings have been recognized by critics and fans alike. In 1996, Gil Rose founded the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP), the leading professional orchestra in the country dedicated exclusively to performing and recording music of the 20th and 21st Centuries. Under his leadership, BMOP's unique programming and high performance standards have attracted critical acclaim and earned the orchestra nine ASCAP awards for adventurous programming and the John S. Edwards

Award for Strongest Commitment to New American Music. In 2007, Mr. Rose received Columbia University's prestigious Ditson Award and an ASCAP Concert Music Award for his exemplary commitment to new American music. Since 2003 Mr. Rose has also served as Music Director of Opera Boston, an innovative opera company in residence at the historic Cutler Majestic Theatre.

As a guest conductor, Mr. Rose made his Tanglewood Festival debut in 2002 conducting Lukas Foss' opera *Griffelkin*, a work he recorded for Chandos and released in 2003 to rave reviews. In 2003 he made his guest debut with the Netherlands Radio Symphony conducting three world premieres as part of the Holland Festival. He has led the American Composers Orchestra, the Warsaw Philharmonic, the National Symphony Orchestra of the Ukraine, the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and the National Orchestra of Porto, as well as several appearances with the Boston Symphony Chamber Players.

In June 2003, BMOP and Opera Boston together launched the much-celebrated Opera Unlimited, a ten-day contemporary opera festival featuring five operas and three world premieres. Mr. Rose led the world premiere of Elena Ruehr's *Toussaint Before the Spirits*, the New England premiere of Thomas Ades' *Powder Her Face*, as well as the revival of John

Harbison's *Full Moon in March* with "skilled and committed direction" according to *The Boston Globe*. In 2006 the Opera Unlimited Festival presented the North American premiere of Peter Eötvös' *Angels in America* to critical acclaim.

Also recognized for interpreting standard operatic repertoire from Mozart to Bernstein, Mr. Rose's production of Verdi's *Luisa Miller* was hailed as an important operatic event. *The Boston Globe* recognized the production as "the best Verdi production presented in Boston in the last 15 years." Mr. Rose's recording of Samuel Barber's *Vanessa* for Naxos has been hailed as an important achievement by the international press. He was chosen as the "Best Conductor of 2003" by *Opera Online*. He made his Chautauqua Opera debut in 2005 with a production of *Lucia de Lammermoor* and in the 2007–08 season he led the Boston premiere of Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar* with Dawn Upshaw as well as a revival of Verdi's *Ernani*.

Gil Rose's extensive discography includes world premiere recordings of music by Eric Chasalow, Lukas Foss, Charles Fussell, Michael Gandolfi, John Harbison, Lee Hyla, Tod Machover, Steven Mackey, Stephen Paulus, Bernard Rands, George Rochberg, Elena Ruehr, Gunther Schuller, Reza Vali, and Evan Ziporyn. Upcoming releases include works by composers Louis Andriessen, Derek Bermel, John Cage, Robert Erickson, David Lang, and David Rakowski. His world premiere recording of the complete orchestral music of Arthur Berger was chosen by *The New York Times* as one of the "Best CD's of 2003."

The **Boston Modern Orchestra Project** (BMOP) is widely recognized as the premiere orchestra in the United States dedicated exclusively to commissioning, performing, and recording music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Founded in 1996 by Artistic Director Gil Rose, BMOP's mission is to illuminate the connections that exist naturally between contemporary music and contemporary society by reuniting composers and audiences in a shared concert experience. In its first ten seasons alone, BMOP programmed over 50 concerts of contemporary orchestral music; commissioned more than 20 works and presented over 40 world premieres; released 13 world premiere recordings; and collaborated with Opera Boston to produce staged performances of contemporary operas including the Opera Unlimited festival of contemporary chamber opera.

In addition to its regular season at Boston's Jordan Hall, the orchestra has performed in major venues on both the East and West Coasts and collaborated with internationally based artists and organizations. A nine-time winner of the ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming of Orchestral Music and recipient of the prestigious John S. Edwards Award for Strongest Commitment to New American Music, BMOP has appeared at Tanglewood, the Festival of New American Music (Sacramento, CA), and Music on the Edge (Pittsburgh, PA).

In 2008 BMOP launched its signature record label, BMOP/sound. Additional BMOP recordings are available from Albany, New World, Naxos, Arsis, Oxingdale, and Chandos. BMOP CD's are regularly reviewed by national and international publications including *Gramophone*, *Fanfare*, *BBC Music*, *American Record Guide*, *The Chicago Tribune* (Best CD's of 2004), *Time Out New York* (Best CD's of 2004), *The Boston Globe* (Best CD's of 2003), and *The New York Times* (Best CD's of 2003).

Composers are at the core of BMOP's mission, and BMOP has hosted a Composer in Residence each season since 2000. In recognition of the importance of this position, Meet The Composer and the League of American Orchestras awarded BMOP one of six three-year Music Alive grants for a collaboration with composer Lisa Bielawa.

CLIVE GRANGER



Dedicated to discovering and advocating for the next generation of composers and audiences, BMOP is committed to encouraging and extending the new music community. Beyond the concert hall, BMOP's trend-setting Club Concerts bring "the music formerly known as classical" to downtown venues, and its in-depth outreach programs provide mentors and workshops for teenage composers in underserved communities.

BMOP's greatest strength is the artistic distinction of its musicians and performances. Each season, Gil Rose gathers together an outstanding orchestra of dynamic and talented young performers, and presents some of the world's top vocal and instrumental soloists. *The New York Times* says: "Mr. Rose and his team filled the music with rich, decisive ensemble colors and magnificent solos. These musicians were rapturous—superb instrumentalists at work and play."

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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—Derek Bernel



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## Derek Bernel

Dust Dances | Thracian Echoes | Elixir | Voices, for Solo Clarinet and Orchestra

Producer Gil Rose

Recording and editing Joel Gordon and David Corcoran

*Dust Dances*, *Thracian Echoes*, *Elixir*, and *Voices* are published by X Pyre Music, under exclusive license to Songs of Peer, Ltd. (ASCAP). All Rights Reserved. *Dust Dances* and *Voices* were recorded on November 22, 2005 at Mechanics Hall (Worcester, MA). *Thracian Echoes* was recorded on November 6, 2006 at Mechanics Hall. *Elixir* was recorded on December 3, 2007 at Mechanics Hall.

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*Iriinaland ueber dem Balkan /  
Iriinaland over the Balkans* (1969)

Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY



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*Die Wohnungen haengen an der Unterseite der Wiesen /  
The apartments hang from the underside of the meadows* (1970)

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