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Douglas Lilburn's Symphony No. 2

A Brief Background and Analysis

by **Matthew Davidson**

The work and the New Zealand composer discussed herein are not well-known to North American listeners. This is unfortunate, as a number of Lilburn's works are quite endearing, and a few are quantifiably exceptional. There is a marvellous recording of Lilburn's Second Symphony on a Naxos CD, 8.555862, *Douglas Lilburn: The Three Symphonies* performed by the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra under the baton of James Judd. The writer of notes for this CD is Robert Hoskins, and in it he talks of "galloping-horse rhythms," "musterer's whistles," and a "panorama of steep and rocky slopes." While these notes are great fun to read, it concerns me greatly that some listeners might be unintentionally misled into thinking that Lilburn's work is somehow a kind of "New Zealand *Fingal's Cave* Overture" when in fact this work is far more important than that. I strongly doubt that Lilburn had any programmatic intentions in the creation of this work. There is much discussion in New Zealand about Lilburn's (and this work's) importance, but I

have yet to see much detail as to exactly, using musical terminology, *why* and *in what way* it is so important. It is absolutely imperative that quantifiable steps be taken in this direction, so that what I believe is a significant contribution to the symphonic literature can be understood within the context of the history of the genre.

Symphony No. 2 was published by Price Milburn Music in New Zealand in 1979. The company has subsequently fallen foul of the economic times, and gone out of business. The acquisition of the study score is virtually impossible, so I am fortunate indeed to possess a copy.

I intend to move along the following path in the discussion of this work: a short background on Douglas Lilburn; a brief discussion of his stylistic approach; a short overview of the Symphony No. 2; and a brief analysis of the 1st and 2nd movement.

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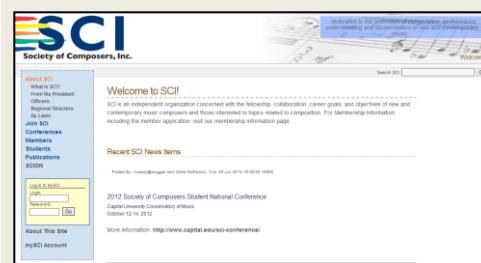
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Douglas Lilburn's Symphony No. 2: A Brief Background and Analysis

(Continued from Page 1)



Douglas Lilburn inside the electronic music studio, Victoria University, Wellington. Photograph by Mervyn Desmond King. Lilburn, Douglas Gordon, 1915–2001: Photographs. Ref: PAColl-0675-06. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22830748>

A New Zealand Trailblazer

Douglas Lilburn (1915–2001) grew up in rural New Zealand, but eventually studied journalism and music at Canterbury University in Christchurch, and went on to learn composition with Ralph Vaughan Williams at the Royal College Music in London, UK. He stayed at the college from 1937–39. He ultimately wound up teaching at Victoria University of Wellington.¹

Musicians in modern-day North America would have extraordinary difficulty in truly understanding the significance of Douglas Lilburn in the history of New Zealand music; to say that he was the “Aaron Copland of New Zealand music” would be an understatement. New Zealand concert music as we know it today would be *unimaginable* without Lilburn. For years during the early part of his career in the 1940s he was literally the *only composer* of serious music in New Zealand.² Combine to this the fact that he was a gay man living at a time when homosexual men could be imprisoned or publicly flogged according to the

statutes of New Zealand³, and it might be possible to imagine the profound and overwhelming social and artistic isolation that this man must have felt.

There is a very telling Radio New Zealand interview between composer Jack Body and Lilburn which took place in 1975. In it, Body asks Lilburn what he puts on his tax return as his profession, whether it might be “composer”; Lilburn states, with characteristic Kiwi humility, that it is “musician” as he does not take himself so seriously anymore.⁴ Lilburn also states emphatically that he feels that New Zealand does not have the tradition to have a “national style”, however, he intelligently delineates that what makes New Zealand music interesting is its “eclecticism” (one could say much the same thing about Canadian and American concert music).

A Lifetime of Eclecticism

An eclectic quality is clearly obvious in the complete oeuvre of Lilburn. Most writers determine three main periods of creativity for him.⁵ His first period of creativity (approximately 1936–55) was more overtly romantic and “tonal”, and includes the second symphony of 1951. During the second period (1955–63) he started to experiment with serialism, which culminated in his Symphony No. 3, a work which deserves a separate article in itself. His final period was filled exclusively with electronic music (1963–79). That a man at the height of his creative powers would so drastically change course in his creative direction, in a way that most musicians wouldn’t even consider, shows extraordinary humility.

A justifiably celebrated television interview exists (now available on Youtube.com) in which Douglas Lilburn

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas_Lilburn

² <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/612/lilburn-douglas-gordon/page-2>

³ http://www.thearts.co.nz/artist_page.php&aid=98&type=essay&essay_id=34, <http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/whatson/exhibitions/sliceofheaven/exhibition/Diversity/Pages/GayRights.aspx>

⁴ [http://www.douglaslilburn.org/audio/jack_body_and_douglas_lilburn\(1975\).mp3](http://www.douglaslilburn.org/audio/jack_body_and_douglas_lilburn(1975).mp3)

⁵ <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/612/lilburn-douglas-gordon/page-3>

discusses an electronic work he wrote, and how he tried to recreate the sound of a Huia (an extinct New Zealand bird) through using raw material of bird sounds, only filtered, to create a single, short sound which he then wove into an electronic work.⁶ This interview, in my opinion, shows Lilburn's main *modus operandi* throughout his creative life. But this is just an electronic work, isn't it? In reality, the Maurice Ravel who wrote *Pavane pour une infante défunte* is still basically the same composer who wrote *Gaspard de la Nuit*; the Alban Berg who wrote the song "Nachtigall" in the *Seben Frühe Lieder*, is ostensibly the same Berg who wrote *Leid der Lulu*; similarly, the man who wrote *Glass Music* is still the same one who wrote *The Second Symphony* of 1951.

What this interview reveals most of all, is how his creativity is centered upon not just attention to detail, but also the microcosmic; further, how he weaves the microcosmic into the monumental. It is an unusual ability—to take small melodic and rhythmic fragments and gradually distort and manipulate them to create different melodies and motifs so that works of a long duration become completely and cyclically developed. It is one of the things that makes the *Second Symphony* a work of exquisite craftsmanship, and it is key to understanding the work.

An Antipodean Symphony

Lilburn's *Symphony No. 2* is divided into four movements: I. Prelude; II. Scherzo; III. Introduction; IV. Finale. Each movement is in one sustained mood, which I would describe as follows: (I) confident but restrained; (II) triumphant yet playful; (III) plaintive; (IV) pastoral yet playful. It is written for 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets in A, 2 bassoons; 4 horns in F, 3 trumpets in C, 3 trombones; timpani and strings. The key structure for each movement is (I) C major; (II) A major; (III) "D minor"/"dorian mode"/final cadence on V^{#5#7} (or possibly just a B⁺ triad imposed upon a G⁺ triad); (IV) C major. The third movement is so chromatic that ascribing it a key is somewhat difficult. Nonetheless, the quality of orchestration in the third movement is such that it

is sometimes reminiscent of the last movement of Tchaikovsky's 6th *Symphony* in its use of "lush" string writing (in this instance through the use of divisi in strings—see **Example 1**). Further, its use of the clarinet as the first solo instrument in the movement is reminiscent of Rachmaninov's *Symphony No. 2*.

Example 1. Lilburn, *Symphony No. 2*, III, mm. 39–43, © 1979 Price Milburn Music (now defunct).

The opening and ending dynamics for each movements are (I) piano/piano; (II) forte/fortissimo; (III) piano/piano; and (IV) piano/fortissimo. So there is a certain balance amongst the dynamics as well as the "keys" of each movement.

Movements 1 & 2

There has been much comparison in the press between Lilburn's work and that of Sibelius.⁷ But a cursory glance at the Sibelius work which most resembles Lilburn's reveals more differences than similarities. For instance, Sibelius also starts his own *Symphony No. 2* in 6/4 but he uses no accidentals at the beginning, nor any hint of modality. At the beginning of the first movement of the Lilburn, we see a vacillation between the chromatic motifs in the violas of G to F-sharp to G, to B to C (**Example 2**) and a change almost immediately thereafter to the modality of B-flat to C (**Example 3**).

⁷ http://www.classicalsource.com/db_control/db_cd_review.php?id=813, http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2006/Nov06/Lilburn_Orchestral_8557697.htm, <http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/acc/lilburn.php>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pM-Q-vDqPU>



Example 2. Lilburn, Symphony No. 2, I, mm. 1–4, violas and cellos.



Example 3. Lilburn, Symphony No. 2, I, mm. 5–6, violas.

This also marks the beginning of motivic development throughout the symphony; motifs will turn gradually into melodies, using intervals of slowly increasing size. These first bars, 1–19 make up an “introduction”. But that might be a misnomer in the “classical” sense, because this material reappears at significant passages in the first movement. Measure 19 ends with what might be called a vii^{o4}_3/V in C major; were it not for the fact that only three notes were present in the chord (F-sharp, E, C), thereby creating tonal ambiguity. Measures 20–38 begin with the oboe playing the first truly recognisable melody, initially based on major seconds (**Example 4**, an inversion of the end of **Example 2**).



Example 4. Lilburn, Symphony No. 2, I, mm. 22–8, oboe solo.

One will have noticed as well a shift in keys from C major to B minor (in addition, accompanied by the same motif which is played by the cellos in m. 1, **Example 1**, in the bass clef). Measures 38–48 are announced by a new motif made up of an ascending second and descending major third. Then a new (fourth) motif occurs which is also made up mostly of major seconds, but opening with a fourth, the largest opening interval thus far, beginning from mm. 49–53 (this motif appears again mm. 167–70). It moves to F-sharp minor 6/4 chord by m. 57, progressing to a dominant preparation of C major (repeated V chord) starting 61–72, but instead “cadencing” on the Neapolitan of D-flat major with the melody of the “introduction” (which we now realize is not an introduction, but an integral part of the overall structure of the movement) and finishing with the melody

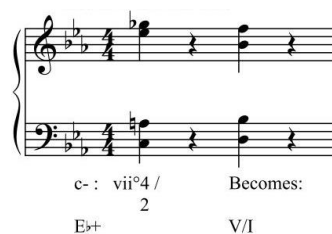
seen in **Example 3** (only in C minor, but cadencing again in C major at m. 83).

I am highly resistant to dividing sections of sonata forms into “first theme” and “second themes” primarily because Mozart wrote a baker’s dozen of melodies and then-some per sonata, and Haydn made an enviable living from writing mono-thematic sonata forms (amongst other things). For that reason, I would warily give this first movement the appellation, “episodic sonata form” due to the episodic nature of the structure and the numerous motifs/melodies, their intervallic relationship to each other, the movement’s changing to various tonal centers, and eventual return to the original “home key”. Space prevents me from detailing all the interesting characteristics of the “development section” (mm. 95–197), but some highlights include a short imitative section played by the trumpets based on the first interval of the first motif (a minor second), and the second motif which is based on a second and a third at mm. 39–40. There is also some clever antiphonal passages between strings and brass, and constant harmonic shifting from “B-flat major” (m. 101), to “E major” (m. 109), to B-flat major (m. 110), to A major (m. 131). A dominant preparation with the opening cello rhythm and the strings playing part of the trumpet “imitative section” (m. 186–97) leads to the “recapitulation” at m. 198 in C major with the melody of the “introduction” followed by the “first melody” from mm. 22–8 in **Example 4**, only played by woodwinds and strings. The recapitulation also highlights the aforementioned “first melody” played by trumpets in C minor, being taken over by the strings which moves to C major, followed by a dramatic unprepared move to E major (the “dominant” of the tonic key of the next movement) at m. 224 with the “introduction” theme (**Example 2**), emphasized by the timpani playing the opening motif of the cellos in **Example 2** (m. 227). Because of this “tonicization” of “E”, we hear the true tonic (C major) as being the lowered-VI chord of E major. The timpani keeps striking ‘E’ with the opening cello motif, but by m. 249, we have moved to E minor, and with no real “cadence,” (e.g., the violins 1, 2 and violas playing G, E, and G respectively, with the cellos playing the melody notes B, C, D, and C—the notes D to C being an inversion of the

major second found in the end of **Example 3**). The tonicization of E, is like a musical joke—getting the listener to think that Lilburn will end on the dominant of the second movement. But then a move is made back to C major.

I have always believed that the art of good orchestration might be dubbed as “The Art of Judicious Doubling,” and the final bars of this movement might be a case in point. At m. 249, the third degree of the E minor chord is doubled by the first violins and violas. As any student of harmony knows, we double the tonic note first, the dominant second, the median last is that doubling “destabilizes” the chord. This indeed, is what it does, and enables the move back to C major.

I need to spend a couple of lines explaining what I mean by a “musical joke”—by using Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony as an example. Although thigh-slapping slapstick does not immediately spring to mind when we discuss Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, we are not talking about that kind of joke, but something more subtle. Consider the two chords which lead from the “first group” to the “second group” in the exposition section (**Example 5**). The first of the two chords is $\text{vii}^{\circ 4}_2/\text{VII}$ in C minor. Of course, this would make no sense in traditional or classical era music, so at this point, we would say that we were modulating to E-flat major, and that second chord becomes V/I in E-flat major. When the chord returns in the recapitulation (**Example 6**), the first chord is exactly the same as before—except, the G-flat is spelled differently, as an F-sharp. This completely changes the function of the chord, and it becomes a $\text{vii}^{\circ 7}$ chord of V/I in C major. A joke is often something where we expect one thing to happen, but then another occurs. Now that I have rendered humour unfunny by explaining it, we can see what I mean by a musical or harmonic joke. The chord sounds the same, but because it is spelled differently, it moves us to a different tonal center. We find these kinds of “jokes” throughout the music of the classical and romantic era. And I am going to explain how Lilburn uses them to great effect in the Scherzo of his symphony.



Example 5. Beethoven, Symphony No. 5, I, mm. 56–8.



Example 6. Beethoven, Symphony No. 5, I, mm. 300–2.

To cite the example of the Sibelius 2nd Symphony again, in that work find the second movement beginning with a timpani drum roll. While this is pleasant, it is not as sophisticated as the timpani writing in the Lilburn.

The second movement of the Lilburn also uses motives of small intervals, and the opening of it has the timpani imitating cellos and double basses at the end of the first bar with a third of C-sharp to A (instead of the usual dominant-tonic relationship found in timpani parts). The first and second violins play A–F-sharp at m. 4 in preparation for the first recognizable melody in the Scherzo at mm. 9–12.

Like most of the motifs and melodies in the first movement, **Example 7** is mostly made up of thirds and seconds. This melody is then taken up in free variation by the strings in mm. 18–24, where we find a move to C major, with the first trumpet playing a motif of G to F-sharp which we found in **Example 2**. Coincidence? I believe there are no coincidences in this work. A sequence based on thirds played by the winds is accompanied by the strings with the rhythmic motif which we found accompanying the first oboe melody as seen in **Example 8**. (The motif played by the second violins in **Example 8** becomes the rhythmic foundation of the entire movement).



Example 7. Lilburn, Symphony No. 2, II, mm. 10–2, oboe solo.



Example 8. Lilburn, Symphony No. 2, II, m. 11, 2nd violins.

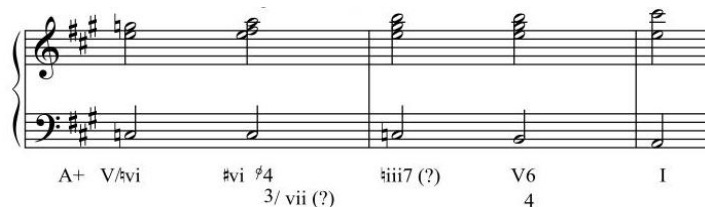
The sequence mentioned above turns into a second sequence with both the winds and strings, and brings back the opening oboe melody played by strings as before. A second section in the key of the subdominant (despite that there is no key signature change) arrives at m. 44 with the melody in **Example 9** (which can be clearly seen to be derived from the first oboe melody of mm. 9–12).



Example 9. Lilburn, Symphony No. 2, II, mm. 44–5, clarinet solo.

It is also based on thirds and seconds with, in fact, the same minor third in the opening melody from A to F-sharp. North American listeners might hear the constant use of minor thirds (e.g. m. 53 in the first violins, m. 54 in the cellos and basses) as a “blue note”, but having studied in England, and most likely having studied the music of Purcell (as this author did while a resident in New Zealand), I suspect that Lilburn heard this as a “false relation”. The combination of the clarinet, violas, and French horns playing a “crushed note” on the second m. 55 adds a comic touch without making it “cartoon music”. The end of the second section at mm. 71–2 are marked with a motif of three eighth notes played by double bass and timpani, and becomes the basis for much development in the third section of the movement (the motif is heard before at mm. 37–8 in the flutes, oboes, first and second violins and violas). An interlude begins with a flute solo using this motif accompanied by basses (an unusually colourful use of orchestration). The sequence based on thirds is repeated again mm. 86–91 by the strings, with the cellos and bass constantly repeating the note C-natural. When a note is repeated like this with a slowly changing figure over the top of it, it could be construed to be a “dominant preparation” even though the dominant note of A major is E. So we must hear it as an attempt to modulate to the lowered-VI chord (F major). Nonetheless, the C natural

moves to B to A at m. 93 with the chords in **Example 10**.



Example 10. Lilburn, Symphony No. 2, II, mm. 92–3, strings and clarinet.

Before I become accused of “imposing Rousseau upon Bach,” I believe we are presented herein with “non-directional harmony” in the second and third chords presented in **Example 10**. This pretence of modulation to another tonal center is another example of a “musical joke,” and it is ingenious. So, the movement above is more contrapuntal than harmonic. Further, in his use of small numbers of contrapuntal voices with either a number of winds, strings, or brass, Lilburn’s use of orchestration more closely resembles that of Shostakovich or Tchaikovsky than Sibelius.

The introduction to the last new section of this compound rounded binary movement (ABACA) uses the strings *divisi a 3*, playing chords originally played by the brass, one set of strings playing pizzicato, the other bowed. It then moves to the key of the Neapolitan, B-flat major. The constant use of the rhythmic motif found in **Example 8**, is compelling, particularly when it is combined with an augmented free inversion of the opening motif played by the timpani, cellos and basses, but played by clarinets, bassoons and cellos. This combining of previous fast rhythmic material with augmented and tied melody notes is redolent of the fifth (*Presto delirando*) movement of Alban Berg’s *Lyric Suite* (which I suspect Lilburn probably did not know about at the time of the Symphony’s composition). In another ingenious move, after the melody is modified, he modifies it again (mm. 130–4) as yet another inversion! Previous material is repeated after that, but with slight variation. When the strings play the opening melody at m. 182 (as when it was repeated the first time), the first trumpet plays a triumphant figure starting at low A to two octaves above by means of the harmonic series

(showing how well Lilburn understands good brass writing) and the high A hammers home how this note was most important when the melody first appeared. A rousing ending is complimented by the use of an "organ tone" in the French horns on the tonic note (Example 11).

The image displays a page of a musical score for Douglas Lilburn's Symphony No. 2, II, measures 189-94. The score is written for a full orchestra. The top section includes staves for woodwinds (flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons) and brass (trumpets, trombones, tuba, euphonium). The bottom section includes staves for strings (violins, violas, cellos, double basses) and percussion (timpani, snare drum, cymbals, triangle, etc.). The music is in 2/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. Dynamics such as *ff* (fortissimo) and *sfz* (sforzando) are indicated. The score is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature of 2/4.

Example 11. Lilburn, Symphony No. 2, II, mm. 189-94.

This particularly effective piece of brass writing one might expect to find in a symphony by Bruckner, but certainly not in a scherzo.

Conclusion

In some of Lilburn's chamber works, as well as in his 1st Symphony, I sometimes hear the composer "struggling" with his aims; that is, to create several independent voices simultaneously sounding, using diatonic and modal melodies

comprised usually of small intervals. I hear no such struggle in his Second Symphony; it seems that he has truly mastered his musical language with a work that sounds at ease with itself. It is almost as if, having at last achieved a complete mastery, he moved onto completely different musical languages shortly thereafter.

I believe I have demonstrated that Lilburn was both a master orchestrator and a master of extended forms. It is my opinion that the third and fourth movements are not as arresting as the Scherzo. However, the question that begs to be asked in that case is *why is the Scherzo the most dynamic and potent movement of the entire symphony?* A scherzo is supposed to be a light-hearted respite from the relative storm of the other movements. Did Lilburn's inspiration fail him for the other movements? Listening to the radio interviews that exist of him, Lilburn gives the impression of an extremely intellectual fellow, with every word exactly in its place when he speaks. It would follow logically that every one of his notes should be in the right place, as well. But recall, also, that he said he tries not to take himself too seriously. Perhaps then, the character of this work manifests the character of its creator. Maybe it does not take itself too seriously, and this was Lilburn's intention. I believe this to be the case—and it is a very innovative concept for a symphony.

Consider also the coordination of dynamics between the movements, and how any composer can end a first movement of a work with loud flourish; it takes restraint, cultivation, and subtlety to end a movement quietly, especially the opening of a symphony. His use of harmony (and its intentional lack of direction at times) and creation of "musical jokes" is redolent and worthy of the language of Schumann, Chopin and Brahms. It is clearly romantic and 19th-century in its language, yet could only have been written in the early 1950s. His use of orchestration is demonstrably more influenced by Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich than by Sibelius. These things being said, I would like, then, to proffer the following opinion:

Perhaps it could be an "inconvenient truth" that the most effective "tonal" post-World War II symphony was created by the child of a mountainous island (to paraphrase James K.

Baxter, New Zealand's most celebrated poet), and that its discovery by the world outside of the South Pacific is long overdue.

Acknowledgements

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SCITINGS: MEMBER NEWS & ACTIVITIES

SCItings

Member News and Activities

Performances, Awards, Commissions, Honors, Publications and other Member Activities.

Stas Omelchenko

On May 2, 2012 the St. Ambrose University-Community Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Kira Horel, gave the premiere of *Et Nebulae Nubis Nubilum* for orchestra and projection in the Allaert Auditorium of the Galvin Fine Arts Center.

David Smooke

On May 11, 2012 the premiere of *Nutshell Miniatures of Unexplained Death*, a concerto for amplified toy piano and chamber orchestra was given with the composer performing the solo toy piano part along with Great Noise Ensemble conducted by David Vickerman at the Atlas Theater in Washington, D.C. On the same evening The Atlantic Guitar Quartet premiered Smooke's *Topographies 2: (maps and) distortions* in Baltimore at the Engineer's Club.

Robert Denham

The premier of Denham's oratorio *Under the Shadow* for orchestra, choir, and mezzo-soprano and tenor soloists was given on May 16, 2012 by the Pacific Chamber Orchestra and Biola University Chorale under the direction of Carl St. Clair with Su-

san Ali and Tyler Thompson singing.

Nick Drake

The dedication concert of the new pipe organ at Saint Mary's Basilica in Phoenix on May 20, 2012 included Drake's *Exhortation*, commissioned for this event, performed by Gordon Stevenson.

Andrea Reinkemeyer

Wrought Iron for flute and percussion was premiered May 20, 2012 at the Albany Symphony's American Music Festival.

Jessica Rudman

On May 21, 2012 the Mivos Quartet premiered *Half Turn to Go Yet Turning Stay* at the CUNY Graduate Center Elebash Recital Hall.

Nicholas Vasallo

Vasallo's *In Another Time* for chamber winds was premiered by the CSU East Bay Chamber Winds under the direction of John Eros on May 22, 2012.

Robert J. Bradshaw

In Columbus, Georgia on May 23, 2012 the premiere of Bradshaw's ballet, *The Girl in White* was given by James Ackley (trumpet), The Palmetto Camerata and The Columbus Ballet.

Adrienne Albert

In May, 2012 at the International Horn Symposium at the University of North Texas, Albert's *UnCivil Wars* was premiered by

The Zinkali Trio (Elise Carter, flute; Susan LaFever, horn and Laura Ravotti, piano), who commissioned the work.

Nicholas Vasallo

Shred for string orchestra was premiered by the CSU East Bay String Orchestra under the direction of Philip Santos on June 7, 2012

Owen Davis

The premiere of Davis' tuba quartet *Drift* written for Las Tubas de Tucson was given at the 2012 International Women's Brass Conference in Kalamazoo, Michigan on June 8, 2012.

Alex Temple

On June 12, 2012 Fifth House Ensemble premiered Temple's *Party at the Last Resort* as part of the Rush Hour Concert Series at St. James Cathedral in Chicago.

Timothy Kramer

On June 23, 2012 as part of the Utah Arts Festival the premiere of Kramer's *Lake Effect* for chamber ensemble was conducted by Andrew Rindfleisch at the Salt Lake City Public Library.

Evan Williams

On July 6, 2012 clarinetist Arianna Tieghi premiered Williams' unaccompanied work *the waters wrecked the sky* at the 2012 International Summer Arts Institute at the Scuola Communate di Musica Giacomo Puccini in Cittia di Castello, Italy.