

## About *Counting Time in Central City*

There are several temporal narratives woven through *Counting Time in Central City*. The first of these is the 35-year history of Central City Chorus which commissioned this work to celebrate their 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary and gave its world premiere performance on June 4, 2016 at Saint Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Since the mid-1980s, CCC has performed a broad range of music from all time periods and has been a strong advocate for contemporary music—they have previously commissioned works by Kristin Kuster, Elliot Z. Levine, and James Bassi, among others, and also gave the New York City premiere of Carol Barnett's fascinating, completely idiomatic bluegrass mass. The stylistic voraciousness and versatility of the chorus informed many of my musical decisions, such as the incorporation and melding of techniques, scales, and rhythms with origins in medieval Europe, East Asia, and Latin America to set a group of three quintessentially New York vernacular poems.

The number 35 serves as an important and perhaps overly obsessive grounding for my music. All the metronome markings are multiples of 35 and the score is even notated on exactly 35 pages! More importantly, the key formulations I made about pitch and meter are rooted in this number which has resulted in an elaborate purely musical narrative involving highly regulated pitch stratifications calculated to compliment metrical patterns precisely pulsed in metronome markings which are all proportionally related to each other and are all multiples of 35. (These different beats come together only once, in the last movement, setting the words "the conceit that time counts (and can be counted)," a phrase that is echoed in the title of the composition.) Although the music I have written is aesthetically very different, my way of thinking about meter and pitch is deeply influenced by Elliott Carter (1908–2012), a composer whose life (spent mostly in New York City) spanned 105 different years (which, as luck would have it, is also a multiple of 35) and who was an avid poetry reader and setter of verse. I'm deeply honored that this received its first performance at the same venue where Carter's entire musical output for chorus—composed mostly when he was in his 30s—was performed in his presence in honor of his centenary in 2008.

To further clarify my own compositional processes: in the first movement, the pitches in each seven-beat measure are restricted to only five choices—7 x 5. The music is not pentatonic in an orthodox sense because, although no more than five pitches can ever be together in any single measure (with one exception, more on that later), there can be a different group of five from measure to measure. Then in the second, each five-beat measure can contain any pitch from a full seven-note scale—5 x 7. But in the last movement, there's a twist. Each measure contains just six notes (a diatonic scale missing a note) and is (mostly) in 6/8 rhythm—6 x 6—which comes out to 36. The 35<sup>th</sup> season of Central City Chorus is the sixth with its current music director, Phillip Cheah, an extraordinary singer who together with my wife, keyboardist Trudy Chan, has premiered both of my song cycles for solo voice and piano. So I thought that his 6th year with CCC should also be celebrated. But this idiosyncratic musical rendering of the number 36 is also a nod to CCC's future beyond this season which begins right after the concert on which this music will premiere and which is why it is only one of the three movements in which there are meter changes. After all, they will undoubtedly be singing a wide variety of music in the years to come!

Charles Passy's three poems about the passage of time are chock full of their own narrative implications and his words have had a very direct impact on my music. Septuple time (7/8), which sounds slightly too short, seemed particularly apt for a setting of his poem "Daylight Savings." Similarly, I used a slowly moving quintuple meter (5/4), which sounds somehow too long, to further accentuate the wistfulness of "The Almost Winter." The final poem, "Dreaming of Lechón," cried out for Latin rhythms as well as the use of a pair of *claves*, a hand percussion instrument that is ubiquitous in salsa. Passing allusions in the poems to "The Star Spangled Banner" and "La Isla Bonita" demanded very specific musical interpretations; upon occasion, other words suggested that the rules of the musical narrative I outlined above sometimes needed to be broken. E.g. although I had set up a rule for myself that I could not change the five pitches I was using until the end of a measure in my setting of the first poem, I could not "discount the possibility of miracles." Similarly, to convey having "missed the point," I cheated and added a seventh note in a measure that was only supposed to contain six, etc.

Finally there's a deep personal narrative behind all of this. I was approached by Phillip Cheah to write a piece for Central City Chorus' 35<sup>th</sup> season in part because they wanted to sing something written for them by a New York City-based composer since they specifically wanted to celebrate their place in the New York City musical landscape. I've lived here all of my life; I actually grew up in Midtown Manhattan—which is the de-facto center of this central city. When pondering what text I should set, it immediately was clear to me that the words should also be by a New Yorker. Charles Passy grew up literally around the corner from me. When Central City Chorus made its debut 35 years ago, Charles and I were preparing to graduate from the High School of Music and Art and both sang in the school's Senior Chorus. He was an aspiring journalist whose greatest joy was writing poetry, while I was an aspiring composer who dabbled in journalism mostly as a way to advocate for things I was passionate about. We both wound up staying in Manhattan and attending Columbia University. Though much has changed over the course of the three and half decades since then, much has remained the same. Now, when I am not writing music, I am writing about music, talking about it, or editing NewMusicBox, the web magazine from New Music USA. Charles is a staff writer for *The Wall Street Journal* whose articles on topics ranging from personal finance to music, food, and drink have appeared in many publications over the years, but my favorite writings of his are still his poems though I had never set them before. Composing *Counting Time in Central City* has offered me an invaluable opportunity to finally respond the best way I can to some of his poetry and to reflect on a friendship that has now lasted much longer than 35 years.