

COMPOSER SUSAN BOTTI'S ASO RESIDENCY BRINGS PREMIERE THIS WEEKEND

MUSIC | JANUARY 31, 2017 | 0 | BY MICHAEL HUEBNER

Since 2009, **Alabama Symphony Orchestra's Sound Investment**

program has brought eight composers-in-residence to Birmingham, yielding an impressive array of performances

and commissioned works. It has played a pivotal role in thrusting the orchestra into the spotlight as purveyors of new American music, through ASCAP awards, national press and its **2012 Carnegie Hall debut**.

Building on that momentum in 2017 is **Susan Botti**, whose 14-minute work, "Glaze," will debut Friday and Saturday, Feb. 3-4. The ASO commission, which was inspired by Botti's love for pottery, will draw on the lucid, transparent textures that are at the heart of Botti's music. Critics have described her work as "a haunting distillation of drama without words," "grappling with real emotional and psychological issues in fresh and modern terms," and "full of lovingly crafted sonic details that gleamed and disappeared."

Botti is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Rome Prize, among numerous others awards and honors. "EchoTempo," a work that will be heard Feb. 16 on ASO's **Sound Edge Festival**, was a New York Philharmonic commission. A former University of Michigan faculty member, she currently teaches at the Manhattan School of Music and Vassar College. She is also a noted soprano who performs many of her own pieces.

Susan Botti

In addition to Botti's "Glaze," this weekend's **Masterworks program** will feature the renowned clarinetist **Richard Stoltzman**, who will solo in Elie Seigmester's Clarinet Concerto. Also on the program are Charles Ives' "Country Band March," Duke Ellington's "Three Black Kings," John Adams' "Lollapalooza" and George Gershwin's "An American in Paris." Music Director Carlos Izcaray will lead the final program in "American Rhapsody," a festival that is celebrating American music.

At the **Sound Edge Festival (Feb. 10-18)**, Botti will perform in her Shakespeare-inspired "Telaio: Desdemona" on Feb. 14, and "EchoTempo," a work for soprano, percussion and orchestra set to Native American poetry.

ArtsBHAM caught up with Botti between residency engagements, which included working with students at Ramsay High School.

artsBHAM: Much of your music is inspired by other art forms. How did that evolve?

Susan Botti: I have always loved pottery, ceramics and glass making. In a museum in Taipei, there was a Chinese bowl brought to Taipei before the Cultural Revolution. I remember going down a narrow hallway and standing in front of this pot. It was the most beautiful I've ever seen. Then I was in Turino, Italy, where they had an Egyptian exhibition. Here again I was amazed by a piece of pottery. I found a wonderful book on glazing — how contemporary ceramic artists approach glazing and colors. It was an excuse to enter into another dimension. The term "Telaio" describes the frame that's made in weaving, so we get these threads of what people say and it emerges through that. With "EchoTempo," I consciously did not listen to Native American music because I did not want to be doing an imitation, so I focused on Navajo poetry in text translations. I was very careful about that. It's an incredible world — four different nations, each a different world.

artsBHAM: Is the ASO commission, "Glaze," which will premiere Friday and Saturday, an example of that kind of inspiration?

Susan Botti: Absolutely. The piece is inspired by the idea of glazing. Having a couple of profound experiences in museums, I was struck by the humbleness of making a pot. Some pieces that were created a thousand years ago, shaped by somebody's hand and accidentally changed when they went into fire. As you start learning more about the process, it becomes a metaphoric process — the idea that you created something hands on and put it into fire, where anything can happen. It's an interesting meditation. I suppose performance is a form of putting it into the fire. We let go, pass it on and it becomes something else, yet there's still this human connection.

artsBHAM: During the Sound Edge Festival, you will perform "Telaio: Desdemona" at WorkPlay, How will that dynamic differ from the traditional concert hall?

Susan Botti: "Desdemona" is very theatrical. It'll be interesting to see how it works on that stage.

My background is in theater, where you enter into different worlds of theater literature. In “Desdemona,” I wanted to do a character piece. Also, it’s a fascinating look at how this character is revealed to us by what other people say about her. In fact, more is said about her than she actually says in the play. As a young actress, I had studied the character of Desdemona and was fascinated by Shakespeare’s portrayal. Verdi cuts the whole first act (in the opera “Othello”), which is all of her stuff. I felt there was something there to explore.

artsBHAM: How does a composer make her or his mark in a competitive 21st century market?

Susan Botti: I really can’t go there. I don’t seek to do that. As a composer and performer, I’m around a lot of other composers. I worked with Tan Dun a dozen years before he became a superstar, but also with composers who no one has ever heard of, but who are still tremendous composers. I’m so grateful for the opportunities I’ve had. Marketing is such a huge aspect. I’m self-published, so I do what I can to get stuff out there. For “Glaze,” I met Carlos (ASO music director Izcaray) when he was performing “Desdemona” with me and the reviewer of the concert was Pierre (Ruhe, ASO director of artistic planning). That has been much of my career. This person led to that person.

artsBHAM: Is 21st century music beginning to expand, change or mix with other types of music?

Susan Botti: I have a great respect for all genres of music. Being honest and being who you are is the most important thing. As humans we need to categorize, group things. I had this moment in a course I was teaching on cross-genre, and a student was presenting Gothic, a special form of metal. There was this incredible conversation about what genre this is. There are defenders of genres because it’s human nature to do that, but it’s a very interesting time for composers because you can bring everything you’re involve in to your music.

artsBHAM: How does your Birmingham residency compare with others you have done?

Susan Botti: It’s a wonderful residency – so well conceived and integrated. I’ve done residencies before, a few with orchestras, working with high school kids. I’m so appreciative of the breadth of it. Usually you’re working in isolation as a composer, so it’s almost a shock to the system when you finish a piece and have an intense engagement of bringing it out to the world. It’s been nurturing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MICHAEL HUEBNER

MICHAEL HUEBNER has written about classical music, dance, visual arts, travel and various other topics since graduate studies in music composition at the University of Kansas in the late '70s. For 10 years, he wrote for the Kansas City Star as a freelancer, and another 10 for the Austin American-Statesman. He joined the Birmingham News staff in 2001, recently leaving that position after 13 years with the News and AL.com.