

# The Mercury News

## Danny Elfman — Hollywood Composer, Oingo Boingo Mastermind — Crosses Over to Classical

By Georgia Rowe; March 7, 2018



Danny Elfman is talking about composers. Not just the ones you might expect from his knowledge of film scores — John Williams, Max Steiner and Elfman’s all-time hero, Bernard Herrmann — but names from the world of classical music: Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich.

That’s because Elfman is crossing over. After composing hundreds of scores for film and television — “Batman” and “Beetlejuice,” “Pee-wee’s Playhouse” and “The Simpsons” theme song among them — the award-winning composer has written a violin concerto.

“Eleven Eleven” for Violin and Orchestra, co-commissioned by the Czech National Symphony Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Stanford Live, makes its U.S. premiere March 10-11 in Stanford’s Bing Hall. John Mauceri conducts, and violinist Sandy Cameron, for whom the concerto was written, is the soloist. The program also includes works by Leonard Bernstein and William Walton.



Elfman's move from Hollywood to "serious" music might seem unexpected. Yet, in a wide-ranging phone call from his home in Los Angeles, which he shares with his wife, actress Bridget Fonda, and their son, the composer said it was characteristic of his approach.

"I have an impulsive way of getting into things without thinking it through," said Elfman. "It's kind of normal for me to get a challenge — a throw-down — and go 'Sure!' And then later go 'Who said that? Was it my doppelganger or me?'"

In this instance, the throw-down came from Prague. A few years back, Elfman was there for a performance of a concert of music he wrote for director Tim Burton's movies — Cameron was the soloist for the work's "Edward Scissorhands" cadenza — and one of the orchestra's reps asked him to write a

concerto for the violinist. "I said 'OK, a violin concerto — it can't be that difficult,'" he recalls.

Actually writing it, he admits, was harder than he'd imagined. "It was a process of education and assimilation," he says, one in which he listened to dozens of scores (Shostakovich's Violin Concerto No. 1 was a favorite) and then started composing, bringing to bear everything he's learned about writing for orchestra in his work for Hollywood.

"I just started it like I start everything," he says. "I wrote lots of ideas. I probably started with an hour and 20 minutes of music and kind of whittled it down."

Central to his approach was the idea that 20th-century concert music has become too rarefied. "So much of it is music that I could never play for my family — they'd just be mystified by it," he said. "I started wondering: 'Why is it necessarily that way?' In the past, classical music was written so anybody could hear it and appreciate it. I was trying to find a way of bridging that weird gap."

Composed in four movements and running about 40 minutes, "Eleven Eleven" is perfectly serious. But it's still Elfman. The composer, who worked in theater for nearly a decade and was the frontman of the legendary alt-rock band Oingo Boingo before embarking on a Hollywood career, says he tried hard to make the concerto rhythmically

intense – and fun. “There are definitely some frisky moments in it,” he says. “I always want to end things with a bit of a bang.”

“Eleven Eleven” premiered at the Prague Proms last June and repeated in Hamburg in September. The Scottish Symphony will record and perform the work later this year.

In the meantime, Elfman has already written and premiered another concert work, a piano quartet which was commissioned by the Berlin Philharmonic Piano Quartet.

And he intends to keep writing for the concert hall; in fact, his goal is one new piece each year. There could be blowback, he says, but that’s fine.

“I know I’m stepping into this other world. But that’s what I’m used to. The thing that fueled me for my first 15 years as a composer was the hostility I got from my own peers. I understood — I came from nowhere and I was upsetting the apple cart. What I realized was that that negative energy was great fuel.

“Now as I enter concert music, I feel that I’ll be up against some of that same energy, and I kind of welcome it. I can’t let it hold me back. I’m getting ready to do three films in a row, and when I’m done with that, I plan to write something really insane. This is like Part Four of my career, and I’m excited about the possibilities.”

[Article Link](#)