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Danny Elfman: First he conquered Hollywood, now he's crashing the classical concert hall

By TIM GREIVING
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Composer Danny Elfman at his studio in Los Angeles. He may be best known for scoring movies, including the new "Dumbo," but Elfman intends to push into more classical terrain. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

Danny Elfman thrives on your resentment.

He did it when he crashed into film scoring in 1985, the flame-haired bandleader of Oingo Boingo daring to write for orchestra and vie against conservatory-trained composers. Elfman poured their skepticism and hate into his tank, taught himself how to write symphonically and became one of the most successful composers in Hollywood — with four Oscar nominations under his belt.

Now he's trying it again, crashing into the staid concert hall and writing ambitious works for orchestra and ballet. His two latest, a violin concerto and a piano quartet, were just released as a single album on Sony Classical. The concerto, "Eleven Eleven," will be performed April 4 at the Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts in Northridge.

"There's still the same problem getting through the institutions, and there will be for a while — but they're going to have to get used to it," Elfman, 65, said of the classical world. "Because, come three years, I'm going to have a lot more stuff out there, and I'm just going to be hitting them from all sides" — he laughed — "and I'm just not going to stop. I will eventually batter these doors down, in the same way I did with film and everything else I've done."

Elfman is known for mischief, in his personality and his music. His film scores include the wackadoodle "Pee-wee's Big Adventure" (1985), the garishly gothic "Batman" (1989) and the macabre songbook for "The Nightmare Before Christmas" (1993) — all for Tim Burton, his consistent collaborator. Their latest project is Disney's "Dumbo," which hits theaters Friday.

But the composer has taken his venture into concert music seriously, respecting the disciplines and traditions of the repertoire — though without losing his signature impishness. The piano quartet, performed on the album by the Philharmonic Piano Quartet Berlin, is based on the timeless children's taunt: "Nya, nya, nya, nya nya!" "I said, 'You know, composers have always taken folk melodies, and done variations on traditional melodies,'" Elfman recalled. "And the one that was in my head was" — he sang the taunt — "which I've discovered is quite universal, because I asked the Germans, 'Does this mean anything to you?' And they were like, 'Oh, yes.' "



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DANNY ELFMAN ON HIS ENTRY INTO THE WORLD OF CLASSICAL MUSIC

Elfman wrote the violin concerto for Sandy Cameron, whom he first met in 2012 when she performed solos in his score for the Cirque du Soleil show “Iris.” At the time, she didn’t know anything about Elfman “other than that he was famous.”

“I kind of lived under a rock, as far as pop culture is concerned,” said Cameron, who lived from Army base to Army base growing up. She started taking lessons in Germany when she was 8, and she gave her first solo performance in the Netherlands when she was 12. “Once I became acquainted with his writing, it kind of turned me into an addict, I guess.”

Elfman had never written a violin concerto before he was approached by the Czech National Symphony Orchestra in 2014. (The work is a co-commission with Stanford Live and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, who will accompany Cameron in Northridge.) He also realized he'd never heard one.

“When it comes to classical music offers, I'm a total slut,” he said. “I just go ‘Yes,’ and then I go, ‘What does that really mean?’ And then, ‘I'll figure that out later.’”

He made a playlist of about 30 classic concerti, narrowed that down to 20 and listened obsessively. He studied the tricky double stops in Leonard Bernstein's, and the four-movement structure and majesty in Shostakovich's. (“For me,” he said, “that was the holy grail.”)

“When I tell myself, ‘You're not supposed to have fun,’ then I go, ‘Wait a minute — listen to Shostakovich,’” Elfman said. “Listen to the second movement of his first violin concerto, which is almost like cartoon music for me, it's so insane. It's like this constant reminder: There are no rules.”

He collaborated with Cameron throughout the writing process, workshopping ideas and phrases and incorporating improvisations she did based on note patterns he gave her. Elfman wondered if that was cheating, but Cameron showed him the score for Brahms' concerto — marked up with violinist Joseph Joachim's notes and suggestions.

“I grew up on stories about violinist and composer relationships,” said Cameron. “The two biggest ones being Johannes Brahms with Joseph Joachim and Dmitri Shostakovich with David Oistrakh. You're taught that almost all violin concertos are written for a specific person, and usually the best ones are based on some kind of fabulous working relationship. As a kid, I dreamed of that.”

Cameron is a fitting interpreter for Elfman's extroverted music. She has an electric stage presence and wears custom outfits for each concerto or program she plays. She was also game for anything the composer threw her way.

“If you want to get Sandy really engaged in a piece,” Elfman said, “you just go, ‘Oh, this is just too hard.’ Immediately she goes: ‘It’s not too hard. I will nail that.’ ”

“I remember he was a little bit frantic about it,” Cameron said. “He was like, ‘I don’t know much about this. Why do you want me to write a violin concerto?’ I was like, ‘Well, then just write it really, really hard, and I’ll tell you what’s impossible.’”

Elfman bookended the concerto with movements where his familiar musical voice would shine through. The second movement, which features an extended cadenza between violin and percussion, and the third are both “a little further off to the left.”

He is always conscious of his two audiences: fans who have never stepped foot in a concert hall, and conservative, subscription crowds who will naturally view his name with a stink eye. And he’s keenly aware that his concert music was invited to the Soraya, not Walt Disney Concert Hall.

He has a barrage of new works in store over the next three years, including a cello concerto, percussion concerto and a piece for the Third Coast Percussion ensemble. That last one will premiere at Philip Glass’ Days & Nights Festival in Carmel this fall.

The classical world “is very often divided into simply two categories: modern and classical,” Elfman said. “They see them as just two completely different things. And I’m coming in this weird zone, that they’re like, ‘What is that? And who is this ... coming from film?’”

“That part I like,” he said, a Cheshire Cat grin spreading across his face, “because anybody who’s like, ‘Who’s this... coming from this world, daring to come into ours?’ gets me excited.”



The composer in his L.A. studio. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)



Royal Scottish National Orchestra and violinist Sandy Cameron

Where: The Soraya, 18111 Nordhoff St., Northridge

When: 8 p.m. April 4

Tickets: \$49 and up (subject to change)

Information: (818) 677-3000, TheSoraya.org

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-danny-elfman-20190328-story.html>