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Jonathan Green

Charlie Schlenker (Interviewer)
WGLT

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WGLT Interview with Jonathan Green, December 30, 2013

- **Charlie Schlenker:** Johnathan Green directs a choir at Illinois Wesleyan University, in Bloomington. He is a member of ASCAP, a professional body for musicians and composers. Green is also the Provost at Illinois Wesleyan University. Thank you for joining us.
- **Jonathan Green:** Oh, my pleasure. Thank you.
- **Schlenker:** Just curious, is there any overlap in the skillset needed to be a Provost and Dean of Faculty and a music composer?
- **Green:** Oh, I think that there is. Ideally, both of those jobs are ones that are focused on intense listening and trying to hear many levels. And whether that's conversations with faculty or fellow administrators, or the counterpoint between different melodic lines in a composition. I think there's a...
- **Schlenker:** not to say cacophonous line (laughs)
- **Green:** Well, sometimes, sometimes. But there is also beauty in cacophony sometimes. But, I think informed listening is a shared skill of those two areas.
- **Schlenker:** The work debuting at Carnegie Hall is a setting of some of Ambros Bierce's cynical definitions. Popularly known as the "Devil's Dictionary". You retain the original name, "A Devil's Abecedarian", suggesting one word for each letter of the alphabet. Why pick that?
- **Green:** I wanted to set some of Bierce's text, and I was trying to figure out some way to link them together logically, and the idea of picking one for each letter of the alphabet just peaked my curiosity. Especially, going through there and trying to find a way to have some semblance of order, randomly picking from the different letters of the alphabet. But I think there is a little thread of, not just the cynicism that is in all of those texts, but an opportunity to have a little bit of social commentary as well.
- **Schlenker:** What drew you to Bierce?
- **Green:** I've always liked sort of the sardonic wit that is in his texts, and the ways in which he manages to, I think, challenge people to think about some of the decisions that we make as communities. At the same point, getting to laugh, and that becomes a lot more effective.
- **Schlenker:** Principle, the conduct of public business for private advantage. Vote, the instrument and symbol of free-man's power to make a fool of himself and the wreck of his country. War, a byproduct of the arts of peace, the most menacing political condition is a period of international amity. The soil of peace is thickly sewn with the seeds of war and singularly suited to their germination and growth. (Laughing) Is there a message here?
- **Green:** Well, I think it certainly forces people to think about the ways in which nations interact unfairly with each other. And maybe reflect on some of the conflicts in terms of what they say and what they do.
- **Schlenker:** He's not much for the young, either.
- **Green:** (laughs)
- **Schlenker:** Here's another definition. Youth, the true saternian reign, the golden age on earth. Again, when figs are grown on thistles, and pigs betailed with whistles, on wearing silk and bristles, live ever in clover, and cows fly over delivering milk in every door, and justice is never heard to snore, etc. (laughing) You picked the holidays to open this?
- **Green:** (laughing) Well, I didn't pick the date of the concert. The concert was scheduled by the

- folks at Carnegie. But, the musicians who had reached out to me to write a piece for this concert seemed to think that this would give them some rich things for them to play with.
- **Schlenker:** This is a commissioned work; tell us how it came about.
 - **Green:** Well, about two years ago, the singer of this group- it's a singer, trombonist, percussionist, and pianist. She was participating in a young artist competition sponsored by the National Association of Teachers of Singing, and one of the byproducts of her participation was that she was rewarded a concert at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. She wanted to focus on American music, and so there are pieces by Paul Bolls and George Crumb, and two new works. One by a young composer from Tennessee, whose last name is Musellman, and then they asked me to write a piece for the concert as well.
 - **Schlenker:** As you mentioned mezzo-soprano, trombone, percussion, and piano. What's going on with that instrumental mix? What, how do they work together?
 - **Green:** These are four people who've been friends and have concert ties together in different combinations and wanted an opportunity to do something with all four of them together. And so, the two new pieces on the program were both written for that ensemble.
 - **Schlenker:** Were there challenges in building a work for that mix?
 - **Green:** It's a combination that, to my knowing, is unique within the chamber music repertoire. But, the oddball in there may be the trombonist, but the trombonist in this group also happens to be the husband of the singer, so. And there are a couple of little winks in there including, one of the words that's defined is marriage and in that particular movement the trombone and the singer are a little bit at odds with each other the entire way through.
 - **Schlenker:** (laughs) Oh very fun. For our listeners not able to be in New York for the premier, what is the best description of the style?
 - **Green:** It's a bit quirky, because the texts are a bit quirky. But I tried to include, in almost all of the movements, some tunes that were similar to some of the melodies that one might have heard during Bierce's time. But then set them against a backdrop that is a little bit more complicated than that.
 - **Schlenker:** Let's introduce people to just some of your music. (music plays in background)
Here is a section of work for piano, a study of the life cycle of the phoenix. (only music plays)
 - **Schlenker:** (music plays in background and fades out) What's going on there?
 - **Green:** Well this was a piece that I wrote for a former colleague of mine, who is from China, and a wonderful of pianist who played a number of pieces of mine. And I wanted to write a composition for her that was based on some ideological themes from Chinese history and culture. And at the same point wanted to take advantage of some of her strengths as a player and so the closing section is a little bit more like a turn of the century French music coming out of the turmoil of the trashing phoenix in some of the earlier parts of the piece.
 - **Schlenker:** Classical music is no longer the dominant and most accessible form for listeners in the popular culture. So what are the challenges of composing for the audiences today?
 - **Green:** Well, I'm not sure that classical music was ever the dominant form; it's certainly, especially during the middle of the twentieth century, had a little bit more support in the popular media. I mean there was a point in time when you could turn on CBS on television and hear an orchestra concert. But that was a short period in the long history of serious music. But I think that it's important for composers now, to be mindful of their audiences and try to find ways in which they can both be provocative, but also engaging.

If you can't encourage a person in your audience to listen to begin with you're not going to reach them with something new you want to share with them. And so, I think that balance of accessibility and innovation is one that is important for contemporary composers.

- **Schlenker:** What are your hopes for future performances of "A Devil's Abecedarian"?
- **Green:** Well, we'll see how the first one goes. It will be a good opportunity to see how the audience reacts, and of course actually the premier will be first time that I've had a chance to hear it as well. And after that, we'll see if this group would like to do a couple more performances and then (laughs) we'll see if there happens to be a similar quartet someplace. That's one of the challenges when you write for an ensemble that's a little unusual. If the group isn't already there, there may not be a number of other performers, but I'm hoping that this group will have a chance to repeat.
- **Schlenker:** We are going to listen to another snippet of your work. This is from "Hagiophony" for violin, viola, cello, and piano. Introduce us to it, would you?
- **Green:** "Hagiophony", literally from the roots, means the sounds of saints. I had begun to work on an opera a number of years ago that was sort of a fantasy based on the lives of a number of saints. Most of whom were saints that were made unofficial by the Catholic Church during the 1960's. So they really are, sort of, fableistic characters and the piece was sitting on my piano and I wanted to do something more with it. And realized that the one way that I could get some of that music in front of an audience was to use the (music plays in background) themes from that as the foundation of a piece for a piano quartet. And this once again was written for a standing ensemble, The James Quartet, which is the group that is performing it in the recording that you have. So I was also being mindful of the particular players when I wrote the piece. (only music continues)
- **Schlenker:** (music continues in background) Jonathan Green is a composer and Provost of Illinois Wesleyan University. His work, "A Devil's Abecedarian" premiers at Carnegie Hall. Thanks for talking with us.
- **Green:** Thank you, it's been my pleasure.
- **Schlenker:** I'm Charlie Schlenker, WGLT News. (music plays)