

**Robert Spano is apologetic about being late. ‘No, it’s my fault,’ he says good-naturedly. ‘I didn’t listen to my messages yesterday. I didn’t know what was going on, but it was wonderful while it lasted.’**

Spano has reason to feel happy. His contract as music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra has been extended to 2009; his musicians are playing with renewed energy; and critics and audiences seem enthusiastic about the New Yorker’s blend of familiar repertoire with intelligent, offbeat programming.

This month sees the sixth Atlanta SO release on Telarc, the team’s most adventurous disc yetworld premieres of two large choral works by David Del Tredici and Masterprize winner Christopher Theofanidis. Both were commissioned for the Atlanta orchestra, the Theofanidis, *The Here and Now*, by the conductor himself – ‘one of the most exciting things I’ve done in my life,’ Spano says.

‘I wanted to commission a piece for the chorus and orchestra and I asked Chris because I felt he would have something special to offer. When I called, he said he was already thinking of a choral piece. So there was a wonderful synchronicity going.’ Upon learning that Theofanidis was to set texts of the 13th-century Sufi mystic Rumi, Spano was even more enthusiastic – ‘because that’s some of my favourite poetry, that kind of ecstatic, transcendental, drunk-on-God poetry’.

Even for those acquainted with Theofanidis’s neo-romantic style, *The Here and Now* will come as a revelation. He is working on a very large canvas, often with audacious writing for baritone, chorus and orchestra. There are echoes of Britten and of Orff’s exultant sensuality, as well as a pronounced Middle-Eastern feel,

For Spano, working closely with Theofanidis was essential. ‘Once I started playing the score at the piano I began calling Chris “How does this sound? Is this the right speed? Is this the right mood?” He’s so articulate about his music and so helpful to me in capturing the subtlety of the mood and the expression.’

Just as striking is the coupling, *Paul Reverses Ride* by David Del Tredici. American choral works set to patriotic texts usually result in static and often numbingly embarrassing results, but not this time. It opens with whirlwind energy depicting Revere’s historic ride, and that momentum is sustained through this setting of Longfellow’s poem, with the composer’s characteristic skill in vocal writing carried off with sensitivity and panache. The demanding choral part was a challenge even for the ASO Chorus, one of the finest in America. ‘It’s very virtuosic, so it was perfect for this chorus,’ Spano says. ‘They just ate it up.’

Del Tredici’s work arose out of a patriotic response to 9/11 – one can hear it in the police sirens. Spano says that while the disc was not consciously planned as a reaction to the attacks, it’s ‘certainly an undercurrent. David dedicated this piece to the firemen lost in the catastrophe, and Bernstein’s “Lamentation” [the third work on the disc] is, of course, about “the city laid waste”.’

So how does the Rumi text fit into that inspiration? ‘I think the beauty of having that poetry there is to try to prevent ourselves from hating a very beautiful and rich culture for the sins of some of their representatives on that day.’

The conductor says he feels fortunate to be affiliated with a label that in straitened times is willing to release a disc of contemporary choral music, and found the give-and-take with the composers exhilarating. ‘It was so wonderful to me to have a living composer to talk to,’ says Spano, ‘because some things I had misunderstood. I thought one passage was sentimental, and Chris would say, “That’s absolutely what I don’t want; it has to be kind of cold”. That kind of thing is so gratifying. But it’s also a little frightening. Because then you wonder just how wrong you’re getting it with the dead people!’

**Lawrence Johnson**

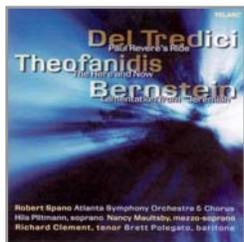
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EDITOR'S CHOICE

**Bernstein**  
**Del Tredici · Theofanidis**

**Bernstein** Symphony No 1, 'Jeremiah' –  
Lamentation<sup>a</sup> **Del Tredici** Paul Revere's Ride<sup>b</sup>  
**Theofanidis** The Here and Now<sup>c</sup>  
<sup>bc</sup>**Hila Piltmann** *sop* <sup>a</sup>**Nancy Maultsby** *mez*  
<sup>c</sup>**Richard Clement** *ten* <sup>c</sup>**Brett Polegato** *bar*  
**Atlanta Symphony Chorus and Orchestra /**  
**Robert Spano**  
Telarc (F) CD80638 (73' · DDD · T/t)

**Two Americans stir widely varying styles  
into the cookpot for two tasty dishes**



In *Rainbow Body*, the winning composition in the 2003 Masterprize competition, Christopher Theofanidis transformed a chant by Hildegard of Bingen into a piece of orchestral Americana – no mean feat. He performs a similar miracle in *The Here and Now*, making ecstatic religious verses by the 13th-century Sufi poet Rumi the basis for a bold, bright American cantata.

Theofanidis's musical means are relatively straightforward; indeed, his melodies have the same kind of directness and compactness that make, say, Carl Orff's so memorable. There are intermittent nods to Eastern musical traditions, as in the penultimate

movement with its Indian-inflected percussion and exotic scales, though Theofanidis seems to make little attempt to hide his American accent. Given the nature of the texts I expected more erotically charged sensuality but, aside from the rapturous conclusion of the sixth movement, the score is wholesomely exultant rather than sybaritic.

Surprisingly, perhaps, David Del Tredici's *Paul Revere's Ride* is the more voluptuous piece. Longfellow's 'musty' narrative poem (to use the composer's description) hardly seems fodder for such Straussian opulence, but Del Tredici pulls it off, somehow – mixing Schubertian Lied, Handelian fugue, patriotic song and countless other musical borrowings into a stirring, exhilarating, humorous and ultimately touching miniature music-drama. Hila Plitmann negotiates the stratospheric, amplified soprano part with aplomb, and her virtuosity is matched by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, who perform brilliantly both here and in the Theofanidis cantata under Robert Spano's direction. The orchestra give the central 'lamentation' movement from Bernstein's *Jeremiah* Symphony a blisteringly intense reading, too; if only Nancy Maultsby didn't sound so strained. Never mind: both the Theofanidis and Del Tredici works offer far more than a disc's-worth of musical enjoyment.

**Andrew Farach-Colton**

**Robert Spano talks to Lawrence Johnson on  
page 11 about working with Theofanidis**