

Composer takes cue from popular culture

DAUGHERTY'S BRAND OF CLASSICAL MUSIC FEATURES ELVIS, SUPERMAN, FRIDA KAHLO

Cabrillo Music Festival 35m 7 2703

By Anita Amirrezvani

Mercury News

Composer Michael Daugherty has a soft spot for pop icons. Superman inspired him to compose a symphony, Jackie Onassis an opera and Liberace a piano concerto.

"I'm fascinated by larger-than-life characters," Daugherty says.

During the last two decades, the Michigan composer has become known for music that draws on American pop culture. Although that may sound like career suicide for a classical composer, Daugherty has received numerous commissions from American orchestras, and his music is widely performed.

He is one of seven composers who will be in residence at the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, which takes place Friday through Aug. 10 in Santa Cruz.

The Cabrillo symphony will perform two of his works, the West Coast premiere of "Fire and Blood," inspired by Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo; and "Rosa Parks Boulevard," an homage to the civil rights activist who refused to move to the back of the bus.

Daugherty is not the only composer who will pay tribute to pop icons at this year's festival.

Other works include David del Tredici's "Dracula," with soprano Hila Plitmann; H.K. Gruber's "Frankenstein!"; and pianist Chris O'Reilly's transcriptions of songs by

Radiohead, the British rock group.

Perhaps it comes as no surprise that Daugherty, 49, has followed a pop path, since his earliest musical influences were far from classical. His father was a dance-band percussionist in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, playing standards such as "Satin Doll" and "Misty." His mother sang in musicals

WHO'S PLAYING WHEN?

A complete lineup for the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music.

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DANIEL MEARS — DETROIT NEWS ARCHIVES

Composer Michael Daugherty at the Detroit Institute of the Arts. The courtyard behind him, filled with Diego Rivera murals, inspired his violin concerto "Fire and Blood."

like "Gypsy."

As a teen, Daugherty played keyboards for jazz and rock bands and intended to study jazz in college. But then, when he was 18, he heard the Dallas Symphony Orchestra perform Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." "I was blown away," he says.

Daugherty went on to get a doctorate in music composition at Yale University but wasn't enthusiastic about the abstract music that composers were writing in the 1960s and '70s.

"I decided I really had to write the kind of music I wanted to write," he

says.

One of his first major successes was "Metropolis Symphony" (1986-1993), a work inspired by Superman comics. "It was very risky to write a piece like that," he says about the pop-culture reference. But once he had found his voice as a composer, his music started to take off.

He has since written music that references Elvis, J. Edgar Hoover, the American obsession with UFOs and with landmarks like Niagara Falls and

THE CABRILLO FESTIVAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

The 41st season of performances

Where: All shows are at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, 307 Church St., unless otherwise specified.

When: Friday through Aug. 10.

For tickets: (831) 426-6966; www.cabrillomusic.org

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CABRILLO FESTIVAL SCHEDULE

All shows are at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, 307 Church St., unless otherwise specified. Tickets: (831) 426-6966; www.cabrillomusic.org

Friday at 8 p.m.: "Blood, Sweat & Tears": Emily Wong's Structures III (world premiere), Michael Daugherty's "Fire and Blood" (West Coast premiere), David Del Tredici's "Dracula." \$20-\$32.

Saturday and Aug. 3 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.: Music, Art & Wine Festival, outside the auditorium. Free.

Saturday at 1 p.m.: Lunch with the Composers. \$6.

Saturday at 8 p.m.: "Monsters In the Park": Michael Hersch's Symphony No. 2 (West Coast premiere), Michael Daugherty's "Rosa Parks Boulevard," Wladyslaw Szpilman's "Ballet Scene," H.K. Gruber's "Frankenstein!!" \$20-\$32.

Aug. 3 at 8 p.m.: Lou Harrison Tribute Concert: "Grand Duo for Violin and Piano" with pianist Dennis Russell Davies and violinist Yumi Hwang-Williams; "Concerto In Slendro" featuring the New Music Works Ensemble, conducted by Philip Collins; an aria from the opera "Rapunzel" with baritone Sanford Sylvan. \$25-\$35; \$50 includes benefit reception.

Aug. 7 at 6 p.m.: Music at the Millpond. A benefit concert at the millpond in Soquel. \$100.

Aug. 8 at 8 p.m.: "Radiohead Transcribed." Pianist Christopher O'Riley performs his transcriptions of songs by Radiohead. \$20-\$25.

Aug. 9 at 8 p.m.: "The 'A' Team: Adès & Adams": Thomas Adès' "Concerto Conciso" (West Coast premiere), "— but all shall be well" and "Darknesse Visible"; John Adams' "Guide to Strange Places" (West Coast premiere) and "Eros Piano." \$20-\$32.

Aug. 10 at 4 and 8 p.m.: "Island of Innocence: Music at the Mission," three West Coast premieres: Augusta Read Thomas' "Prayer Bells," Richard Danielpour's "Metamorphosis" and Kevin Puts' "Symphony No. 2, "Island of Innocence." Mission San Juan Bautista. \$32 (4 p.m.), \$27 (8 p.m.)



Marin Alsop is music director of the Cabrillo festival and will conduct the festival orchestra.



Soprano Hila Plitmann will sing David del Tredici's "Dracula."

CABRILLO | Music inspired by murals

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Route 66.

During his four years as composer in residence with the Detroit Symphony, Daugherty has found inspiration in two iconic subjects with local ties.

"Fire and Blood," a violin concerto, is inspired by Rivera's controversial 1933 murals — which were called anti-American and blasphemous — for the Detroit Institute of the Arts. The first movement, "Volcano," is a tribute to the Mexican artist's fierce personality and virtuosity, while the second, "River Rouge," takes a quieter and more intimate approach, "like Frida Kahlo's paintings."

The final section, which features the full orchestra and the soloists, attempts to capture the feeling of a "mechanical assembly line," Daugherty says. The work had its world premiere in May.

"Rosa Parks Boulevard" (2000) has a jazzier feeling. Be-

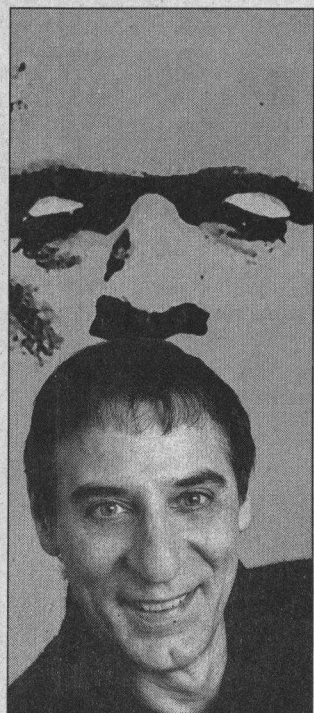
fore composing it, Daugherty attended a church service with Parks at the St. Matthew African Methodist Episcopal Church in Detroit. "What struck me was that the church was very modest, and so is she," he says.

Parks has lived in Detroit since 1957. After learning that her favorite spiritual is "Oh, Freedom," Daugherty drew on its melodies in composing his work for orchestra and three trombones. The piece is jazzy and sensual at times, yet full of strife at others to reflect ongoing struggle.

Despite occasional charges from critics that his music is "lite," Daugherty persists in finding inspiration in popular subjects, preferring to select the title and the theme of a new piece before composing it.

"To me, it would be a compromise to write totally abstract music," he says.

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Joseph Ribeiro, a Cabrillo College instructor, sings H.K. Gruber's "Frankenstein!!".