

Mission: Commission

The second round of the Ford Made in America commissioning program moves into high gear this fall, with **Joseph Schwantner's** *Chasing Light...* Over the next two years, orchestras in every state will perform the work.

by Michael Manley

Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.

—Henry Ford

Ford Made in America equips small-budget orchestras with everything they need to gain the confidence and skills to present the music of our time.

—Henry Fogel

These words from two Henrys best describe what is at the heart of the Ford Made in America program: Whether in industry or art, we can often achieve greater results by working together than we can by working alone. Ford Made in America is the largest orchestral commissioning consortium ever undertaken by our field, and in its first round resulted in Joan Tower's *Made in America*, which was performed by 65 orchestras in all 50 states as part of the program. Tower's work went on to win a Grammy Award for Best Classical Contemporary Composition, while the recording by the Nashville Symphony and conductor Leonard Slatkin picked up Grammy Awards for Best Classical Album and Best Orchestral Performance. The Ford Made in America program offers an unparalleled opportunity for ensembles in smaller communities to premiere a new work by an established American composer, and brings music

by a living composer to audiences nationwide.

The second round of Ford Made in America will be launched by the Reno Chamber Orchestra on September 20, 2008, with the premiere of Joseph Schwantner's *Chasing Light...* The work will then be heard by audiences nationwide when orchestras in all 50 states perform it during the 2008-09 and 2009-10 concert seasons.

The Ford Made in America commissioning project is jointly administered by the League of American Orchestras and Meet The Composer. The program is made possible by a generous grant from Ford Motor Company Fund, the philanthropic arm of Ford Motor Company. Major support for the program is also provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, with additional funding from The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trusts, and The Amphion Foundation.

Joseph Schwantner has always been something of a hero to me for his 1977 work *and the mountains rising nowhere*, which I first heard as an undergraduate music student. Written for brass, winds, percussion, and piano, this evocative piece was nothing like the typical works for band I was used to hearing, and it helped advance the wind ensemble as a format for serious art music. The work introduced me to Schwantner's sonic



Composer Joseph Schwantner

landscape, which is often rooted in poetry that speaks of nature, capturing both the vast splendor and echoing loneliness that the best landscape photographs and paintings inspire. The success of *and the mountains rising nowhere* was followed by his orchestral work *Aftertones of Infinity*, which was awarded the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for Music.

It was an honor to sit down recently with Joe—after meeting him it's hard to call him Joseph or Mr. Schwantner—to discuss Ford Made in America and his composing career.

MICHAEL MANLEY: Creatively, you started out as a poet, is that right?

JOSEPH SCHWANTNER: Actually, my first engagement was with music, when I began studying the guitar at the age of seven. But I was also interested in poetry, and in grade school I won a poetry contest. I had the kind of personality that led me in a number of different creative directions even when quite young. In my guitar lessons, I would often not play exactly what was on the page, but would add things to the music. I was doing that rather continually, so finally my wonderful teacher Robert Stein said to me, "Look, I really want you to play the assignments

that I've given, but if you're interested in exploring your own music, that's fine, too." That's all he had to tell me, and I would write these pieces by ear and come in and play for him. We began to talk about melody and harmony and rhythm and musical form. And it just seemed to be a very natural process as a way of making music, not only to play music that had already been composed, but also my own music.

This relationship with poetry again came very early. I would read a lot; my parents had an extensive collection of poetry. I was inspired by words and their meanings, and how they could be formed into poetic images. Those interests—both in composing and performing music, and also the ideas that were generated by poetry—seemed to be a kind of constant fascination for me early on.

My parents also had a rather extensive record collection, and I listened to all kinds of music, including operettas and symphonies. They had an extraordinary collection of jazz from the 1930s, especially guitarist Django Reinhardt, who was really a remarkable performer. He played in the Hot Club of France, an ensemble from Europe. And he was an extraordinary virtuoso on the instrument. I was fascinated with his skill and virtuosity. So the whole issue of "How does one learn how to play music like that?" was another influence.

As an American musician, I had an incredible multiplicity of influences and experiences in music from listening to 1930s jazz to classical music to more current, popular music. These can't help but color how we think about our own work.

MANLEY: What's interesting about your work is that it has that eclectic feel to it, yet it's very distinctively your own voice.

SCHWANTNER: Well, you hope at some point in time the voice will come through as a natural part of living your life through your music. But I remember, my father helped me make a crystal radio when I was very young. I would stay up all night listening to local radio

stations in and around Chicago. And I remember hearing, for example, the Grand Ole Opry. And that interested me as much as the jazz from my parents' record collection. So, it was very much like turning on the radio and moving the dial quickly back and forth—it all seemed to interest me, not that I couldn't discriminate one from another. But that was part and parcel of who I was as a musician growing up in this country.

Chasing Light...

by Joseph Schwantner

*Beneath the sickle moon,
sunrise ignites daybreak's veil*

*Calliope's rainbowed song
cradles heaven's arc*

*piercing shadowy pines,
a kaleidoscope blooms*

*Morning's embrace
confronts the dawn*

MANLEY: You came of age as a composer in the 1960s and '70s, when many composers were attached to various schools of composition, from serialism to minimalism. Your music is not really in any "camp."

SCHWANTNER: Right, exactly. I actually began to move away from

serialism in the '70s and began to engage elements from earlier music, really as an attempt to better understand who I was as a musician. And I think it's maybe most clear in a piece called *Sparrows* that I wrote in 1978 for chamber ensemble and the American soprano Lucy Shelton. In that piece, you see a music that moves in some cases with a sense of collision and in other cases a sense of fusion—varied, kind of dissimilar musical elements that I was trying to pull together. At the end of the day, I hope, those dissimilar elements are all within the voice of a single composer, and it's that voice that comes through in the clearest, most direct way.

MANLEY: There is a clarity and directness to your music—emotionally and dramatically.

SCHWANTNER: Well, I hope so. I've written some very complicated music, and my attempt has always been to communicate to the musicians, because they have to understand what it is that you're trying to say as a composer and as a musician. And if you can't write music that speaks to them and to their experiences, then you run the risk of not being able to communicate to anyone, you know? So it has to go to them first, and then to an audience. I look back on my life in music, and I feel my strongest pieces almost always involve musicians whom I understand and care about.



Jennifer Seamster, executive director of the McLean Orchestra (Virginia), and Jennifer Philpot-Munson, executive director of the Plymouth Symphony Orchestra (Michigan), rehearse their new composition with instruments made from found and recycled materials at the Ford Made in America workshop, January 2008.

Tools and Resources

Ford Made in America is more than a commission and performance. Through the program's innovative "Tool Kit," orchestras receive step-by-step resources for engaging audiences, supporting and promoting their orchestras in their community, and educating their students and communities. Highlights of this round include:

- A creative and accessible "build your own instruments" education module designed by noted music-education consultant John Bertles;
- A program DVD that features musical examples and interviews with Joseph Schwantner;
- A totally redesigned website, FordMadeinAmerica.org, featuring:
 - An interactive Google map of participating orchestras, including performance and venue information;
 - Embedded YouTube videos featuring demonstrations, interviews, and content submitted by participating orchestras;
 - Joseph Schwantner's blog, in which he reports on the piece and his program-related activities

MANLEY: Did this more direct style of writing make you a renegade in the '60s and '70s?

SCHWANTNER: I think it was something in the air. You saw lots of composers of my generation who were turning away from the kind of stranglehold of their education. Music was very ideological when I was a student, and one had to stake out a certain kind of ideological territory. I decided that didn't interest me, and that I had too many other interests in music. I was interested in music from Bali, and then African music, different styles of jazz, as well as classical



Schwantner and flutist Wendy Stern tape an educational DVD about *Chasing Light*....

Philip Rothman

music. I decided that my music ought to reflect those interests and let those sounds wash through me—and hopefully something interesting would come out of that.

MANLEY: You've written a lot of pieces specifically for certain artists and ensembles. How does that affect your writing process?

SCHWANTNER: If you're working with friends, you know what they're capable of, you know what their experiences have been, and you try to tap into the very best of what they can do. I wrote a number of pieces back in the '70s for soprano Lucy Shelton, who has a special feel for contemporary music. I learned so much about how music is made by working with her over an extended number of years. You can't pick that up from recordings or studying scores; you have to work on a very active basis with musicians who have these extraordinary talents.

We go through life working with musicians in a very intimate way, and we learn from each other. And that can only be done when you have the opportunity—in my case, with Lucy—to write a series of pieces over an extended period of time where we really allow ourselves to explore our own resources as musicians. It's not only the quietude of your own studio where ideas kind of fall out of the sky—it's an intersection with poetry that helps fire my musical imagination. This music has to be lifted off the page and brought to life. And that's done with musicians who are very much committed

to your work at the time and do in fact bring it to life.

MANLEY: Let's talk about the Ford Made in America program, which in some ways is the opposite situation. You're writing a piece that's going to be played by—

SCHWANTNER: Lots of different ensembles, yeah.

MANLEY: Nearly 60 orchestras in all 50 states, from youth orchestras to professional orchestras.

SCHWANTNER: Once I knew which ensemble was going to premiere the piece [the Reno Chamber Orchestra], I made a connection with that ensemble. I had them send me a whole series of recordings, and I listened to them over and over and over. That was the beginning of a process of acclimating my music with their sound.

MANLEY: So the Reno Chamber Orchestra almost stood in for the artist.

SCHWANTNER: Yeah, exactly. I suppose I could have proceeded without that, but I knew that it would be helpful to me to get a sense of what their sound was like, the kind of clarity of the ensemble. And what I came away with was this: Not only is it a terrific group of musicians who play extraordinarily well, but I was especially impressed with the woodwinds in that ensemble. It led me to consider using solo woodwinds in a way that was very, very helpful to the piece.

Participating Orchestras, Ford Made in America Round II

The following ensembles will perform Joseph Schwantner's *Chasing Light...* throughout the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 concert seasons. For specific performance dates, visit FordMadeinAmerica.org.

- Augusta Symphony Orchestra (GA)
- Baton Rouge Symphony (LA)
- Bay-Atlantic Symphony (NJ)
- Billings Symphony Orchestra (MT)
- Black Hills Symphony Orchestra (SD)
- Brown University Orchestra (RI)
- Carmel Symphony Orchestra (IN)
- Central Ohio Symphony (OH)
- Central Wisconsin Symphony Orchestra (WI)
- Civic Orchestra of Tucson (AZ)
- Clinton Symphony Orchestra (IA)
- Coeur d'Alene Symphony Orchestra (ID)
- Duluth-Superior Symphony Orchestra (MN)
- Evanston Symphony Orchestra (IL)
- Fairbanks Symphony (AK)
- Florence Symphony Orchestra (SC)
- Glens Falls Symphony Orchestra (NY)
- Grand Junction Symphony Orchestra (CO)
- Greater Grand Forks Symphony Orchestra (ND)
- Greenwich Village Orchestra (NY)
- Honolulu Symphony Orchestra (HI)
- Huntington Symphony Orchestra (WV)
- Huntsville Symphony Orchestra (AL)
- Irving Symphony (TX)
- Juneau Symphony (AK)
- Las Cruces Symphony Orchestra (NM)
- Louisville Youth Orchestra (KY)
- McLean Orchestra (VA)
- Miami Symphony Orchestra (FL)
- Nashua Symphony Orchestra (NH)
- New Britain Symphony Orchestra (CT)
- New Philharmonia Orchestra (MA)
- Oklahoma Youth Orchestra (OK)
- Omaha Area Youth Orchestras (NE)
- Orchestra Nashville (TN)
- Paducah Symphony Orchestra (KY)
- Peabody Institute (MD)
- Pine Bluff Symphony Orchestra (AR)
- Plymouth Symphony Orchestra (MI)
- Portland State University Symphony (OR)
- Portland Symphony Orchestra (ME)
- Reno Chamber Orchestra (NV)
- Sacramento Philharmonic Orchestra (CA)
- Saint Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra (MO)
- Salisbury Symphony Orchestra (NC)
- San Angelo Symphony (TX)
- Santa Barbara Symphony Orchestra (CA)
- Southwest Symphony Orchestra (UT)
- Stow Symphony Orchestra (OH)
- Tupelo Symphony Orchestra (MS)
- University of Delaware Symphony Orchestra (DE)
- University of Wyoming Symphony Orchestra (WY)
- Vermont Symphony Orchestra (VT)
- Waukesha Symphony Orchestra (WI)
- Whatcom Symphony Orchestra (WA)
- Williamsport Symphony Orchestra (PA)
- York Symphony Orchestra (PA)
- Youth Symphony of Kansas City (KS)

MANLEY: When you first heard about this idea of nearly 60 orchestras in all 50 states playing your piece, was that daunting?

SCHWANTNER: It was astonishing. I mean, it's an astonishing idea. You have an array of orchestras, from professional orchestras to community and youth orchestras. There is going to be a considerable range of talent and experience and expertise. On the other hand, I really did have the Reno Chamber Orchestra in my ear, and they were the platform that helped me as a sonic backdrop to this project to keep me thinking about the kind of piece I wanted to write. You have to write your own music, despite the variety of ensembles that will engage it. It will be more challenging for some orchestras than for others, but that's okay. I think that's a good thing.

MANLEY: What do you think Ford Made in America has done for composers and orchestras?

SCHWANTNER: I think the bottom line is the notion of renewal, of reinvigorating the repertoire. Ensembles not only have this extraordinary resource of great music of the 18th and 19th centuries that they regularly play, they're also thinking about the possibility of new work, in the case of the first go-around with Joan Tower and now with my piece. And if these pieces are successfully engaged, and the musicians and conductors find them interesting, that will expand the orchestra's own horizons in terms of engaging the work of living composers.



FordMadeinAmerica.org, whose home page is seen at far left, features multimedia clips, a blog by composer Joseph Schwantner, links to resources and further information, and background about the program. An interactive map (near left) shows the locations of the 58 orchestras in 50 states that will perform *Chasing Light...*



On September 20, the Reno Chamber Orchestra and Music Director Theodore Kuchar (above) will give the world premiere of the latest work in the Ford Made in America program, Joseph Schwantner's *Chasing Light*...

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It's the only way, it seems to me, that orchestras can survive. They can't simply survive as museum pieces, you know? They have to consider new work and an infusion of new blood and energy in order for them to be vital institutions. And so this program, especially since it allows for the possibility of so many ensembles to consider new pieces, is really very, very important.

MANLEY: You mentioned Joan Tower, whose work *Made in America* took inspiration from the tune of "America the Beautiful." Did the idea of America, of this national effort, play into your thinking about the work?

SCHWANTNER: Only in the sense that I knew there were going to be many ensembles involved that were very different. What's clear to me is that we live in a country with extraordinary musical development, and you can hear great music not only in the major population centers, but in small towns and hamlets and university environments where really first-class, world-class music is being made. That's simply the result of being in a very large, rich, and powerful country that has developed extraordinary institutions like the Eastman School of Music and The Juilliard School and Indiana University and on and on. These musicians are out doing good work all over the country.

MANLEY: As we near the premiere of *Chasing Light*... by the Reno Chamber Orchestra, do you have any words for the hundreds of musicians who will be playing it or for the thousands of listeners who will hear it?

SCHWANTNER: My hope is that they will engage the work with the full measure of their own musical resources. And the music in some cases is challenging. There are lots of metrical changes in the fast music, and some of the solo passages are fairly virtuosic. But I'm hoping they'll find that it was worth all of their individual effort—that the collective result of all those disparate parts is a single whole, with the voice of the composer coming through strongly and clearly.

MANLEY: There's something very democratic about that idea. Has it occurred to you that for many audience members out there, this may be the first time they've heard your music?

SCHWANTNER: That's quite likely, in fact. That happens all the time, even with major orchestras. The only experience I've had where that really changed was when I was composer in residence with the Saint Louis Symphony. I was down there in the early '80s for three years, and then maintained a relationship with the orchestra and Leonard Slatkin after that. When I finished my tenure in St. Louis, the orchestra had played every one of the orchestra pieces I had written to that point in time. And that St. Louis audience knew my music as well as that of any other living composer they had ever experienced. I thought about that later, and I remembered one experience. I was in a morning rehearsal, and all of a sudden Leonard stops, turns to me and says, "You know what? Your music sounds like the standard repertoire for this orchestra at this point in time." They were so familiar with my voice and comfortable with the language that it was like all of the works by past masters that they had played; they could engage it with that degree of familiarity.

And that's all we composers can hope for—that the music can be engaged in a full way and with the kind of understanding that musicians have when they come to Brahms or Mahler. **EB**

MICHAEL MANLEY is director of artistic programs at the League of American Orchestras. He worked as a professional French hornist before pursuing a career in arts administration.



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