

NOTEWORTHY

In Tune with the Times

Symphonies and start-ups are all in a day's work for a postmodern classical musician. • BY HSIAO-YUN CHU

BRIAN SAGER THE BIOCHEMIST is a strategy consultant and the founder of Nanodigm, a new Bay Area nanotechnology company. Brian Sager the composer writes symphonies and produces CDs. As far apart as the two worlds seem, Sager, PhD '94, has managed to integrate them.

Music came first. Sager can recall watching from his crib as his mother, an orchestral violinist, practiced at home in Madison, Wis.; he began piano lessons when he was 3. When it came time for college, music led him to science: he wanted to learn how the brain perceives sensory input such as sound.

Sager early on figured out how to pursue both interests without shortchanging either. As an undergraduate, he studied musical composition, linguistics, biochemistry and molecular neurobiology. While pursuing his doctorate in biochemistry at Stanford, he took classes in the music department. In an interview, Sager explains how he found time to write his aptly named first symphony, *Janus*, while conducting his doctoral research. He would get his experiments up and running, then turn to composition while he waited for results. His dissertation dealt in large part with chemical signaling between cells, a process vital to sensory perception.

Since then, Sager's music has hardly skipped a beat. By the time he completed postdoctoral work in neurobiology at Harvard, he had finished his second symphony, *Phoenix*. Later, he found the rhythm of consulting work—intense bursts followed by slower periods between projects—complements the more drawn-out pace of composing. In addition, he says, "When I have a job in another city, I spend an extra day there, and I hit every record outlet to try to get my music into stores." His first CD, *Senses Rising* (www.newclassical.com), features his first two symphonies and a sonata for string quartet, played by a studio orchestra, and four piano solos he performs.

Just as Sager's working life combines two different professions, his compositions mix elements of strikingly distinct musical eras: classical and postmodern. As he explains, music from the classical period (c. 1800-1850) was "rich in compositional structure and narrative content, but rhythmically simple." By contrast, the 20th century saw melody and harmony break down as atonality gained acceptance and composers expanded their palette to include strong rhythmic textures like those of jazz, hip-hop and reggae.

Sager wants to reinterpret classical music for contemporary audiences by creating works that have a structured musical narrative and are rhythmically interesting. The final movement of his first symphony is an allegretto that uses rhythmic variation as well as tonal progression to build tension. Rhythm takes center stage in his solo piano pieces, where unexpected syncopations propel the melodies forward, giving them a dancelike character.

Although the composer respects tradition, he is far from conservative. While at Stanford, he was influenced by John Chowning, MA '64, DMA '66, an electronic music pioneer and founder of the University's Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics. Sager predicts that computer-based music will become an integral part of symphony orchestras and looks forward to composing works with the electronic section in mind. "It's just a matter of overcoming prejudice in the industry," he says.

At present, Sager is working

on two new CDs. One is his third symphony. In the other, he started with modern polyrhythmic dance music and is working backward to fuse it with classical instrumentation and structure. "I'll probably get some flak from the classical community for incorporating elements of dance music," he says, "but I don't care. I have to do this to come full circle."

Besides, Sager wants to make music that appeals to a younger generation. When he goes to the record store, he says, he doesn't want to be the only person under 50 buying classical music. ☐

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GLEN MATSUMURA



HARMONY: Neither of Sager's careers plays second fiddle.