

THE SACRED AND THE SUBLIME: *Composer James Lee Describes His Musical Journey*

BY ALITA BYRD

The music of Adventist composer James Lee III has been played by top orchestras and conducted by well-known maestros across the United States.

With more than eighty works written and fourteen new works due to be premiered, including a piece to be performed by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra for Juneteenth, Lee is busy. But recently he took some time to talk to *Spectrum* about the composers that inspire him, the definition of sacred music, how he keeps the Sabbath hours holy, how he incorporates elements of African American music into his work, and the concertos and oratorios in his head that are yet unwritten.

You are a prolific composer, and you have written a wide variety of music for a wide variety of instrumentations. I believe the Detroit Symphony Orchestra will soon be playing a piece of yours called *Amer'ican*. Can you describe that music for us?

Well, *Amer'ican* is actually a work that was influenced

by some paintings that I saw that are emblems of America. The composer Antonín Dvořák composed the

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New World Symphony, and he always advocated for American concert music to incorporate music from Negro Americans and from Native Americans. So, this particular work was inspired by some emblems from 1798 of Negro Indigenous Indians here in America. And with those paintings, I was inspired by various aspects of that history, so I quoted a little of the *New World*

Symphony in my particular work.

So, part of that work is a nod to Dvořák?

Sure, so when I spoke to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, I encouraged them to program the *New World Symphony* along with my piece because I thought that would be a good pairing, in terms of the programmatic aspects of the concert, and it would also encourage other orchestras in the future, when they are programming Dvořák's *New World Symphony* to consider programming



my new work, *American* along with that.

How did you come to hear of me and my work? Because I am not used to Adventists taking an interest in what I am doing.

Yes, I only found a few little mentions of you in Adventist publications, and I was surprised by that, because your work is amazing, and Adventists should be proud of your work and be talking about it.

Well, that's nice. Yeah, I was surprised.

I don't know if you know about GYC? It was called General Youth Conference and now I think it's called Generation of Youth for Christ. I was the music director of that for about four years. I have always been in the church. I am an elder in my church now.

But it's funny, it didn't seem like that side of my music interested anyone. I talked to the *Adventist Review* about what I was doing one time at the Kennedy Center, and they weren't really interested, so I said yeah, that's okay, I will just keep doing my work. It doesn't matter.

I am surprised, and kind of appalled, that more Adventists aren't aware of you and your work. But I guess that would kind of explain why I hadn't heard about you earlier!

It seems that a lot of your work has been inspired by your faith, at least according to the secular press that has talked to you. Maybe we can talk a little bit about that. How would you describe your faith as influencing your work?

When I was a student at the University of Michigan,

I listened to a piece by a French Catholic composer called Olivier Messiaen. He composed this work called *Quartet for the End of Time*, and I remember being so taken by that work. He was such a towering figure in twentieth-century classical music, that I was thinking in my doctoral programs that why can't I, as a Seventh-day Adventist, also incorporate various doctrines that we have, or even some of the Bible studies that I had been doing on Daniel and Revelation, and that wonderful imagery, and incorporate that into music?

So, from my student days I decided that would be part of my compositional output. And my dissertation, *Beyond Rivers of Vision*, was actually premiered by the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in 2006. So, one year after I graduated, that work was performed. And that work is based on the River of Life in Revelation, and of course one of the visions of the river from Genesis, from the Garden of Eden, and then the same river, the Tigris, or in Hebrew the *Hiddeqel*, from Daniel chapter 10. So that work actually started my career.

What was the reaction to your piece when it was performed at the Kennedy Center?

The press—the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Washington Post*—were very favorable in their reviews. And the orchestra members were also quite enthusiastic in their performance. And the conductor at the time, Leonard Slatkin, was—and still is—a proponent of young American composers. And he actually told me after the Saturday night performance that he wanted to keep tabs on me so he could keep track

of what I was doing, and then consider programming more works of mine.

So that is what he did. He programmed a new piece about my grandfather in World War II with the Detroit Symphony as his first concerts with the Detroit Symphony in December of 2008. And it was such great exposure because all the concerts were sold out. They were also programming with it this large work, *Carmina Burana*, for soloist, chorus, and orchestra. And that sold out every night. So, I had a tremendous amount of exposure from that concert.

That is an amazing conductor to have in your corner!

I know the books of Daniel and Revelation have inspired many artists, and the late Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse wrote her oratorio, *The Vision of the Apocalypse*, which was performed in Carnegie Hall. I find it interesting that you also find these books of the Bible some of your biggest biblical inspiration. Are there other biblical themes you have explored or are interested in?

I have a premiere next week, a song cycle. The 92nd Street Y commissioned me to write a work for soprano, clarinet, and piano. And they wanted that particular instrumentation because there is also a work by Franz Schubert in the same concert using those same instruments.

I did some research, and I found these poems about women in the Bible who did not have a voice. I wrote music for the imaginary responses from these women whose real words were never recorded. So, for example, there is Absalom's wife. That is one of the poems. And Abishag, the young woman who was taken to be near King David during the late years of his life. The woman who was bent over, who Jesus healed. And also Matthew the

tax collector's wife. They all have their expressions about what life was like for them being near their husbands or men. So, these are some of the poems that I found. And the poet is actually delighted that I found her poems. And they are going to be premiered next week.

So, the soprano in this piece will be singing the words of these women, who up until now, have not had a voice.

Yes. It starts with a prologue, and the first song is called "After Eve, Then What?" And then the four songs explore these experiences of these women if their stories had been told.

I hope you get a great reception to that work. But I can imagine that audiences have been greatly impacted and premieres and concerts have been greatly affected over the last year and a bit because of COVID. How has COVID impacted your work?

I have never stopped during this whole COVID time. I have been working on pieces that were scheduled to be premiered this year and next year. I never stopped at all. I have actually received more commissions than ever before in my whole life. And then there are also performances of my music online.

This past Tuesday a clarinet quintet of mine was played in Ohio, with a live audience. But it was premiered in March online. So, I have had quite a few performances online during the pandemic, and a lot of music that I have been writing for future premieres. I have never really stopped at all.

Maybe you have had more quiet time to compose, since you haven't had to be running around as much as in your normal life!

Sure, I haven't been on a plane as much. But I just got back from Tulsa, Oklahoma, on Sunday. That was the first time I needed to travel in over a year for a premiere of

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a new piece. I have mostly been on Zoom interviews and listening to online concerts.

Do you generally travel to attend a premiere of your work?

Yes, I usually travel for all premieres. They usually really desire my presence there, as usually a composer is at the world premiere. Maybe not the subsequent performances, but typically for the world premiere, the composer is present.

And going back to instrumentation—what type of ensemble or orchestra do you prefer to compose for? What instrumentation do you like the best?

Oh, by far the orchestra. That has been my favorite. It seems that it offers more opportunities. You might think that composing for a choir might be easier, but for me and my experience, having an orchestra play my music or commission a new work has always been easier than having a choral piece commissioned.

There are so many voices to be thinking about when writing for an orchestra!

Yes, but the colors you can achieve, and the things you can do with an orchestra—that really attracts me to it.



Have you played orchestral instruments yourself? I believe you were a pianist first.

I have only studied the piano—and I still play the piano. Although in high school at Andrews Academy I played the timpani one semester.

How many pieces have you composed?

I never know exactly how many pieces I have composed. I just write and send them to my publisher. The listing my publisher has may be over eighty works, but I am not sure. I know that once concerts start to be rescheduled, I know I am expecting fourteen world premieres pretty soon. So, I know I have to plan my schedule accordingly for when I can travel again, and my teaching schedule.

Do you have so much music in your head just waiting to come out? To me, the work of composition is just unfathomable. How do you actually write the music? Do you ever take a commission and then sit down and have whatever the composer’s version of writer’s block is? How do you keep having new ideas?

I usually pray before I compose anything. And yes, sometimes when I listen to my music, I think, “Wow, did I really write that?” I don’t even know how I did it. But I know I pray, and I use the skills I learned when I studied at the University of Michigan. And then I work out some ideas and harmonic structures or what I want to appear rhythmically or melodically in the music.

Sometimes I do experience writer’s block. For example, I have a new piece that was commissioned by the Baltimore Symphony for narration and orchestra that is being premiered next month. It was a new piece that they just added—and they just told me about it in late February. I had one day where I worked all day, and I just could not get a breakthrough until almost midnight. Finally, I just changed the direction of where I was going

with one particular passage, and then it just solved the problem.

Going back, can you tell me how old you were when you started playing the piano?

Quite late—I was 12 years old. My father signed me up for lessons without my knowledge. He just told me one day: “I signed you up for lessons.” Years later, I thanked him for doing that because like any other young boy, I was mainly interested in sport. (I still am, but I don’t play sports the way I did when I was younger.) But yeah, I used to pass the method books for piano, one every week. I was so interested in and in love with music.

Have you asked your father what inspired him to sign you up for piano lessons?

Probably because they bought me a toy piano when I was a little boy and they saw my interest in playing around with that little piano.

They tried to sign me up for guitar lessons later, but I didn’t really want to learn the guitar. And I really thought piano was more of an instrument for girls. But then when my father just made the decision for me and registered me for lessons, I just fell in love and have loved the piano ever since.

What experience did you have with music before you were 12?

Really mainly music in church. And some popular music. I remember liking popular music until I started piano lessons. And since then, I have never really listened to it, unless it is being played in my hearing somewhere.

I was in the children’s choir and the youth choir.

Was that a formative experience for you?

I used to have fun with my friends there until I really started to understand more about music and then the youth choir wasn’t as interesting to me anymore. Then I felt like what I was learning and what they were doing were too different—it just wasn’t as appealing to me. I wanted to be really serious with my music, but the choir rehearsals felt like just a social gathering.

Do you remember when you first became interested in composing?

In elementary school a teacher saw me writing notes and she told me: “You know, there is such a thing as manuscript paper?” I didn’t know that. Later, at Andrews Academy, I started to write more, and I wrote something for piano that ended up winning The People’s Choice

Award in a talent show.

Can you give us a synopsis of your musical education after that?

I thought I would be this wonderful pianist. I went to Andrews University for two years. I really wanted to work on my solo piano repertoire, but I ended up mostly accompanying—singers and violinists.

For my third year, I applied and was accepted at the University of Michigan to study at the school of music there. I finished my bachelor’s degree in piano performance at the University of Michigan. Then I was going to go to the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, or I was also accepted at the University of Maryland for piano performance, but then I changed my mind about piano performance altogether. I applied to the composition program at Michigan, which was at the time ranked in the top four or five in the country. So, I ended up staying at Michigan for the master’s and the doctorate in composition.

You probably met a number of other musicians and composers in your time at the University of Michigan. Have you worked with some of them since?

Oh yes. There is a married couple—both musicians—who were students at the University of Michigan when I was, and they have started an organization called The Sphinx Organization.

That organization really helps young Black and Latinx string players. They have a competition every year that gives students the opportunity to play with orchestras. They also have an orchestral composition consortium commission. They nominated me for this commission in 2010. I won that, and to this day, the piece that I wrote, called *Sukkot Through Orion’s Nebula*, has been played more than twenty times. That has been a huge blessing. So that is one example.

Another example is a pianist who studied at the University of Michigan. She recorded my piano compositions back in 2014 on the Albany label.

So, I have been collaborating on and off with colleagues of mine that studied at Michigan.

How about Adventist musicians? Are there Adventist musicians you have collaborated with or Adventist music groups who have played your work?

Actually, I have been the most successful in South America with Adventist musicians. I had an oratorio

performed at the Adventist University of São Paulo in Brazil, UNASP. And then I was the composer-in-residence in January 2020 for the festival they have at the university there. I would have been there again this year, but of course the pandemic has changed everything.

Besides that, I wrote a concerto for violin and orchestra that Carla Trynchuk at Andrews University would have premiered last March. But they rescheduled it to spring 2022. She was actually one of my music theory teachers at Andrews University before I transferred. I am looking forward to going back to Andrews and hearing her premiere the violin concerto.

I would imagine that Adventist universities and music groups might not have a budget to commission works the way that bigger organizations do, and that would have some impact on who plays them.

Yes, certainly. Well, at Andrews, I gave them the “Adventist discount!”

And what about the New England Youth Ensemble? Have they played any of your pieces?

They haven’t yet. I wrote a piano concerto for Daniel

Lau, and that would have been premiered at Washington Adventist University in August of last year. But I haven’t yet heard when they plan to reschedule that concert. But that is another that I am really enthusiastic about hearing.

How would you describe the style of music that you compose, for someone listening who is not a musician?

There are certain elements of contemporary classical music, and harmonies, that I incorporate. But I always try to provide elements of accessibility. So, for someone who doesn’t normally listen to music, there is always a balance of what one can really grasp and understand as a lay listener. And also appreciate some of the more modern techniques of rhythm and meter—and dissonance that is eventually resolved.

I remember at one concert, some of the elderly attendees told me that my music kept them on edge—they were really engaged with it, whereas they went to sleep during Brahms!

Historically we have had this definition of sacred music versus “profane.” We have sacred music that we play during worship service or the Sabbath hours



James Lee III with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

When I am thinking about what happens musically and want to convey the idea of what a text is saying, not everything will line up in a metric order that is always even. That is not the way some of these Biblical texts and stories are written. You can't convey the Beast from Daniel 7 in a way that is predictable—you just can't do it! When you talk about those four winds. . .

versus music that is classical, but that has no religious history or connotation. Would you differentiate between these types of music? How would you define sacred music?

Certainly I think about that, especially because of the Sabbath. A lot of my music has biblical subject matter, or refers to Bible prophecy, and one reason is because a lot of the time, my music is programmed first in a concert. So many times, if it is programmed on the Sabbath, and I am actually there listening to it, I will usually leave right after it, so that I am not drawing any undue attention to myself during the Sabbath hours. And I don't want to have conversations about some things on the Sabbath.

When I am thinking about sacred music, of course I am thinking about what can bring honor and glory to God and his handiwork, in a way that is tasteful—telling a story and being genuine about what the word of God says. There are some who may think about syncopation and these aspects of music that might have negative connotations, but music doesn't have to be negative just because it might have some sort of stress on the offbeat. When I am thinking about what happens musically and want to convey the idea of what a text is saying, not everything will line up in a metric order that is always even. That is not the way some of these Biblical texts and stories are written. You can't convey the Beast from Daniel 7 in a way that is predictable—you just can't do it! When you talk about those four winds. . .

I have a piece called *Night Visions of Kippur* where I explore that, especially in the first and last movements.

I had a piece of mine that was played on the radio

with the Chicago Symphony, it is this *Sukkot Through Orion's Nebula*, which is describing the Feast of Tabernacles and the Second coming of Jesus from Revelation 14, after the Three Angels' Messages are mentioned. And in the same concert, they played *Night on Bald Mountain*, which is about witches and darkness. So, I have been programmed as a music of light, in contrast with the music of darkness.

So, in the profane aspect, that music is drawing one more to what is worldly and human, and worshiping the human artist instead of the Creator God—that is how I make that distinction in thinking about the sacred and the profane. Who are you going to worship? At the end, that is the question. Who will you worship? Who will your allegiance be to?

I used to play with Virginia-Gene Rittenhouse, and at every concert she told the story of how JS Bach believed that all music should be “to the glory of God and the refreshment of the spirit” and if it met those criteria, it was sacred music.

Bach, of course, and Mendelssohn always both highlighted God in their works, in terms of him being the Creator and him being the one whom we should honor and glory.

Just because it's classical music, sometimes people think that means it is sacred. But some of these works really don't have any business being played or heard on the Sabbath.

I know the history of many of these composers and their work, and just because something might seem neutral—well, I don't really think all those works are as neutral as one might think.

What contemporary composers, and what historic composers, inspire you?

Well, I like some of my teachers of course. All of my teachers! But I will name just a few. William Bolcom was one of my teachers, and Bright Sheng, and Michael Daugherty. And then there is John Adams, whose music I really appreciate and learn from. There is a composer from Australia whose music I have really come to know. His name is Nigel Westlake. He has this wonderful work called *Compassion*, which mixes the Hebrew language and Arabic, and it is just wonderful what he did in that work.

Some of the older composers I like include Tōru Takemitsu, a Japanese composer, and of course Shostakovich. I love his pacing and balance in his symphonies. And, of course, Beethoven, Ravel, and Debussy with the colors. Oh, and [Argentinian composer] Alberto Ginastera—his driving rhythms are very fascinating.

At the beginning of our conversation you mentioned elements of Native American and African American music. Are there elements of African American music that you try to incorporate into your work?

Yes, I have. In this piece *American* I used a Negro spiritual, “Just One,” in a passage played by the flute. Interestingly, Dvořák said that when he listened to music of Negro Americans and Native Americans, he couldn’t really distinguish between the two. So, if you play the music of a spiritual on the flute, you will actually think it’s Indigenous American, or Native American.

A lot of times, African Americans are called African Americans, but historically many of us have a lot of Native or Indigenous blood in us. That is a whole other story. But when you hear the music of the spirituals, it has the same sort of scale or construction of minor modes and minor pentatonic scales that you will find in Native American music as well. So that is something I have been very interested in. Because historically, many African Americans have been reclassified from being so-called Indians to being so-called Africans.

Do you know any other Adventist composers?

I do. Joel Thompson gets a lot of different performances of his work. I know he has music being premiered by the Seattle Symphony this season. He has been played by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. He is Atlanta-based but at the Yale School of Music right now.

If you are talking about composers writing orchestra music, he is the only one I can think of. I know we have other Adventist composers at our institutions, but I don’t know anyone else doing similar work to what I am doing.

What are the works you are the most proud of, or best show the range of what you have done?

The temptation is to say *Sukkot Through Orion’s Nebula* because that is the piece that has been played the most. And I am almost a little embarrassed—not embarrassed by the piece but sometimes I think people might say, “Oh that is the only piece he has written that’s good.” But that is definitely one to listen to for sure, because that one has been a blessing to me ever since I wrote it.

Maybe my second violin sonata. That one worked out very well. That is a good one to listen to. It is also on my web page.

There is a piano trio called *Temple Visions*. That might be one that people would be interested in.

It just depends on whether someone wants to hear instrumental music.

I have a work called *Hallelu Yâh!* for chorus that is also on my website. That is for acapella choir. In that one I use the name of God in Hebrew, and the various names of God are intertwined with alleluia throughout the choral piece.

You live in Baltimore currently, right? Would you say the Baltimore Symphony is your local orchestra?

Definitely, they are. I have been blessed to be commissioned by them in this year twice.

Are you able to go and hear them play again now?

They are planning for that this fall. They commissioned this piece that I wrote called *Destined Words*. That is to commemorate Music Director Marin Alsop’s tenure with the orchestra. That will be her last concert with the Baltimore Symphony. And it’s also Juneteenth and they wanted to write something for Juneteenth as well. Their Artistic Partner, who is actually a rapper named Wordsmith (Anthony Parker), wrote the text. It is for narration and orchestra. So, they will be premiering it on June 19, that Saturday night. And it will also be viewed via Maryland Public Television.

I am really looking forward to it. This is the piece I was saying I had a breakthrough at midnight.

Do you have other big projects in the works?

I am at this moment, today, working on a piano trio.

Chamber Music America commissioned me to write a piano trio that will be premiered at Tanglewood in November this year. So, I have to finish that this month. Because I have a new piece for the Baltimore Symphony, the Boston Symphony, and the Rochester Philharmonic. That premiere is in January next year, but it has to be delivered in November. And I haven't started!

Then I have a band piece that I am writing for a consortium of university symphonic bands. That will be premiered next spring.

But what I have also wanted to write is a cello concerto. And an oratorio based on the Second Coming of Jesus, or the Great Controversy theme. That has been something I have always wanted to do. But at least with secular orchestras and organizations, that would probably be too long for their programming.

You are so prolific, and you have so many things coming up, I don't know how you have any extra time left over. But are there other things you do to relax or give your mind a reset so you can come back to the creative process?

I am studying Hebrew. I love foreign languages. My wife is Brazilian, and she taught me Portuguese, so every time I am in Brazil, I can communicate in Portuguese. I am fluent.

I also studied German at Andrews, French at University of Michigan; I learned Portuguese with my wife, and now I am studying Hebrew. I am really serious about Biblical Hebrew and modern Hebrew. I have been to Israel twice.

I also like watching LaLiga soccer games, or European leagues.

Well, maybe that is one time where you let your brain rest! Studying foreign languages—you don't give yourself too much of a break!

My wife—she is a middle school teacher—and I sometimes relax together and talk, or we might watch a movie. But usually if I am watching something, it's a game.

Composer James Lee III has written works for orchestra, string quartet, chorus and other varied musical ensembles that have been commissioned and premiered by the National Symphony Orchestra, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, the Boston Symphony Chorus, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra,

and many other orchestras across the United States. His music has been played at Tanglewood and championed by famed conductor Leonard Slatkin.

Lee attended Andrews Academy and Andrews University before he went to the University of Michigan, where he earned his first degree in piano performance and then his masters and doctorate in composition. The piece Lee wrote for his dissertation for the University of Michigan was based on the River of Life in Revelation—he called it Beyond Rivers of Vision, and it was premiered by the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in 2006.



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