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## [Bits and Pieces That End Up a Life](#)

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The role of music in telling stories will of course change depending on the type of narrative being told. In planning “collected stories,” the fascinating series of six concerts at Zankel Hall that concluded on Tuesday night, the composer David Lang explored the various approaches composers have taken to relate tales of adventure, love, longing and spiritual questing.



And various was the operating word for this series, presented by Carnegie Hall, which opened last week with a program titled “hero” that boldly paired the singer Benjamin Bagby’s version of the Anglo-Saxon tale “Beowulf” with the composer Harry Partch’s unconventional 1930s opera about hobos.

Tuesday’s concluding program, “memoir,” opened with three intriguing works by John Cage that were performed, strange as it may seem, simultaneously. After intermission, the evening, and the series, ended with the premiere of Mr. Lang’s “mystery sonatas,” a work of nearly 40 minutes for solo violin performed stunningly by the brilliant young violinist Augustin Hadelich.

Cage’s “Indeterminacy,” a memoir work, began its life as a lecture at the Brussels World’s Fair in 1958. As Mr. Lang explained in his notes, Cage decided to write a kind of catalog with stories “about things he learned by chance” or accidental happenings. Cage wrote the stories on 30 notecards, shuffled them and read them in whatever order emerged, cutting off each tale after a minute even if incomplete. He later raised the number to 90. For this performance, featuring the director, actor and Wooster Group alumnus Paul Lazar in the role of Cage, 45 cards were used.

This presentation of “Indeterminacy,” directed by Mr. Lang, also followed Cage’s suggestion that to enhance the effect of superimposition, another work of his could be performed simultaneously. So as Mr. Lazar, sitting at a small table with a desk lamp, read the random notecards, the formidable percussionist Steven Schick performed Cage’s elaborate 1956 work “27’10.554.’ ” To take things a step further (and why not?), this performance included lighting by the designer Eric Southern, who followed the

instructions in Cage's graphic score "Fontana Mix."

The engaging Mr. Lazar was an alternately low-keyed and hyper-paced reader of Cage's beguiling little tales about encounters with friends, lessons from gurus and other random events that enriched and, in a way, defined the composer's life. One of my favorites, a sweetly funny story, concerned matching wooden boxes containing Oriental spices and foodstuffs that Cage and his friend the pianist David Tudor received. The contents had gotten completely mixed up. Tudor spent three days working with tweezers to sort out each spice flake, bean and sugar cube. When he finished, Tudor said to Cage, "Whenever you want to get at that box of spices you have, let me know. I'll help you."

During the 50 minutes of "Indeterminacy," the percussion music unfolded in spurts with tense pauses. Delicate scraping sounds, rumbling drum riffs, sudden thwacks and conch blasts became like a sporadic musical commentary on the stories.

Mr. Lang borrowed the title "mystery sonatas" from the name of a collection of violin pieces from the 1670s by Biber, the Bohemian composer and violin virtuoso, a "bizarre and fiery" set of sonatas, to quote Mr. Lang, which tells of Christ's birth, crucifixion and resurrection. Mr. Lang's new work is like the memoir of a composer's musical and spiritual journey, structured in seven titled sections, the pivotal ones called "joy," "sorrow" and "glory," though, surprisingly, the music of these movements is mostly reflective and pensive. One piece is a breathless, almost dangerous perpetual-motion toccata. Another is a restless outburst of modernistic fiddle-faddle. But most of the pieces are ruminative and lyrical, with lacy spiraling figures, searching melodic lines, tender tunes played in hushed harmonics.

I cannot imagine a better performance than the one Mr. Hadelich gave. His playing combined impressive technical command with plush, rich-textured sound. And with magisterial poise and serene control, Mr. Hadelich became a riveting storyteller, which was the point of this piece. And the series.