

FACING REALITY:  
'I thought classical music  
was God's gift... and then  
I found I had to make a living'



## NORTH AMERICAN FOCUS

# Starting late

What makes a composer who has enjoyed huge success in jazz, pop and folk turn to classical at the age of 62? *Susan Elliott* asks Michael Colina just that

**C**inematic sweep, great swirls of orchestral colour, recognisable motifs that recur in different guises. Is it classical music? Film music? Easy listening? Jazz? Yes. Trying to label Michael Colina's music is like trying to pin Jell-O to the wall. The evidence on his new CD, *Three Cabinets of Wonder*, recorded with the London Symphony Orchestra, is certainly tonal and neo-Romantic, but it avoids banality through sheer craft and a lying-in-wait voice that finds the unexpected and nails the listener with it. Latin rhythms, hummable tunes and jazz-tinged harmonies abound, but there is a continuous sense of tension, angst even, that drives it all forward.

Colina's musical coat of many colours is a biographical reflection of the man. Born in North Carolina, with a 'southern belle' as a mom and a 'crazy Cuban guy' as a dad, he had his career path all set by age 11. 'I decided I was going to be a famous composer,' he said recently. 'I wanted to be Stravinsky. I was looking for fame and fortune.'

Colina grew up in the late 1950s and '60s, when classical music was far more in the popular parlance than it is now. Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts were on TV, pianist Van Cliburn was celebrated with a ticker-tape parade on Wall Street for winning Russia's prestigious International Tchaikovsky Competition. Lincoln Center was under construction; Mahler had been rediscovered; the Kennedys invited a stream of classical performers into the White House. 'Classical music was in the media,' says Colina, 'people talked about it. It had a different presence. Things have changed...' No kidding.

Armed with composition studies from the North Carolina School of the Arts and with composer Thomas Pasatieri in Italy, Colina set off for New York City, ready to hit the ground running as the new Stravinsky. 'I thought classical music was God's gift to humanity,' he recalls. He even accuses himself of being a classical music 'snob' at the time. Pop and jazz – they were for the lesser folk. 'And then I found out I had to make a living!' he laughs. 'So I ended up writing music for whatever – modern dance, Off-Broadway, Joseph Papp's Shakespeare Festival, film music, TV music...'

If his initial goal was to make the monthly rent, he quickly gained a reputation as a sublime short-order chef of music for any occasion. The Stravinsky dream was put aside in favour of things more collaborative, more fun and, of course, more lucrative. As a record producer, his client list resembled a who's who of the jazz and pop worlds: jazz greats such as Bob James, Michael Brecker, Bill Evans; folk/pop icons such as James Taylor, Linda Ronstadt and Bonnie Raitt, to name just a few. Gold records and Grammy nominations followed. As he puts it, his career as a pop/jazz writer and producer, 'took off, full force'.

Fast forward 25 years and the bottom had dropped out of the record biz. 'By the end of the 20th century, downloading had taken a huge bite out of recording company budgets,' he says. 'The fees I was charging I could no longer get – young guys would come a long and do the same thing I would do for five grand for 500 dollars. So I decided, if I wasn't going to make any money, then I would not make any money doing what I loved most and go back and pick up the young voice I had left off at 25.'

The new Stravinsky was back at the drawing board, this time with an added facility in jazz and pop styles and a willingness to let his innate feel for the Latin rhythms of his dad's homeland come through. The first opus was a three-movement piano concerto, then a piano quintet, a string quartet titled *Disturbing the Silence*, a woodwind quintet, and more. To date, Colina's catalogue, including ballet scores and incidental music for assorted stage works, includes about 20 pieces, not including the three on which he is currently working.

His new CD, *Three Cabinets of Wonder*, recorded on the Naxos-distributed Fleur de Son Classics label with the London Symphony Orchestra, takes its title from one of the three pieces, a Concerto played by and written for violinist Anastasia Khitruk. Although Colina says it is not necessarily his practice to work from specific scenarios or images, this disc is full of them. The movements of the *Three Cabinets* Concerto, an incredibly virtuosic vehicle that Khitruk finesses with spitting, splitting intensity, are titled 'Fanny's Brother', 'Buddha's Assassin' and 'Guardian of the Glowing'. The

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**RAISING HELL:**  
Colina's disc draws  
from the hellish *Los Caprichos*  
depictions by Goya (below)



first is constructed from sketches (perhaps imaginary – Colina's liner note explanations are intentionally ambiguous) by the famous composer's sister. Colina says he found his 'inner Mendelssohn' in writing it.

Less Mendelssohn than, perhaps, Dvořák, the style is straightforward tonality. Ethereal chimes herald the beginning of the next movement, 'Buddha's Assassin', which, writes Colina, is 'set in a jungle in Thailand'.

This section elicits from Colina melodies that verge on Puccini save for a twist of lemon. 'Guardian of the Glowing' (set 'deep in the Amazonian rain forest') is a mystical, atmospheric tone poem, in which the soloist is the protagonist to the orchestra's stormy rumblings.

I ask Colina if it offends him when I call his music 'accessible'. 'Not at all. I'd be offended if you told me it wasn't accessible. I've spent so many hours with my jazz artists in live concerts watching an audience give back to the artist when they're performing. I want to communicate! I don't want to be writing plink-plunk music that makes people walk out scratching their heads. I want to feel nourished, especially after 9/11...'

Our interview takes place just days after the tenth anniversary and the horrific event is very much on his mind. Colina calls it 'a fault line' not only for his music but for his outlook on life. 'It's when I shifted,' he says. 'I realised it was time to grow up a little.'

It also sowed the seeds of his new role as a peace activist. To that end, he has titled 11 of the tracks on his *Three Cabinets of Wonder* CD as 'Los Caprichos', after 18th-century Spanish artist Francisco Goya's 'black paintings' (prints, actually) depicting the horrors of war. Goya has become something of a muse. 'He was the first to depict war and disaster and carnage like a photojournalist would, with the moral imperative that "this shouldn't be happening".' Colina notes, too, the 'weird, awful similarity' between these paintings and the photos from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

The release of *Three Cabinets of Wonder* in November coincides with its world premiere by the Royal Philharmonic in Cadogan Hall in London. November also marks the premiere of the piano reduction of *Baba Yaga*, named after a witch in Slavic folklore who, reports Colina, 'liked to eat children' – she also makes an appearance in Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Khitruk performs the work with pianist Elena

Bakshyt on 14 November at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. Later in the month, the full version – a fantasia for violin and orchestra – will be recorded by the LSO for a disc to be issued in autumn 2012, also on Fleur de Son Classics. At the moment, Colina is still working on yet another project for that recording. 'I'm scaring myself,' he jokes.

He's incorporating changes suggested by Ira Levin, his friend and colleague who is to conduct the LSO recording. 'He had a lot of good insights and comments, so I've gone back and done some extensive revisions,' says Colina. This work too, will take its title from Goya – *Quinta del Sordo* ('Deaf Man's House'), where many of the black paintings originated.

I wonder aloud if there isn't the possibility of a symphony taking place in Colina's future. 'I prefer working with soloists. It appeals to my producer hat, when you have someone to put in the spotlight, someone whose virtuosity can shine through your music. There's a focus, a pin spot of intensity. It's fun. Plus, during the writing process, I allow their input as I go along. I can show Anastasia something and she might say, that's really, really not playable. It would be better if...'

He's no longer producing, but he's certainly still collaborating and, with the myriad distinctive styles he has absorbed through the years, communicating with a voice that speaks to many tastes. At the age of 62, composer Michael Colina is just getting started. ■