

When He's Not at Work: An Interview with Brian Robinson

A lone figure sits at a desk in an office. The office has soaring windows, and imposingly high ceilings, but the man is tall and his mannerisms are broad—the expansiveness of his office feels appropriate. His artfully unkempt hair hangs down to his shoulders, and his black office chair seems too plain for his long, dynamic limbs. If I had to characterize his office with a sound, it would be a quietly thudding rhythm: *lub-dub* pause, *lub-dub* pause, *lub-dub* pause, and so on. For the man is Brian Robinson, and when he's at work, he's the beating heart of the Symphony.

His job? "It's actually all the things that isn't waving your hands in front of the orchestra," he says with a sheepish grin. It's an affectionate snarkiness, to be expected from the long-standing Managing Director of the Yale Symphony Orchestra. Robinson's held this post for nearly two decades, like a firmly planted rock in a shifting stream of interim conductors, imported directors, and incoming students. Normally, "There would be an operations manager, a personnel manager, a development director, a marketing manager, tour coordinator." Instead, "It's just all, you know, it's all here—all centralized in one delightful package," he says, gesturing towards himself with a large, flapping hand motion.

We're meeting earlier than expected, because Brian had emailed, "Hi, Vicky. I'm gonna be leaving around 1030 to send a contrabassoon in for repair. Could we meet around 10?" I picture him swaddling an oversized contrabassoon like a small, injured bird, and reply, "No problem, see you then." We've met like this a half-dozen times since he took me on as his graphic designer, so I've seen him in action: overseeing ticketing software for the largest performance venue on campus, arranging orchestral scores for the infamously avant-garde Halloween Show, fielding questions from overzealous first-years ("No, I really don't think you should re-audition with a new piece—the Elgar is in your fingertips").

When he speaks, Robinson's distinctive, baritone voice reverberates against the stoicism of the surrounding architecture. Within these walls, he packages himself and conforms to expectations—the daily ritual of any artist with a steady job, and the especially necessary ritual of an artist with three kids. "I spend a lot of brain energy holding myself back in every situation, except when I'm on stage."

On his stage, Brian Robinson transforms. Gone is the nine-to-five symphony manager, the Mannes-College-of-Music-trained composer, the comic-book-collecting dad. He's replaced with a hot-blooded, head-banging rock n' roll performer, long hair thrashing, long limbs finally loosened. He leaves his tightly wound, day-to-day personas somewhere backstage, and grips the microphone stand with the desperation of a man drowning.

But Robinson's music is a far cry from classic rock. To be precise, it's exactly as far from classic rock as it is from classical orchestral music. Robinson is the founder, lead singer, and composer for The Tet Offensive, a string quartet rock band that's been performing in New Haven and New York since 2009.

"Yeah, it's a band, 'cause it's got a drummer," he admits when I press him for clearer terminology. "The only difference is that the guitar and the bass are being played by strings—other string instruments." Calling it a band first, string ensemble second, makes sense given his Guilford, Connecticut roots. "I grew up in the suburbs, where classic rock was the only genre they let you listen to," he explains, leaving us guessing as to who "they" are, and whether Big Brother preferred the gritty melodies of Lynyrd Skynyrd over the searing guitar solos of Pink Floyd. Robinson had some classical exposure in chorus and theatre, but "Even then it was a lot of Disney arrangements."

There's a moment in every good story where everything slows and the music gets louder—something important is about to happen. Brian Robinson's moment occurred when he first heard the Bartok string quartet playing on the radio.

"I was seventeen so everything was super passionate . . . I had to pull over and stop the car and listen to the string quartet, because it was the most incredible thing I'd ever heard." He recognized Bartok's essence—seething, expressive, and undeniably human—because he hadn't been conditioned otherwise. The demure sophistication of classical music culture (a culture of rustling gowns, dimmed lights, and uncomfortable chairs) warps our perception of the genre's sound. So while we hear an overarching balance and inhuman precision, Robinson hears the musician's underlying, unbridled energy.

"Which is the same thing I like about rock music—not just the loudness, but . . . the intensity. I like when somebody lets their whole soul out into the music. It's not restrained at all. It's actually very passionate, even though it's calculated." The hybridized arrangements and original compositions that Robinson writes for The Tet Offensive chip away at this façade of control and restraint, revealing the passionate and soulful physicality of the string instrument itself.

"You've got horse hair grating against gut string, it's so organic. And the vibrations from those instruments, amplified by their own wood. It's so visceral. That's the word. It's visceral. I wanted to get that across. I think that if we educate the general public more about how visceral classical music is, that it won't be taken for granted as much, and that people will dig deeper and discover more of that music. Not default to whatever the louder scores are telling us to listen to."

When he's speaking this way, Robinson's thoughts seem to gain momentum, and his tone of voice becomes even, and quiet, and prophetic. Even though he's talking classical, he exudes

the defiance of a rock star. Defending his genre requires this kind of rebelliousness, because most people expect a “string quartet rock band” to take the melodies of beloved rock songs and smooth them into neat, orchestral arrangements. The Tet Offensive intentionally delivers the very opposite.

“We’re not pretty. You get us on the stage and you see that I’m literally flailing on the stage in costume, and the strings are ripping and shredding and drums are banging. I want to catch everyone by surprise.” Live, his music might come across as chaotic, perhaps even blasphemous to a purist of either genre. But Robinson’s compositions are grounded in a knowledgeable appreciation of both rock and classical.

“String instruments have a versatility that the guitar and the bass don’t. And they don’t rely on amplification or effects—they have to rely on counterpoint and harmonies.” By tapping into the essential qualities of each genre, he creates a sound that infuses the technical sophistication of classical with something “more raw and accessible.”

“Accessible sometimes gets translated into ‘pretty’ or ‘easy to listen to’ . . . I feel like accessible means that it’s relevant to people today. Haydn’s great, but that’s 400-year-old music. It touches emotional cores of things that are universal, but it doesn’t reach today. I listen to early-20th and mid-20th century music and I hear the struggle and the anxiety and the worry and the fear and the speed at which things are going, and I go, ‘Wow that touches me, that I understand.’”

As he launches into a tangent on Phillip Glass, a prolific minimalist composer of the late-20th century, I’m reminded of my supplementary interview with Daisy, a Yale administrator with an MFA in Creative Writing. She’s seen Brian Robinson on his stage, so she remembers his stage presence, his musicality, his hair. But then more quietly, she adds, “I think he wishes he could do more.”

Asking an artist whether he’d like to quit his day job and try to “make it big” comes across naïve at best, and outright mean-spirited at worst. So instead, I listen to Robinson talk about Glass, hoping to catch him sounding wistful.

“I think people get Phillip Glass totally wrong. They think he’s repetitive and droning, and I’m like, ‘No, no. There’s something really incredible happening that he’s touching on.’ He was a New York City cab driver before he became famous—he completely understands the bohemian lifestyle, the experience of living poor in a fast city. That’s what he’s doing with music. I hear it every time I listen to it. This is somebody who’s translating that bustle that he sees around him—but he’s not a part of it.”

Per usual, Brian Robinson seems completely smitten with the act of translation—taking the experience of living a double life, and turning it into sound.