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It's all relative for evening of premieres - Jane Lott - May 9, 2006

IN A WAY, to hear composer Philippe Bodin's music is to understand the concept of relativity.

In the early part of the 20th century, Albert Einstein theorized that time is relative, meaning simply that time changes, moving at different speeds relative to different objects. He later postulated that gravity, too, warps time, making it appear to slow down or speed up. What Einstein described in theory, Bodin - who once studied mathematics in his native France - creates in reality.

Bodin, a New York City resident, is one of two composers whose works will debut at the Left Coast Chamber Ensemble concert Thursday in Mill Valley. The program repeats Monday in San Francisco.

The Mill Valley concert marks the world premiere of Bodin's newest piece - originally called "stay" but later changed to "st(r)ay" when its character changed course. It was commissioned for the LCCE concert by the Barlow Foundation for Music Composition as a companion piece to Franz Schubert's "String Quintet in C Major," which will close the program.

Between these two compositions, musicians will play the West Coast premiere of "Mood Swings," a piece for piano, violin and cello by composer Paul Moravec, winner of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize in Music.

In a way, the Schubert piece is a premiere, as well. It was written in 1828, a few months before Schubert died of syphilis. Knowing he was dying, Schubert presaged Einstein's relativity theory by writing at least 22 major compositions in his final days, including the "String Quintet." He never heard the piece performed.

But Bodin has: "It's one of the most beautiful pieces in the repertoire," he says. "Completely fabulous."

In the relativity of time, the haunting second movement reached across the centuries to March 2006, the month when Bodin composed his new work. Like the quintet's slow movement, Bodin's "st(r)ay" is about stasis.

"I'm always fascinated with music where nothing happens," Bodin says.

Except that in "st(r)ay" - as in the Schubert - something does happen.

"It was very strange that it showed up," Bodin says, referring to the surprise element in the middle of his piece. In fact, he explained, in the whole work, things just showed up. "This is one of the most stream-of-consciousness things I've written in a long time," he notes.

Although trained in Western musical tradition, Bodin composes in a process that is Zen-like in its connection to creativity and its relativity with time. "When I write, I try to be as empty as I can," he explains. "I try to move aside." In that state of being, the music just comes to him. Sometimes it comes to him in a dream, as it did with "st(r)ay" when he dreamed of hearing the piece in rehearsal with LCCE - something that in the restlessness of time didn't actually happen until this week.

His music, too, has that same restless association with time. He likes things "to circle back," the return to their starting point. "That's my nostalgic filter," he says. "There's a sense of loss and whenever something comes back, it's like having it again."

Consequently, his works are imbued with canons (tunes, like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," which repeat in a multitude of echoes) and retrograde canons (which are canons played backward).

"That," Bodin explains, "is how symbolically you can change time."