

## music

# A Thousand Notes, A Thousand Miles

Hot young composer burns through Portland

by Stephen Marc Beaudoin

In the category of hotshit queer classical music composers, Nico Muhly reigns supreme.

Anointed by *Out* magazine as an "Out 100" artist to watch, courted by the Boston Symphony and Björk for musical commissions and swooned over by *New Yorker* magazine (which dedicated a four-page spread to him in February), 26-year-old Muhly is all but crowned as his generation's answer to John Adams or Philip Glass (a mentor of his).

But whatever you do, don't call him a gay composer. "Just the word order is so hierarchical in English, I'd rather not participate," he says with a typical verbal flick of the wrist. "Just linguistically it doesn't move me." Muhly, by the way, is creator and sole author of his self-named blog, NicoMuhly.com, where he rants on cooking, composing and couture in equal measure.

From his New York studio, fresh from a weekend of Berlioz and pink wine at the idyllic Tanglewood music festival in Massachusetts, Muhly spoke with me about his sophomore album, *Mothertongue* (Brassland Records), a lovely stuttering thing soaked in strings, and his upcoming folksy-classical tour with collaborators Sam Amidon and Doveman, which touches down in Portland on Aug. 15.

**Stephen Marc Beaudoin: What did you make yourself for breakfast this morning?**

**Nico Muhly:** I had a cup of coffee at this kind of organic, annoying ice cream store. People are so self-congratulatory about being organic. I'd rather people do it and not make a thing of it.

**SMB:** Why should I be nervous about interviewing you?

**NM:** Oh, I don't know. I'm probably younger than you. So I'm not old and scary.

**SMB:** I have all these musician and art friends in New York who always tell me about

the latest Nico Muhly spotting at such-and-such place. Why?

**NM:** God, I have no idea. It could be because I'm young and up to stuff. It's kind of exciting theoretically to people. I spot myself all the time. I spot myself changing the cat litter and wandering around my apartment scantily clad.

**SMB:** The singles Web site OKCupid.com tells me there are three single gay guys interested in you—two in New York and one in Philadelphia.

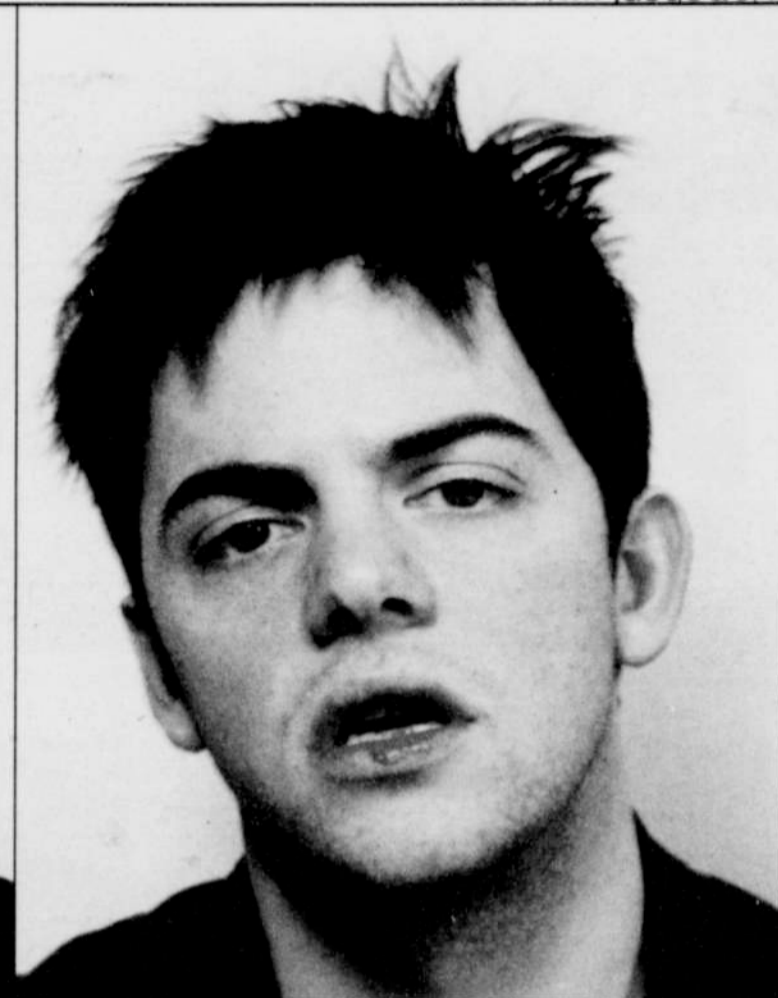
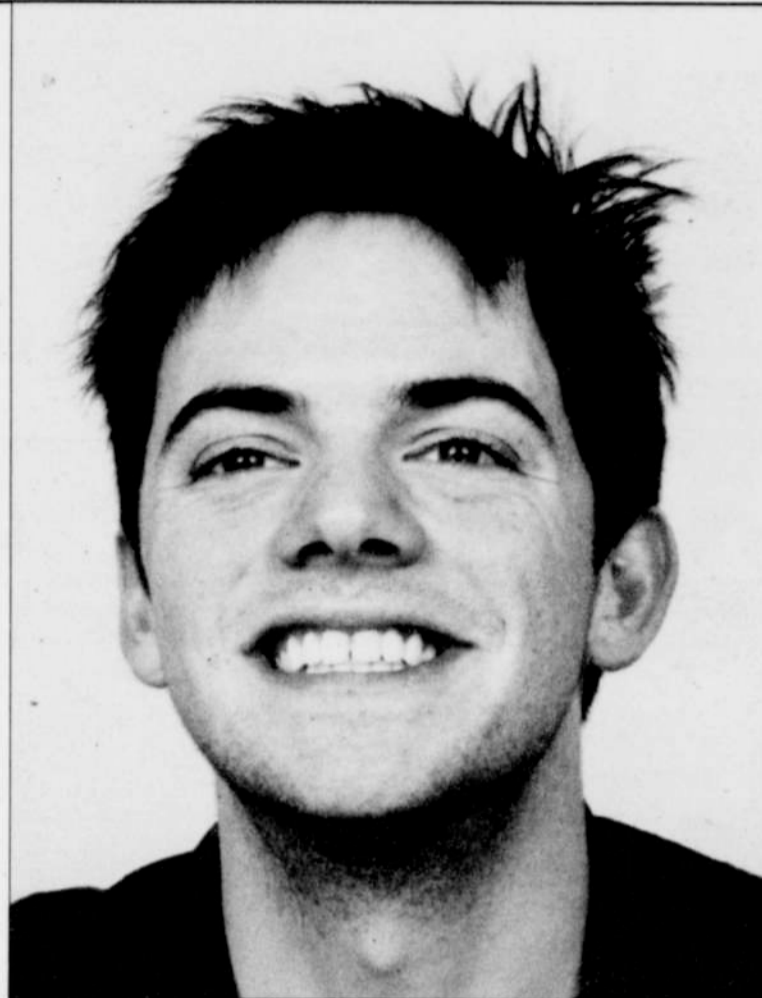
**NM:** No shit, who are these faggots? Wait, can you send me that link? When I was in school and stuff I was really disinterested in being all out and proud, and I didn't want to be that fag who also composes. Now I'm more aggressive about it.

**SMB:** Your blog is kind of amazing, and your music's rad, too. How much of your career success do you attribute to your status as a cult blogging celeb?

**NM:** I don't think any, really. I can't imagine that's the case. The thing I'm interested in doing there is demystifying the stuff: Other composers know what other composers do, but nobody else does. To write the kind of music I'm writing requires this kind of engagement with the world.

**SMB:** *Time Out Chicago* was somewhat dismissive of *Mothertongue*: "Brimming with ideas, at this point Muhly mostly gloms and glues, lacking the emotional foundation of Björk or Philip Glass." The writer also called you classical music's "most hyped talent."

**NM:** There we go. I read that as very well put. It's funny, it's true, I do glom and gleam, and we



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should all have the emotional resonance of Björk or Philip. He's totally correct.

**SMB:** In your *New Yorker* feature, so fabulous, you said some composers relied too heavily on a programmatic theme or feature to drive their music, deriding "this stupid conceptual stuff where it's like I was really inspired by, like, Morse code and the AIDS crisis." One of your former teachers, John Corigliano, wrote what I consider an exceptionally affecting work, his *Symphony No. 1*, as his emotional response to the AIDS crisis. Was Corigliano wrong to compose like that, or does knowing his "program" lessen the impact of his music?

**NM:** It's so embarrassing, I didn't really mean that. The first thing I did was e-mail [Corigliano] and say, "Oh, John, that's not what I meant." Corigliano's thing is a programmatic agenda that is primarily emotional; it's programmatic as a vehicle for the emotional itinerary.

**SMB:** Let's talk about *Mothertongue*. In a live concert, you as composer exert some control over the experience of hearing your music. Obviously with a recording, you can't tell a listener whether to absorb *Mothertongue* in the shower or while they're getting an amazing blow job. Do you have a way in which you wish listeners to hear the album?

**NM:** No, no, I wouldn't presume to. I kind of secretly think that in the car is best. It wouldn't

occur to me to have that thought; I try to make it as flexible as possible so people can wear it at all times.

**SMB:** What is the last thing you did in silence?

**NM:** I spent two hours today just writing music, working on a piano trio. I'm making drawings, I'm making sketches, I'm drawing shapes, I'm singing things in my head. It's a kind of ritualistic process, it's a sort of precompositional process—it's like chopping up all the vegetables before you're cooking.

**SMB:** Do you have a desire to teach in academia?

**NM:** No. People in academic situations can get so stupid and catty and Xerox machine memos and all that shit. I can't fuck with that. I feel like classical music, the capital-A academy, you want to get really intense with it for five or six years, then stop with it when you're 23. But what they want you to do is stay in the academy and teach other people. Right now is a really, really, really good time for me creatively...I'm like manic and voracious. I read a thousand books and run a thousand miles. **jp**

NICO MUHLY performs with Sam Amidon and Doveman 9 p.m. Aug. 15 at Aladdin Theater, 3017 S.E. Milwaukie Ave. Tickets are \$15 from the box office or Ticketmaster.

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