

**‘Simply put, it’s just the idea that music can be a powerful force for healing. And there’s a real need for healing in that community over there — and far beyond that community, in the country and the world.’**

— Jay Bowerman



COMPOSER CHRISTOPHER THOMAS

**O**n a warm, sunny Sunday afternoon in May, hundreds of people crammed into the gymnasium at Burns High School in eastern Oregon for a concert. One estimate put the crowd at 700. That’s roughly a quarter of the population of this remote high-desert town.

In Oregon’s cowboy country, people hadn’t come out for a honky-tonk band or a rock ‘n’ roll star on tour. Instead, the crowd of townspeople and out-of-town visitors, white-collar workers, grocery clerks, binocular-wielding birders, government scientists and ranchers had shown up for the world premiere of a brand-new classical symphony.

“The place was filled,” says local writer Terry Keim, who was at the concert. “It really hit a chord in the community.”

The five-movement *Malheur Symphony*, as the work is titled, was composed by Christopher Thomas, a Bend musician accustomed to having his music performed at much larger venues. His suite *Music For Strings* is to be performed in August at Australia’s Sydney Opera House.

A frequent composer for film, Thomas has worked with such Hollywood names as Samuel L. Jackson, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Zoe Bell.

*Malheur Symphony*, which was played that afternoon in Burns by the Central Oregon Symphony from Bend, refers to Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, which in early 2016 was the scene of a 41-day takeover by armed right-wing extremists. The occupation of the refuge, 30 miles south of Burns, stunned and, for a time, divided the community. Harney County is the kind of face-to-face place where politics quickly be-

comes personal.

A year after the occupation ended in gunfire, arrests and the death of one of the occupiers, Thomas was approached by Jay Bowerman, one of three sons of Nike co-founder Bill Bowerman and a lifelong naturalist and supporter of environmental causes.

Could Thomas, Bowerman wondered, compose a piece of music to honor Malheur Refuge in the wake of the occupation? Could he produce something that might help the fractured community reunite in the wake of the ugliness and violence?

“The real philosophical reason for doing this was to use music as a form of healing,” Bowerman explains. “You know, what I don’t want to do is dredge up those old hard feelings on either side, right? And so I guess, simply put, it’s just the idea that music can be a powerful force for healing. And there’s a real need for healing in that community over there — and far beyond that community, in the country and the world.”

Thomas signed on. The two men spent several days together exploring the refuge and its surroundings. They met native Paiute leaders from the Burns Paiute Reservation, situated on the edge of town, and talked to ranchers, scientists and other members of the larger Harney County community.

Out on the refuge, Thomas recorded the sounds of the wind, of thunder and of birds singing in the marshes.

Bowerman had imagined a single short piece of music. But as they headed back to Bend on the 130-mile desert highway connecting the two towns, the composer fell silent for long stretches. Everything from ancient geology to the traditions of the native Paiutes to birdcalls and ranchers in cowboy hats was swarming through his mind.

“And suddenly this beautiful architecture showed up,” Thomas says. “And I said, ‘Oh shit, we’ve got a

symphony on our hands! It’s five movements.’” He had never before composed a symphony. “But, you know, if Brahms and Berlioz can do it, we can do it!”

As everyone knows who lives outside the *Fox News* bubble, we live today in a time of crisis, both political and environmental. American democracy seems a thing of the past, pushed aside by greed, corruption and gerrymandering at the political high end, and by extremists with assault rifles at the bottom.

Meanwhile, as scientists are reminding us in increasingly urgent reports, our planet is quickly running out of time — no matter what breed of politicians happens to be in charge.

As a result, an informal connection between artists and scientists is creating what amounts to a new genre of music. You might call it “music to heal a dying Earth.”

## ***In Nomine Terra Calens***

In Los Angeles, scientist Lucy Jones was known for years on television as “Dr. Lucy.”

Now retired, she spent three decades as a seismologist with the U.S. Geological Survey and as a research associate at Cal Tech. Unlike many scientists, Jones made a point of being accessible to the news media when reporters had questions about, say, this afternoon’s temblor.

Once — to the delight of Southern California TV viewers — she cradled her sleepy young son as she appeared live on camera to discuss a massive earthquake that had just struck in Joshua Tree. The *L.A. Times* called her “the Beyoncé of earthquakes.”

Jones, whom I’ve known since we were in grade school together in L.A., has also been a musician all her life, taking up the viol — a Renaissance stringed instrument with frets — when she was an undergraduate at Brown University. Returning to music as her children