

Reena Esmail

RE/Member

First performance: 2021

Approximate duration: 7 minutes

[Listen](#)

RE/Member is a piece about reunion—about coming together after time apart. Composer Reena Esmail (b. 1983) composed this piece for the Seattle Symphony Orchestra. It was originally intended to be about the orchestra's return to performing after their usual summer break. However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 delayed this reunion, giving the first performance an even deeper meaning.

Esmail reflected on the time the orchestra's musicians spent separated from one another. Each had different experiences—some deeply personal, some artistic—and when they finally reunited, they brought those unique and diverse experiences back into the ensemble. Esmail said of her work, "I wanted this piece to honor the experience of coming back together, infused with the wisdom of the time apart."

RE/Member begins with a melancholy oboe solo. As the piece continues, the orchestra builds upon the oboe's melody, taking it through various moods. At the end of the piece, the oboist plays their opening melody again, but this time, a second oboist joins them. In this moving duet, the original oboe soloist is playing alongside their past self (represented by the second oboe), creating a musical conversation across time.

Billy Childs

Diaspora

First performance: 2023

Approximate duration: 22 minutes

[Listen](#)

Diaspora is a *concerto* for saxophone and orchestra. A concerto is a piece of music written for a solo instrument that is accompanied by an orchestra. Its primary goal is to show off a soloist's technical skill. This particular concerto is unique due to its instrumentation and story. The saxophone is not typically included in orchestral music, but here it takes center stage. Steven Banks performs on both the alto and soprano saxophones. Additionally, most concertos are not programmatic, meaning they don't tell a story. However, *Diaspora* is different. It tells a story.

The word *diaspora* means the forced spread of people from their original homeland. In this piece, composer Billy Childs (b. 1957) and saxophonist Steven Banks work together to tell the story of how West Africans were forced from their homelands into slavery in America and then suffered oppression and displacement throughout US history. By the third movement Childs expresses Black Americans' resistance to their oppression as they find power in their community.

Movement I. "Motherland" is inspired by [the poem "Africa's Lament" by Nayyirah Waheed](#).

Movement II. "If We Must Die" is inspired by [the poem of the same name by Claude McKay](#).

Movement III. "And Still I Rise" is inspired by [the poem of the same name by Maya Angelou](#).

The three movements are performed *attacca*, meaning there is no pause from one movement to the next.

Prokofiev and Childs: Anthems of Resilience

Concert Guide



St. Louis Symphony
Orchestra

Stéphane Denève, Music Director

Sergei Prokofiev

Symphony No. 5

First performance: 1945

Approximate duration: 46 minutes

[Listen](#)

A symphony is a composition usually written in four parts called movements, each with distinct tempos and moods. When performed, it is customary for there to be pauses between each movement with no applause.

Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953) was living abroad when dictator Joseph Stalin rose to power. The Soviet regime lured him back in 1936 with funding and opportunities—then forced him to compose under heavy censorship. Though some of his work was rejected, he was spared persecution because the government saw him as a valuable propaganda tool. Prokofiev walked a careful line between artistic expression and state control during one of the most repressive eras in history. Stalin ruled through fear, censorship, and violence, and his time in power caused the suffering and deaths of millions.

Prokofiev wrote his fifth symphony in 1944, as World War II was raging and the Soviets were pushing Nazi forces from their borders. When the symphony was premiered, it was an international success. Officially, Prokofiev wrote that he “conceived of it as glorifying the grandeur of the human spirit, praising the free and happy man—his strength, his generosity, and the purity of his soul.” This idea aligned with the optimistic, heroic narrative favored by the Soviet regime, which often demanded that music serve political and ideological goals. It was the perfect piece as the Soviets and their allies fought to defeat the Nazis. However, Prokofiev later told a correspondent for *Time* magazine that it was “about the spirit of man, his soul or something like that.”

Prokofiev and Childs: Anthems of Resilience will be performed on February 6, 2026, with Xian Zhang conducting.

Activities To Enrich Student Learning

1. Reena Esmail said of *RE/Member*, “I wanted this piece to honor the experience of coming back together, infused with the wisdom of time apart.” What do you think she meant by this? Take a few minutes to think or write about what it means to bring your own experiences—and ultimately your own voice—into music. How do your past experiences shape the way you play or listen to music now?
2. The oboe duet at the end of *RE/Member* represents Esmail's idea of “honoring the experience of coming back together, infused with the wisdom of the time apart.” Inspired by this reunion, create a musical conversation with your past self. Find a short, simple duet for your instrument (or write your own). Record yourself playing one part, then play the other part live along with the recording. Afterward, reflect on the experience: What was it like to play alongside your past self? Did it feel different knowing both parts came from you? How did your “time apart” affect your “reunion” in music?
3. Read Maya Angelou’s poem, “[And Still I Rise](#).” Take note of any words, phrases, or themes from the poem that stand out to you. Then, listen carefully to the third movement of Billy Childs’ *Diaspora*. What elements or text from the poem do you hear in the music? Describe how the text and words might be connected.
4. Of his fifth symphony, Prokofiev wrote that he “conceived of it as glorifying the grandeur of the human spirit, praising the free and happy man—his strength, his generosity, and the purity of his soul.” However, Prokofiev later told a correspondent for *Time* magazine that it was “about the spirit of man, his soul or something like that.” It’s important to note that the *Time* magazine interview was in November 1945, after the war ended. Describe the emotion of the first quote compared to the second quote. Using the link on page 3, listen to this excerpt from the end of the piece (41:47–44:40). Does the emotion of the music match Prokofiev’s words? Which quote more closely matches the emotion you perceive in the music?
5. Learn from the pros! Discuss how the experience of seeing and hearing the SLSO has informed your own music-making. What did you see or hear the SLSO musicians doing that you could strive toward, both individually and as an ensemble? What do you think it would take for you to perform with a professional music ensemble one day?
6. Following the concert, complete the following statements with your students: “I noticed...”, “I enjoyed...”, “I wonder...”.

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