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## A Border-Crossing Work Wins One of Music's Biggest Prizes



Joel Bons, a Dutch composer, has been awarded the 2019 Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition for “Nomaden.” Credit: Daniel Bons

**By Michael Cooper**

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With nationalism on the rise around the world — Britain planning to leave the European Union and the Trump administration sending troops to the southern border of the United States — one of contemporary music’s most prestigious prizes is being awarded to a work that crosses cultural borders.

[Joël Bons](#), a Dutch composer, has been awarded the 2019 Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition for “Nomaden,” an hourlong work featuring a cellist and an ensemble

playing a wide array of instruments from across Asia, the University of Louisville in Kentucky, which awards the prize, announced Monday.

The Grawemeyer, which is one of the largest and most prestigious in music, comes with a \$100,000 award. In Mr. Bons, 65, it is going to a composer who has long thought deeply about integrating music from different corners of the world.

“Nomaden,” which was written for the French cellist Jean-Guihen Queyras and the Atlas Ensemble, a group of 18 musicians from Asia, the Middle East and Europe, had its premiere at the [Cello Biennale](#) in Amsterdam in 2016, where it was [received enthusiastically](#). It pairs its cello soloist with musicians who play instruments from China (erhu and sheng), Japan (sho and shakuhachi), India (sarangi), Turkey (kemenche), Armenia (duduk), Iran (setar) and Azerbaijan (tar and kamancha).

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“‘Nomaden’ is not a traditional concerto, but a work for cello and instruments from cultures around the world,” Mr. Bons said in a statement. “I imagined an unlimited potential of combinations and an unheard spectrum of timbres. My aim was to create a piece in which the musicians and the instruments, in all their cultural differences, could bloom in full glory.”

Mr. Bons, [a professor of composition at the Conservatory of Amsterdam](#), attributes his interest in music in world music to his parents’ wide-ranging record collection. In 1980, he was one of the founders of the Amsterdam-based contemporary music group Nieuw Ensemble, and in 2002 founded the [Atlas Ensemble](#). He has championed works by contemporary Chinese composers, and his musical travels have taken him to Syria and Iran.

Marc Satterwhite, a music professor at the University of Louisville who directs the award, cited Mr. Bons’s musical juxtapositions in a statement. “Art of all kinds is becoming more and more eclectic, juxtaposing materials and influences in increasingly new ways,” Mr. Satterwhite said. “‘Nomaden’ is one of the most successful musical examples of this trend in recent years.”

The Grawemeyer has been awarded to some of the most important composers of our time, including Gyorgy Ligeti, Harrison Birtwistle, John Adams, Tan Dun, Thomas Adès, Pierre Boulez, Kaija Saariaho, Gyorgy Kurtag, Brett Dean, Louis Andriessen and Esa-Pekka Salonen, among others. Mr. Bons will accept the prize in Louisville in April.