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FEATURES

16

Artistic Evolution

Seth Parker Woods has reimaged an immersive concert experience as an audio recording

By David Templeton

24

The Subtle Beauty of Cold Water

A personal look at Sibelius' Sixth Symphony, a paean to the natural world that debuted 100 years ago

By Inge Kjemtrup

28

Lost Treasure

The Catalyst Quartet is recording forgotten works by Black composers that deserve wider appreciation

By David Templeton

34

Games of Chance

Mozart's Divertimento emerges into a gambler's paradise

By Patrick Mackie

40

The Way Back

Jazz violinist Sara Caswell releases her first solo album in 17 years and marks her return to the stage

By Greg Cahill

SPECIAL FOCUS

CONTEMPORARY INSTRUMENTS, BOWS & CASES

48

A Trade of Tiny Details

Every small part of the violin making process makes a big difference

By Cliff Hall

51

Violin Hero

Mark Wood's Viper electric has enough star power to make guitarists envious

By Karen Peterson

54

Made for the Long Haul

Matt Wehling makes bows with balance, strength, weight, and longevity in mind

By Cliff Hall

57

Making His Case

Desmond Timms has been working in a centuries-old tradition for over a quarter of a century himself

By Karen Peterson

**MAY/
JUNE**
2023

VOLUME XXXVII, NUMBER 3, ISSUE 312

COVER: SETH PARKER WOODS

PHOTOGRAPHER: MIKE GRITTANI

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DEPARTMENTS

10
Editor's Note

12
News & Notes
Post-Covid audio trends; 5 minutes with the Dovers; and more

82
Shop Talk
Sara Caswell on the soul of her Norwegian Hardanger d'amore

WORK BENCH

60
What's in the Case?
The versatility of cellist Mike Block's gear

64
Tales of the Trade
Jacob von der Lippe ponders his signature sound

66
Your Instrument
What does a beginner cellist really need?



PER TORE MOLVAER

PLAY

68
Tech Support
Learn to start on the string

70
My Studio
Smart practice is the key to improvement

72
Stage & Studio
Laura Metcalf's special music series

REVIEWS

74
For the Record
Stella Chen's stunning album debut

76
For the Record
The Ligeti Quartet meets Anna Meredith

78
In Print
Norman Lebrecht's life with Beethoven, and more

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Vincenzo Cavani, Modena 1940 •
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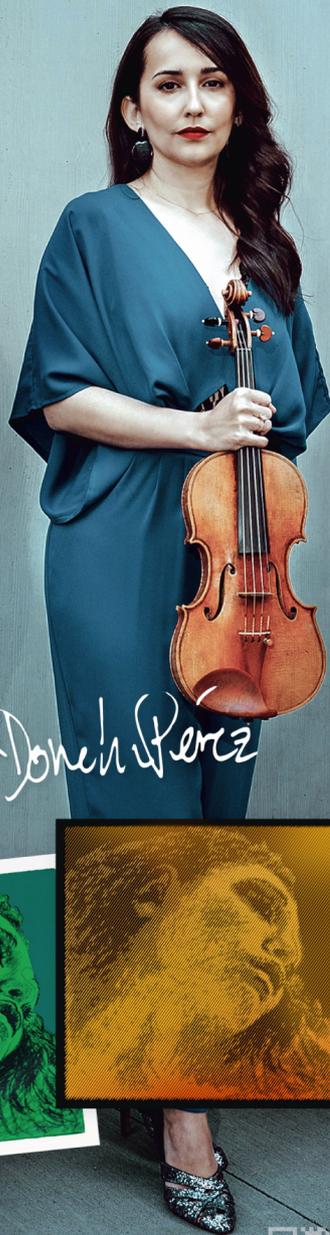


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Edgar Russ



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Try more than one instrument in as many different playing situations as possible and have someone you trust listening to you. Play the same excerpts with the same bow. Keep to instruments in good condition and (if vintage) ideally with well-documented provenance. Watch your budget. Have a checklist. Be patient.

There is plenty of advice out there (and often within these pages) about how to approach one's search for an instrument. What is harder to define, however, is what exactly one is looking for. Some players describe it as a search for their own voice, a kind of musical soulmate fashioned from maple and spruce or willow or poplar. You know it when you find it.

Interestingly, at the heart of this meta-physical connection is the influence of the strictly physical. Someone made the instrument. Attended to a million tiny details. Carefully shaved the wood bit by bit, tapping, listening, flexing, until finally the maker determined it was finished. Is it not

fascinating to consider that had this person taken slightly more off the top—a difference of mere millimeters—your instrument may have given voice to someone else entirely?

You may investigate more fully how, in violin making, science and art (and that most hard-won magic—experience) intersect in this month's special focus on contemporary making, including an inside look provided by luthier Edgar Russ. I hope you enjoy lingering on the details in these features and in the others you'll find in this issue, which highlight cellist Seth Parker Woods' journey with his concert experience turned recording project *Difficult Grace*, the connection between gambling and composition during Mozart's era in an excerpt from poet Patrick Mackie's book *Mozart in Motion*, the Catalyst Quartet's determination to bring to light forgotten gems by Black composers, Sara Caswell's first solo release in 17 years, and the curious case of Sibelius' Sixth Symphony.

As always, I'd love to know what you think.

—Megan Westberg

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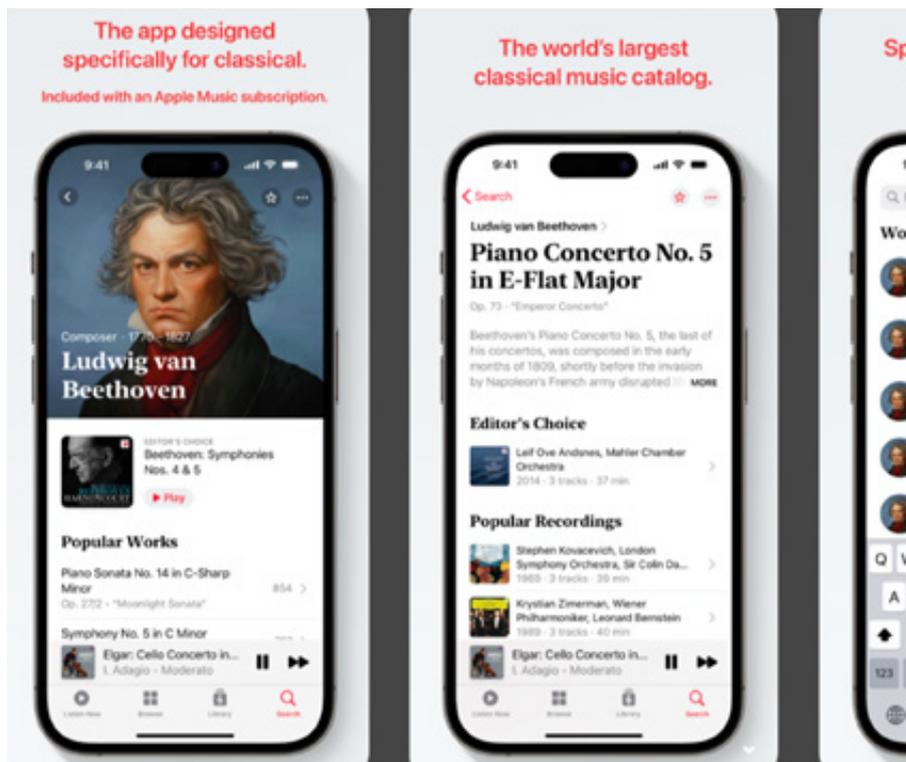
Apple's classical music app, listening on speakers, and a list of demo discs

By Laurence Vittes

The launch in March of Apple Music Classical, Apple's new standalone app designed specifically for classical music, had been widely anticipated since August 2021, when the company announced its acquisition of Primephonic, a classical music streaming service with great metadata that, in its own words and those of many critics, "seemed to get classical right." Because metadata is the name of the game for searching through the vast reaches of classical music's composers, editions, artists, movements, engineers, contemporary reviews, venues, dates, and more, Sean Hickey, managing director of Pentatone, thinks that "the release of the Apple classical app will overshadow everything in the industry for a while." If you can't find it, you can't stream it, and, until the Apple Music Classical app, searching for classical in the current artist-album-song world was pretty unsatisfactory.

If Apple's unleashing of Primephonic's metadata engine gets everything right, you might be able to ask the service for a rather complicated menu. Say you're on a Gregor Piatigorsky binge. Imagine the convenience of requesting (and actually being provided) a playlist of his best performances of the major concertos, his *Don Quixote* with Fritz Reiner (not Charles Munch), his Dvořák with Munch (not Eugene Ormandy), his Brahms Double with Nathan Milstein, conducted by Reiner (not with Jascha Heifetz and the Los Angeles Philharmonic).

Apple Music Classical's rollout was aimed at Apple Music subscribers who will be able to download and enjoy the Apple Music Classical app as part of their existing subscription; the new app will automatically



APPLE MUSIC

download at launch to enable immediate listening for users who have Auto Update turned on in their settings.

As part of the vision, Apple will also work with classical music artists to provide unique content and recordings, and to create exclusive artwork, including a series of high-resolution digital portraits of the world's greatest composers commissioned from a diverse group of artists, "blending historical research with color palettes and artistic references from the relevant classical period," according to Apple. "The results display an astonishing attention to detail, bringing listeners face to face with leading classical figures like never before."

Apple Music Classical will initially be exclusive to iOS, but Mac and Android versions are on their way. The goal is attracting new subscribers. According to the 2022 year-end report from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), the number of paid subscriptions in the US market overall grew to a record high of 92 million, topping \$10 billion for the first time. These subscriptions continued to be the largest driver of music revenues, accounting for 84 percent of streaming.

There are significant potential benefits to a successful Apple Classical Music app for

classical music—the art and the industry—and a long way still to go to put them to use. Simon Eder, who co-founded Primephonic in 2014, a year before Apple Music launched, told me that classical music had been "massively underrepresented in the digital world and amongst the DSPs at the time. Their lack of understanding of how classical music metadata needed to be handled was obvious. The economic dynamics for recorded music are also very different for classical compared to other genres. And the ties between live and recorded are stronger in the nonclassical world, where the composition is more closely tied to the respective artist; in classical, artists are mostly interpreting existing repertoire over and over."

Eder, who now heads business development for the London-based Intermusica management agency, maintains that the broader classical music industry "is still behind in fully understanding and embracing digital developments and in finding digital opportunities (and threats) still to be found in the recorded music sector as streaming grows massively."

Eder doesn't want classical "to end up in an ivory tower" and sees "big music players like Apple taking an interest in classical as a big opportunity for the genre. If the big

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players get classical right,” he says, “the opportunities for reaching broader audiences are immense.” Eder is also surprised at “how few artists, including young classical artists, care about their digital reach and how little they know about how streaming portals work. It’s left completely to the labels, where you’ll find a different level of understanding of digital knowledge.”

Streaming Drives an ‘Ease of Use’ Trend in Audio Gear

As streaming has surged, Gramophone’s audio editor Andrew Everard has noted “a growing trend in the market for one box, simple to set up with operation that’s more or less plug and play, sufficient amplifier power and quality to drive everything from compact bookshelf speakers to larger floorstanding designs, and the ability to integrate online services. It’s never been easier to stream music at the tap of a finger on an app.” Everard singles out Cambridge Audio Evo systems for their “supreme ease of use, wide-ranging capability, great sound, and real style.”

Also answering the trend, for those looking to include speakers in the package, KEF’s stunning new LS60 wireless system, with streaming and amplification built in,

does the job for a penny under seven grand. KEF’s bookshelf version, the LS50W, comes in at under half the price. And Amazon’s Echo Studio (in less grand style) does it at \$299. Launched in support of the company’s own HD music subscription service, the one-piece Echo, with its five-speaker array, is capable of hi-res audio but comes into its own playing Dolby Atmos material like Apple’s new and remastered Spatial Audio titles.

Brian Bloom at high-end SoCal dealer Brooks Berdan Ltd. says that listening on speakers “is for listeners looking for a better audio.” He often sells smaller speakers starting at \$800 a pair and recommends models from Bowers & Wilkins and Sonus Faber. A significant shift in the market, he says is that “better wireless models are starting to see more action.”

Trial Recordings

Looking to put some speakers through their paces? The following list of mostly new and recent recordings was auditioned on Spendor A1 Bookshelf Loudspeakers and Rega’s io integrated amplifier. All are available on Apple Music and most other services. The titles with asterisks are available in Spatial Audio.

- *Bach: Six Cello Suites*. Jean-Guihen Queyras (Harmonia Mundi, 2007)*

- *Beethoven’s Violin Concerto with new cadenzas by Jörg Widmann*. Veronika Eberle, violin; London Symphony Orchestra, Simon Rattle, cond. (LSO)*

- *Beethoven Complete String Quartets, Vol. 3: The Late Quartets*. Dover Quartet (Cedille)

- *Beethoven, Op. 97 “Archduke,” and Brahms, Op. 8, Piano Trios*. Victoria Mullova, violin; Heinrich Schiff, cello; Andre Previn, piano (Philips, 1993)

- *Elgar: Viola Concerto; Bloch: Suite for viola and orchestra*. Timothy Ridout, viola; BBC Symphony, Martyn Brabbins, cond. (Harmonia Mundi)*

- *Ode à la nuit*. Cello8, Raphaël Pidoux, cond. (Mirare)* Four Schubert songs are at the heart of these lovely arrangements for cello octet.

- *Where Is Home (Hae Ke Kae)*. Abel Selaoce, cello, and friends, including Yo-Yo Ma (Warner Classics)*

- *Stravinsky: Violin Concerto and Chamber Works*. Isabelle Faust, violin; Les Siècles, François-Xavier Roth, cond. (Harmonia Mundi)* Another unexpected revelation on period instruments.

- *We Get Requests*. The Oscar Petersen Trio (with Ray Brown on bass) (Verve, 1964)*

- *Telemann: Viola Concertos, Overtures, and Fantasias*. Antoine Tamestit, viola; Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin (Harmonia Mundi)

For demo-ing vinyl in nonclassical genres, Eric Gorfain—violinist, leader of the Section Quartet, and arranger for Def Leppard, Dr. Dre, Christina Aguilera, and Nick Cave—suggests the following (these are all also available digitally):

- *World Galaxy*. Alice Coltrane (Impulse)

- *Symbiosis*. Bill Evans (MPS)

- *Another Green World*. Brian Eno (with John Cale on viola on two tracks) (Island Records)

- *Promises*. Floating Points, Pharaoh Sanders & The London Symphony Orchestra (Luaka Bop)

- *Salome Dances for Peace*. Kronos Quartet (Nonesuch/Warner) ■

5 MINUTES WITH . . . JULIANNE LEE AND CAMDEN SHAW

By Laurence Vittes

Beginning in September 2023, Julianne Lee, currently assistant principal second violin of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and principal second violin with the Boston Pops, will take up her new role as violist of the Dover Quartet. She will join the founding members—violinists Joel Link and Bryan Lee and cellist Camden Shaw—and replace Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt, who left last August. Lee began playing viola during her third year at Curtis, when she learned about Curtis' Viola for Violinists program. The program allowed her to continue viola studies while she pursued her master's degree at New England Conservatory, studying with violist Kim Kashkashian. Lee has since forged a career as both a violinist and violist, frequently appearing as a soloist, chamber musician, and orchestral player.

Lee plays a Robert Brode (2005), which will join the quartet's instrument lineup: Link's Pietro Guarneri of Mantua (1710–15), on loan from Irene R. Miller through Beare's International Violin Society; Bryan Lee's Samuel Zygmuntowicz (Brooklyn, 2020); and Shaw's Joseph Hill (circa 1770). I spoke first with Lee about her new position, then Shaw about the search process.

What was the process of auditioning?

Julianne Lee: I was excited to receive an invitation to read with the Dovers. We met in Philadelphia and played through movements from several different quartets.



ROY COX

Reading together for the first time, I think we all knew that we had something special.

Was it love at first sight (or listen)?

JL: We started with Mozart's "Dissonance" string quartet, and immediately our instruments spoke to each other. We felt a natural synergy and openly shared how it felt so easy to play together. As the reading went on, we continued to naturally adjust and inspire each other.

What other music did you play?

JL: After the first movement of Mozart's "Dissonance" quartet, we played the slow movement from Brahms' String Quartet No. 2 in A minor; some Ravel; Brahms' String Quartet No. 3 in B-flat major; Beethoven's Op. 59, No. 2; and Dvořák's "American" quartet. We played through some pieces just once,

others we dove into a bit deeper to experience what it was like to rehearse together.

Had you prepared this specific repertoire?

JL: Yes, the Dovers had specifically requested these movements, and I had played most of them already, but on the violin—so it was fun to learn a different voice. When I dive into a new piece, I enjoy learning all of the lines and how they interact in the score. This preparation gives me the freedom to bring my full self out in rehearsals and performances.

What instrument, bow, and strings did you use?

JL: I played on my viola, which is made by Robert Brode. Having found my love for viola as a student at the Curtis Institute of Music, I commissioned this instrument upon graduating. It is a copy of an old Italian

instrument that used to be played by Choong-Jin Chang, principal violist of the Philadelphia Orchestra. My first teacher, Joseph de Pasquale, played on a Robert Brode viola and so did several others in the Philadelphia Orchestra. My setup on it is a Larsen A string, a Pirastro Gold D, and Thomastik-Infeld Spirocore G and C strings. For the audition, I borrowed my Boston Symphony Orchestra colleague's Fétique bow.

When will you find the time to prepare and rehearse enough repertoire for the new season?

JL: We are looking forward to spending some time in June together in Philadelphia to rehearse and get to know each other more. During that time, I'll also be finding an apartment in Philly. I'm excited to be returning to a city I love so much. We will also have time together in September before we play our first concerts.

How has the tradition of chamber-music excellence at the BSO shaped your playing?

JL: The Boston Symphony Chamber Players was founded when my mentor Joseph Silverstein was concertmaster. One of many things I have in common with Joseph is a love for playing chamber music with my colleagues. The BSO musicians have so much experience and knowledge—I always learn a lot from them. Even prior to my position with the BSO, I've been very fortunate to surround myself with inspiring chamber music artists. The quartet I was a part of during the first year of my master's program at NEC was in the honors quartet program, where we had the opportunity to work with founding members of the Cleveland Quartet Martha Strongin Katz and Paul Katz, as well as Lucy Chapman. Another mentor, Donald Weilerstein, certainly made a huge impact on my playing as well. His infectious love of music was always an inspiration.

I am told that your new colleagues like hiking and food.

JL: I feel like all musicians share a love for food! We talked about how the food scene is very lively in Philadelphia. I can't wait to check it out! The hiking topic hasn't come up yet, but I do love to hike, especially in the Grand Tetons. My favorite hiking companion is my Cairn Terrier, Sylvie.

Cellist and founding member Camden Shaw on the Dover Quartet's search for a new violist and the ensemble's plans for the future

You were lucky to have found such a fine violist as Hezekiah Leung to step in while you were searching for a permanent violist.

Camden Shaw: We are incredibly thankful to Hezekiah for generously stepping in. Hez is one of the best violists and people we have ever had the pleasure of working with, and we're eternally grateful for what he has given us. He will always be part of the Dover family!

“
We felt a natural synergy and openly shared how it felt so easy to play together.
”

—Julianne Lee

What was your search process like?

CS: We had a broad and thorough search process, but it also wasn't surprising that Julianne, who had studied at the Curtis Institute of Music with the same teachers as Joel and Bryan (Joseph Silverstein and Victor Danchenko, respectively), instantly felt like a kindred spirit musically.

How do you expect Julianne's viola to fit into the group?

CS: As far as I know, Julianne is still in the process of trying to find her dream viola for the quartet, and that can be a long process. But when we first read with her, it was clear that her voice, as it were, came through with

such clarity that we fell in love with the musician beyond the specific viola.

Are you intending to integrate Lee into your existing ensemble style as a quartet or develop a new one?

CS: When going through a member search, any ensemble must maintain a balance between finding someone to fit into the existing philosophy and finding someone to invigorate and challenge that philosophy. The sweet spot on that spectrum will also be different for each group, depending on their history, and in a way, I think we learned a lot about our own ensemble through the search process.

Some of the greatest quartets have been the amalgam of four distinctly different musical personalities with four different backgrounds. This can bring an immense amount of color and variety to the music making, but also present challenges when it comes to creating a truly unanimous message. As for our own history, the Dover Quartet began in a way that was, at the time, unique: four undergraduate students in their late teens, all studying under the same very concentrated group of mentors.

Our quartet had become known for a certain unanimity of approach that runs very deep. With Julianne, that unanimous approach has been kept alive in a very special way. As for invigorating and challenging ideas, she absolutely brings her own new philosophies and inspiration to us as well. We are absolutely thrilled to be welcoming her to the Dover Quartet!

You have announced your three programs for 2023–24 to contain music by Turina, Janáček, Schubert, Mozart, Lowell Liebermann, Debussy, Haydn, Florence Price, and Shostakovich. What about other projects?

CS: Following the 2023–24 season, early 2024 will see the delivery of a very exciting co-commission from Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate (Chickasaw), a multi-part project exploring American Indian music and its influences. The project includes a transcription of songs from the Native American women's vocal group Ulali; an original work by Tate; and Dvořák's "American" quartet, which draws on Native American influences. The project will also be recorded for release on the new Curtis Studio label. ■

Artistic Evolution



Difficult Grace was first envisioned as a multimedia concert experience.



Seth Parker Woods has reimagined an immersive concert experience as an audio recording

By David Templeton

Difficult Grace, the new album from acclaimed cellist Seth Parker Woods, got its title long before the iconoclastic musician committed to recording it as an audio release. Woods, currently on the faculty of the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California, originally commissioned the title piece from Fredrick Gifford for a planned live touring show. The program would blend musical performance with lush electronic soundscapes, vivid video projections, vibrant spoken word, and dance—and a vocal performance by Woods himself. An early version of the show—with the same title but in a very different form—was debuted in Seattle in February 2020, less than a month before the Covid-19 pandemic parked Woods at home for the duration of the ensuing shutdowns.

As it so happens, those words—*difficult*, meaning “tricky, hard, and complicated,” plus *grace*, meaning “finesse, charm, elegance, and beauty”—would come to describe Woods’ own personal process during the long months that followed. The words have also become an increasingly apt characterization of the genre-sculpting, ever-evolving project that goes by that name.

Difficult Grace, described as “a concert-length tour de force,” is scheduled, at press time, to be unveiled on April 15, both in a digital format and an elaborately packaged CD release. Woods will perform the piece several times throughout 2023. But first, he’s got the world premiere of Freida Abtan’s *My Heart Is a River*—a piece for cello, electronics, and film—taking place (at press time) in a few days at Seattle Symphony’s Octave 9 performance venue.

Contacted on a busy rehearsal day, Woods takes a break to talk about *Difficult Grace*, and the sometimes-surprising path the impending album release has taken. As is the case with many musicians who were sidelined during the pandemic, what would have been a busy year came to a crashing halt. Looking back now, Woods sees that while many elements of the lockdown were painful, others carried a peculiar blessing.

“The lockdown,” Woods now reflects, “actually gave me a chance to breathe for a while, to recalibrate and refocus my trajectory, to reprioritize where I was artistically, creatively, and personally. It allowed me to

ask what I was trying to do, and if those projects ahead of me were still the things I wanted to be working on.”

Among those projects was the suddenly sidelined *Difficult Grace*, and, as it turned out, the whole pandemic experience would ultimately provide the perfect cocoon in which the complex venture would transform into something that never would have happened otherwise. “*Difficult Grace*, as it is now, is completely different from how I was originally thinking about it, back then,” he says. “It’s a stretch and a departure for me. The lockdown gave me a chance to reimagine

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There’s
a bit of a
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to it, for the
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of enjoy.

—Seth Parker Woods

”

what music and art could be, through mediated platforms, in a way I hadn’t really explored too much before that.”

It was something of a positive time, it seems.

“Well, yes, once I got over the existential crisis of it all,” Woods confirms with a laugh, explaining that what the isolation of Covid did provide for him—and countless other creatives desperate to be sharing their work with the world—was a rapidly expanding landscape in which virtual streaming platforms like Zoom and Facebook Live were more than just acceptable and necessary. They had become the only available space in which to play.

“Once I started to move beyond the awfulness of the pandemic, I began to think, ‘Maybe there is something I can do here,’ he

says. “Maybe I can bring together the creative teams I’ve worked with in the past and find ways to use this new space, this virtual space, to really be able to say something in a way I probably couldn’t have done in the traditional concert-hall setting.”

Those possibilities applied equally to the bold, experimental new compositions that Woods is always exploring and the classical repertoire he continues to love and still sometimes performs. “This new world offered opportunities to rethink everything,” he says, “from how we present Bach or Schumann or Rachmaninoff, along with all of this new work that’s existing now, made by people who are creating amazing music in this specific moment in time.” In the early stages of the pandemic, Woods began to produce a number of short films, which led to an explosion of creative energy. “Out of that,” he continues, “came a revamping of the entire *Difficult Grace* show, with lighting and costuming and stage settings and platforms, plus the whole dance component.”

With the exceptions of Alvin Singleton’s *Argoru II* (written in the ’70s for the cellist academic Ronald Crutcher), Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson’s *Calvary Ostinato* (composed in 1973 as part of his *Lamentations: Black/Folk Song Suite*), and Nathalie Joachim’s *Dam Mwen Yo*, every composition on the project was commissioned or co-created by Woods. Joachim’s *The Race* is among those commissioned pieces, and she appears as a vocalist on *Dam Mwen Yo*.

“They weren’t originally meant to be paired together in this way,” acknowledges Woods. “When I approached them from a curator’s point of view, I saw how they could fit together. They work, they really do, and it really is a journey, you know, all of the different stories that are being told here.”

The most recent work in the project is Ted Hearne’s multi-part cycle *Freefucked*, in collaboration with New York poet Kemi Alabi. One of those movements, titled *A Wedding, or What We Unlearned from Descartes*, would eventually become the first single from *Difficult Grace*, the album. Once performance spaces reopened again, Woods took the new version out on the road, a year or two delayed but all the more exciting for the new changes. And that is when he began to see how *Difficult Grace* could be transformed yet again—this time into a recorded audio project.





BAILEY HOLIVER

“I wanted to find a way to archive all of this, these four years of work, so it can exist beyond the stage,” he says, adding that for a project like this, one painstakingly designed to be seen and experienced, translating it to an audio experience was no small challenge.

“Some of these pieces have existed with film or dance for so long. Some have existed right beside the visual works of painters Jacob Lawrence and Barbara Earl Thomas, with a very intentional cinematic feel connecting it all together,” Woods says. “Figuring out how to create this very immersive sonic experience—not just settling for a stereo, right channel–left channel experience, but to create depth

beyond that sphere—that was not terribly easy.”

The undertaking was, to put it mildly, a lot. “Oh, it was huge!” Woods says, ticking off some of the things that needed to be done. “Remastering all the electronics, thinking about things like ‘spatialization’ and where we put the sound, asking myself, ‘How do I produce it and craft it for the best-case listening experience, as well as the worst-case,’ like if someone is listening to it on their iPhone. And then there was all of the packaging for the actual physical album, to be able to imbue that with a lot of the concert footage and the artwork inside of that booklet. I know we are in the stage where so many are just doing digital releases and streaming,

but I wanted to make sure that people who do buy the physical version get this really beautiful object that captures a lot of the visuals around it.”

The primary intention of that “beautiful object,” he admits, is in part to give listeners a way to experience some of what happens in the concert hall with *Difficult Grace*, and also to encourage them to try and see the project live.

Working in the studio, Woods has come to see, was a bit like working in an audio laboratory. During that period of experimentation, his ideas began to shift yet again, slightly re-envisioning how *Difficult Grace* would function onstage in its post-recording existence.

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“Working in the studio, it puts you on the clock,” he says, “forcing you to think about what you are doing, to zero-in and capture the whole piece in the studio, and then take it back to the stage with everything new you’ve discovered.” Among the discoveries Woods made was a new approach to his rarely heard singing voice. “Because in this case,” he explains, “since—with the Ted Hearne cycle—I’m both cellist and singer, being in the studio gave me a chance to work out all of the little vocal things I may have already been doing onstage, but that I want to perfect even further. It was actually quite nice, having that time.”

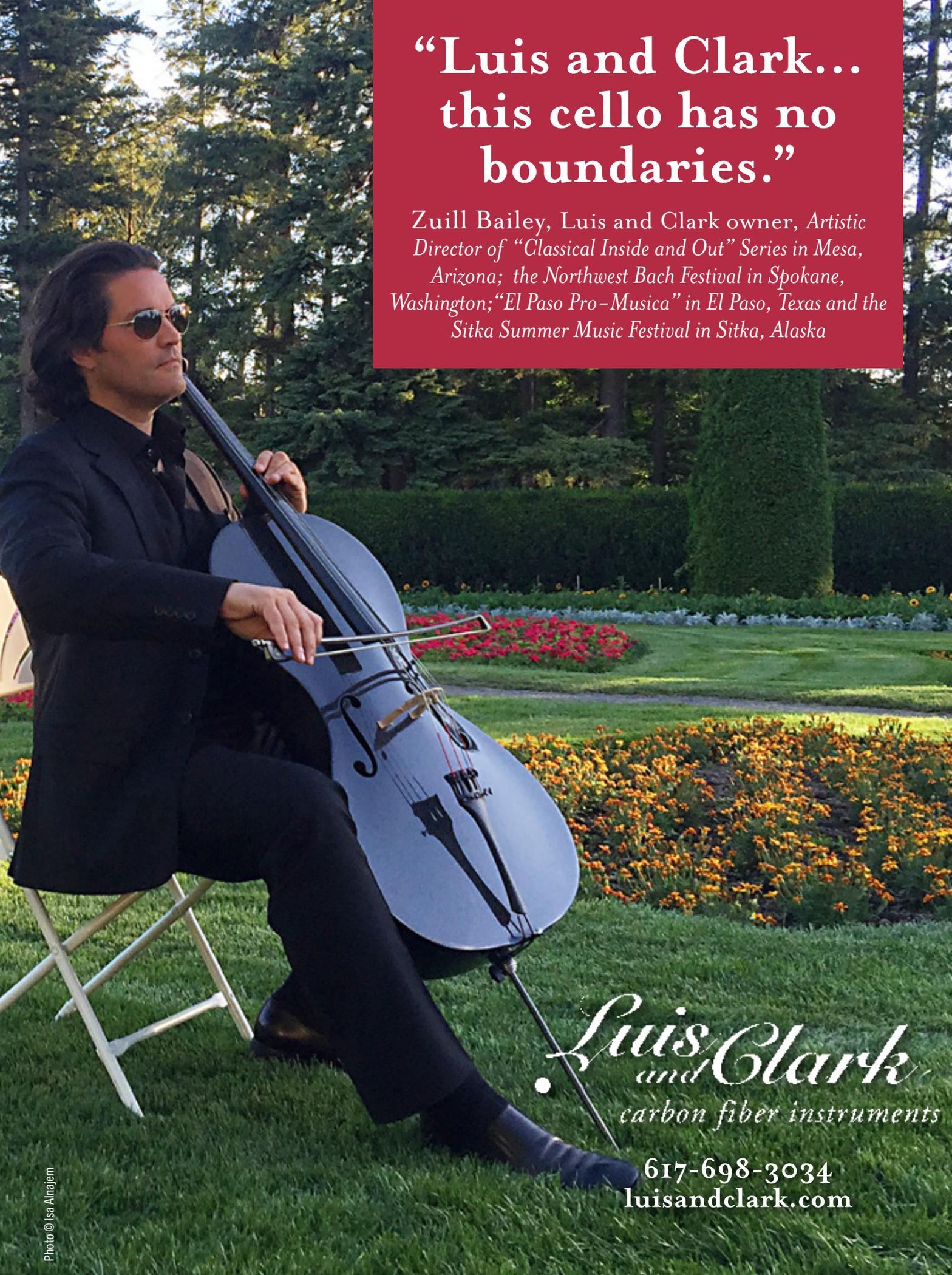
Singing, Woods admits, is not something he has done a lot of as a professional.

“This is very much my ‘vocal debut,’” he says, laughing again. “That’s why I say this album is a stretch and a departure. Most people, when they come see the show, don’t know that I’ll be singing. It’s something that I was truly, truly afraid of. I’m not trying to be a Leontyne Price or a Bob Dylan. I’m just trying to be myself, and capture as best I can the spirit and ethos of the words of Kemi Alabi, coupled with the sonic world that Ted Hearne has created.”

When Woods performs this portion of the show live, it’s just a stool and a microphone—and him. “My cello sits in the background as a silhouette,” he says. “There was a version where I did try to perform parts of it on cello while singing, but it was impossible. So in live

performance, I just deliver the vocal parts, while you hear the recorded version of me playing the cello. There’s a bit of a shock factor to it, for the audience, that I kind of enjoy. It’s quite powerful to stand in a wide-open space, with no cello to prop me up or hide behind, and to be exposed in a very intimate way.”

Asked if he is having fun with this new evolution as a performer, Woods is silent for a few seconds, before laughing out loud. “I don’t know. Yes. No,” he says. “What I do know is, as an artist, I’m always looking for ways to express myself as organically as possible, to free myself, and in this case, I get to use the very first instrument I had, which is my voice. So, sure. Yes. It is fun, but it’s very scary. And I love that.” ■

A man with long dark hair, wearing sunglasses and a black suit, is seated on a white folding chair in a lush garden. He is playing a dark blue carbon fiber cello. The background features a well-manicured lawn, a flower bed with red and yellow flowers, and tall green hedges under a clear sky.

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Jean Sibelius, Helsinki,
Finland, 1899



THE SUBTLE BEAUTY OF COLD WATER

A personal look at Sibelius' Sixth Symphony, a paean to the natural world that debuted 100 years ago

By Inge Kjemtrup

The Finnish composer Jean Sibelius defies the neat categorizations of music history. Perhaps this is because his life span (1865–1957) straddles the 19th and 20th centuries. He certainly is not part of the club of late-19th-century monumental Romantics like Mahler, Bruckner, and Strauss. Nor can he be said to have been in the forefront of the early-20th-century modernists like Debussy, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg.

Some might be inclined to file Sibelius under the category of nationalist composers. His music often reflects the legends and landscape of his beloved Finland, and his *Finlandia* is one of the most popular national hymns. His tone poems drew upon epic poems, like the *Kalevala*, and crystallized the national identity as Finland emerged as an independent country from the Russian Empire. To be sure, he is a national hero in Finland and the leading reason

for that nation's extraordinary music culture, but this, too, is reductive.

His music, after all, took little directly from Finnish folk music. In an interview, the Finnish conductor Sakari Oramo compared Sibelius to Janáček: "They both I think were influenced by the language, which means the music they wrote was influenced by the language. However, Sibelius was different to Janáček in one aspect—he never used a single folk tune in his music, never ever."

Sibelius' symphonies, tone poems, and the great violin concerto are frequently heard in concert halls. His catalog of works includes tone poems, a small but piquant collection of chamber music—including the *Voces Intimae* string quartet—choral and vocal works, and seven symphonies. Of the latter, the Fourth and the Fifth are among the most played. He completed the Seventh Symphony in 1924. Yet, with a handful of exceptions, including the tone poem



ERIC SUNDBSTROM

Jean Sibelius at his desk in Ainola, just north of Helsinki, 1915

Tapiola (1926), he wrote little else of significance until his death in 1957. Rumor had it that he was at work on an eighth symphony. He even promised imminent completion to orchestras and conductors around the world. But that last symphonic utterance was never realized.

Who was this perplexing and brilliant composer, so beloved in Finland, both during his lifetime and now, that his birthday on December 8 is celebrated as Finnish Music Day?

Johan Julius Christian Sibelius was born in 1865 in Hämeenlinna in the southern part of what was then the Grand Duchy of Finland, a part of the Russian Empire. His father, a medical doctor, died of typhoid when the boy was two years old, an early tragedy that some feel accounts for his

moody nature and his long periods of dependence on alcohol. His pregnant mother was forced to sell the home and move her small family in with her mother.

Young Jean, as he became known, found a father figure and a first musical mentor in an uncle, Pehr Ferdinand Sibelius, who bought him a violin. Jean studied the instrument seriously and considered making a career as violinist. His growing interest in composition predominated, however. Guided by Helsinki Music Institute founder Martin Wegelius, he expanded his horizons beyond Finland, studying in Berlin and Vienna.

In 1892, he married Aino Järnefelt. They spent much of their married life in a home they built on a lake north of Helsinki (today it is a museum to Sibelius), keeping him close to the Finnish landscape he loved.

It seems that the composer's greatest ideas came to him when he was alone and

immersed in nature, as Daniel M. Grimley writes in his biography of Sibelius, *Life, Music, Silence*: "His intensely felt response to nature and environment was not merely a well-worn trope in his critical reception; it was a more drastic way of rethinking human subjectivity and our relationship with the natural world."

Aino came from a family with a strong feeling for Finland's unique culture, views that would prove problematic. For by the first decades of the 20th century, the Russian Empire collapsed, the Revolution set Russian rule into disarray, and Finland was one of the battlegrounds in the conflict between the Reds and the White armies. The Sibelius home was searched, and the family was escorted to safety in Helsinki. It was in the aftermath of this turbulent period that Sibelius began work on what would become his Fifth and Sixth Symphonies.

Sibelius's Sixth Symphony, Op. 104, received its premiere one hundred years ago this year. That first performance took place in Helsinki on February 19 by the Helsinki City Orchestra with the composer conducting. The Sixth is a departure from the rest of his symphonic works, and yet a culmination at the same time. Its subdued yet multifaceted personality calls to us across the seasons, and across time, cherishing the natural world that meant so much to Sibelius. Perhaps it is the perfect climate change symphony.

One of the first times I heard the Sixth, I happened to be in a car with friends driving through the New Jersey countryside on our way to an apple farm. It was autumn, and sharp pangs of winter air cut through the warm temperatures. The gentle burbling sounds of the Sixth's opening seemed to capture the bucolic surroundings we were passing through.

The Sixth had a long gestation. It was conceived in the final years of the First World War, along with the Fifth Symphony, a grander work that has made more frequent appearances in the concert hall. The Sixth is so descriptive, so lacking the heroic direction of his other symphonies, that it is rather astonishing it didn't end up as a tone poem.

In an era when the symphony had fallen out of fashion, Sibelius kept to the form. As Grimley writes, "... in its quiet, understated manner, it is no less formally innovative than either of its predecessors. And as a testament to the consolatory power of musical reflection, in the wake of a period of unimaginable violence and trauma, it is a particularly eloquent and sustained study."

Sketches for the Sixth demonstrate that nature was the focus—"Talvi" ("Winter") and "Hongatar ja tuuli" ("Pine-tree Spirit and the Wind"). The composer set himself a deadline of January 1923 to finish the work.

The Sixth packs a lot into its approximately 25 minutes, and does so in a very unflashy manner. As *Guardian* writer Tom Service noted, "the dynamic of the symphony rarely rises above mezzo forte. The high peaks and low valleys are absent."

Sibelius himself remarked of the Sixth: "Whereas most other modern composers are

engaged in manufacturing cocktails of every hue and description, I offer the public pure cold water." According to Service, a less-than-impressed Benjamin Britten threw cold water on that comment by remarking that Sibelius must have been drunk when he wrote the symphony!

The first movement, *Allegro molto moderato*, opens with a sense of yearning with strings alone. Gradually the strings are joined

about it, as an extended section of flautato for strings flutters underneath the bird sounds of the winds. Grimley remarks, "It is a strangely haunting passage of gentle forest sounds that seemingly suspends any regular feeling of time or motion."

The third movement, *Poco vivace*—a swirling 6/8 dance that is interrupted by an emphatic statement from the strings—has the strongest pulse of all the movements. Grimley describes it as being "a compact burst of cyclic energy."

As noted earlier, there are no extended sections of *forte* or *ff* in this symphony. Instead, there are brief outbursts or interruptions, but the eight-bar ending of the third movement is one exception.

The final movement, *Allegro molto*, opens with another nostalgic melody from the winds. While it seems over the course of the movement that it might be heading toward the traditional triumphant ending at loud volume, instead the music fades away in the valley of quiet. "To face the world with such a restrained and gracious equilibrium at the time of the work's premiere in Helsinki on 19 February must have demanded considerable creative courage," writes Grimley.

There are many recordings of the Sixth, often in the context of complete symphonic cycles led by Finnish and Scandinavian conductors including Paavo Berglund, Sakari Oramo, Osmo Vänskä, Leif Segerstam, Thomas Søndergård, and Klaus Mäkelä. Beyond conductors from the northern lands, distinguished Sibelius interpreters include Colin Davis and Herbert von Karajan.

Alas, Sibelius seemed to have rarely been fully satisfied with his own music. Honors and awards and accolades from orchestras and audiences around the world (including the United States, where he traveled in 1914 to receive an honorary doctorate from Yale University) did not assuage his feeling of inadequacy.

As he wrote in his diary in 1910, "The most beautiful moment is when I finally have a particular composition planned and I have it in my heart. Work is a battle between 'life and death.' And this is because of self-criticism or deficient talent."

It was, in the end, only the creative process that brought this complex composer true satisfaction. ■

“
As a testament
to the consolatory
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”

—Daniel M. Grimley

by flute and clarinet, all the new instruments adding a sense of motion. It is, at the beginning, the quietest of dynamics (turn up the volume if you are listening in a car). There are sharp turns from major to minor, and the common description of the symphony as being in D minor (though the score itself does not specify the work's key) seems like a random choice. The movement's end feels abrupt and forlorn.

The winds begin the second movement, *Allegretto moderato*, with another quiet entrance. There's something dreamlike

Lost Treasure

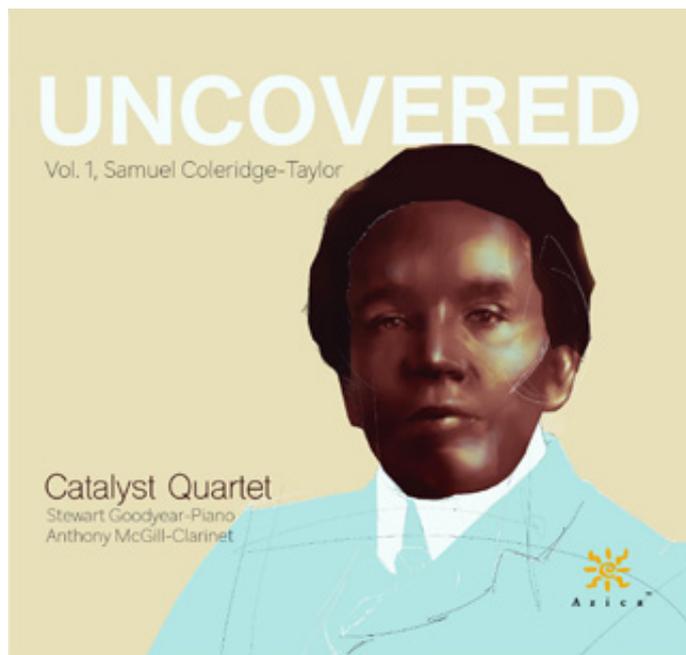


The **Catalyst Quartet** is recording forgotten works by Black composers that deserve wider appreciation

BY DAVID TEMPLETON



**The Catalyst Quartet's
Uncovered Project, Vols. 1–3**



“I think it’s really interesting that William Grant Still and Florence Price went to the same elementary school,” says Karla Donehew Perez, first violinist of the Grammy-winning Catalyst Quartet. Price, the legendary Black composer and pianist, was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1887. Still—who would come to be known as the Dean of African American Composers—was born in Woodville, Mississippi, in 1895, but moved soon after to Little Rock, where he had more in common with Price than just attending the same school eight years apart.

“They actually both ended up studying with this incredible schoolteacher who’d gone off to the east coast to attend some famous school, and came back just to bring up these kids, including these two incredible minds,” continues Donehew Perez. “There is an age difference, obviously, so they didn’t overlap much at school, but they knew each other, and their families knew each other. I think that’s really cool, and it’s one of a whole bunch of things we’ve learned while working on the Uncovered Project.”

Donehew Perez is calling this morning from Atlanta, Georgia, where the New York-based quartet recently performed at Clayton State University’s Spivey Hall, followed by a couple of days of residency work. They will be performing at Agnes Scott College’s Presser Hall in Decatur, Georgia, and will then head home. Founded in 2010 by the Detroit-based

Sphinx Organization, a social justice nonprofit dedicated to changing the lives of young people by championing the power and importance of diversity in the arts, the quartet also includes violinist Abi Fayette, violist Paul Laraia, and cellist Karlos Rodriguez.

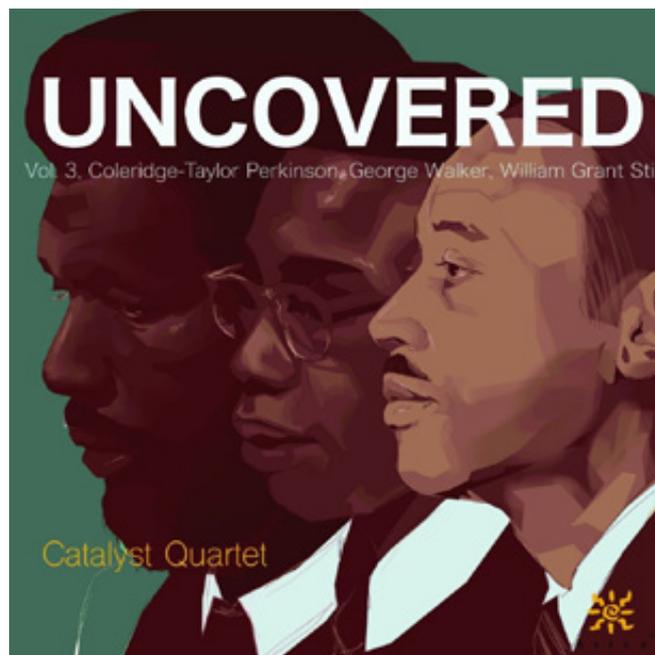
The Catalyst’s first album, *Bach/Gould Project*—presenting the first ever four-voiced version of the Goldberg Variations for a string quartet along with Glenn Gould’s only published composition, his String Quartet Op. 1—instantly established the group’s reputation for bravely showcasing lesser-known compositions and composers and turning heads with unusual approaches to well-known pieces. In 2018, the Catalyst won the Grammy for Best Jazz Vocal Album with *Dreams and Daggers*, a two-CD album with vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant. In 2021, after years of preparation, the ensemble released *Uncovered Vol. 1*, featuring works by British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, the first in its planned four-album Uncovered Project, centering on the music of Black composers whose work, while often well-known at the time it was created, is now rarely or never programmed in contemporary concert halls. A year later, *Uncovered Vol. 2* was released, featuring compositions by Florence Price.

In March of this year, *Uncovered Vol. 3* appeared, this recording presenting three string quartets by three composers—George Walker’s String Quartet No. 1, “Lyric”;

Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson’s String Quartet No. 1, “Calvary”; and William Grant Still’s Lyric String Quartette, with movements (subtitled “Musical Portraits of Three Friends”) mysteriously named The Sentimental One, The Quiet One, and The Jovial One.

The seeds of the Uncovered Project were initially planted in 2010, shortly after the quartet was formed, while the Catalyst was assisting the Sphinx Organization in running its performance academy at the Cleveland Institute of Music and Curtis Institute of Music. “We thought it was important to have inclusive programming for the students in all things, in the faculty recitals as well as in what the kids were playing,” Donehew Perez says. “So not only were students hearing Beethoven, Mendelssohn—they were hearing great pieces by composers of color. Our colleagues kept bringing in these pieces, new and old, and we brought in some ourselves, and that’s how we began to accumulate this collection of works.”

The higher the stacks of compositions grew, the more convinced the quartet was that these works needed a wider audience. One way the Catalyst could address the problem, they realized, was to start recording some of the pieces and to give them the attention and respect they deserve. “There was all of this incredible repertoire that we’d been living around and thinking about, and we were going, ‘Well, that’s a great piece. And *that’s* a great



piece. Why don't people program these?" says Donehew Perez. "After a while, you come to the realization that the reason is either because there are no existing recordings, or the recordings that do exist are not of very good quality. That's just unacceptable for such great music. We decided we wanted to focus on historically important Black composers, composers who were important in their time, and for whatever reason, their music has not stayed in the repertoire. We ultimately chose these composers."

The project would take money, of course, and at first, the people that the Catalyst Quartet approached were not interested. "They generally thought it was a good and noble idea, but they were a little bit skeptical, and fundraising was difficult," she says. "We actually had to fight really hard to get that first *Uncovered* album recorded and out into the world."

Part of the problem, of course, was that much of the music they'd selected was virtually unknown, and producing a studio recording of music with next to no recognition value is a risky proposition in the modern world. Despite such difficulties, the quartet continued to fundraise for the project, all the while slowly unearthing more little-known or forgotten pieces that collectively took their breath away.

This musical archeology presented a number of unique challenges, requiring a combination of googling and guesswork. Some pieces that they had already become aware of *only* existed as recordings, with no published scores available, and sometimes the recordings were not particularly good. In cases

“
We actually had to fight really hard to get that first *Uncovered* album recorded and out into the world.
 ”

—*Karla Donehew Perez*

where great recordings existed, often there were only one or two in existence. With pieces of music that existed as scores, there were sometimes obvious editing mistakes, requiring a bit of additional sleuthing or experimentation to correct.

Those types of challenges have arisen with every volume of the *Uncovered* Project

so far. For example, with *Vol. 2*, the Florence Price album, the scores they were working with sometimes showed clear mistakes. As Price died in 1953, she couldn't be consulted. "Florence Price had a copyist," Donehew Perez says. "We all make mistakes—we're all human—and that's true of Florence Price's copyist. It's clear that when you play this one piece, when you hear it, you can tell that one note is off by one accidental, or the viola part is written in treble clef, even though the clef was the alto clef. So we would say, 'That sounds weird, Paul. Why don't you try playing it as if it were a treble clef,' and suddenly the music sounded amazing. There's a lot of trial and error."

The more time they spent with a specific composer's work, however, the easier it became to sort out such mysteries. "Once you learn a composer's language—because they all have a very clear way of expressing their own musical language—you get a better and better sense of what the composer was going for," says Donehew Perez.

Of Walker's piece on the new album, the *String Quartet No. 1, "Lyric,"* Donehew Perez says she has come to deeply appreciate the harmonic language within which the composer's most recognizable work—the middle movement, often performed alone as the *Lyric for Strings*—originally existed. That movement, which Walker did publish as a separate work, has become fairly well known, especially over the last few



Karla Donehew Perez, left, Paul Laraia, Karlos Rodriguez, and Abi Fayette

years, but many don't realize it comes from a quartet as deserving of attention as its most famous movement.

"On either side of this incredibly gorgeous, hauntingly beautiful piece," she says, "are these two quite emotionally tense, and kind of crunchy, harmonically dense movements, and I think it's really powerful and interesting to see where that comes from."

For Donehew Perez, Perkinson's "Calvary" quartet has become a personal favorite. "He led such an amazing life," she says of Perkinson, who was born in 1932 and died in 2004. "He had his hands in so many different kinds of music making, and even other art disciplines, like all of his work with Dance Theatre Harlem. So, you can really hear in his piece all of these different influences. His use of rhythm and textures and layering is just really unique, and very much his own. It's just a phenomenal work, and so stunning and jaw-dropping. It's another one of those compositions that you hear and say, 'Why isn't this being played?'"

The piece by Still, probably the most famous composer whose work has been recorded in the Uncovered Project, has also become a favorite. "I've always been a fan of

his music," Donehew Perez says. "His lyricism and the way he used melody is just so incredibly beautiful, and I find this piece to be a real gem. It's so intimate."

Along with the hours required to locate the pieces used in the Uncovered Project, and then fill in the missing pieces, the Catalyst Quartet did significant research into the lives of the composers who produced the works. "That's been a huge part of it," Donehew Perez says. "We want to know where they were, what they were doing, what they were listening to, how they were living their lives—because it does affect the interpretation. Knowing how these pieces were played in their time is really important, and it informs the kind of phrasing that we try to do with their pieces."

Now that the Catalyst has released three albums in the project, they've found that the initial skepticism has vanished. "The first one set the stage," Donehew Perez says, "and since then, every time we get ready to release a new one, people get really excited." The fourth and final album, now in the planning and funding stage, will be all of the Chevalier de Saint-Georges' quartets. "There are three sets of six, and one

set lives in a library in Europe, so we are working on that," explains Donehew Perez. "It's going to be a long journey, recording all of that. It will take seven days of recording, which doubles what these other albums have cost so far. We hope we can record it in a year and then release it six months later."

Asked if the passion project has had the effect it was designed to have—to expand awareness of this music and inspire programmers to put it in front of audiences—Donehew Perez is quick to point out that any recent or future success that the works of Perkinson, Walker, Still, Price, and the others are having belongs almost entirely to the composers and the artistic brilliance of the works themselves.

"That said, I do think it's having an impact," she says. "I've noticed more programming of this music. I do think the Uncovered Project has helped, and I hope it continues. I'm just incredibly proud that we are able to put this together, because these are truly extraordinary string quartets by very important Black American composers. And now, more people will know how incredible their music is." ■

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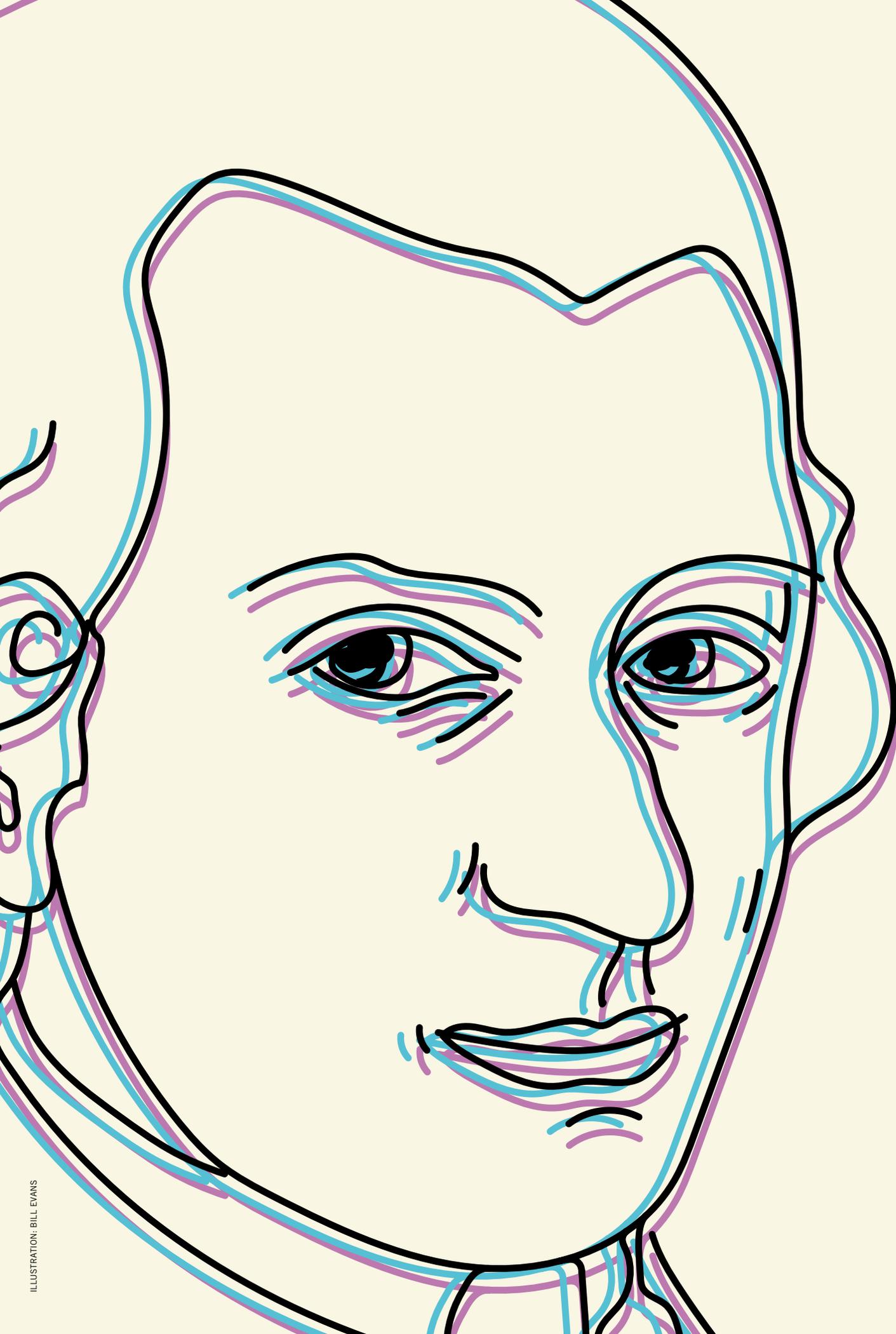
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gambler's paradise

By Patrick Mackie



Excerpted from MOZART IN MOTION: His Work and His World in Pieces. Originally published in 2021 by Granta Books, Great Britain. Published in the United States by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Copyright © 2021 by Patrick Mackie. All rights reserved.



In his book *Mozart in Motion*, Patrick Mackie describes the era during which Mozart wrote his *Divertimento for string trio in E flat*, toward the end of the composer's life, as a "manically golden age of gambling across Europe," wherein his friends and contemporaries made and lost astonishing fortunes. Though his own involvement in this pursuit is, as poet Mackie describes, "unlikely to be resolved," Mozart's finances, with their periods of largesse and somewhat inexplicable poverty, indicate some quiet siphon at work. Be that as it may, it was during this period that Mozart—after having completed his symphonies in E flat, G minor, and C, and having assumed his court position in Vienna—penned his late work for string trio, when, says Mackie, "gambling and music were two key forms of experimental social life offered by this accelerating period."

—Megan Westberg

Mozart was getting older now, a strange enough fate even for those who have not been singled out for a renown defined by youth. He was a perpetual son who now lacked a father; he threw himself into grand compositional projects as if time was suddenly chasing him. The divertimento came late enough in the resulting spate for him to have known what impressive fruits it was bringing. The piece reopens his imagination with renewed, limber tenderness to the world of manners and amusement that the divertimento genre conjures. But it does so with a certain curt freedom that comes from having traversed the vast territories of the summer's symphonies. It must have been hard to step away from the architectural vigour of the symphonies and their sense of ramifying scale; writing them would have been both exhausting and addictive. The divertimento makes the great sideways move of pouring the momentum from those works into a vessel that claims delicacy and charm as its idioms, rather than into some more self-evidently serious genre of chamber music. The divertimento treats its own slightness with expansiveness and fervour, but it does stay relentlessly slight. Choosing such a small ensemble has sharply ambiguous consequences in this context; the sound-world can seem somehow both harshly pared down and deliciously light.

MOZART
IN
MOTION

HIS WORK
AND HIS WORLD
IN PIECES

PATRICK
MACKIE



Maybe writing the piece was Mozart's way of coming back down into a shared, pleasant social world after his weeks of exalted clambering on the heights of the symphonies. It does then still carry the charge of their mountainous air. But the divertimento seems to know just how hard it would be for the symphonies to find routes into the world that they also so richly grasped; it encodes Mozart's fierce desire for formal reach within more modest and manoeuvrable shapes and

attitudes. The ambitious styles of classical chamber music or of Haydn's symphonies retain blurry links to the divertimento genre's more arbitrary and skittish musical world. But a slipperiness of style and purpose is exactly what Mozart now exploits by using the label of divertimento for the first time in years; the strenuousness of the symphonies can be cast off, but the gains that it brought are flexibly retained. The composer gives the piece the six movements characteristic of

divertimentos, and includes the two usual minuets; by this point much of his chamber music did not call for any dance movement at all. Its feel for the bodily and social rhythms and angles of eighteenth-century dance baits the divertimento with allusions to an entire historical world, one filled with elegant dance halls and shiny decor and flowing flesh. A fine work might have resulted if Mozart had wanted just to reconnect the progressive ardour of his 1780s chamber music style to this vision's smooth flights and sparkly choreography. The crucial prism here comes instead from using the string trio as a group, a choice that turns out to reach far further than we might guess if we simply see it as a quartet that has lost a violin.

String instruments cannot easily harmonize their own lines or phrases as keyboard instruments can; the two hands of a violinist can only produce one note at a time except by the dramatic and often cumbersome expedient of double stopping, whereby the bow pulls across two strings in the same gesture. One result is that dropping from four to three string instruments in a group makes a massive difference to how richly or otherwise they can harmonize one another. The divertimento finds itself thrown onto a terrain of sonorities that has been emptied out, as if poverty and curtailment lurk deep within the social loveliness that nevertheless keeps bubbling up. Mozart's trio of instruments gambles on

making restriction and exposure work in its favour; the piece matches its tense harmonies with melodic lines that are themselves highly idiosyncratic and exposed, and its players face not so much grand interpretative choices as teeming opportunities for intricate and intimate touches and nuances. Instead of making the cello run through basic accompanimental motifs to fill out the group's harmonic textures, the piece gets it to oscillate with an often quick-fire flexibility between accompaniment and soloistic excursions of its own. The violin and the viola must consequently work out their relations to each other on their own terms, a task complicated by how high in its range the viola plays, as its sonorities touch and tangle with the violin's. The three instruments use rhythms and phrase lengths that are often drastically different, as the musical flow seeks waveringly singular ways of locking itself together.

The divertimento's meditations on togetherness logically enough extend to patches of counterpoint; after all, the term refers to the most traditionally attested set of means for binding musical lines together into coherent textures. Counterpoint is used here in ways that are renowned for their elegance but that can be bitingly curt too, as the precision-tooled rigour that it brings bursts out of these wavering relationships before slipping back into their more playfully melodic gambits. Mozart merges a distinctively tight harmonic vision with the capaciousness of older genres like the Baroque suite. The divertimento contains two allegros as well as the two minuets, creating a more relaxed and digressive sense of musical space than the composer's more recent quartets or symphonies do. If listeners did not like one minuet, another would be along in a minute. But the minuet was also the one great dance form that was thriving within the high vistas of the classical symphony, so its deployments here help turn the piece into a bridge between the broad musical past and the insistent present.

During 1788 he was often busy writing the society dance music exacted by his court appointment; maybe the mixture of duress with relief involved in this elevation prodded him towards this piece that is somehow simultaneously reductionist and expansive. Writing all this dance music was in some ways an



LARA FEIGEL

Patrick Mackie

artistic move backwards, but there was also much to energize Mozart's liberal, progressive sides in the seasonal balls in which many strands of Viennese society were meant to weave together. The sides of him that just loved fun and spectacle were involved too; the opulent Redoutensaal was the setting for balls during each carnival season, and it must have been exhilarating to see his music streaming through so many moving, finely encased bodies. The task and its pleasures loomed as autumn began and the winter's balls approached, while he was working on the divertimento's mixtures of charmed curiosity and steely incision. At the same time the piece casts its cool mind back through the forcefully sociable wind serenades from earlier in the decade and through his ambitious and sometimes outright experimental divertimentos and society music from the later 1770s in Salzburg, all the way to the maelstrom of occasional and social genres and categories that

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”

had crowded the musical world during the century's middle decades. Serenades, nocturnes, and divertimentos had poured through that world often indiscriminately, but had fertilized the soil for the classical symphony in the process. In this divertimento Mozart returns to that profusion from the other side of the stylistic advances that had emerged from it. The dance music that he wrote now thronged with fairly short pieces of no great structural ingenuity, but bursting with fulsome orchestration or rich rhythms. It is probably no coincidence that the divertimento is the opposite; a pared-down delicacy here extends and complicates itself. Eighteenth-century culture finds itself unhoused, and so seeks a new and expansive knowledge of itself. It is as if a mask was removed to reveal another mask beneath, one that is more starkly elegant. In this work masking has no end; it can seem to show its own true face though.

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No other string trio of similar stature was composed until Schoenberg's massive, acerbic piece about a century and a half later, itself a thrillingly strange meditation on historical loss and personal vulnerability. In the divertimento elegance comes not from refusing complex experience but from inviting and subsuming it. No one with no love for them could pass through as many salons and parties as Mozart had, but no one could develop such a feel for them without having often enough been sick at the thought of the next one. Whatever raw ambivalence he must often have felt towards success and its hinterland turns here into refinement, as artistic seriousness and social levity remake each other, and dance. The divertimento still resounds with the swish of fine dresses and the gleam of bodies dancing beneath gilt ceilings, and the flutter of cards being shuffled. But the piece has a gambler's lucidity about its world, and a gambler's ruefulness

about how far such lucidity gets anyone. Nothing is more ambivalent than watching the roulette wheel as it flies; a gambler's winnings come laced with fear and contempt, while losses savour of near misses and the awful likelihood that hope will soon return. In both music and gambling, the eighteenth century told the truth about itself in the form of yet more distraction.

Mozart's divertimento ends with an allegro movement whose spirit of wiry melodic release speaks of a certain relief at having moved over such highly contoured ground and emerged. Are liberalism and democracy and republicanism gambles too? No society can sanely seek their realization without a large tolerance for uncertainty of outcome. A society throws itself into gambling when it no longer finds its own values and bases compelling. In the decades following Mozart's death, the greatest music extended itself to extremes of subjectivity,

inwardness, and willfulness in its attempts to balance itself against a world addicted to crises. But the E flat divertimento advocates coolness, refinement, tolerance, curiosity, a certain almost violently winnowed tenderness, and a lightness full of trenchancy. Perhaps Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades* is the work that makes the ecstasies of music and of gambling interpret each other most openly and acutely. Composed more or less exactly a century later, it focuses all the rampancy of nineteenth-century opera on the tale of a man obsessed with a particular trick for winning at cards, a man for whom gambling reveals the full horror of its version of pleasure and desire. At its heart are dazzling and trenchant passages of pastiche Mozart.

This is an excerpt from Chapter 21, "Gamblers: Divertimento for string trio in E flat," found in Patrick Mackie's Mozart in Motion, available June 6 from FSG.

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THE WAY BACK

JAZZ VIOLINIST
SARA CASWELL
RELEASES HER
FIRST SOLO ALBUM
IN 17 YEARS
AND MARKS
HER RETURN
TO THE STAGE

BY GREG CAHILL



“Oh, yeah, I’ve always been a very melodically oriented person. It’s how I express myself,” says jazz violinist Sara Caswell when asked about the more lyrical tunes on *The Way to You* (Anzic Records), her first solo album in 17 years. “When I was growing up, I was a very introverted person. I was very shy. But whenever I had a fiddle in my hand, I felt like myself—I felt like I had a voice. So melody has always been a way for me to express myself, a way to communicate with people.”

The desire to communicate took on extra meaning after the pandemic delayed not only the album’s release for nearly three years, but also the chance to tour this material. Now, Caswell is returning to the stage after a painful lockdown-driven hiatus. “To not have a performance in that period was so difficult,” she says during a phone interview from her home in Brooklyn. Her mood is upbeat and positive as she discusses her first post-pandemic tour. “Musicians breathe with the idea of making music with each other and feed on the energy and enthusiasm of the audience. So, it was hard—kind of like having the air sucked out of the room. We all went through a withdrawal, performers and audiences alike, and it’s good to be back. It’s a welcome return to our careers.”

Her own career has been impressive. Caswell is a Grammy-nominated, classically trained string player who has been ranked several times in the past decade on the prestigious *DownBeat* Critics and Readers Polls. As an A-list collaborator and session player, Caswell has toured or recorded with Bruce Springsteen, Esperanza Spalding, Regina Carter, Linda Oh, Henry Threadgill, Fred Hersch, Brad Mehldau, John Patitucci, and Helen Sung, to name a few. She also is a member of the 9 Horses trio and Chuck Owen and the Jazz Surge. Caswell teaches at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, New York University, and the New School.

Her ace band, which she has led for nearly 15 years, features guitarist Jesse Lewis, bassist Ike Sturm, and drummer Jared Schonig. The band was joined on the new album by vibraphonist Chris Dingman.





Indeed, it was the band that instigated the sessions for the new solo project. “Over the years, I had been invited to do shows at various venues and concerts, and the guys and I had enjoyed playing repertoire for those concerts, but we hadn’t actually gotten into the studio to document that material. Jared was the first one to say, ‘Sarah, we’ve got to get these tracks recorded. We’re having so much fun,’” she recalls. “So, I’m really grateful to them for their role in getting this music on record.”

The Way to You sat idle while Caswell spent the lockdown teaching on Zoom and posting performance videos on social

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media. “It became obvious early on that this was a project that was going to have to wait,” she says. “We had planned to release it [in 2020] and go on tour, but a couple of weeks’ delay turned into a couple of months, which turned into a couple of years. I could have released it during the pandemic, but that meant I would have had to sacrifice touring. With the amount of joy I feel playing music and playing with these guys [in the band], I just couldn’t do it.”

“I felt it was worth waiting for.”

The new album has a broad sonic range, from the lush lyricism of the titular track (a variation on Michel Legrand’s “On My Way to You”) to a fanciful rendition of Brazil composer Egberto Gismonti’s “7 Anéis” to the

raw energy of “Last Call,” a Bill Frisell-inspired number driven by distorted guitar and a burning violin solo. “I’m a huge fan of Michel and his music—pretty much everything he has done I adore,” Caswell says of the title track. “That song was new to me. When I had a chance to explore the melody and the chord changes, I knew this was a tune I had to play with these guys. It became pretty clear early on that it was a song that was going to make it onto this project.”

On the album’s closer, a cover of the Antônio Carlos Jobim ballad “O Que Tinha de Ser,” Caswell plays a ten-string hardanger d’amore, designed and built by Norwegian luthier Salve Håkedal. “I was in Seattle in 2013 and the host of the concert had a great instrument collection,” she says. “One of the newest acquisitions was a hardanger, one of the first that Salve had made. My friend said, ‘Sara, you really have to try this fiddle—it’s incredible and you have to experience it.’ I played three notes and was moved immediately by the warmth of tone and the depth of the resonance. I could feel it—every inch of my body was vibrating from the resonance. I ended up playing it that night for two to three hours. The next morning, I reached out to Salve and asked him to make me one.”

Caswell first picked up the violin at age 5. Growing up in Bloomington, Indiana—home of Indiana University’s famed Jacobs School of Music—she had access to a deep pedagogical pool. Caswell enrolled in classical instruction through IU’s pre-college training program under instructor Rebecca Henry. She later studied with IU violin professor Mimi Zweig for five years. At age 12, she transitioned into esteemed violin pedagogue Josef Gingold’s studio for four years, until his death in 1995. “All of those teachers were incredible to work with,” she says. “I am so grateful I had those years to work with Josef Gingold, who was a big influence on my life.”

Her formal introduction to jazz came through David Baker, the founder of IU’s jazz studies department. “He was an incredible teacher and instrumentalist,” she says. “He was the first person who introduced me to the jazz language and helped me build that foundation. He was an important person in my development.”



SHERVIN LAINEZ

WHAT SARA CASWELL PLAYS

In addition to the custom-built Håkedal hardanger d'amore (which has five main strings and five sympathetic strings), Caswell plays one of two violins, depending on the ensemble, instrumentation, setting, and repertoire: "For near-acoustic concerts requiring minimal amplification, I use a gorgeous 1908 Stefano Scarpella, on loan to me since 1998, combined with a DPA 4099V instrument microphone," she says. "I've found no other clip mic to so cleanly and effortlessly capture the heart of my tone. When performing with a rhythm section or larger jazz ensemble, I use a 1905 Joseph Collingwood violin, which has an L.R. Baggs bridge installed, and route it through an L.R. Baggs Para Acoustic DI into the venue's sound system. Because my desired EQ is already set on my DI, I'm making efficient use of my band's allotted soundcheck slot and avoid the challenges that sometimes occur between a violinist and sound technician regarding how to best EQ the violin.

"When amplification is necessary, but no house sound system is available, I use my Collingwood violin with the Baggs bridge and route it through an AER Compact 60 amplifier. Popular among guitarists, violinists, vocalists, and countless musicians seeking a clean and powerful enhancement of their natural tone, the AER is an incredible amp that also happens to be one of the most portable, NYC subway-friendly rigs around."

—GC

Surprisingly, many of her idols were not violin legends, but the great jazz horn players of the past. "When I started taking jazz lessons, David said the transcriptions he was going to give me were those of horn players," she explains. "He felt it was crucial to learn the language from a variety of instrumentalists: Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Bud Powell—alto sax, trumpet, and piano. That way the *language* could be front and center. He said after that language became something I was comfortable speaking, we would look at jazz violinists and how that language was applied to the instrument. He was concerned that if I heard the jazz violinists first, then I would start to sound like them. He wanted me to learn the language of jazz and to develop my own voice."

And why did she connect with jazz at all, given that so many classically trained string players have a visceral fear of improvisation? "I was drawn to the in-the-moment creativity and the fact that you are reacting to the environment," she says, "whether it's the music on the page or the musicians with whom you are playing. Or the room. Or the weather. Or your mood. There is instantaneous freedom within those structures. And that was something that was really appealing to me. And it was fun!"

That's not to say jazz was more fun than classical music, she adds, but jazz did present a new avenue to self-expression. "It was a chance to take a risk, you know, and to see where that would take me," she says. "That was a fun adventure to have. And I was introduced to jazz at a young age. When you're young, you don't necessarily have some of those barriers we develop as we grow older. We're willing to skin our knees or get a bruise or a bump because it's fun—it's a game. And I was young enough to process the musical language of jazz. It was like growing up in a bilingual home. That helped to facilitate my learning."

And then there's the Big Apple. Caswell credits her move to New York City nearly two decades ago with shaping her as an artist in a major way. The cultural riches of the city that never sleeps provided seemingly endless opportunities to learn; in addition to attending performances at jazz

clubs and concert halls, Caswell spent hours combing through the stacks of jazz and world-music recordings at the New York Public Library. “I’m a changed person, of course,” she says of her move to New York. “When you open yourself up to any new environment, it inspires and changes you, and New York has changed me for the better. I’ve met so many incredible musicians and heard so much incredible music. The energy here is just electric, thanks to the musicians who come into the city to work and to craft their music. I’m so grateful to have been here for 20 years—I’m always evolving and growing and changing. I love the idea of having different experiences on this journey.”

Even the darkest days of the pandemic—when the usually bustling streets grew silent as cautious New Yorkers sheltered in place—offered lessons. “It was a weird, uncomfortable time, but the sense of community was strong,” Caswell says of the lockdown. “People reached out and checked in on each other. It was a chance to connect. I’ve never felt so strong before. I love that the sense of camaraderie has carried on since Covid. Bonds were created, and friendships and networks. We all leaned on each other to get through a couple of crazy years.

“It wasn’t all bad,” she adds with a slight laugh. “I now live life with more mindfulness and gratitude. So many aspects of our everyday existence were stripped away during the pandemic—gathering with friends and family, making music with colleagues, performing live in clubs and concert halls, traveling and touring, teaching in a classroom, eating in restaurants, hugging loved ones. Living without these things for so long made me realize how essential and invaluable they are to me.”

With the pandemic fading in the rearview mirror and performance spaces once again filling with music and audiences, Caswell looks forward to her summer tour. “I tend to be shy, but when I feel the most joy is when I’m making music with my friends,” she says. “I’m just so grateful for the fact that I’m able to do that. I love the people. I love the places the gigs take me. I love the music I am being entrusted to play. Every day is different. I feel like every day, especially after having gone through the pandemic, is a gift. I go to bed very grateful every night.”

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A Trade of Tiny Details

Every small part of the violin making process
makes a big difference

By Cliff Hall

The violin has always had a certain mystique. In the film *The Red Violin*, the instrument takes on an otherworldly quality, which is rooted in the beginning scenes as an eccentric luthier toils away to craft the perfect violin. Even the varnish he chooses is mixed with his dead wife's own blood, which further mythologizes lutherie to apotheosis.

That's some drama, for sure.

Although the violin has not changed much in the last 400 years, and the way it's made by individual luthiers has stayed nearly the same as well, modern technology has dragged this process out into the light of day. Edgar Russ, an Austrian luthier who has lived in Cremona, Italy, for almost 40 years, started his YouTube channel (which has more than two million views) with exactly this goal in mind.



“Years ago, instead of telling people that I handmake instruments, I thought it was a good idea if I just showed people tiny details. Then, if they’re a little bit interested in it, then they understand that many tiny details make one nice result,” says Russ. “It’s an indirect way to underline that only by making it by hand with a certain concept in your mind will you achieve a certain quality.”

Before a tool is raised, however, Russ first needs to pick the brain of his customer. “What they’re going to expect for the new instrument is a pretty important detail. [You get the] happiest customers if you satisfy their request, but you even give them more than they actually expect,” says Russ. But it is not enough for a client to ask Russ for a Guarneri copy, as is typical in the trade.

“Among the Guarneris you have the Ysaÿe, the Ole Bull, the Heifetz, and the Lord Wilton—four different sound characters within the Guarneri sound. And when you match these models one over another, you’re surprised how little difference there actually is,” says Russ. “Sometimes it’s only one or two millimeters, and it has such a big impact on the character of things.”

Russ evokes actor Christoph Waltz in his speech and Ernst Heinrich Roth in his reputation as a master craftsman with a line of historical instruments and a similar devotion to quality. “I could make a violin in one month, but I don’t make more than eight instruments a year now,” says Russ. “In the beginning, I was better, but the more I kept on going, the more I became a maniac of preciseness.”

As for wood selection, Russ exclusively uses Bosnian maple and spruce from Val di Fiemme, a forest in the Italian Dolomites that has been renowned for centuries for producing some of the finest tonewoods in the world. To avoid any surprises like tops that are light on one side and dark on the other, Russ splits the wood in his shop.

“If it’s cut well, and if it comes from the right area and is well seasoned, I think this is a good ingredient to start with,” says Russ. “It doesn’t make any sense to not use good material. It would be like building a nice house with the worst tiles and materials. The most expensive part isn’t the wood—the most expensive part is actually your time.”

Once the top and back wood is book matched and glued, he begins construction

on the sides. “I bend my ribs on the inner form like the Cremonese unless I make a very fancy copy like the Ole Bull. Then I make the outer form like the French mold,” says Russ, noting that the outer form is best for asymmetrical copies.

Once the sides are glued to interior blocks and linings, Russ takes the ribs off the mold and marks the outline on the top and back. To rough out the basic shape and thickness of the plates, Russ temporarily diverges from using the traditional hand tools, instead opting for modern efficiencies that can be only obtained with a band saw, an electric plane, and a router.

Although it is at this point that many luthiers turn to graduation maps of Stradivari instruments to determine the variable thicknesses of the arching of the top and back, Russ uses an approach that was used before these maps were drawn.

“When I was starting, I drew even the lines, and now I don’t do that anymore. I have a rough concept where I make my thicknesses. I make them by touching and bending and tapping with my fingers on it. I take a little bit away. I tap again,” says Russ. “You’re slowly reaching the right thickness. Then sometimes it’s already so good, nicely vibrating, then why should you take away more? And if it’s too thin, then it becomes a little bit floppy, and then the sound becomes too dark.”

Though quality is always top of mind, Russ has learned to spend just the right amount of time on this step.

“Then I clean it up with a scraper, and it’s pretty quick. Some makers in the past, I saw them take two liters of red wine and a lamp that’s very low down. And then they stay there for a long, long time—until it’s super clean, and they’re super drunk,” says Russ.

After he makes the channel for the purfling and inserts it, he turns to a pleasant point of the process after the purfling has dried.

“It’s just a very nice moment to take the gouge and make the fluting all around along the purfling. And then with the small planes, you adjust the fluting with the arching,” says Russ, who then cuts the f-holes and flutes them as well.

These smaller details, though important, are dwarfed by the time and attention that making the scroll gets. Serving mainly an aesthetic but also a functional purpose (weak or absent scrolls can create wolf tones), Russ can spend between ten and 15 hours on this aspect of the violin that Yehudi Menuhin once called “a thing of beauty that would have graced a temple of the gods.”

“Years ago, I invested time and money to find ways to have it roughed out quicker by someone. But I was always regretting it because you have to make some compromises. Personally, I love to do it myself,” says Russ. “It’s somehow your signature, you know?”

Another important consideration that Russ spends a great deal of time on is fitting the bass bar.

“People pay a lot of attention to cleaning and making nice purfling and fluting, and the scroll and everything you can see. But the bass bar actually is smashed in, from even the great masters, just somewhere in an area that is not clarified where it should be,” says Russ. “It takes us more than a day because that has to be well fit. And I swear that this makes a huge difference.”

After Russ glues the top and back plates to the ribs and sets the neck at an ideal angle (which can change depending upon the part of the world it’s going to), he begins to consider whether to apply spirit or oil varnish. Russ does not see one as superior to the other, although he only uses oil varnish on his master instruments.

“Spirit-varnished instruments are just a little bit more focused and more brilliant, which might be a taste that nowadays people prefer,” says Russ, who will mix pigments in either type to determine the instrument’s color. “But with an oil-varnished instrument, I have the impression that the instrument is freer and more ready to vibrate from the very first day.”

Although that was the last step luthiers like Guarneri would have taken with the body, artificially distressing or “antiquing” a violin is very common today. But Russ noticed this quality is not desired for other new items. “If a car is shiny and well cleaned, it’s immediately driving better. If you have the same car dirty, you probably would perceive it a little less reliable. And with the violins, it’s just the opposite,” says Russ. “A little bit of patina gives it a nice charm where you’re not afraid to take it in your hands. If you make it so sharp that you are afraid that you will make the first scratch on it, you might say, ‘Oh, damn. I used my violin too much.’ I personally like them better when they are slightly antiqued.”

Finally, the tailpiece, strings, soundpost, and bridge are attached to the instrument, and Russ tailors the setup to the player. Though he loves the entire violin making process, there’s something special about when the player meets their new instrument for the first time.

“I love it all,” says Russ. “But I appreciate it very much at the end, when a musician comes, and I take my time to adjust the sound, and I realize what I have created.” ■





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Mark Wood playing the Viper electric violin

Violin Hero

Mark Wood's Viper electric has enough star power to make guitarists envious

By Karen Peterson

His energy as electric as his violins, Mark Wood has been on a mission to disrupt the most venerable of musical traditions since his first day at Juilliard, when he discovered that innovation was not part of the string curriculum—and neither was the music that had ignited the fire in the fingers of this classically trained then-violist. Hard rock. Heavy metal. Eddie Van Halen.

Especially Eddie. “He was a heavy metal virtuoso,” says Wood, reverently, of one of rock’s greatest guitarists. Wood was there when the late Van Halen guitarist astounded audiences with the explosive “Eruption,” an insanely nimble, revolutionary display of plugged-in licks, riffs, and melodies—everything an inventive string player like Wood could admire.

Of the violin as we’ve known it, “there’s been nothing new since the Stradivarius 400



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARK WOOD VIOLINS

The Viper is available in a variety of configurations and finishes.

years ago,” scoffs Wood. Seeing and hearing Eddie Van Halen’s “Eruption” solo onstage was the genesis of what has defined his music and professional life for the past four decades.

“His opening notes came from Étude No. 2 by [French violinist and opera composer Rodolphe] Kreutzer,” says Wood of the performance, then exclaims, “That was *my* music.”

As Wood saw it, there was “a modern-day Paganini” playing the guitar like him, a classically trained musician who was taking on the traditional canon and artfully distorting it to fit a new time and culture—just the sort of experimental musicianship Wood was pioneering. All he needed was the right instrument.

“There was nothing out there for me,” says Wood. So, he did what he had to do: designed and built his own electric instrument, one that better fit his aesthetic. There were numerous attempts, some fanciful. One resembled a space-age vacuum cleaner; another used a cast of his arm as ground support.

But the challenge was readily accepted by the Emmy-winning Wood, whose upcoming performances will delight fans with an electric violin rimmed with strobe lights. His instruments are a part of his all-around mission to inspire creativity and empower players who may not see a future in the traditional concert hall, especially up-and-coming musicians who attend his summer music camps,

participate year-round in his music education outreach, and consider him an icon.

Freedom to Move

In the end, the solution appeared in the form of the Viper, today Wood’s bestselling, fuel-injected “violin with wings.” He also describes the Viper as a “tripod on a body.” And it’s reminiscent of the Gibson Flying V guitar.

Everything about the Viper, from its explosive sound to its original metallic blue body—all of it to Wood’s delight and direction—is anathema to the strictures of the past. He suggests that traditionalists would see “blasphemy” in his creation, not art or a crucial expansion of the violin’s range and cultural reach.

No matter.

The Viper, says Wood, “is the vehicle for my imagination,” and was, in fact, designed to match his physical exuberance. Like a guitar, the Viper allows a player the freedom to leap—literally. Among the famous players attracted to the Viper: Rachel Barton Pine, when she played with thrash metal group Earthen Grave. It disbanded in 2014.

Notably, the Viper is also designed with ergonomics in mind, Wood’s empathetic nod to the needs of the player’s body—and a god-send for those who have suffered the neck, back, and shoulder injuries that plague string players. Wood includes testimonials on his

website from string musicians who have picked up the Viper after years of pain—and played for hours without incident. “The Viper frees up the body,” Wood says. “There’s no tension; the left hand is relaxed. All is in balance.”

Made in Long Island

Today, nearly 40 years after its inception, the Viper is the signature instrument in Wood’s portfolio of electric violins, which includes the semi-hollowbody Katana, the asymmetrical Nashville, and the entry-level Stingray. He also has a line of acoustic-electric instruments known as the Concert Series.

From his earliest years, Wood followed a family heritage that includes both playing classical music—he and his three brothers were a professional string quartet—and also fine custom woodworking. As an example of his enthusiasm for the lutherie trade, in a video on his website, Wood eagerly introduces the wonders of the millworker’s dream machine: the computerized CNC, a state-of-the-art “machining” center that can mill, weld, grind, lathe, and rout just about anything.

For Wood Violins, it cuts a perfect Viper silhouette from sheets of poplar, his material of choice. “It is light and feathery,” he says of poplar, “but with just enough density, which is critical.”

Wood points out that, aside from the CNC silhouette cutting, Vipers are handmade in



Viper bodies are machine carved using CNC, then finished by hand.

PICKING UP THE VIBES

Building a Viper would be a futile exercise without pickups, which convert an instrument's vibrations into electrical signals. The traditional guitar pickup "picks up" the magnetic vibrations of the strings; a piezo, embedded in the bridge of the Viper, picks up the vibrations of the string and the instrument.

Without pickups, the Viper, like all electric instruments, would sound tinny, if there was any sound at all.

Wood offers two configurations. His Tru-Tone piezo pickup bridge is used with the five-string model. An exclusive design, the bridge-based pickup allows the player to "get the full strength" out of the instrument without interference from body-movement distortions.

For the extended six- and seven-string Vipers, Wood calls on the Barbera, a multi-piezo bridge with a pickup for each string manufactured for the Viper by Rich Barbera of Staten Island, New York. Barbera pickups offer a "warmer, full fidelity," says Wood. "You are essentially able to squeeze the juice out of every note." —KP

America. On Long Island to be exact. Pre-pandemic, Wood Violins produced around 200 instruments a year; this year he's looking to return in full force. "It was a hard time," says Wood of the pandemic. Two of his seven luthiers died of Covid-19.

Fretting and Floating Naturally

There's another name for the Viper, the "floating violin," which refers to Wood's clever, patented "chest support system." The support system is also the primary ergonomic feature of the Viper—it frees the arms, body, neck, and head to move unencumbered. The head is not tilted to hold the violin; the arms dangle until needed; the core faces straight ahead.

The wrap-around system, in structure similar to a baby sling, consists of a paddle that is nestled comfortably under the left arm and holds the Viper upright on the shoulder. A strap attached to the instrument is then wrapped around the player, back to front, and attached to the right wing.

The same ergonomic attributes extend to the Viper's fingerboard. Just under ten inches in length, it boasts dual frets to introduce players to chords and inverted dots to help with string fingering positions. Both are low to the surface so as not to be obtrusive.

But the primary bonus is its line-of-sight positioning: The fingerboard moves with the

body, like an appendage. The player's head remains upright. There is no neck crunching required for bowing.

Turbo Charged

Many things set the electric violin apart, like an amp (Wood offers a proprietary model on his website); machine tuners, not pegs; and, on the Viper, up to seven carbon steel strings, the sixth and seventh included by buyer request. The first five strings add a viola C to the four-string violin range; six and seven return deeper sound. In total, the seven-string Viper allows for six octaves. Tuning, using the viola C, is A-E-D-G-C-F-B flat. The added strings were tricky. When he was finalizing the Viper, strings weren't readily available for the three he added, in diameter 27, 32, and 34 mm, respectively. The solution came by way of John Cavanaugh of Super-Sensitive Strings, now part of D'Addario of New York.

The extra strings were added by Wood to give the violin a range similar to the piano and also to provide "something supersonic." "A seven string is a race car" compared to a traditional violin, assures Wood. That extra *oomph* out of a violin made waves when Wood settled on the final design: Electric violinists "are very competitive with guitarists. But once I got to seven strings," Wood says, "guitar players were sweating." ■



DIANA RACKEY

Matt Wehling

Made for the Long Haul

Matt Wehling makes bows with balance, strength, weight, and longevity in mind

By Cliff Hall

“To the violinist, a good fiddle without a good bow is like Hamlet, with Hamlet left out. It may surprise the reader to learn that a good first-class bow is much more difficult to obtain than a first-class violin. To the artist, the perfect bow means everything.”

—Lyon & Healy’s 1896 *Catalogue of Their Collection of Rare Old Violins*

What is the perfect bow? Though most string players have a general awareness that the bow is a fundamental part of their sound, how it functions and therefore how it is made is somewhat shrouded in mystery. But before we can identify what the ideal bow is, we’ll need to hop aboard the Magic School Bus back to elementary school.



Remember levers? Those rigid bars placed on a fulcrum to move a heavy rock—the simple machine whose importance your third-grade science teacher tried to impress upon you? Well, the violin bow is a lever, too, but just not that kind. That would be a first-class lever, which is a force multiplier. No, the bow is a third-class lever, like a tennis racket or a golf club.

Third-class levers are mechanically inefficient (read: you have to put more work into them than you get out of them), but their main advantage is that they are a velocity multiplier. That means you can move the string a longer distance than you move the bow on the string, with the thumb and middle finger serving as the fulcrum. And what do you get out of this? Speed and, when combined with the right amount of natural arm and bow

weight, pressure. In biomechanical terms, the bow functions as only one part of a complex kinetic chain.

Tennis players typically are always looking to generate effortless power and a racquet that facilitates that. Since work is a measure of the racquet's power, the less work the player has to create, the more powerful the racquet. For more than 20 years, Matt Wehling, a bow maker out of Northfield, Minnesota, has been making high-end bows that help players minimize their effort (while maximizing their power) and color their tone. This process, not surprisingly, often starts with the player.

“One of the absolute most important parts in making a bow is choosing the right piece of wood for the client. So before you can choose the wood for the client, you have

to get to know the client well,” says Wehling. “What is their repertoire? Where are they at professionally, or perhaps they are a good amateur player? A person who is just getting out of a conservatory is going to have very, very different needs than someone who's been in an orchestra for 20 years.”

What information is Wehling looking for at this point?

“The ‘aha!’ moment could be absolutely anything. But some of the variables I'm interested in are balance, strength, and overall finished weight,” says Wehling. “But balance is what I personally think is more important than weight.”

After an initial conversation, he sends the client one of his finished bows so they can tell him how their ideal differs from the demonstration bow. The next step is invariably

picking out the right piece of pernambuco—the Brazilian wood that has served as the standard for good bows for centuries and, although carbon fiber and less expensive brazilwood are available options, the only kind of wood he'll use. What stick he picks (which has been cut to that form and seasoned for at least 15 years) is based on information like where on the bow the client likes to perform spiccato passages and where they like their balance point. It's at this stage when Wehling lets the stick do some talking.

"You're always letting the wood be what it wants to be rather than imparting your own will," says Wehling. "Once I have a really good idea of what I'm going to make with someone, I will rough out and bend the initial stick. And then I'll let that sit for a couple of weeks. I'll drill the end hole and let that sit for three or four weeks."

Turning away from the stick for a bit, Wehling brings his attention to constructing the frog and the button. Both are made of ebony, and Wehling does the metal work for the button as well. As he roughs out a basic shape for the frog, he has a very precise goal in mind as he goes through the process that many makers often skip.

"One of the things you see in older bows is that they were made incredibly quickly. The parts don't fit nearly as well once the wood has settled," says Wehling. "So I'm trying to

eliminate that from the process so that this is going to be a good, stable bow for someone for generations to come."

The next step is for Wehling to start meticulously dialing in the balance of the bow, which is what distinguishes a good bow from a great one. Violinist David Garrett recognized this difference in his book *If You Only Knew: Autobiography* when he wrote that François Tourte (1747–1835) "was able to create perfectly balanced bows that were more pleasant and effortless to use." Known as the Stradivari of the bow, Tourte revolutionized bow design, and his changes have since become the standard way to squeeze every modicum of efficiency out of what is essentially an inefficient simple machine. But some of Tourte's techniques proved very difficult to reproduce.

In 1856, Belgian musicologist François-Joseph Fétis wrote *Anthony Stradivari the Celebrated Violin Maker*, in which he described Jean Baptiste Vuillaume's formula to calculate the way Tourte changed the bow's radius over its length. Although musicologist Stewart Pollens asserted in the 2013 edition of Fétis's book that Vuillaume's math was wrong, the fact that he was trying to mathematically codify Tourte's methods to maximize the efficiency of a nonefficient lever demonstrates the relationship that bow making has long had with science.

At this point, however, Wehling makes a notable divergence from this approach.

"Once the frog is mated to the stick, I can switch my brain into a much more artistic mode, much more concerned with how the stick is going to play. It is less, 'Hey, let's measure a whole bunch of numbers,'" says Wehling. "[When] carving the head and the frog . . . I'm going much more by feel."

Wehling has a musician in mind and how they want the bow to play. "I've got hair in the bow at this point . . . and a pseudo-grip, and I'll be bringing it down to where it's four grams overweight. I'll be reviewing all my notes, and I'll be playing the bow to some extent. I'll be feeling it in my hand. I'll bounce it, which is a really big part of making a bow," says Wehling. "Being able to look at a piece of wood and imagine, 'What's in this?'"

By generating this feedback, Wehling can get an exact feel for what the balance of the stick is. "I'm constantly cambering the bow at this time. I'm constantly putting in just a little bit more here, a little bit less there. And similarly, I'm trying to make the graduation of how the bow gets thicker from the thinnest point behind the head to the thickest point. I have a very regular concept of what that should be."

Does this tinkering ever go a little too far?

"To quote a Los Angeles violin maker of yore, we don't want to hear, 'Oopsy,'" says Wehling, who studied bow making in France for five years. "One of the things I learned at Benoît Rolland's shop in Brittany is one time I made a bow that had gotten too thin at one place. And he said, 'You can't finish this bow. You might think it's okay—it's just this once—but if you lower your standards one time, then you've lowered your standards. There's no such thing as *just this one time*.' So if I did have an 'oopsy' like that, it would just not go out the door."

The final steps are to finish the bow with three to five coats of shellac and to add the silver winding. Although the extra weight of the winding is another variable he has been planning for, there is still a mystique about the process as a whole. "There are formulas to some extent," says Wehling, echoing Vuillaume's scientific efforts. "But there's mystery as well, which is a really fascinating, interesting thing that keeps driving me forward." ■





COURTESY OF T.A. TIMMS & SON

Desmond Timms

Making His Case

Desmond Timms has been working in a centuries-old tradition for over a quarter of a century himself

By Karen Peterson

The end of an era is literally in Desmond Timms' hands. Proprietor of T.A. Timms and Son (named for his late father), maker of fine bespoke wooden violin cases from his workshop in the lush green landscape of Buckinghamshire, England, Timms feels the weight of history with each new order. There is nothing dire forcing Timms to break with a 250-year tradition of making the most celebrated cases since Stradivari produced the studded-wood-and-leather Milan "delivery case." He's talking about his open-ended but impending retirement after working "seven days a week for 26 years" as the last case maker trained to meet the standards of England's celebrated W.E. Hill & Sons violin emporium.

Beginning in the mid-1700s, Hill & Sons challenged Europe in setting the standard for



PHOTOS COURTESY OF T.A. TIMMS & SON

Dart Case

elegance and precision with its instruments and high-end cases—the company’s top-hat reputation reinforced by its neighbor, Fabergé, when it moved in the 1800s to London’s posh (then and now) New Bond Street.

Timms has come to this pivotal moment centuries later, after having serendipitously met the late Michael “Mick” Gordge. Trained in Hill & Sons’ workshops and apprentice to its senior case maker, Ken Turtle, Gordge set out on his own and tapped Timms, then in his 30s, for “a mid-life apprenticeship.”

“He was my mentor,” says Timms of Gordge, who died “suddenly” in 2007. “He was a great craftsman and a close friend.” He was also without pretense. On Timms’s first day at work, Gordge advised, “At the end of the day, we just make nice boxes.”

Timms had already set up a small “box”-making shop before Gordge’s death, working part time for a software company during the day and as a case maker by night “in a very small, cold, leaky garden shed with very basic tools.”

The business grew, orders started to flow in, and Timms carried on in Gordge’s learned footsteps. “I made cases exactly as he had taught me, and to his recipe with actually very few changes,” Timms says.

T.A. Timms had hit its stride, handsomely encasing and protecting the best violins and violas from England to points east and west in a collection that includes Gordge’s creation, the English Oblong model. Timms has typically built around 200 cases a year—not mass produced, but painstakingly “with my own bare hands,” he assures me.

Today, Timms is taking on fewer jobs and consciously reducing his workload. He and his wife, Rachel, are the sole proprietors, and both are looking forward to the next stage of their lives. He is also weary of the hassles inherent in running a small business—late payments, no payments. In 2014, Timms stopped supplying his cases to shops and dealers and began to sell directly to players.

“Many of these players and collectors around the world [have] become friends, and occasionally, when making a case for an instrument of great importance, we’ve travelled about the planet to take measurements and outlines,” says Timms. Today, most players with more expensive instruments visit him for the all-important task of measuring to fit.

The Timms Quartet

As he approaches retirement, Timms is acutely aware that he is indeed “the trustee” of a long tradition of English case making. Until the day comes when the doors of his shop close, Timms is focused on producing four primary models from his collection, in limited availability. First, the classic English Oblong Model, a tribute to Gordge. “In my opinion,” says Timms, “in terms of design, less is often more, and I just love the classic, clean, unfussy lines of a traditional English case.”



English Model

Also still available, the sought-after Leather Collectors case. Based on models from Hill & Sons and Gordge, the cases come in sumptuous black or cognac leather, with polished brass locks and a three-layer inner blanket to swaddle the instrument.

The compact Double Violin case for two violins and four bows remains in stock, as well as the Dart Case—a model “forced” upon Timms by “shoulder-rest makers making ever larger rests” that needed to be accommodated, he says.

It All Begins There

All T.A. Timms cases are made in-house from the ground up. Time-tested, with modern updates, they still exude the refinement and beauty of their heritage.

Timms laminates the sides and lids using “no less than nine layers of birch veneers.” The veneers are pressed onsite. Timms jokes that a friend, knowing his penchant for perfection, suggests he plant his own birch forest.

Joints are bonded together with slow-set Araldite adhesive. The exterior of the side walls is covered with a faux leather fabric, and the lids and base panels are treated with wood preservative, in all a four-day process.

Hardware is crucial, and even quality hardware can fall short, so Timms uses solid steel hinges rather than the more common pressed-steel products. Locks are handmade in solid polished brass by an outside contractor; the handles and shoulder straps are handstitched by a master saddler.

Case interiors are built for air circulation, and they are lined in 100-percent cotton velvet, colorfast and available in appealing matte-textured moss green, burgundy, and royal blue—or in 60 other colors at an additional cost.

You Get What You Pay For

Whatever the model, Stradivari or other,

Timms says he never forgets “that a violin is usually the most important possession in a player’s life.” Respecting that, Timms and his predecessors “build our cases to last.”

“We make a case as strong as we possibly can,” says Timms, with the intention “that a graduate could buy one of our cases and use it every day of their professional life.” While it might look well-worn in its later years, he adds, “it will actually be just as capable of doing its initial intended job: that of protecting” the family jewels.

Longevity comes with a price. “Our cases are not inexpensive,” he admits, but the simple fact that one case will last a lifetime “proves to be the least expensive option long-term.” Prices for his classic English cases start around \$1,000.

Timms only has to look outside his window for proof that quality is a bargain in the long run. He’s driven the same beloved Volvo for 27 years. ■



KELLY LORENZ

VERSATILITY REQUIRED

Mike Block's gear has to keep up with his eclectic, multi-style career

By Leah Hollingsworth

Cellist Mike Block identifies as a “multi-style musician,” one who views performance, composition, and improvisation as connected aspects of his musical practice. He is the most excited about cross-cultural collaborations, especially getting to work with musicians of different backgrounds and styles. Recent such projects include his duo with tabla player Sandeep Das, his six-piece American/African fusion band featuring a balafon player from Mali, and an acoustic folk group with mandolin and upright bass. Block's bio is impressively diverse, with performances that range from classical concerti to improvisation to jazz and bluegrass.

He is as passionate about education as he is about collaboration, and is the founder/

director of two summer programs created to inspire young musicians. He has been a member of Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble since 2005, teaches online through his Multi-style Cello School, and is on the faculty at the New England Conservatory. I enjoyed chatting with him about his instruments—a modern cello and an electric—and his setup, including a tool of his own invention: the Block Strap.

Tell me about your primary cello.

My primary cello is a new instrument made in 2014 by a really great maker from Quebec named Fabienne Gauchet. I bought it in 2015, so I'm the first owner! Its story is my story, in a way. I have a good relationship with my local dealer [in Boston], Carriage

House Violins, and I just tried every cello in the shop and fell in love with this one. I often have to check my cello when I fly—it's more practical in the nonclassical work that I do—and one got destroyed in the process. I decided after that experience to get a new instrument and also a backup cello, so that's what led to my search that ended with my current instrument.

I also really enjoy my Yamaha SVC-200 electric cello with collapsible wings. Most of my performing outlets tend to be acoustic, even if amplified. So I do not tour with the

“
This back and forth makes me more versatile—and whichever cello I'm playing seems to become my favorite.
”

electric, but I use it at home for compositional exploration, experiments with pedals, that sort of thing. I would love to have a band some day so I could play it more.

What first drew you to your instrument and how did you know it was the right fit?

In contrast to older Italian instruments, what I appreciated about [the Gauchet] is that it didn't have its own strong personality that it was imposing on me. It felt very versatile, and particularly for the multi-style work that I do, this felt good to me—even vital. When I tried it, I felt like it allowed me to both soar melodically and also play crisply and rhythmically when I needed to—it responded to me better than a more stubborn older instrument might.

MIKE BLOCK'S GEAR

You designed a strap for the cello to allow the player to stand. How does it work?

About ten years ago, I first put a strap on my cello. I was inspired by my good friend Rushad Eggleston, who was teaching at my camp in Florida in the summer. He played with a strap during a faculty concert, and a lot of students showed up with straps on their cellos the following morning. I myself had resisted trying it for a few years, but then, inspired by these younger students, I gave it a try in March 2013 for a music video. It became clear that a guitar strap was not conducive to playing with the technique that I had learned while playing seated. I spent a month trying to adjust my technique—then I realized that instead of changing my technique, I should change the strap design.

That became a two-year project of revising and redesigning, and I've been selling it since April 2015. As I was working on it, friends kept asking, “When you figure it out, can I get one too?” That led very early on to the idea of turning it into a product that I could sell. From the initial stages, I wanted to make something that didn't just work for me, but that would work for anyone. It attaches via buckles at three different places on the cello and has a chest cushion to help customize the inward angle. The strap comes on and off in 20 seconds and does not require any adjustment to the instrument itself. The whole idea is that anyone can feel comfortable with normal technique and normal positioning while standing.

I've played concertos, string quartets, bluegrass, jazz—all sorts of concerts using it and standing up. There are two obvious benefits: logistical and psychological. Logistically, I don't need a chair or a place for an endpin, and I'm ready to play anytime, anywhere, with any ensemble. In ensembles where there's improvisation and spontaneity, this is really important—I can take a step forward when it's time to solo and then take a step back when I'm done. Psychologically, there's the power of performing when standing in front of a

roomful of people. I feel different. I'm more emotionally and physically engaged when standing. Think about it: people don't give speeches sitting down; teachers only rarely sit down in front of a class. There's a reason for this, and there's just so much more power in being able to stand.

STRINGS:

I have a long relationship with D'Addario and am a D'Addario artist, so I play with their Kaplan Mediums for both instruments. I find them very affordable and versatile.

BOWS:

My primary bow is a Pierre-Yves Fuchs, which I found through Carriage House, and have been playing on since about 2015.

CASE:

I am horrible with cases. I break them all—you name it, I break it. I go through cases about every two years. I've learned not to be too personally attached to style and color. The Bam Slim Hightech is my latest case, and I do really swear by the Bam flight case. So whenever I am buying a new case, I look for one that fits into the Bam flight case.

ROSIN:

I am a man of convenience. After years of Pirastro Gold, and then years of the sticky Kolstein rosin, now I'm really enjoying the D'Addario rosin. It also comes with a nice rubber grip that protects it.

ADDITIONAL GEAR:

When I'm touring, I'm playing amplified most of the time (like 90 percent), so I've got two amplification setups. If I'm playing in a group, I use a combination of a DPA clip-on microphone and Realist piezo pickup, which helps provide clarity on the low end, and I can use the pickup in the monitor to avoid feedback. Then the clip-on is the primary source for the sound. If I'm playing solo or a duo with another string player, I really love the Ear Trumpet Labs Delphina mic, which adds in lower frequencies that work nicely for cello. —LH

What is something your cello has taught you?

I don't check my Gauchet; I tour with a Chinese cello that I can check and not worry about much. As a result, I'm constantly shifting between instruments, depending on whether I'm at home or on the road. This back and forth makes me more versatile—and whichever cello I'm playing seems to become my favorite. This practice makes me stay on my toes, and keeps me engaged in the details of the sound production.

And how did you settle on your electric instrument?

I'm a Yamaha artist, and I've enjoyed working with that company over many years. They hooked me up with this cello, so I did not do an extensive shopping trip of my own. I have tried all the other electric instruments, and they all have different strengths. Yamaha is the ideal bang-for-your-buck option—it's a fantastic cello at an affordable price. The Yamaha is collapsible and particularly easy to

travel with, and it's set up to use with headphones; you could practice late at night and not bother your roommates or in a hotel room and no one would know.

What gift does the electric bring to your playing that can't be found in any other instrument?

I have learned so much and been able to experiment with so much on the Yamaha by using pedals and amplification for compositional and recording purposes. What I really appreciate is how much easier certain things can become. For instance, if you're playing with a delay pedal or an echo effect, you can create textures that you could approximate acoustically, but creating them using a pedal, you don't have to work very hard at all. It's an inspiring mental place to be in, because you can create really interesting textures, but you're not working super hard so your brain can stay creative and engaged and not worried about the technical concerns.

Additionally, projection is such an important part of training, but when you eliminate the need to play with a con-certo-level forte, it gives you much more endurance and flexibility musically because you're not trying to play really loud all the time. So playing with amplification—whether with an electric or on an acoustic—can redirect all the energy that otherwise goes into just being heard into creativity.

What is your modern instrument's personality and temperament like? Does it remind you of anyone or anything?

A very polite and helpful friend.

Does it perform better in certain situations?

I haven't thought about it. I would usually blame myself if something is not working. I guess that's part of playing a very modern instrument—and what I love about it. It's not very temperamental.

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SIGNATURE SOUND

Jacob von der Lippe ponders the tonal characteristics of his work

By Karen Peterson

Musicians create a signature sound. Composers do, too, obviously, and have over the centuries. Why not violin makers?

That's the question Norwegian maker Jacob von der Lippe asked himself a decade ago, and one he continues to explore with each violin he handcrafts: Can a luthier make an instrument of his own device—as in, not a carbon copy of a classic—that emits a sound so singular that there's no mistaking its modern provenance?

Von der Lippe responds with an enthusiastic yes, and in late November 2022, to underscore that optimism, he released *Sculpted Sound* on CD and vinyl through his side venture, Von der Lippe Records. The recording captures live performances in a series of concerts at famed venues throughout Oslo, such as Tomba Emmanuelle, a vaulted mausoleum known for its remarkable acoustic reverberation and the resting place of the Norwegian artist who also created its dark, secular interior, Emanuel Vigeland.

In performance were some of Norway's finest string musicians playing the violins von der Lippe had created for each of them, some upward of 20 years ago.

The question asked of the musicians and the audience at the back-to-back concerts: “Can a characteristic of sound be heard among instruments created by the same log of spruce and the hands of one specific violin maker, even if played by different instrumentalists?”

Violinist Matias Jentoft, who performed a Bach partita at the Tomba Emmanuelle venue, describes the experience, on von der Lippe's website, as “an impressionistic painting of sound” with the added drama of the acoustics in the “tomb of a bygone artist.”



VON DER LIPPE RECORDS

Time will tell if von der Lippe's hypothesis that his instruments created what he terms the “sound of now” is true, as he and those who participated in the events take a closer listen to the recordings. For those interested in hearing more, audio clips are available at vonderlippe.com.

“Ninety-nine percent of makers today are making Stradivarius and Guarneri copies,” says von der Lippe. “I'm trying to find my own voice.”

The quest for stylistic independence began in 2010, when von der Lippe stopped imitating the masters to concentrate on his own sense of constructed musicality, tossing out what didn't work for him and keeping “the best qualities,” many of which, he says, were discovered through conversations with his playing customers.

“We have to move forward,” von der Lippe says of his belief in the evolution of the violin during a Zoom conversation from his Oslo workshop. He is not dismissing the past—on the contrary. Von der Lippe believes we are living in “a golden age for the violin,” thanks specifically to the knowledge that has been

passed down to luthiers over the many years. There are so many skilled makers, “from New York to Oslo and Singapore,” says von der Lippe, and all are interconnected by the internet. “It is a fascinating time for a violin maker.”

With more than 60 commissioned violins completed over the 22 years since his studies at the esteemed Istituto di Istruzione Superiore Antonio Stradivari Cremona, von der Lippe admits he has an edge in his quest for a signature sound. The advantage is not just through his formal education, and a teenage fascination with playing and making his own cello, but also because of where he lives: Norway, home of some of the world's finest violinists and composers, from the legendary, flamboyant Ole Bull—in speed and virtuosity the Nordic version of Paganini—to the famed Arve Tellefsen, at 86 still a force in classical repertoire.

Also, there's Norway's history of musical innovation, famously the elaborately decorated, melodious hardanger fiddle with its set of double-decker strings. The hardanger emerged in southern coastal Norway about the time Stradivari was at work in Cremona.

Jacob von der Lippe



GIULIA TROISI

Combined, the wealth of skilled players and the musical heritage of his homeland represent what von der Lippe considers his strongest motivator: proximity to greatness.

“I live in a city with a rich musical life; I am where the music is,” he says. “The instruments I make today are a result of the ongoing relationships I have with the musicians. I listen to their wishes, and I really try to make the instrument sound the way they want. Not all musicians are looking for the same thing.”

Making a violin is an esoteric exercise, arising from inspiration and also gut feelings, says von der Lippe. Luthiers and others with a trained eye can see the slight differences in von der Lippe’s instruments, he reports; the rest need guidance. For example, proportionately, he says his violins are within classical measurements but “on the wider side of the spectrum.”

“All the shapes and curves have been drawn from scratch,” says von der Lippe, rather than copied from an old instrument, and as a result his silhouette is “personal and unique.” The differences also extend to his scroll design and f-holes.

“
I’m trying to find
my own voice.

—Jacob von der Lippe

”

Von der Lippe makes his oil varnish from scratch, brewing up the linseed oil and resin in an outdoor cooker for a week, much in the same way it was made 300 years ago. “It’s all about the ratio between the oil and the resin,” he advises.

He uses rabbit-skin glue for the entire violin, and, notably, most of his instruments come from the same tree that he found in

the Italian Alps. “I bought one log of a spruce and had it cut into pieces,” he says, adding that it takes six to ten years before he uses the wood to build a violin. “The wood needs to be dry and stable.”

Von der Lippe says 99 percent of his violins are made by hand; it takes 250 hours—roughly a month and a half—to finish one. Making something new, he says, is a process of evolution and, as such, a never-ending story.

For the past 22 years, von der Lippe has documented each violin he has made, as evidenced by a stack of five hardback journals he holds up during our Zoom call. Each instrument gets two or three pages, with photographs and notations on the specs, size, and so forth. “It is a fingerprint of the violin,” says von der Lippe, flipping through the pages. “You put so much of your personality in every instrument you make—I feel like my violins are 60 small children.”

Pausing, he says, almost to himself, “Maybe I should sit down one day and try to put some of this data together. There is a lot of material here.” ■



PHOTOS: EMILY WRIGHT

STARTER KIT

Making sure a beginning cellist has the right gear

By Cliff Hall

When starting cello lessons, it's important for beginners to have the appropriate instrument quality and gear. According to Emily Wright, the founder of Tamarack Arts, it's best for students to have the nicest gear they can afford, within reason, when first starting cello lessons. However, she recommends that most students rent an instrument for the first few months for two reasons: one, to see if they're going to stay the course, and two, because the kind of instrument outfit a reputable luthier will offer usually exceeds what they'll find on sale at the entry-level budget of most players. In her words, "Please, please, don't get a \$300 cello online."

Though a financially attractive substitute, buying instruments from untrustworthy sources is a common mistake that some parents make. Wright warns against buying instruments from Facebook Marketplace or

similar platforms, as they often have not been set up properly and do not stay in tune. In her experience, "the odds of getting one that will function for you is about the same as winning the lottery." Instead, she recommends finding a reputable luthier or larger shop that can offer a proper setup.

So, what does a student really *need* to have? "A student should have an instrument made of wood (or carbon fiber), with a bridge that has been carved to fit that specific instrument, a bow that is reasonably straight with full width hair that can loosen and tighten, fine tuners, and strings and pegs that can hold a tune," says Wright. "Additionally, the cello should not have any open seams or wild improvised repairs that will fight the student."

When it comes to "nice to haves," Wright recommends an instrument that has been played for a while. "Unlike cars, with instruments—even those at the entry level—the more they have been played and taken care of, the better they tend to sound. As an example, I played on a completely beat up instrument in middle school: it had people's names carved into it and the fingerboard was faded where the fingers had worn away the color. I'm pretty sure a cockroach

once crawled out of it after going unplayed for a summer," says Wright. "It sounded better than any of the new shiny orange instruments the other players clamored for!"

Beyond the instrument itself, Wright describes some other desirable enhancements. "Premium strings are another wonderful upgrade, and once a student is willing to spend more than a few hundred dollars for a bow, they can witness firsthand how much difference a better bow can make, both in helping their mechanics and in generating a beautiful tone," says Wright. "Geared pegs are also a great addition, as they help instruments hold their tune and prevent over-tightening."

When it comes to adults buying instruments for themselves, Wright says that there's no such thing as too nice for a beginner. However, she has seen many students become obsessed with expensive gear instead of focusing on their development as a musician. While it's wonderful to play a professional-level instrument, it's useful to occasionally play on a less expensive instrument to maintain perspective.

Although sometimes beginners incorrectly see it as an accessory rather than a primary part of a cellist's sound, a good bow is an important consideration as well. Not



Be sure your bow is straight with full width hair; fine tuners are also helpful.

BEGINNER LESSONS

As for the goals of the first year of lessons, Wright emphasizes the importance of learning to read music in first position across all four strings. For most students who take lessons regularly, she encourages them to explore some of the other positions (second through fourth) in scales and pieces. She also wants them to have a good bow hold and an understanding of what both hands do and what the ideal techniques look and feel like. In addition, students should learn the way keys work, be able to play basic scales, and know how to work with a tuner and a metronome.

It can be slightly harder to learn the cello bow hold than the violin bow hold; the violin has the built-in benefit of being more horizontal in nature, and so it is easier to balance the bow on the instrument. The more vertical orientation of the cello can be a challenge for beginners as they tend to hold the stick too tightly out of fear of dropping the bow. Knowing how challenging that is, Wright is not looking for the perfect bow hold immediately. “I’m looking for a bow hold that roughly performs the function and resembles the form it will take over the next few years,” says Wright.

Once a basic bow hold is established, beginners can then start to explore the bow stroke itself. Again, Wright is not looking for mastery right away. “They’ll know some of the basic articulation names: *détaché*, *legato*, *martelé*, *collé*—because these are the strokes we use to create a strong foundation and relaxed arm,” she says.

Perhaps the most important goal for the first year of lessons is for students to have a real sense of how to practice. According to Wright, “With beginners, at least half of our time is centered around how to work on what is presented during the lesson at home.” —CH

that beginners need an expensive pernambuco bow from the outset. “Some fiberglass bows are actually better than wooden ones in terms of weight and balance. Especially for younger students, I find a hardy bow helpful for the abuse they’re exposed to, like taking it on the bus or in a carpool, sitting on it, dropping it, having their pet abscond with it,” explains Wright with the experience of a teacher that has seen it all.

Even with a rental instrument, if a bow isn’t the right fit for the student (younger or more petite students can struggle with a heavy feeling bow or too-stiff stick), most shops will exchange until the right one is found. Also, if a student is serious enough, plenty of folks buy a bow first. It’s important for this to be under the guidance of a teacher or shop staff, so that a number of contender bows can be tried, and that someone objective can vouch for the sound at a distance.

Starting cello lessons can be an exciting but overwhelming experience, especially when it comes to choosing the right instrument and gear. But short-term solutions, like acquiring an inferior instrument or bow, often lead to short-term playing experiences instead of setting up the student for a lifetime of music making. ■



JOEL VOGT

SOS!

Starting on the string yields great benefit with less effort

By Scott Flavin

The great violinist Nathan Milstein continually emphasized two main practice goals: make it better and make it easier.

A great place to start this kind of work is to look at the intersection of the bow and the string: Beginners are instructed to put the bow on the string and pull. As students gain greater fluency, the breath becomes tied to bow use, and the larger gestures of the right arm are used to initiate bow strokes.

Quite often, sensitivity to the actual moment when the bow initially contacts the string becomes lost, and if the bow approaches the string with an incorrect amount of weight or speed, or at the wrong point of contact, the result may be a less-than-ideal sound or position. Thus, starting from the string (SOS, or grounding one's overall technique by focusing on the moment the bow first touches the string) is a critical tool in making playing both better and easier.

The three main elements of bow tone production (or the Big Three) are bow speed (or

how much bow is being used), bow weight (or bow pressure or arm weight), and contact point (or sounding point or point of contact). There are infinite sound colors to be found in the manipulation of these three variables. SOS produces many positive effects in these areas, including:

- Physical efficiency—By using the weight and balance of the arm rather than excessive preparatory gestures, there is greater economy of motion.
- Ensemble uniformity—Whether in orchestra or chamber music, starting from the string will help ensembles play together.
- Greater power and color—By focusing on the intersection of bow and string, greater attention can be paid to tone through the manipulation of the Big Three bow tone variables: speed, weight, and contact point. An example is the opening of Dvořák's Cello

Concerto in B minor, Op. 104. Yes, there can be a gesture connected with the breath and moving the whole arm, but if the bow contacts the string without a clear beginning, that first note will lack definition and perhaps strength of tone.

• **Clarity**—A greater sensitivity to articulation can be found by starting from the string.

How to SOS

In order to gain control starting from the string, several strategies may be helpful.

Pizzicato: Without holding your bow, “feel” the string with your plucking finger and look for a release of the right arm as well as a feeling of balance before you pizz. Gradually you will find increased ease and consistency in pizzicato. Once that has been achieved, do the same with the bow, placing it at the frog and using a balanced and released right arm to make a clear down bow. It may take some repetition to find the proper balance and avoid crunching the sound.

Articulated Strokes: Practicing bow strokes with articulated beginnings that start on the string (like *collé* and *martelé*) are excellent for building the musculature and sensitivity to the string that is needed. *Collé* is a bow stroke that starts from the string and is initiated by the smaller joints of the arm, most notably the fingers. *Martelé* can take many

forms but is articulated at the beginning and the end of each note, meaning that the bow begins from the string with a good deal of bow weight, the pressure is released in the middle of the note (creating a rounder tone), and weight is added at the end of the note, stopping the bow on the string. Kreutzer *étude* No. 7 is traditionally used for working on these bow strokes, but scales or repertoire may be helpful as well. Be able to start with either down bows or up bows at both the frog and the tip, as well as the middle, balance

point, and other parts of the bow, in varied dynamics and tempi.

Have fun finding ever-richer tonal possibilities with greater ease, always remembering that successful bow placement creates a greater connection with the string and uses the balance of the arm, rather than force, to better control bow tone. By gaining greater control of how you’re placing the bow on the string, you can use your energy where it counts—in the sound. ■

SOS STRATEGIES

Practice starting from the string, initially as pizzicato, then with *martelé* and *collé*, helping gain muscle control and consistency.

Keep breathing! There must always be a preparatory breath for a new bow stroke, whether starting above the string or from the string.

Be continually aware of the Big Three elements of bow tone: bow speed, bow weight, bow contact point.

Have fun finding greater richness and tonal control with less effort! —SF



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LEVELING UP

Slaying the final boss—
performance—requires
smart practice

By Nick Revel

When I was a young viola student, I didn't have a real sense of the learning process, and I had to rely on my teachers' guidance. I'm sure they showed me how to practice what they assigned, but I don't remember the process feeling very creative. The idea of getting better was like leveling up in a video game—grinding out scales, arpeggios, and études so I could beat the final boss, the actual music performed in recital. Even in high school, when I'd like to think I was getting smarter, I drilled passages until my fingers became tingly. That's probably bad . . . and not very smart. Two Grammy nominations with PUBLIQuartet, multiple composition awards, and several albums later, I've learned that experimenting and tinkering with audio play-alongs, games, and improvisation keeps me grounded, present, and focused in the practice room. I like to try out what I've learned on my students—my precious guinea pigs.

But Mr. Nick, my fingers get tingly too! How do I practice smarter? In my experience, efficient practice is creative, self-informing, and interactive. The process can be broken down into making clear goals, trying out specific methods to achieve them, and then immediately observing if the methods were helpful.

When my students make overly general goals—like to “play better”—we spend a solid chunk of the lesson talking about how “better” is an ambiguous, depressing void. Without clear goals, we drift in space. For me, “better” falls into four general categories of work: body, time, pitch, and expression. In reality, the practice process is a magical maze of interconnected concepts, but it's always helped me and my students to break it down. So, for example, in terms of time, a clear goal, like “don't rush,” is better, but the best goals are positively oriented ones, like “play in a steadier tempo.”

Nick Revel



LELANIE FOSTER

A method is an action that accomplishes your goal and can be as simple as “play with a metronome.” But learning is messy, so it's best to have extra options, like “speak the rhythm with a metronome,” “sway to the pulse while playing,” and maybe “record and listen back.” Careful with that last one though. Observing the method's effectiveness is a crucial part of the process as it informs next steps. Verbalize or write down what worked in terms of accomplishing your goal.

But Mr. Nick, what if I can't find the methods? What if I'm wasting my time? What is the meaning of life? Whoa . . . let's stay grounded. Observing a “nope, fixed nothing” is not bad because it reveals that your method was ineffective at conquering the current goal. It could be an absolute banger for a different goal, so keep it in your pocket. The “right” way is to follow this self-informing cycle into the rabbit hole, allowing your GPS to reroute your process as you burrow deeper. Progress might feel glacial because it can lead to more questions than answers, but you are not alone, and people love giving advice, so bring your questions to a teacher or a trusted friend.

One of my students, whom I started working with on Zoom in 2020, had difficulty maintaining a steady pulse in the Suzuki Book 4 concerto movements. He would rush on repeated eighth notes and cut rests short, so that by the time the armies of sixteenths reared their oppressive double-beamed noteheads, he was sunk like burnt toast in a raging river. We experimented over several weeks with many methods, but none fully solved the issue. Feeling stuck during practice is frustratingly inevitable, so I decided to seek help from an online piano accompaniment audio play-along. I end up devising games, exercises, and play-along tools when I run out of ideas. It's pure curiosity, like “what does this button do?” Really, it's tinkering. And I love it.

External audio sources are fantastic practice tools because they can be applied to achieving a variety of goals. This backing track gave him so much more information than just a metronome and a tuner. It allowed him to hear the interaction between the viola solo and the piano reduction as he played, not only completely solving the rushing (over time), but also helping to

improve his intonation and knowledge of the harmonic structure. Anything and everything that provides an external reference point for pitch, rhythm, and harmony creates an inviting musical workspace. He later crushed the final boss (Zoom recital), alongside the audio play-along, and was crowned hero to thunderous emojis in the chat.

My most ambitious tinker project came from a desire to practice intonation and rhythm more efficiently as a daily warm-up. Enter *DragonScales*—a 3-octave scales and arpeggios audio play-along system in all keys, in slow to fast rhythms, for violin, viola, and cello. Unlike most scale books, *DragonScales* are fully notated through cycles of rhythms to which the audio play-alongs, accessed via YouTube QR code links, follow in perfect unison, effectively combining drone tones and a metronome. And *wow* is it obvious when you play out of tune or time! The feedback is immediate and constant, and therefore useful. I play with *DragonScales* at every practice, often explor-

ing intervals, different rhythms, and improvising alongside the audio.

Any time my tinkering creates a useful tool, I immediately try it out on my students.

“
Learning is messy, so it's best to have extra options.

—Nick Revel

”

I figure if these tools help me, they will probably help others too! My hope is that by showing learners of any age how I use them for myself, they will eventually have

their own creative tinker sessions that give direction to their own processes. I recently learned that my student who slayed rushing regularly holds jam sessions with his pianist friend after school two or three days a week, just for fun. I was so happy and proud of him knowing that they share time, tinkering with music and learning about themselves.

When Nick Revel is not touring as founding violist of the multi-Grammy nominated PUBLIQuartet, he is composing, producing, and performing original solo pieces, audio engineering, and creating practice tools like DragonScales. His recent award-winning compositions appear on his latest album, Dream Collider (Sapphire Records, 2022). He has served as artistic and executive director of the Norwalk Youth Chamber Ensembles, is co-creator of the New York String Studio, and serves on the board of the Seabury Academy of Music and the Arts in Norwalk, Connecticut.

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Laura Metcalf and Rupert Boyd



HAROLD LEVINE

COME SUNDAY

Laura Metcalf's unconventional career has led to the founding of a special musical series

By Laurence Vittes

Cellist Laura Metcalf, who grew up in Connecticut, is coming up on her 19th year in New York, where she has been involved in one creative project after another. She founded the string quartet the Overlook, dedicated to amplifying music by Black composers. With her husband, classical guitarist Rupert Boyd, she has a duo called Boyd Meets Girl. She performs with the cello-percussion quartet Break of Reality, selected in 2015 for a world tour as musical ambassadors by the US State Department. She was cellist of the string quintet Sybarite5. After the pandemic, Metcalf started teaching one day a week at a school in the Bronx, the Riverdale Country School, in order to have “a little bit of steady work.”

“I am drawn to chamber music at the intersection of genres,” Metcalf tells me in a wide-ranging conversation. “I’ve never been a part of, like, a super standard classical string quartet. And I couldn’t have predicted the way it’s all unfolded. It’s become even more exciting than I would have imagined.”

Metcalf’s current project is a Sunday-morning concert series called GatherNYC at the Museum of Arts and Design on Columbus Circle, the heart of Manhattan. Now in its fifth year, there will be a concert every two weeks until the end of May.

“We want to showcase the diversity of incredible talent and the immense creativity of our musical scene here in New York. We’ll have a classical string quartet followed by a fiddle bluegrass band. We had Baroque harpsichord for the first time last week. Violinist Alex Fortes and soprano Ariadne Greif will do Kurtág’s *Kafka Fragments* next week. We’ve got a beatboxer coming in with cellist Mike Block in a couple of weeks, and we’ll have a sextet from the New York Philharmonic close out our season with Vivaldi and *Verklärte Nacht*.”

Each one-hour concert opens with a short music set followed by a five-to-seven-minute spoken word performance inspired by the open mic format of the Moth StorySLAM storytelling competitions. “It’s an interesting

Clockwise from top left: Twelfth Night, A Far Cry, Isidore String Quartet, Pigeonwing Dance with Derek Ratzenboeck, violin



HAROLD LEVINE

moment of something completely different from the music, and it often connects with the audience,” Metcalf says. “Then we have a two-minute celebration of silence when we turn the lights down, centering ourselves in the center of the city. Then the lights come back on, and the music starts again out of the silence. We find that the listening and the feeling in the room changes after that.”

GatherNYC launched in 2018 and was just shy of its 50th concert when Covid hit; it carried on from 2018 to 2020 at the downtown venue Subculture, which “unfortunately during Covid went out of business.” Metcalf regrouped and in 2021 presented outdoor concerts at the historic Morris–Jumel Mansion in Washington Heights before moving in the fall of 2021 to the Museum of Arts and Design.

Metcalf explains that GatherNYC was inspired by a long-standing series in Albuquerque called Chatter, which produces 50 Sunday morning concerts each year. “They developed a beautiful supportive com-

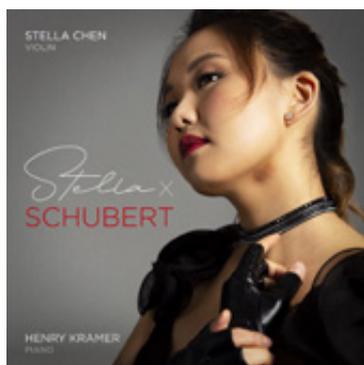
munity. Even if it’s something that may not be familiar, they come out and they support it—and oftentimes they love it. We wanted to create something similar in New York. Not the same scene or climate but the idea of a Sunday gathering, the feeling of ritual around music, spoken word, and meditation, and coming together as a community.”

Metcalf is especially proud of Boyd Meets Girl. “We play a large range of music where we arrange classical and pop songs; we also do new music written for us. It’s a microcosm of the variety that we’re looking for in our GatherNYC programming. We’re touring more since the pandemic; in fact, because we were home together, we had the time to create a lot of new content and do a lot of online stuff. Our visibility increased. We’ve also been playing at a bunch of music festivals, at Caramoor and Moab, Newport, and Napa Valley. We released our second studio album last March.”

Metcalf studied with Timothy Eddy. “He was the best. He encouraged me to pursue

what I wanted to. He didn’t try to tell me what to do. He helped me figure things out. He said, ‘You need to be sensible. You need to make a plan and go for it.’”

Metcalf was nine when she started playing the cello in a group class at her public school. “I was not a prodigy who was winning competitions when I was 13. A lot of my concentrated work and practice was done when I was an undergrad rather than when I was eight. I liked being able to come to the cello on my own, to fully go for it. Spending the time on it when I was a little bit older made me more appreciative of what I accomplished and what I’m able to do now. But everybody’s different. Some kids just take to it, and it feels natural to them, and it feels natural to their parents to nurture it and support it. And that’s great. And maybe if I’d started when I was four, I would be a virtuoso soloist playing concertos all the time. Who knows? But for me, I’m grateful for the way that my story unfolded.” ■



STELLA X SCHUBERT

Stella Chen
(Platoon)MAGIC
KINGDOM

Violinist Stella Chen makes 'interesting' sounds on stunning debut album

By Greg Cahill

"I fell in love with the sound of the violin after hearing a young girl play it in a performance," violinist Stella Chen, 31, says. "My mom asked the girl who her teacher was, and the answer was Li Lin, a passionate young violinist, unknown at the time, but now a widely respected pedagogue. From him, I learned the basic fundamentals of how to play the violin and so much more. I have never met someone with such an insatiable hunger for learning and an almost fanatic dedication to excellence."

"Something that has become part of my DNA," she says of her lessons with Lin, is to "produce an *interesting* sound at all times." Judging from her debut album, Chen learned that lesson well. But she was no mere child prodigy when she first picked up the violin at age seven. Growing up in Silicon Valley, Chen was instilled with a strong appreciation for education, especially in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) areas. "Instead of playing chamber music and in the youth orchestra, I spent my free time participating in my school's Science Olympiad team," she says. "Playing the violin was

Stella Chen



FAY FOX

definitely my personal haven, my little escape, and respite from the academic pressures of the time. And Sieun Lin, a fabulous cellist, cello teacher, and wife of Li Lin, was an invaluable source of inspiration to me.

"She made music synonymous with fun."

That sense of enthusiasm can be heard throughout Chen's supremely confident debut with pianist Henry Kramer, *Stella x Schubert* (Platoon), as evidenced when Chen deftly navigates the thorny passages of Schubert's challenging *Fantasie* in C major, D. 934: II, Allegretto. The program is rounded out by Schubert's Rondo in B minor, D. 895; *Sei mir gegrüsst*, D. 741; and the strikingly beautiful *Ständchen*, D. 920.

In the years since the violin first caught her ear, Chen has excelled as the Grand Prize Winner of the 2019 Queen Elisabeth International Violin Competition, the youngest person to ever win a prize at the Menuhin Competition, and a recipient of both a 2020 Avery Fisher Career Grant and 2020 Lincoln Center Emerging Artist Award. She is the inaugural recipient of the Robert Levin Award from Harvard University.

Her mentors have included Levin, Donald Weilerstein, Itzhak Perlman, Miriam Fried, and Catherine Cho. She serves as teaching assistant at the Juilliard School, where she received her doctorate, to Li Lin. Chen plays the 1700 "ex-Petri" Stradivari and the 1708 "Huggins" Stradivari.

Strings asked Chen about her career and her love of Schubert.

What would you like readers to know about you, this album, and your artistry?

I find that thinking about and working on Schubert's music is my safe space, my own little haven. When my mind is racing, life is overwhelming, and the anxieties and mundanities of everyday life become too loud, I turn to Schubert's music, and it transports me to another place. It's such a privilege to have this music in our world, which is so fast paced, so relentless. And I hope that people will take a moment to open their hearts and be vulnerable with this music.

You have said your own love for Schubert blossomed suddenly during a performance

analysis class with Robert Levin. What was it about the music and that performance in particular that made such a big impression?

I learned the Schubert G major quartet with Robert Levin at Harvard, and every coaching had me in tears at one point or another. The music is earth-shattering. The way that Schubert brings us from the sublime paradise to utter terror and back within the blink of an eye is truly unbelievable. Professor Levin has a unique way with words and with music that moved me deeply and changed me for life, and my love and reverence for Schubert continues to grow every day.

Tell me more about Levin's influence on your understanding of composition.

Leaving aside the details of what I learned from him about the construction of individual pieces, here is how I would characterize his impact generally. I did not grow up with the idea that scholarship and a performer's intuition necessarily coexisted easily in a single person. Robert was the first person I met who seamlessly integrates them. It's easy to box oneself into one category or the other: sometimes I would read an analysis and, despite learning useful information about how the piece is put together, I might then forget to attend to the details that make music magical in the moment. But with his example of how these mental habits can live together, it was easier to gain perspective on other ways I had let certain misconceptions limit my thinking: we can so easily become obsessed with "perfecting" a technically difficult passage on the instrument, but in the end, all is in service of crafting a personal interpretation of the music. All input, whether instinctual or intellectual, is valuable. The way that Robert exudes enthusiasm and flits so seamlessly between roles is endlessly inspiring. I have learned so much from him as a generous person, scholar, teacher, and performer.

For those who may not be intimate with Schubert's string works, how would you describe his chamber music?

There's great variation between Schubert's string works, but from the smallest sonatina to the massive [1828] *Fantasie*, all have the unmistakable stunning Schubertian melodies. Some are dramatic, cathartic experiences, others are delightful little gems. One

thing remains in common: Schubert has no regard for how comfortable or possible something may be to execute on the instrument. He asks for a command over the instrument that many may not have. In fact, the difficulty of the *Fantasie* played a significant role in the disastrous premiere.

The *Fantasie*, which you note was shunned for decades after Schubert's death, is quite a workout. What is the key to mastering it?

There is no mastering of this piece—it will be a lifelong relationship and journey that I feel so blessed to have.

“

The way that Schubert brings us from the sublime paradise to utter terror and back within the blink of an eye is truly unbelievable.

—Stella Chen

”

What technique is required to approach music of this magnitude?

The opening of the *Fantasie* is notorious among musicians. The pianist must play the quietest of tremolos—but in fact, measured—while the violinist emerges out of nothing with the most vulnerable and tender long note. The joke is that the nervous pianist will play nothing but a chord and the violinist's bow will start trembling, reversing roles. It's hard to describe the command over technique that is required to play music like this—it's not explicitly virtuosic techniques that are being demanded, but rather, such confident and subtle control that one doesn't need to think about anything other than the music. The mental focus needed is also daunting.

What drew you to these four works in particular?

There's been no doubt in my mind that presented with the opportunity, the

Schubert *Fantasie* would have to be the feature on my debut album. It's my single favorite work—our relationship only deepened after I brought it to the Queen Elisabeth competition—and I ended up writing my dissertation on the work as well. For me, no composer conceives of more beautiful melodies than Schubert, and this quality is in full display in all four of these works.

Why did they fit together so well?

The B-minor Rondo was the best received of Schubert's duos for violin and piano; the *Fantasie* the worst. I thought it only natural to include *Sei mir gegrüsst*, the song that Schubert adapted to become the theme for the theme and variations that feature in the second half of the *Fantasie*, one of Schubert's least well-known songs, and *Ständchen*, perhaps the best known song, seemed an organic pairing.

You have commented on the otherworldly nature of Schubert's music. How do you prepare to capture that quality?

The shiver-inducing quality of Schubert's music has baffled and captivated performers since its writing. Every happiness seems tinged with sadness and vice versa. I imagine that Schubert's long health struggles had him teetering on the brink of life and death, just as his music does. Perhaps he saw things that most of us don't—the power that his music holds is irreplicable and potent. The way that Schubert is able to convey vulnerability through his music is exquisite and one of the key factors in a compelling Schubert performance, and that's something I work on both as a person and as a musician.

I fell in love with the violin because of the beauty of its tone, and I do seek to find that beauty every time I touch the violin, which is a significant part of my connection to Schubert, the master of lieder. The honesty, vulnerability, exquisite beauty, without ever becoming sentimental. True magic.

What advice do you offer those that are planning to play Schubert?

Enjoy. Marvel in the courage and genius of the music, listen to the quiet musical voice inside your heart, and guide your hands to find that beauty. ■



NUC
Ligeti Quartet
(Universal)

EXPLORING NEW WORLDS

Ligeti Quartet taps the nucleus of Anna Meredith's avant-garde universe

By Greg Cahill

“**M**usic writing brings out the most confident, no-F’s-given version of myself,” the avant-garde Scottish composer Anna Meredith, a recipient of the prestigious 2020 Mercury Prize for composition, once told the online publication *Loud and Quiet*. True to her word, the string works on *Nuc* (Universal), the latest album by the Ligeti Quartet, include the newly commissioned Meredith piece “Solstice In/Solstice Out” for string quartet and trumpet, as well as eight other works by the 45-year-old composer, who arranged several of the pieces included on *Nuc*.

Ligeti violist Richard Jones chuckles when asked if Meredith’s music is viola friendly. “Ha-ha, there is a kind of ironic self-awareness in Anna’s music that I think a lot of viola players might relate to,” he says. “And,

Anna Meredith



GEM HARRIS

yes, it is music full of exaggerated gestures and intricate textures, which make for very exciting inner parts.”

The members of Ligeti—Jones, first violinist Freya Goldmark, second violinist Patrick Dawkins, and cellist Val Welbanks—are no strangers to adventurous, experimental contemporary music. After all, this is an ensemble that in 2018 launched a concert tour of UK planetariums. Since its founding in 2010, the quartet (named for the Hungarian composer György Ligeti) has commissioned more than 100 works. Meredith’s always engaging, often fanciful acoustic and electronic work exists within a bristling alternate universe that ranges from pop to carnival sounds to wildly dissonant electronica. The lead track, “Tuggemo,” is a dizzying example of the latter, originally commis-

sioned by another string quartet with a penchant for innovation. “We gave the UK premiere of ‘Tuggemo,’ which was commissioned by Kronos for their ‘50 for the Future’ scheme, a project creating new repertoire for developing string-quartet playing—we took part in the inaugural concert at Carnegie Hall back in 2016,” Jones says. “The rest of the album is a compilation of Anna’s quartet music over the last decade or so, plus new arrangements by me.”

What was the advantage of working closely with Meredith?

The difference between working with a contemporary composer and one not from the past is that rather than being interpreters, you can also be collaborators. Traditionally in “classical” music, you extract meaning and

Ligeti Quartet



ED MILES

how to best communicate ideas through the score. And in that case, I see a fairly clear division between the role of the composer and of the performer. When you work with a composer that you can talk to, the line is often a lot more blurry—you can have a dialogue about the realization of a piece of music and, quite often, if the piece is written for you, the work takes on characteristics of your playing and ideas. In which case, there is overlap between the composer and performer, because to a certain extent the performer is involved in the composition and the composer can be involved in the performance through rehearsal. To me, this collaborative approach is a more natural kind of music making and, in all honesty, I find it a historical peculiarity that we nowadays have such a clear dividing line between composer and performer—we

know that Mozart, Haydn, and Bach, for example, combined the two within their practice. I actually think that today, there are increasingly composers who perform and performers who compose. Anna Meredith is an excellent example of this.

How does *Nuc* fit in with your previous recording inspired by the traditional folk music of Tuva and Sardinia?

Our previous album—*Songbooks, Vol. 1*, released on the Nonclassical label in 2020—was similarly based on music that sits across musical genres. We got really interested in the relationship between throat singing—or overtone singing—and our stringed instruments. So we commissioned composer Christian Mason to create new pieces, which explore overtone practices from around the

world and the way in which these can shape our own practice as string players.

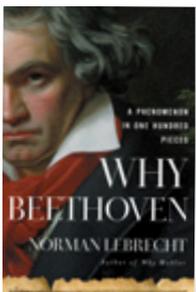
And how does this new recording fit in with the Ligeti ethos?

I could read that question as either Ligeti, the composer himself, or us, as a group named after him—I hope the answer isn't too different though. We chose to name ourselves after Ligeti because his music brings together avant-garde spirit alongside playfulness and humor. In many ways, it is complex, but he always guides the listener along—his pieces are, in a way, full of pop hooks. Anna is similarly a composer who works outside of traditional boundaries—her music is satisfyingly complex, but also finds a way to bring you in. And it's often really funny. ■

Norman Lebrecht



ISTVAN BIELIK



**WHY BEETHOVEN:
A PHENOMENON
IN 100 PIECES**
by Norman Lebrecht
Pegasus Books, \$29.95

LIFE WITH BEETHOVEN

Critic and author Norman Lebrecht pens an ode to the master

By Laurence Vittes

In order to write this kaleidoscopic look at Beethoven's life and music, Norman Lebrecht listened to 1,000 Beethoven recordings and live broadcasts (the first more than 100 years old) and consulted 116 experts, including leading conductors and musicians of the day. Less a guide than a provocatively illuminating, occasionally scandalous survey of the recordings that shaped his own life, with lots of behind-the-scenes stories

within stories, the 100 chapters examine the pieces "never in order of publication but mixing works from different periods to uncover their coherence and consistency." Lebrecht's stream of consciousness runs parallel with Beethoven's own as the British journalist increasingly finds himself "confronted by long-buried childhood traumas, by insights into adult relationships, and by various tramlines that Beethoven laid down

in my life.” It makes for an exhilarating narrative that in its wake also raises several divisive cultural issues.

Instead of three compositional periods, Lebrecht prefers his Beethoven in six parts: Himself, In Love, Immersed, Immured, In Trouble, and Inspired. Through the first five, Lebrecht is more concerned with the symphonies, piano sonatas, and piano concertos than with the music more specifically for strings; although he does a superb job on the Violin Concerto (his touchstone recording is by Ginette Neveu, 1949), he spends relatively little time on the cello or violin sonatas other than the “Spring” (with memories of Erica Morini’s 1927 recording in Berlin) and the “Kreutzer” (with a nod to George Bridgetower). He devotes only two pages to the three “Razumovsky”s.

The pages take a tour through the Late Quartets, about which Lebrecht writes at greater length. His Op. 131 reference recordings are “Busch (1936), Guarneri (1989), and Takács (2005).” The one he cherishes most is the LaSalle Quartet (1977). “Based in Cincinnati, four Hitler refugees—Henry Meyer, Walter Levin (violins), Peter Kamnitzer (viola), Jack Kirstein (cello)—enter late Beethoven in reverse, through the prism of Schoenbergian serialism, informing the past with evidence from the future. Each time I listen, I learn something new. Each time, I want to seclude myself for a week with this work, and no other.”

Lebrecht discusses artistic truth versus dishonesty through the complex extra-musical morality of Beethoven performances during WWII and after. In the case of Wilhelm Furtwängler, whom Lebrecht describes as having “embraced both the spirit of his time and place, and its criminal ideology,” Lebrecht singles out his “Eroica” recordings with the Vienna Philharmonic in December 1944 and in 1952 Berlin as “unsurpassed.” By contrast, in the case of Herbert von Karajan, Lebrecht describes the “Eroica” Karajan “chose to celebrate the Berlin Philharmonic’s centenary in April 1982 as a conductor-glorifying film that cannot be watched more than once without nausea.”

In 2010, Lebrecht wrote *Why Mahler?* about how one man and ten symphonies changed the world. After writing *Why Beethoven*, Lebrecht concludes, “Because we need him now, as ever.”



**ARNOLD SCHOENBERG:
STRING QUARTET
NO. 2, OP. 10**

G. Henle Verlag, \$49.95
(study score & parts);
\$11.95 (piano reduction)

Arnold Schoenberg, dubbed the “father of modern music,” had come to feel that the entire tonal system since 1600 had exhausted its possibilities. Listeners and colleagues did not at first embrace his visionary style, finding it confusing and inaccessible. Nevertheless, the composer stayed the course, and his second string quartet determinedly breaks with precedents, pushing the boundaries with his atonal system.

By and by, his innovations were accepted, even admired, and thus the Second Viennese School emerged, along with his pupils: Berg, Webern, Egon Wellesz, and many other followers. Schoenberg’s String Sextet, *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night), perhaps his best-known work, had introduced his 12-tone system already in 1899, followed by *Pierrot Lunaire* and large-scale works in the 1930s such as the Violin Concerto and Fourth String Quartet. By this time, his 12-tone method had formally taken hold.

His Second Quartet, penned in 1908, was one of his most revolutionary to date. Transitioning through his experimental style, its first two movements use traditional key signatures, although they are highly chromatic in color. The unusual final two movements are almost fully atonal and incorporate poetry by Stefan George in a soprano vocal line. (The lyrics for movements three and four are printed here in three languages: English, French, and the original German).

Thus, we have a parallel to Mahler’s Second Symphony, which also features vocal writing in its final two movements.

Schoenberg throws in a bit of sardonic humor, incorporating the trite but well-loved tune “Ach, du lieber Augustin” into the center of the second movement Scherzo—a diatonic interlude in total contrast to the tonal ambiguity of the rest of the work.

Schoenberg’s subsequent free atonal expressionist language coincided with the times, exemplified by the painters Kandinsky, Klimt, and Kokoschka, the poet Stefan George, Freud, and Wittgenstein. Their Vienna camaraderie was a cauldron of



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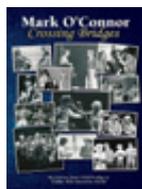


intellectual and artistic ferment, with highly stimulating dialogue between disciplines.

For all its atonality, Schoenberg's Second Quartet reverts to the classic four-movement form. Premiered in Vienna in 1908 by the renowned Rosé Quartet and a singer from the Vienna Opera, Marie Gutheil-Schoder, it provoked a storm of indignation with roars of laughter and protests. A second concert just a few months later produced a different and undisturbed reaction from many supporters. Despite the initial fear of the new acted out by the public, now its imagination, color, and profundity were appreciated.

An extensive Preface and Comments enhance this fine Henle edition based on the 1937 final authorized version. A pocket score is also available, as well as a piano reduction to aid rehearsals for the singer.

—Mary Nemet



CROSSING BRIDGES

by Mark O'Connor
\$29.99 (paperback);
\$35.99 (hardcover)

Mark O'Connor has lent his wide-ranging instrumental virtuosity to folk, jazz, rock, and classical music. He has recorded and toured with icons of all genres, composed fiddle concertos, and translated his signature fiddling style into a comprehensive, widely used teaching method. O'Connor has now written a 430-page memoir detailing his experiences from the time, rising from humble beginnings, he burst on the scene in 1974 as a 13-year-old fiddler and flatpicking guitar champion until he began working with guitarist and producer Chet Atkins in 1982.

The most memorable passages in the book are those on his first mentor, Texas fiddler Benny Thomasson, and Stéphane Grappelli, with whom he toured. Of his transition into classical music after playing a concert of fiddle standards and swing classics with members of the Chicago Symphony calling themselves the CSO Okies, O'Connor recounts that "Burl Lane, the orchestra's principal contra-bassoonist who doubled as saxophone player in the group, told me that nearly the entire first violin section was in the audience. Years later the Chicago Symphony Orchestra gave the world premiere of my Double Violin Concerto."

I heard O'Connor and his wife Maggie at the Lockenhaus Festival on a sweltering night in July 2015 on a program called "Appalachian Waltz." They chatted about their teaching method and recordings and spun out ten cuts from their brand-new CD until the normally restrained Lockenhaus audience was on the verge of dancing in the aisles. One of Mark O'Connor's solos that night was the Allemande from Bach's Partita No. 2; his playing was closer to work done by the most forward-thinking of the original-instrument crowd. The other acts on the bill were the Kelemen and Van Kuijk quartets—two of the world's best—playing

“
Mark O'Connor
has lent his wide-
ranging instrumental
virtuosity to folk,
jazz, rock, and
classical music.

”

classical fare. The message to parents was clear: it's okay to let your children grow up to be fiddlers.

—LV



CLAUDE DEBUSSY: DANCES FOR HARP & STRING ORCHESTRA

G. Henle Verlag,
\$14.95 (study score);
\$22.95 (piano reduction)

Scored for harp, violins 1 and 2, viola, cello, and double bass, Debussy wrote these two short dances to a commission from the instrument-making firm of Pleyel, keen to market its newly developed chromatic harp. The dances are also playable on the pedal harp, which soon replaced the chromatic harp on the concert platform. The dances' archaic style, including modal harmonies, used to

express a "sacred" rite and a "profane" dance of joy, reflects Debussy's enthusiasm for antiquity and for his artistic world around 1900.

Playing the concert harp with its 47 strings was challenging enough, with its seven foot-pedals, each with three positions, making a harpist's feet as busy as their hands. In what seemed like a good idea at the time, the Pleyel Company in Paris (whose pianos were Chopin's favorite) decided to eliminate the pedals. They came up with a "chromatic" harp with a separate string for every pitch—thus no more complicated footwork. However, Pleyel's harp had not one but two or more rows of strings.

Excited about their innovation, Pleyel needed to showcase it to the world. Who better to endorse it than the composer of the well-loved harp piece *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, Claude Debussy? So in 1904, Pleyel approached him with a commission for a new work for the debut of the chromatic harp. *Dances sacrée et profane* was an instant hit, but the chromatic harp was not. Too cumbersome with its many rows of strings, it was too heavy, difficult to keep in tune (there were no electronic tuners in 1904), and not nearly as resonant as the pedal harp. Off it went to the museum.

At the Dances' premiere on chromatic harp in Paris, the public was enthusiastic while the critics (including Gabriel Fauré) ranged from restrained to negative. "His harmonic idiosyncrasies are sometimes curious and alluring, sometimes also unpleasant," opined one such critic. At a second performance in 1910, the pedal harp was back in favor, much to Debussy's relief, and the Dances have survived to this day, enjoyed for their intoxicating melodies and lush harmonies.

Often called impressionistic (a term that Debussy strenuously denied), his music shares the same luminous characteristics as the paintings of his contemporary Impressionists Monet, Degas, and Renoir. The first edition of the full score (there is also a two-piano version), dating from 1904, is the main source for this Henle critical edition. The generous Preface and Comments highlight the extensive research and scrutiny of each note by experts in the field, culminating in a clear, reliable, and comprehensive score.

—MN

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Ashokan Fiddle & Dance Workshop ashokancenter.org	71	Montclair State University montclair.edu/john-j-cali-school-of-music	39
Bischofberger Viols Ltd. bvliolinsltd.com	79	New Harmony Music newharmony.com	79
Brobst Violin Shop brobstviolin.com	8	Pirastro GmbH pirastro.com	9
Claire Givens Viols Inc. givensviolins.com	45	Robertson & Sons Violin Shop robertsonviolins.com	3
David Kerr's Violin Shop kerrviolins.com	62	Shar Products Company sharmusic.com	84
FASTER Sound Systems fastersound.com	63	Snow Stringed Instruments, Inc snowviolin.com	11
Gewa gewamusic.com	38, 45	The Banff Centre banffcentre.ca	69
Ifshin Viols ifshinviolins.com	2	The Kun Shoulder Rest Inc. kunrest.com	7
Jargar Strings jargar-strings.com	6	Thomastik-Infeld thomastik-infeld.com	21
Johnson String Instrument johnsonstring.com	83	Vann Bowed Instruments Ltd bowhair.com ; michaelvann.com	62
Larsen Strings larsenstrings.com	33	Vichy Encheres vichy-encheres.com	4
Learning Trade Secrets learningtradesecrets.com	63	Virtu Foundation virtufound.org	71



Sara Caswell on what it's like to play her Norwegian Hardanger d'amore

It strikes me as being an old soul. It's a new instrument, but it's got that warmth. You just feel, when you're in it and surrounded by those sonorities and tones, like you have a cloak around you in a beautiful way. It's that kind of tonal embrace that I love. It has a warmth to it and an age and a wisdom to its sound. I feel like I'm playing music with an old friend.

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