SPRINGING FORWARD AND OTHER FALLBACKS

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Teaching Up Close & Impersonal
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Horn player Louis-Philippe Marsolais devotes an entire album to chamber music for horn. He is joined by pianist David Jalbert, Pentaèdre wind ensemble, and horn players from the National Arts Centre Orchestra in Ottawa.

For our SHHHule programme, we wanted something fun and playful, that SHHHuffled up the typical musician photo shoot. — Zac Pulak

If you can equate photography with music then approaching images like this one are as free as a contemporary jazz solo. Zac and Edana are always willing to let go, experiment, have fun, and be free. If anything motivates a photoshoot like this it’s a healthy dose of laughter, and sharing a zany experience. At any moment we play just like children would and we are only limited by our imagination and surroundings. These mallets make the perfect toys to play air percussion!

Anyone else want to join the band? — Alan Dean

PHOTO: ALAN DEAN
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If This Were a Podcast

If this was the preamble to a “For Openers” podcast (now there’s an idea!), instead of just words on a page, I’d start each episode with 15 to 20 attention-grabbing seconds of arrestingly musical noise. Then, once I had your attention, I’d lure you further in with a few carefully scripted off-the-cuff remarks, like these, as to why that particular soundbite was the perfect lead-in to this particular episode.

Next, I’d drop in a choice quote about the snippet we’d just heard (“It’s a sort of bizarro polka with some incredible combinations of sounds and, as you can see from the smiles of the musicians’ faces, a treat to perform.”) After that, we’d listen to the whole piece (about five minutes). And after that, the big reveal – “my guest this episode is ...” And away we’d go. No more script, and only a few holds barred.

If this were a podcast, by now I’d have told you that today’s opening soundbite (and the choice quote) come courtesy of percussionist Ryan Scott, director of Continuum Contemporary Music, one of several presenters around (a topic for another time) who have really latched onto the e-letter, with its capacity for embedding music, as fundamental to maintaining contact with their audiences.

The pandemic-inspired Continuum newsletter I found this piece of music in is called “Throwback Thursday”. It features performance videos from back in the day when videos like this were the icing on the cake, not the cake itself – more like souvenirs, for those who were there or wish they had been; moments in real musical time, with live audiences attending on sounds flung into the air, unfiltered, and the players in turn feeding off the energy of that attentiveness.

This particular “Throwback Thursday” segment revolves around a Continuum concert from almost a decade ago (February 12, 2012) titled ORGaNized. It took place at the Music Gallery, back in the Music Gallery’s St. George the-Martyr days. The clip, I’d have explained by now, is the premiere performance of a commissioned work titled Remix for Henk, which opened the concert. And I’d have mentioned that not only did the piece set the tone for the evening, but the whole evening would likely not have happened had the composer of the piece not introduced Scott and his co-director Jennifer Waring to Henk de Graauw in his shed in Bramalea ... (But that’s their story, not mine.) And then, if this were a podcast, we’d listen to the whole piece, right through (five minutes).

After that – the moment you’ve been waiting for – I’d introduce my guest: Richard Marsella, composer of Remix for Henk, executive director of Regent Park Community Music School, the eponymous “Friendly Rich” of the band Friendly Rich and the Lollipop People (you can look them up). And, drumroll please, the writer of a community arts story in the current issue of The WholeNote, on the post-pandemic community-building potential of musical playgrounds.

I’d probably start by asking my guest to connect the dots: from the music he composed for Continuum almost a decade ago, inspired by Henk de Graauw’s musical worked, to the piece he just wrote for Henk de Graauw in his shed in Bramalea ... (But that’s their story, not mine.) And then, if this were a podcast, we’d listen to the whole piece, right through (five minutes).

In any issue of the magazine, like the one you have just started reading, figuring out a running order that connects the dots is always a challenge – figuring out how to paint a larger picture, without compromising the integrity of each separate piece. A bit the way the good concerts do. But a launch party like this would be a whole other challenge, and one that, come to think of it, I’d probably be lousy at, given the kind of choreography required for the kind of occasion it would need to be in order not to crash and burn. I get too easily distracted by delightful coincidences.

In this case, for example, I’d be obstinately insisting to my co-curators that the next guest after Marsella has to be Max Christie and his story about Ottawa’s SHHH!! chamber duo, which digs into why the things that make small indie ensembles most vulnerable right now will very likely be the things that will help them bounce back faster.

Why? Obviously because, as it happens, clarinetist Christie shows up as a member of the Continuum ensemble in Remix for Henk! It’s the kind of segue I find as irresistible as the Sunday New York Times crossword. “You can’t plan coincidences like that one,” I’d be arguing. “Yeah, but so what?” someone would need to be brave enough to say to me.

I am not for one moment suggesting, by the way, that eight or nine WholeNote launch parties a year is on the agenda. But it sure sounds like a good idea for the launch of Volume 27 in the fall.

So let’s pretend for a moment: that these next couple of hundred words are the final paragraphs of my opening remarks at an upcoming Volume 27 season launch party (date to be confirmed): “An Evening with the WholeNote” (virtual and real).

We’ve bumped elbows with some of you, live at the door, on the way in, and informed you that there’s an $8.00 cover charge for the event. You’ve happily paid, and some of you have even said keep the change, it’s a good cause. And we’ve said thank you.

Others of you, dozens of dozens, have arrived at the venue through some virtual portal and paid your $8.00 cover charge* some other way (a three-issue subscription is $24, for example). Whichever way you bought in for your $8.00, you did. So thank you for that.

The important thing is you are here, in spirit, sharing a musical moment in common time, witnessing the attentiveness of a live audience responding to music carried through live, virus-load-reduced, shared air.

And then I’d wrap up my remarks by saying “a warm welcome, dear friends, to Volume 27 no 1. Who the hell would have dared hope, a year ago today that we’d make it this far.”

“Because that’s what this is all about, isn’t it?” Gathered here today we are a microcosm of the “cultural ecology” without which the titans of our so-called “cultural industries” would have no source of sustenance.”

It’s a picture we try to paint every issue, including this one.

*As for the $8.00 cover charge, if you already think it’s a good idea, you don’t have to wait till September. Contact our circulation department and jump in right away, with a three-issue subscription (as some of you already have done, so thank you for that.) Your $24 will take you all the way to September 14, 2021, Volume 27 no 1. And you will have helped us get there.

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Women From Space returns, streaming April 9-11

CAMILLE KIKU BELAIR

The third annual Women From Space Festival, a Toronto-based concert series, is returning this year, livestreamed on www.womenfromspace.com. Recently postponed due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, the festival is now taking place April 9-11, 2021.

Festival passes this year are free, but there will be a PayPal donation button set up during the livestream to contribute to next year’s festival. The concerts will remain online for a week following the events. Access to the livestream will begin at 7:30pm each evening; the concert itself starts at 8pm (EST). The artists’ roughly 30-minute-long sets will be pre-recorded, with live MCing in between.

Founded by Kayla Milmine and Bea Labikova to celebrate International Women’s Day in 2019, the Women From Space Festival focuses on women-led experimental arts. The festival’s directive is “to celebrate and create a space for women [...] working within and between various exploratory musical traditions,” aiming to counteract underrepresentation and inspire a new generation of performing artists. Keeping with the festival’s boundary-pushing nature, this year’s virtual format is not your typical livestreamed concert, instead offering an innovative and exciting alternative to in-person performances: The Holobox Theatre, a miniature holographic stage handcrafted by the festival and available for $10 plus shipping.

According to the WFS website, it’s made of “recycled cardstock, pins, mini string lights and a reflective plastic sheet.” They ship flat and must be assembled by the at-home concertgoer: A laptop, smartphone, or tablet is used as the projector. Everything you need besides your streaming device is included in the envelope, including different cosmic backgrounds to project the performances onto (or people who choose to do so can create their own!). The festival can be streamed online without ordering a holographic stage, but it is strongly recommended if viewers want to get the full experience.

Performances are being pre-filmed against black backdrops from a single angle to maximize the three-dimensional effect the portable mini-theatres provide. The goal is to imitate the in-person concert experience at a miniscule scale. When I spoke with event organizers Milmine and Labikova, they stressed that The Holobox Theatre can be used for any type of visual media projection, though images with black backgrounds work best with this illusion. These small stages can be used for all types of creative projects – there are even apps that can artificially create black backdrops so Holobox Theatre owners can also project their own creations into holospace.

Though it’s a shame the festival cannot take place in person this year (how we all miss live music), it is wonderful that people who might have otherwise been unable to attend can tune in from outside of the city. (Note: if you are in Canada outside of the GTA, ordering a Holobox Theatre will involve paying at least $13 in shipping fees – $16 if you order more than one. International festival attendees will have variable shipping fees, depending on the country. For international orders, it is best to order your Holobox at least two weeks before the festival starts; five days before if you are local.)

Women From Space’s 2020 festival took place mere weeks before the lockdown began last March. They applied for the next round of grants right away to meet deadlines, but the decision to go ahead with the festival did not take place until later, amidst ever-changing pandemic protocols. In August it was already decided that the 2021 festival would take place online and feature a fully local lineup (with the exception of two artists from Montreal – Maya Kuroki and Tanya Iyer), while allowing for the chance of a small in-person audience. By late fall and the start of the pandemic’s second wave, it became clear that this year’s events would be taking place exclusively online.

From the performers’ perspective, the organizers said, no one was expecting an in-person show: the online format was already anticipated. “Everyone adjusted their performances to video,” Labikova said, reflecting on the months people had spent exploring the potential of virtual concerts. “There was no one who expected to have a live performance when we reached out to the artists,” said Milmine. “They just assumed it would be online anyway. Nobody really questioned it at that point.” Incorporating online offerings into future years will be dependent upon funding. “It is nice to know that that platform is
there to explore and potentially use again,” Milmine added.

This year offers an exciting lineup, including one dance performance per night:

**April 9:** Thanya Iyer + Anh Phung, Hannia Cheng, Britta B. + Pursuit Grooves, Denise Solleza + Madeline Ertel (co-presented with the Music Gallery)

The festival kicks off with a night full of collaborations co-presented with the Music Gallery’s Emergents series, and it is intriguing to imagine what these performers will create in holographic space. Thanya Iyer, songwriter, and Anh Phung, flutist – one of the performers on Iyer’s 2020 album KIND – will be performing together. As past collaborators, this set is bound to be both virtuosic and genre-bending. The first day of the festival will also feature a performance by Hannia Cheng, multidisciplinary artist and Tea Base co-founder (co-presented with Bricks & Glitter). Stay tuned for the release of their upcoming debut EP Linen & Denim.

Still on the first day, Britta B., poet, spoken word performer and educator, will be performing with Pursuit Grooves (Vanese Smith), electronic musician and visual artist (co-presented with Toronto Poetry Slam). And Denise Solleza, dance artist, will be performing with Madeleine Ertel, trumpeter, vocalist, composer and arranger.

**April 10:** Eve Egoyan, Anita Katakkar + Aki Takahashi, Laurel MacDonald, SlowPitchSound + Mairi Greig + Laura Barrett

The second day of the festival features internationally acclaimed pianist Eve Egoyan, who constantly pushes the boundaries of her instrument and who, as described on her website, “works to improve gender equity in the contemporary music community.” A prolific recording artist and performer with an extensive repertoire and 12 solo albums, Egoyan is one of 50 Canadian Music Centre Ambassadors, celebrated for her contributions to and continuous support of Canadian contemporary music.

Anita Katakkar, tabla player, and Aki Takahashi, traditional shamisen player, composer and folk singer, will be performing a set together. As artists who regularly push through genre boundaries in their collaborations, this is not a performance to miss. Rakkatak, Katakkar’s solo tabla project, is releasing a single on Bandcamp off of an upcoming album on International Women’s Day, March 8, 2021. Takahashi is the founder of the ten ten ensemble, which has released...
two CDs of original music and has performed with artists from a variety of other cultural backgrounds and traditions.

Laurel MacDonald’s performance project Videovoce integrates live voice, live electronics and projected visuals. It will be interesting to see how her performance is adapted to the Holobox since she is also a video artist. “Sci-fi turntablister”, composer and mentor SlowPitchSound (Cheldon Paterson) will be collaborating with Laura Barrett, singer, songwriter, composer and music teacher, in another exciting set. Dancer Mairi Greig will also be performing alongside them, making this a second night of interdisciplinary collaboration.

April 11: Sarah Thawer + Tara Davidson, Fides Krucker + Tania Gill, Maya Kuroki + Natasha Poon Woo, Kayla Milmine + Bea Labikova

This year’s festival wraps up with a schedule likely equally well-suited to the holographic stage. Sarah Thawer, JUNO-Award nominated drummer, and Tara Davidson, multi-JUNO-Award nominated saxophonist, composer and bandleader, will be performing together, with the versatility of both artists making this pairing especially exciting. Singer, interdisciplinary creator, educator and writer Fides Krucker is joining forces with Tania Gill, jazz and improvisation-based pianist and composer, combining the worlds of contemporary opera and voice with contemporary jazz and creative music in what looks to be another wonderful set.

Maya Kuroki, musician, performer and visual artist, will be collaborating with dancer and dance educator Natasha Poon Woo. With a background in theatre and experimental rock, Kuroki has collaborated with dancers in the past, so this looks like another exciting program.

And, appropriately, festival co-founders Kayla Milmine, soprano saxophonist and improvisor, and Bea Labikova, saxophonist and improviser (and the visual artist behind the Women From Space Festival artwork), will perform together, “weaving their distinctive approaches to the instrument into a single sonic fabric.”

Women From Space 2021 runs online from April 9 to 11, 2021, and can be viewed as standard online video or via hologram illusion. Please visit www.womenfromspace.com for festival details, and www.holoboxtheatre.com for purchasing information for The Holobox Theatre.

Camille Kika Belair is a Toronto-based classical guitarist, composer and writer. They are currently pursuing an MFA in Composition and Experimental Sound Practices at California Institute of the Arts.
what is possible during this important period in our existence. At the end of all of this, our relationships will remain the bedrock that will get us through it, and out the other side. They are what we will retain, those human moments in the midst of the chaos – like the mother entering the Zoom shot to give her daughter a hug after her trumpet performance in a virtual recital.

Music helps us to access and connect those human moments. Over the last year, Regent Park School of Music, along with so many of our community music colleagues, have worked to create safe and accessible spaces, albeit virtual, for students to thrive in, a luxury that the pandemic from a hundred years ago did not have. That safe space could be a virtual open mic night in Zoom, or a file-sharing collaboration that creates something totally new, using the varied technologies at our disposal. Virtual safe space has also opened up collaborative potential between geographically unconnected neighbourhoods (such as Regent Park and Jane and Finch), and also between cities, as we explore ideas with our colleagues at Sarah McLachlan School of Music in Vancouver, and also at The People’s Music School in Chicago, to name a couple.

And on the other side

One thing is certain. The ways we end up teaching and learning will come out of this pandemic looking much different. This is an opportunity, as we all continue to prioritize health and safety, for a reset on the field of music education. Education at large will keep a door open to virtual learning long past this global health challenge.

We can now begin to imagine a world more accessible. If it is easier for you to attend your music lesson virtually for the most part, and in person periodically as required, why would we not accommodate that approach?

During this period, children are not necessarily learning math or music online. In this dire era of human existence, they are learning resilience, more so now than ever before. Students of all ages are learning the art of pivoting, wearing multiple hats on multiple platforms, and all at once! We are learning how to make art with the technology we have access to, or providing more access so that relationships between teachers and students can still thrive. As we look at new communities forming among different organizations, networks, cities, we are beginning to look at collaborative projects and outcomes with fresh (and tired) eyes.

Also, the very constraints we are each of us faced with play a role in shaping our musical output – using what we have at our disposal, to remain connected. Might be an old phone, might be one microphone, might be patchy Wi-Fi – it all adds to the look and sound of this new era we find ourselves in. It is all part of the creative recipe for coming out stronger on the other side: the self-expression of a mother reading her poems and editing videos, while her son makes beats and creates the musical backdrop; collaborations within a home that took a pandemic to help incubate. The imagination soars: new music rooms, new musical instruments, virtual reality music rooms, musical playgrounds, new outcomes and collaborations!

I’m not anti-physical space; of course, great things can happen in well-thought-out, accessible spaces. But let us continue to reimagine what the music room can look like when it isn’t necessarily a room. In some cases, let’s remove the walls, or let’s have walls that can be instruments themselves. Inside out is the best way forward. When we take such an open approach, who else will find their way into our music classrooms?

The Music Box Village

Earlier on in this article, I mentioned research I conducted on the impact of the Music Box Village project in post-Katrina New Orleans. What drew me to this particular research was that I already hoped to explore a different path for music educators. Why does a musical curriculum need to be so standardized? Who does really need another Winter Recital? Let us dream of new musical instruments; of projects, collaborations, deliverables, outcomes; of spaces, indoor and out, for musical play. As more and more formal publicly funded music programs are being cut from elementary and high schools there is a growing need for alternative music education models to fill this gap.

Where can a musical playground fit into all this? The answer is it can function in any city, and will take on a distinct reflection of that.

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city’s sonic and cultural traits. Community development, architecture, urban planning and grassroots politics; community health and playground design — from my Music Box Village research, all of these and more will come into play when discovering your musical playground’s potential to help a neighbourhood heal.

It will not necessarily all be plain sailing. An example: with community music models out there such as Luke Jerram’s Play Me, I’m Yours project (which has seen over 2,000 street pianos installed in 65 cities) and others that allow public access to musical experience, the notion of noise in a public space cannot simply be ignored. On this particular topic, I have always supported the concept of choosing, even helping shape, the noise and sonic landscape of one’s community. I can think of a lot less constructive soundscapes in a city or neighbourhood than a musical playground.

It’s a topic that slides easily into related areas, such as playground safety, and the danger in removing all risk from play – not an easy question to resolve, with national-level architecture and design policies to guide developers and planners in their decision making on the one hand, and a resurgence of child-led public play spaces on the other. Both can help cities make wiser long-term decisions around playgrounds. Playground safety is undoubtedly an important consideration, but musical playgrounds allow us to embrace some well-argued tenets: that “art should be dangerous”; and that a certain level of risk in play is actually healthy. Where better than a musical playground, with multiple intelligences being fostered between adults and children alike, for these ideas to run safely wild?

What city in Canada is daring enough to embrace a musical playground? The answer: very likely more now than would have before. As we collectively begin to reimagine our relationship with space, there is an opportunity to turn the corner towards innovative spaces that build community in a bold new way. With institutions of formal learning taking a good look in the mirror, this is also an opportunity to rethink education, and to set up informal learning spaces, because we know that this is where so much of the real learning happens.

Let this gruelling pause we are in not be in vain, and as we begin to take baby steps in reintegrating as humans, let us all move towards playing more in communal spaces such as the Music Box Village in New Orleans. But here, with our own multiple weirdo Canadian twists on them, celebrating and strengthening the assets in our various communities.

Richard Marsella is executive director at Regent Park School of Music. His recent doctoral dissertation, The Musical Playground as a Vehicle for Community-Building, is available online via the University of Toronto. To donate to the Regent Park School of Music, visit rpmusic.org.

TAKING ONE:
Morgan-Paige Melbourne’s multidimensional practice

G L O R I A B L I Z Z A R D

When pianist and composer Morgan-Paige Melbourne recorded her first album, it was during the March 2020 lockdown. She did it on her own, with one podium microphone and an iPad. She placed her mic underneath the piano to capture the gritty sound of the keys working. She recorded the ambient sounds of the city. Sometimes she sang. The resulting EP, Dear Dysphoria, is beyond genre: it is an emotional soundscape, an artful negotiation through our challenging times via formal compositions, improvised music and songs.
With some assistance from her sibling, Genia, with mastering and violin (and with the addition of a new microphone and a two-channel mixer), Melbourne produced a second album titled *Dear Serenity*. She then went on to create videos for some of the pieces, filming and editing them all on her iPad. Did I mention that she does everything on the first take? The more I talk with this extraordinary and multifaceted artist, the more I am astounded.

Trained as a classical pianist, Melbourne has a licentiate diploma in piano performance from the Royal Conservatory of Music. “It is the equivalent to a bachelor’s degree, and you can go into postgraduate studies from there,” she informs me. Melbourne has had significant success in the contemporary and classical music worlds. She has performed internationally, at Toronto’s Koerner Hall, and recently in Besançon, France where she was composer, musical director and principal accompanist for the Cine Concert silent film festival.

Despite deep roots in contemporary and classical music, Melbourne has always been open to all styles of music. “My parents were touring musicians. The only thing they did not play was classical music and I ended up being trained in it,” she says. “I grew up on 90s R&B, hip hop, jazz, blues, country, reggae and soca. I love heavy metal. I find my inspiration in everything.”

**Beyond Opera**

Tapestry Opera’s artistic director and general manager Michael Hidetoshi Mori first encountered Melbourne’s work at the lifetime achievement celebration of composer Alexina Louie, held at Toronto’s Arts and Letters Club in 2019. Melbourne performed one of Louie’s pieces. Mori says that what he witnessed was a very young woman playing extraordinarily difficult music with passion, poise, grace and exceptional ability. “Since then, I’ve seen the whole songwriting side to Morgan, as I follow her on Instagram,” he adds. “She has the chops to be up there with the best of the interpreters of contemporary classical music and also has the sensibility of a singer-songwriter. She is already exploring what it’s like to be a multidimensional artist.”

In early 2020, Tapestry Opera was able to pivot their programming and presentations rapidly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. “We’re a new works development company,” explains Mori. “Reinvention was important to us before the pandemic hit. The capacity for change was there already. We decided to rethink a season, boldly called ‘Immune to Cancellation,’” he laughs. They reinvested some of the budget of the cancelled 2020 production of the opera *Rocking Horse Winner*, originally presented by Tapestry in 2016, into training performers and staff on recording software and technologies for collaboration. The opera was successfully presented online and on CBC Radio, reaching a much larger audience than it would have playing to full houses in a Toronto venue.

The contemporary opera company first came on my radar with the presentation of a fully improvised online concert by jazz musician Robi Botos in October 2020. Mori felt that working with Melbourne would be another great fit for their innovative programming. He contacted her, suggesting a performance in collaboration with a dancer. “This felt like an exciting potential to bring the storytelling you can do with dance [together with the] storytelling that Morgan brings with her whole package of being a composer and interpreter,” he says.

**Take One**

Melbourne’s resourcefulness and improvisational focus has on some level come from working with limitations. She works at home with an electric piano, not the acoustic piano of competition and concert stages. “I do a lot of sight reading, and I hear the music in my head,” she says.

Her clarity of vision started early when she entered the classical music competition world. “Oh, I’m surprised that you are here and you played like that,” one adjudicator told me. Some other performers told me that Black people don’t belong in classical music, and that I should be playing jazz,” she recalls. “They would do this, nearly every time, ten minutes before I had to go up to perform.”

Such comments came from teachers, adjudicators, other performers and their parents. “I went into competition when I was nine. This occurred every year until I was 17, when they realized that I’m not going anywhere. It was insane!” she says. “Early on, I had to learn how to block out a lot.”

In response, Melbourne developed the skill of razor-sharp focus, which allows her to perform deeply and well on the first take – of anything. In her brilliant self-made video for the piece ‘Say Their Names’, she stands looking at the camera, going through all manner of emotion, while the names of Black people murdered by police appear and dissolve around her onscreen. The performance was recorded on the first and only take.

**Where Do I Go?**

Melbourne brings her compositions, improvisations and voice to a bold new genre-bending performance for Tapestry Opera, titled *Where Do I Go?* This sonic journey is a coming-of-age story, exploring struggles with society, mental health and a young woman’s evolution towards resilience and success.

The presentation is a collaboration with contemporary dancer Natasha Poon Woo and director/choreographer Alyssa Martin, of Rock Bottom Movement. Poon Woo brings “additional layers to the narrative, communicating a version of these messages from the perspective of movement,” says Melbourne.

Presented by Tapestry Opera via livestream on March 27, 2021, this performance is one of many to come from Morgan-Paige Melbourne, a truly exciting, multidimensional artist. Where will she go? Keep watching. I see her on a trajectory that will take her through a multitude of cultural venues and concert halls across Canada and abroad.

**Gloria Blizzard is a non-fiction writer, poet and penner of songs, whose wordsmithing has appeared in numerous literary publications, magazines and sound recordings. She is currently completing her first full-length book, a collection of essays, and can be reached at www.gloriablizzard.com.**
n February 22, in response to the continuing uncertainty about when the Ontario government would ease the COVID-19 lockdown protocols disproportionately affecting the live performing arts, the Toronto Alliance for the Performing Arts (TAPA), which represents 164 professional theatre, dance and opera companies, sent Lisa MacLeod, Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries “an urgent plea requesting regulatory fairness with the television and film industry.”

The letter continues: “Restrictions preventing professional theatre, dance and opera companies from doing the same [as TV and film companies] threaten the survivability of our sector. We are planning to return to engaging our communities in our theatre venues when it is safe to do so. In the meantime the creation of digital content has become the only form of artistic practice for the professional theatre, dance and opera industry in Toronto, and our members have found new and creative ways to continue to operate and connect with our audiences.”

Meanwhile, even though many TAPA member companies have temporarily shifted to hybrid theatre, dance and opera models that include livestreaming, pre-recorded film and digitization, “entertainment concert venues, theatres and cinemas (includes drive-in or drive-through events) [are] closed for all purposes, including rehearsing or performing a recorded or broadcast event, artistic event, theatrical performance or other performance.” However, the letter points out, the Businesses Permitted to Open and Sector Specific Restrictions (14) have allowed film and television to continue to operate: commercial film and television production, including all supporting activities such as hair, makeup and wardrobe.

Granted, there are conditions and restrictions, and the TAPA letter enumerates these: no studio audiences permitted to be on the film or television set; no more than ten performers permitted on the film or television set; the set configured and operated in such a way as to enable persons on the set to maintain a physical distance of at least two metres from other persons except where necessary for filming; persons providing hair or makeup services must wear appropriate personal protective equipment; and singers and players of brass or wind instruments must be separated from any other performers by plexiglass or some other impermeable barrier.

It’s a list familiar to many sectors of the economy. None of these items, however, prompted performing arts sector pushback as reflected in the TAPA letter. So what did? The following sentence: “The film or television set may be located in any business or place, including any business or place that is otherwise required to be closed.”

On February 24, J. Kelly Nestruck, The Globe and Mail’s theatre critic, underscored “how infuriatingly illogical the continuing situation is,” in a quote by Chris Abraham, artistic director of Toronto’s Crow’s Theatre, which captured the unfairness and apparent arbitrariness of the situation: “A film company can come and rent our theatre and shoot a film in it – and we can’t do that ourselves,” said Abraham. The Globe and Mail published two letters to the editor in response to Nestruck’s story. A Toronto reader wrote: “Perhaps the quickest solution to this lack of logic would be for theatre companies to
redefine themselves as film companies. It is, by definition, their current activity.”

The second letter came from Karel Martin Ludvik, a Canadian operatic soloist living in Essen, Germany. “It is crucial that we all do our part to reduce the spread of COVID-19,” Ludvik wrote. “However, not allowing theatres to film or stream their work gravely endangers the fate of artistic institutions that are vital to our communities.” Last fall, Ludvik appeared in two productions at the Bavarian State Opera. One was performed in front of an audience; the second was reduced to a livestream because of COVID-19. “We took the exact same precautions in both productions (frequent testing etc.),” he wrote. “No one became ill. He added: “Although singing for a live audience is more pleasurable, the livestream nonetheless allowed the art to be brought to the audience.”

**Twists and Turns**

Since the TAPA letter and the Nestruck article, the situation has taken a couple of twists and turns. On March 2, 2021, TAPA executive director Jacoba Knaapen replied to a question from me: “FYI, to date, ZERO reply from the Province.” And then, on March 8, the current lockdown was lifted, with Toronto and Peel moving out of lockdown into the incongruously named “Grey Zone.” It is better than it sounds, though. TAPA member companies (and other presenter/performers) can, for now, return to the business of creating digital content, rehearsing and broadcasting, subject to conditions similar to those imposed on film and TV companies: no audiences allowed; rehearsing, recording or broadcasting an event or performance permitted (for example, streaming a performance to an online audience); two metre distancing except when essential for the performance; and a barrier between both singers and wind/brass players and all other performers.

It’s good news, as far as it goes, but does nothing to address the inequity which prompted the February 22 TAPA letter. Simply put, without a change to Sector Specific regulation itself, if we go into lockdown again, the temporarily levelled playing field reverts to the regulatory unfairness challenged by TAPA and others.

All of this prompted me to follow up, as I did in the February/March issue, with a range of performing arts presenters, to get their current thinking (cautiously optimistic, for the most part) on this thorny question.

**Toronto Symphony Orchestra**

Matthew Loden, CEO of the TSO, issued the following statement in response to my questions:

“The TSO has been in close contact with our colleagues in government and conveyed our commitment to rigorous adherence to safety protocols and our desire to continue to record our concerts. We have also been part of a collaborative effort with other arts organizations in expressing our desire to safely continue. While we are disappointed to not be able to record during periods of lockdown and stay-at-home orders, we appreciate the difficult decisions our public health units have had to make to keep our city and province safe. We are grateful that the issue was brought to Public Health Ontario for consideration and will always accept the direction of scientists and medical experts about how to keep our orchestra, staff, patrons and community safe. Once the city goes back to the pandemic framework we will resume our recordings, sharing our music with our patrons and our city.”

**RCM**

The Royal Conservatory continues to do everything possible to reschedule upcoming concerts to new dates and, in the meantime, bring music online. “Despite the ever-changing pandemic chaos, including regulations from the province, the music is not stopping,” said Mervyn Mehta, executive director of performing arts at RCM. “Artists are eager to play for you and we are thrilled to... invite you to stream a dozen more concerts from our original season schedule.” Included among the free online concerts over the next several weeks are two by the ARC Ensemble. The first, on March 12, at 8pm, is a rescheduled item from RCM’s Beethoven 250 Festival: Beethoven’s Piano Trio in D Major, the composer’s own arrangement of his Symphony No.2 Op.36, and a selection of folk songs for voice and piano trio with Monica Whicher, soprano. On April 11 at 1pm, the Ensemble will play music by two little-known Jewish composers: the Sephardic works of Alberto Hersi (1898-1973) and the elegant classical compositions of Vittorio Rieti (1898-1994).

The ever-popular Glenn Gould School Piano Showcase, another free online concert, is available May 7 at 7:30pm, with GGS students displaying their talents in a French program that includes Debussy’s Preludes Book 1 and various works for two pianos and piano four hands.

**INNERchamber**

In a story in our February/March issue, Wendalyn Bartley noted that INNERchamber’s Lost and Found concert on February 7 – which was to have been livestreamed from Revival House, the Stratford ensemble’s usual restaurant partner – had been forced by the new protocols to move to Canterbury Music Company studios in Toronto. I contacted INNERchamber’s artistic director, violinist Andrew Chung, to ask what the change in venues was like.
“The concert was a different experience for us as our concerts have never been presented from a recording studio,” he said. This season, he explained, was already quite an adjustment: “We have [only] been permitted a small in-person audience in Stratford, and we simply have to imagine the collective attention of our other followers watching from home. For Lost and Found we were, additionally, physically two hours away, even though takeaway meals were being served back in Stratford through our restaurant partner, Revival House!”

He has no complaints about Canterbury, though: “We had a great experience – Jeremy Darby at CMC studios is really a fantastic guy to work with and a talented sound engineer. Our videographer, Mike Fisher, also lives in Stratford but does a lot of work at CMC studios. From the technical angle, everything was covered really well and we really enjoyed performing. With a lot less performing work taking place these days, every opportunity seemingly takes on so much more meaning.”

Significantly, Chung explained that the protocols the ensemble had been using at Revival House were basically the same as those in CMC studios. “We physically distance ourselves two metres apart and we use pop-up, banner-style clear plastic barrier screens between wind players and singers,” he said. “CMC studios had excellent health and safety protocols and cleaning procedures in place that put us at ease.”

Since then, Stratford has returned to the Orange Zone within the Response Framework, enabling INNERchamber to return to Revival House for performances on March 21 and April 18. “Again, a small in-person audience is permitted,” Chung said, “and livestreaming continues for those enjoying at home. Revival House serves meals to those in person, while keeping the takeaway option available for home viewers.”

Arraymusic
A story in our September 2020 issue, by Andrew Timar, described how The Array Space (which had been transformed into a livestreaming venue before the pandemic) was at that point ahead of the curve in adapting to COVID protocols. I asked Sandra Bell, Arraymusic executive director, how they were holding up during this latest lockdown. She told me that they were closed for any activity that involves a live audience and that they’re incurring additional expenses for cleaning and PPE. “We are grateful for the support of the provincial and federal governments’ rent and wage subsidies,” she added “and for our landlord’s support. This has allowed us to have staff on payroll and to begin to operate our space. We’re also grateful for the Canada Council, Ontario Arts Foundation and Ontario government for additional funding. We will continue to program, record and stream productions with a very limited number of performers and strict safety protocols, as others are doing. So stay tuned for our upcoming announcement of new programming.”

Music Toronto
Redoubtable British pianist Stephen Hough had been slated to appear on Music Toronto’s stage this past January 19, 2021. Instead, he will perform on November 9 – one of five recitals in a formidable piano lineup that also features David Jalbert, Marc-André Hamelin, Benjamin Grosvenor and Vanessa Benelli Mosell for Music Toronto’s 2021/2022 season.

In an online conversation in early March on Musical America’s One to One with the magazine’s features editor, Clive Paget, Hough spoke eloquently about the value of the arts in our lives:

“If you look back to a year ago when this whole pandemic began, imagine that year without the arts, without movies on the television, TV of course, without concerts, without interaction, without listening to music – we would all be absolutely mad,” he said. “Yes, we need our economy and all that side of life, but without the arts you wonder why we are on the planet at all.

“What’s the point of living unless we have that nourishment, and whatever religious side (or not) you see to this, it’s an ecstasy, it’s contemplation, it’s transcendence. And I think we need to get that into the bloodstream of politics, too, so that our politicians say, ‘You know, we need to put money into the arts because the arts give us back more than we could ever give it.’”

Paul Ennis is the managing editor of The WholeNote.
The Many Virtues of Necessity

JENNIFER PARR

This is such a strange time to be writing about music theatre. As I scour the Internet for news of new works and remounts, the contrast with this time last year is impossible to escape. On top of that, as the one-year anniversary of the first pandemic lockdown approaches it feels as if we are collectively holding our breath as we wait to find out if we are actually on the road out of this horrific year, or if a longer period of isolation is first going to be necessary.

Not only are live performances still not allowed in Toronto, but (as of March 5) the rules of the current lockdown, imposed in December, also forbid arts companies from even rehearsing to film content to be streamed online (as of March 5). This hits particularly hard when so many companies are using this method to not only survive by creating streaming content, but to share their productions beyond local borders thus extending their reach and their audiences across the country and even around the world.

Digdance

In the dance world one of the most exciting new initiatives, and on an international scale, is Digdance, a collaboration between four of Canada’s leading dance presenters: Toronto’s Harbourfront Centre, Ottawa’s National Arts Centre, Vancouver’s DanceHouse and Montreal’s Danse Danse, that may not have happened without the impossibility of live performance this season. By joining forces, these partners have been able to aim for the top, making it possible for audiences across Canada to watch in their own homes – for an incredibly inexpensive ticket price (starting at $15) – the very best from the cutting edge of contemporary dance, both very recent international repertoire as well as seminal earlier works.

Digdance launched in February with the online debut of thrillingly kinetic Canadian choreographer Crystal Pite’s Body and Soul, created for the Paris Opera Ballet in 2019. In March, it now takes a step back into dance history with Jean-Pierre Perreault’s Joe, an equally groundbreaking large-scale dance piece from 1984 that took the dance world by storm. From March 17 to 23, audiences can thrill again to the surprising power and noise of this work danced by a company of 32 in overcoats, fedoras and heavy work boots; a work so iconic that it has been compared to a Beatles album, a Kundera novel, or an Andy Warhol print. As with all Digdance presentations, the screening will be supplemented with informative additional content exploring the creation and context of the work (harbourfrontcentre.com). This is exciting in so many ways: glorious contemporary dance works are going to be seen by a much wider audience than ever before.

Opera 5

One of Toronto’s younger indie opera companies, Opera 5, is also stretching its wings and taking flight into new territory with Threepenny Submarine, a collaboration with practical filmmaking and puppetry company, Gazelle Automations – a collaboration that might never have happened without this year’s need to isolate. For the young and young at heart, Threepenny is planned as a series of
Born out of the idea of isolation, *Threepenny* also had to be created ... in isolation, with all the elements having to be made separately and then cleverly combined.

ten-minute “webisodes” following the adventures of “Sea-Botanist Iona the cockatiel and Sea-Biologist Lydian the vixen” who set out together in the Threepenny Submarine to explore the seafloor and hopefully map out the mysterious Salieri Sector. Inspired in part by a nostalgia for classic cartoons like Bugs Bunny and Tom and Jerry, “where music played a central role and was almost a character in the series,” as O5’s general director Rachel Krehm told me, the new filmed puppet series will begin featuring beloved opera arias and chamber music but, the creators hope, will in the future include commissioned original Canadian music. The show will be in musical theatre style combining dialogue and music with moments where the characters suddenly break into operatic song. “Born out of the idea of isolation,” *Threepenny* also had to be created by the team members working in isolation, with all the elements having to be made separately and then cleverly combined together to make the complex final product. The first webisode is expected to be online by the end of March. Keep an eye on the website (opera5.ca) for news and updates.

INNERChamber

A good example of a company which has benefited from streaming is a group I consider one of the best kept secrets of off-season Stratford, Ontario: INNERChamber. Now in its 11th season, this small company led by founding artistic director Andrew Chung, has been creating intimate concert evenings built around a resident string quartet, combining spoken word and music from a wide variety of sources – from classical composers to musical theatre, to new age songs and poetry, performed before a loyal local audience at venues such as Stratford’s Factory 163 and, this year, at Revival House. When they found out that live audiences would either be forbidden, or at the least restricted, IC quickly pivoted to presenting their concerts online and, as a result, have not only kept going during the pandemic, but actually increased their audiences with ticket holders tuning in from further afield in Ontario, from Nova Scotia, Quebec, Saskatchewan and British Columbia in Canada, from Oregon and Pennsylvania in the US, and even from as far away as Australia. Check out if you can, their upcoming concert: *A Night In The Salon* on March 21, featuring Stratford Festival bass-baritone, Marcus Nance, and pianist Emily Hamper (innerchamber.ca).

Tapestry

Meanwhile, here in Toronto, Tapestry Opera has been at the forefront of the fight for government support for the arts and artists, and has itself pivoted to showing their always innovative work online. While larger programmed productions have been postponed until further notice, there has been a rewarding mix of smaller shows taking advantage of the chance to reach for new audiences, including two coming up: Morgan-Paige Melbourne’s intriguing piano and dance combination, *Where Do I Go*, on March 27, and on April 24 (rescheduled from its original January date), one of my must-see shows of the season: *A Joke Before the Gallows*. In this show, acclaimed concert pianist, Adam Sherkin, is joining forces with poet/librettist David James Brock and innovative director, Tom Diamond, to weave together four original darkly comic monologues with four dramatic scherzi by Chopin to create something new – what exactly that will be I can’t wait to see, as Sherkin will be not only playing the piano but speaking the monologues himself. Later in the spring we are also promised a second episode of *S.O.S Sketch Opera Singers*, the pandemic-inspired filmed sibling of one of my favourite.
Tapestry live traditions – the experimental five-minute Opera Briefs (tapestryopera.com).

Stars in the House

In the category of shows that might not have happened without the restrictions of the pandemic, one of my favourites is Stars in the House, the nightly musical chat show created and hosted by Broadway musical director and radio personality, Seth Rudetsky, and his husband, producer James Wesley, to support the (American) Actors Fund. Streaming for free eight times a week, from the very beginning of the first lockdown this show brought Broadway stars into our living rooms from their living rooms, chatting about how they were dealing with COVID, talking theatrical shop and singing the odd song. Still going strong almost a year later, the greatest thing about this show is how it creates a sense of community and brings stars into an up-close-and-personal relationship with fans and audience members around the world.

Locally, a Canadian version sprang up very quickly last spring, Big Girl & Friends, hosted by Toronto Musical Concerts’ Christopher Wilson and Ryan Kelly, in support of the Actors Fund of Canada. While it only ran for about three months, and then for a second weekly series that just finished on March 1, BG&F played a similar role to SITH, bringing Canadian musical theatre personalities into closer proximity with viewers, like its prototype, creating a sense of community that audiences don’t normally have with leading performers, who are usually seen only at a distance from the seats in the theatre.

Up Close and Musical

As I wrote last month, the Stratford Festival has created a new carefully curated series that does something similar. The wonderful Up Close and Musical Series showcases nine Stratford musical theatre performers each in their own 25-minute show built by themselves with an intimately spoken through-line crafted around five songs, again, chosen by the performer. So far the series is superb – each episode distinct from those before – and clearly sharing with us, the viewer, the personal as well as professional personality of each performer in a unique combination of stylish fully staged concert footage filmed on Stratford’s Festival Theatre stage with an intimate conversation in the seats of the house. New episodes debut as part of the free streaming on the Stratford Festival’s YouTube page and then become part of the content on the streaming service, STRATFEST@HOME (stratfordfestival.ca).

A similar step to bring its performers and audiences together while full-scale live shows cannot be produced, is being taken by the Drayton Festival, mainstay of Ontario’s summer stock circuit, with its recently announced Livestream Cabaret Concert Series running from March 7 to April 18. Showcasing some of Drayton’s usual headliners, including Mark Cassius and Kelly Holiff, each concert is free to watch but only streams once. For more details see the full concert listings at draytonentertainment.com. Although this seems to be more what one would expect of a regular concert series, as opposed to a more complex show, it will still give us the opportunity to enjoy these performers up close, while we watch at home, as we wait for the longed-for return of live theatre.

While I hope that we soon reach a turning point in the battle against COVID-19 and can return to creating and attending live performances, I am in awe of the spirit of innovation that has kept the performing arts sector alive, and am grateful both for the new creations and the new closeness to the artists that those creations are making possible while we hold our breath and wait.

Jennifer Parr is a Toronto-based director, dramaturge, fight director and acting coach, brought up from a young age on a rich mix of musicals, Shakespeare and new Canadian plays.
Listening Fast and Hearing Long

STEVE WALLACE

Jazz is not easily boiled down to any one element but when you get right down to it, learning to play jazz is largely about learning how to listen. Really listen, hard, to many things simultaneously while making spontaneous decisions based on what you’re hearing. This is true of all music to some extent but especially so with jazz because it’s so unscripted: there’s often very little on paper to tell you what to play or how to play it, or when. The best jazz is like a coherent conversation between musicians using sounds instead of words, and what makes it coherent – or not – is whether the “conversationalsists” are not only speaking the same language, but also really listening to one another.

As a player you have to learn to divide your ear to monitor many aspects at once: the form and structure of the tune being played; the melody, which you try to hold in your ear even after it’s been abandoned; the harmony and its variations; the dynamics; the rhythmic pressure/development and other minutiae; all while trying to hear the big picture, the overall arc of a performance. You have to listen to yourself closely, but also to what everyone else is doing. But while doing all this listening you also have to act and react instantaneously – to not only listen hard, but fast. Hesitate, even for a second, and you’re lost.

A Different Kind of Ear Training

And yet, not enough time or weight is given to the art of listening in jazz education. Students are bombarded left and right with all sorts of things to work on all at once: developing technique on their respective instrument (a lifelong pursuit); theory and harmony; repertoire development; improvisational skills; playing in ensembles; some composition and arranging classes; a smattering of jazz history; and ear training, largely given over to identifying and distinguishing intervals/chords and rhythmic patterns. All of these elements are essential and when taken together can certainly aid in developing the ability to listen. But often the trouble is that students have so much going through their minds at once that it affects their ability to concentrate, to focus on both details and the larger picture of a jazz performance.

I’ve often thought that a solution to this overload would be to turn the faucet off and have a weekly class where students simply gathered and listen to great records under the guidance of a teacher with some insight into jazz records and history. You know, to develop listening by actually, well … listening, without the pressure of playing. And not just listening, but learning to listen critically and analytically, aided by some discussion following the given track and some questions posed about what’s just been heard. Such as: what was the form of the song they played? How many choruses did the saxophonist take? At what point did the bass player switch from playing in two to playing in four? What was that wild substitute chord the pianist played in bar three of the fourth chorus? How did the pianist and drummer interact and what did they do to vary and spark the overall performance? And so on. Taking stock of the details and the big picture, what my friend Mark Eisenman calls “hearing long.”

But while doing all this listening you also have to act and react instantaneously – to not only listen hard, but fast. Hesitate, even for a second, and you’re lost.

The University of John Sumner

I certainly benefited from this sort of crash course in listening, except it rarely took place in school but rather in the company of fellow (and often older) musicians with a great knowledge of jazz, a sizable record collection, and the generous desire to share it. Apart from on-the-job training, these were my teachers, foremost among them my good friend, the late, great drummer John Sumner, who passed away in the spring of 2019. John taught himself to play largely by listening and along playing with the records he so obsessively collected over a lifetime. It’s not just that he had a lot of records, but he knew how to listen to them – what to listen for in music – better than anyone else I’ve ever known.

I’d been playing jazz professionally for ten years by the time I met Sumner in 1986, and thought I knew a fair bit about it. And I suppose I did, at least enough to get by, most of the time. But countless hours spent hanging out with John listening to records deepened my ear and exposed me to reams of jazz styles and musicians I may have read about or heard of, but hadn’t actually heard. There’s no substitute for that. In essence, John taught me how to listen and I felt like I started to really get somewhere as a player after doing all that listening with him. I don’t have a degree in jazz, but I’ve often said that playing at Bourbon Street with all those people was my bachelor’s degree, and I got my master’s degree from the University of John Sumner. And the beauty of his “school” is that it was never a chore; listening to all those records with John was pure pleasure and it also led directly to me writing about jazz. I can’t thank him enough nor can I say how much I miss him.

A COVID Silver Lining

The second (third?) wave of the pandemic put an end to in-person ensembles at U of T by late November, which was really too bad, it had all been going so well. My ensemble this year is the biggest and best I’ve had so far – eight pieces with a singer, three horns (trumpet, alto saxophone, trombone) and a full rhythm section of piano, guitar, bass and drums. They’re all quick studies and the band had a built-in cohesive spirit from the beginning, which only grew with each week; I loved working with them. But oddly, there was a silver lining to not being able to meet anymore: I decided to use our two-hour meetings to do some guided listening sessions as described above, using Zoom and YouTube clips, and the students all agreed it
would be a worthwhile use of their time.
I had a dry run at the nuts and bolts of doing this back in early November. Colin Gordon runs a seniors’ jazz appreciation course which I’ve spoken to as a guest several times; in fact, I wrote about the first one I did in a column several years ago. Back in May, Colin contacted me about joining them again, except that it would have to be via Zoom as they obviously weren’t meeting in person. I agreed, even though I’d had very little experience using Zoom at that point, reasoning that I had time to learn how and would surely have to anyway.

**Back To the Drawing Board**
As the class neared, I decided to give a seminar on the 1940-41 Blanton-Webster Ellington band, a sort of one-stop shopping centre of great jazz. I made a brief outline with notes about what I wanted to say and set about selecting the tracks I wanted to play, copying and pasting each link from YouTube into a Word document. I was all set, and with about three days to go, I emailed Colin about my intended topic only to hear back from him that a member of the class, Frank Richmond, had covered that subject just weeks before. So, I had to think fast; fortunately years of training as a jazz musician came in handy.

In a flash I came up with a new idea: to present a blog I’d written years ago called *Lightning In A Bottle*, about a dozen examples of jazz players reaching rare heights in live performances which were recorded, often against very long odds. I was able to use the blog as a rough script and found all the relevant tracks on YouTube. With Frank Richmond kindly acting as my DJ and Zoom negotiator, it went off quite well; afterward I sent the class a link to the blog with them quite a few tracks on which I played. I had tears in my eyes and my voice broke several times but I think the students enjoyed putting it together, the challenge was maintaining emotional composure while talking about Ed and listening to his magical playing. I had tears in my eyes and my voice broke several times but I think the students appreciated how close to home it was for me.

It was very personal and while I greatly appreciated how close to home it was for me.

It’s my hope that this ad-hoc use of the COVID suspension may lead to such listening classes becoming a permanent fixture in the future, whether I’m involved or not. But I hope I am, because listening to music with people and talking about it is just so rewarding. There’s not much else I’d rather do.

The next week I decided to cover Billie Holiday-Lester Young with a selection of their immortal Columbia records from the 30s, culminating with a video of the famous 1957 version of *Fine and Mellow* from *The Sound of Jazz* TV show, their last appearance together. There wasn’t a dry seat in the house.

The following week was the last class before the Christmas break so I decided to make things more democratic and proactive by asking each student to select a favourite jazz track and present it with comments as to why they like it, etc.

The range of music was fascinating – some very contemporary, some quite old, and our trumpeter gave me a nice surprise by picking Clark Terry’s version of *In a Mist* from *The Happy Horns of Clark Terry*. One never knows, do one?

Mixed in with these listening tours, we’re attempting to do some remote recording using overdubs and mixing so that there is still a playing element to our meetings. It’s been slow going due to technical challenges, but we’ll get there. In the meantime I presented Count Basie for our next listening session and asked the students for some suggestions for future programs – I want them to have some ownership of this. One suggested a class on Ed Bickert, another The Boss Brass, and one suggested I do a presentation with tracks from my own musical career. I killed three birds with one stone by presenting a class on Ed Bickert which included some of his best playing with The Boss Brass, among them quite a few tracks on which I played. It was very personal and while I greatly enjoyed putting it together, the challenge was maintaining emotional composure while talking about Ed and listening to his magical playing. I had tears in my eyes and my voice broke several times but I think the students appreciated how close to home it was for me.

It’s my hope that this ad-hoc use of the COVID suspension may lead to such listening classes becoming a permanent fixture in the future, whether I’m involved or not. But I hope I am, because listening to music with people and talking about it is just so rewarding. There’s not much else I’d rather do.

Toronto bassist Steve Wallace writes a blog called “Steve Wallace jazz, baseball, life and other ephemera” which can be accessed at wallacebass.com. Aside from the topics mentioned, he sometimes writes about movies and food.
Up Close and Impersonal?
A New Kind of Educational Intimacy

In the immediate aftermath of the March 2020 quarantine, I experienced an immense wave of anxiety about my ability to work. Nearly all of my professional activities are linked to in-person interaction, in one way or another. It was immediately obvious that live performances were off the table. Writing about music, for this magazine and for other clients, seemed uncertain. Private teaching, however, was the biggest question of all.

The initial stay-at-home orders came during March Break, when both public and private schools weren’t in session. (I teach privately, as well as at a friend’s community music school.) When students came back, I wondered, how many would be willing to make the switch to Zoom? If they did make the switch, would they get anything of value out of the experience? After a long day of working or attending class virtually, would anyone have the energy to care?

Teaching a private lesson is profoundly different, in many ways, than teaching a group in a classroom, even though the two formats share many similarities. Ideally, both involve instructor expertise and preparation, student engagement, and a shared sense of direction with regard to learning outcomes. They differ fundamentally, however, in the relationship between instructor and student. A class is just that – a “class”; in a private lesson, the instructor teaches an individual. By its very nature, the relationship between instructor and student in any one-on-one setting is intimate; in a private music lesson, this intimacy is underscored not only by the artistic nature of the subject, but by the shared aural experience of harmony, timbre, melody and rhythm.

Without access to this sense of a shared physical space, I wasn’t sure how effectively I would be able to communicate with my students, on either a musical or an emotional level. (Not that all moments in all lessons are moments of deep, spiritual connection, with the music and with each other; sometimes people are tired, or distracted, or silly.) The big surprise of early quarantine, however, was that Zoom lessons were, in fact, intimate, in a different way. Students could suddenly see a part of my home; I could see a part of theirs. This familiarity did much to compensate for the loss of a shared physical space. Though the lessons were mediated by electronic devices, the spaces that we were sharing were our own. Without the formality of the band room, both participants become more active in creating the structure of the lesson itself.

For better and for worse the convenience of online teaching will likely mean that the format will become normalized.

“You know, we’ve still never seen each other in person.”
So said one of my favourite guitar students, a man in his early 40s whom I teach on Wednesday evenings. I’ve been teaching him for nearly a year, since spring of 2020, when baking bread and Zoom cocktail hour still seemed novel and rewarding. We’ve covered a lot of ground: scales and arpeggios, theory, phrasing, cultivating a sense of personal style. We’ve become acquainted on a more personal level, and have shared jokes, memes and YouTube videos of compelling musical performances. We have not met in person.

“We’ll probably never do this in real life.”
Another student of mine, a young professional drummer who lives in Milton, who has been playing guitar casually for years. He’s been taking lessons from me in order to improve his skills, to better be able to play with his wife (a professional singer), and to be able to teach beginner and intermediate guitar students in his own teaching practice. We have not met in person.

“Honestly? It feels pretty normal at this point.”
Yet another student, when I apologized for any feelings of discomfort that he might be experiencing performing a full song for me through his phone. As you must expect, at this point: we have not met in person.

Sophia, in Toronto, leads an after-school ukulele-based music lesson with Amelia and Celeste (with Kaya, the lab, supervising), in Hornepayne, Ontario.
Colin Story is a jazz guitarist, writer and teacher based in Toronto. He can be reached at www.colinstory.com on Instagram and on Twitter.

my professional life that has grown during quarantine – to create basic play-along tracks, as well as recordings of assigned material. Some of these tracks became opportunities for further collaboration, as some students used them to undertake at-home recording projects (in lieu of the conventional recitals and live-performance opportunities). Listening recommendations – a YouTube video of a live performance, or an album that illustrates a particular artistic concept – could be sent as links to students in real time, instead of simply being mentioned in passing.

Virtual guitar lessons required some quick pedagogical realignment, but teaching production skills – something that only really started for me during the pandemic – is, luckily, well-suited to online learning. Modern music production happens on software called, in the singular, a Digital Audio Workstation (DAW). In educational settings, this already typically means students working on individual computers in a computer lab, with an instructor’s screen coming through a projector and speakers. Zoom’s audio-and-video-sharing capabilities obviate the need for the lab; students are able to work on their own computers, from the comfort of their own home studio setups, which allows for easy demonstration and effective guided work. It also allows an instructor to help students develop their own practice, within their own space. Software and hardware issues, physical setup conundrums and other questions can be addressed right away in concrete terms, rather than theoretically, as in a class setting. Again, a new kind of educational intimacy.

Something lost
Amidst the positive developments, there remain limitations. The immediate and obvious one that’s lost in an online lesson is the capability to play with a student in real time. Time – rhythm – is communal, a shared temporal experience of sound. To be able to communicate it efficiently, one must give a student the opportunity to feel the pulse. Students have access to recordings, and can listen and imitate, but there is something about playing in time with another musician that can’t quite be replicated in other circumstances.

Through a screen, it is also harder to make corrections to a student’s physical technique. It is relatively easy, in a face-to-face scenario, to show a student why one posture might work better than another, or where to position one’s thumb on the back of the guitar neck. Over Zoom, however, this task becomes a bit more complicated, visual demonstration is helpful, but there is only so much one can see in two dimensions.

For better and for worse
The convenience of online teaching will likely mean that the format will become normalized, at least outside of post-secondary music programs. This normalization will likely affect community music schools; no longer bound to the band room, teachers have a greater financial incentive to establish an independent teaching practice. For students, online learning also means greater access to their preferred teacher, regardless of geographical location; over the past year, I’ve gained students from Vancouver, Brooklyn and towns across Ontario, none of whom I would be able to teach regularly under normal circumstances.

It seems impossible that online lessons will ever fully replace in-person lessons; there is too much to be gained from being in the same room as another musician. But the value of virtual lessons is such that it seems impossible that in-person lessons will ever look the same as they once did.
any of us are finding things to do outside of our usual range of work activities, since one thing afforded by the current pandemic for many performing musicians, if not for those in other professions, is time. Zac Pulak, one half of the duo known as SHHH!! Ensemble, has built an igloo. Or rather, as he clarified, his structure is properly referred to as a quinzee, which is built by piling snow and ice blocks into a mound, and then hollowing it out once the exterior hardens into a shell. As any would-be igloo builder needs to know, this is the preferred option when the consistency of the available building material isn’t right for making uniform blocks.

Snow and the pandemic being a source of grief for many of us, it’s heartening to speak with Pulak and his partner Edana Higham about how things are generally positive for this active and upbeat team. Already a couple before forming SHHH!! in 2017, they pair piano (Higham) and percussion (Pulak, playing mainly, but not exclusively, mallet instruments). The name, they explain, conveys a demand for attention – not so much “don’t make noise” but rather “listen to THIS noise!” They are making lots of good noise, and as much as any of us can be nowadays, they’re “all in,” committed to a prospective performance schedule and developing new repertoire for their unusual instrumentation.

Friday the 13th

Most performing musicians around these parts will recall the date of Friday, March 13, 2020 as being the last day they were able to perform for the public in an enclosed space. Pulak and Higham had only that week returned from performing their SPIRITS program in Calgary and Edmonton; their next engagement was a concert in an Ottawa long-term care facility. Then they played their last live performance, the last date of the SPIRITS tour that same Friday, when many of us were already learning that live performances were being suspended.

Since then, they’ve had some disappointments, notably the cancelation of a career-development residency that was to begin in May at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, working with the Gryphon Trio. Instead, along with the rest of us, they have been navigating the pandemic – ironically something of a career-development work-shop itself.

They had postponements too, putting off until fall 2020 performances that had been scheduled for spring. The first was a launch of their concert series NightCAPS with SHHH!! Ensemble, livestreamed on January 30, 2021. The other was part of their SHHHuffe series, recorded at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Toronto in October 2020 for CBC’s In Concert with Paolo Pietropaolo. It aired in early February this year, and of course can still be heard online.

The idea behind SHHHuffe is a good example of how they like to work. It’s a mashup of their various arrangements with new works, some of which they have adopted and many of which they’ve commissioned. The idea, Pulak explained, is to intersperse the unfamiliar and so-called “difficult” pieces with lighter and “easier” fare. They’ve even coined a term for this practice: “Avant-accessible.”

Purists in the new music world, and no doubt there still are some, will perhaps shake their hoary heads at this; Pulak, on the other hand, admits that in fact, the duo may have underestimated how accessible the so-called “difficult” stuff would turn out to be. All credit to their easygoing manner and fine skill, and to the audiences who turned up to listen to them. And to the magic of live connection.

To the drawing board

But the model now requires a different kind of connection, one that must make the best use of electronic media to connect with remote audiences. When asked whether this new model of recorded or livestreamed performance could become the new normal, they won’t come down with an absolute no, but it’s clear they much prefer to be in front of people in a room.

“Certainly it’d be wonderful to go back ... to playing for a live audience.” (They help one another finish sentences.) “We founded our duo to bring new music to new people. We love seeing the way people react to some of the programs we put together; we get a lot of joy out of showing someone something new.”

They don’t see the situation as it stands as permanent and perhaps not even as an impediment. “We had built into our schedule a little break, we were going to refresh our repertoire after the tour,” explains Pulak. And while that “little break” is now not so little, they have made hay by continuing to commission new works, and have one or two irons in the fire that will remain cloaked in mystery for now. Stay tuned. They hope to premiere Kelly Marie Murphy’s Double Concerto, provisionally scheduled for the fall of 2021, with the Thunder Bay Symphony.

Manoeuvrability

Furthermore, their outlook has brightened with their recent appointment to a two-year co-artistic director post with Ottawa New Music Creations. If the pandemic is a rutted muddy track for many in the performing arts, SHHH!! seems to be driving an ATV, light and manoeuvrable, with traction that those bogged down in larger vehicles can only envy.

Take the case of larger entities like symphony orchestras, opera and ballet companies, for example. Most have worked hard to maintain a profile online, usually offering partial performances (which cost money, without promise of raising any). They have, to some extent, been afforded a safety net by their donor bases, by government aid and even by insurance agreements. One might go so far as to say the snow falls differently for them. By contrast, smaller groups are making the best go of it by whatever means their personal financial situations allow.

Chamber players can at least afford to imagine playing in halls where safely spaced audiences will feel comfortable.
On the other hand, the large companies are forced to confront a reality about house size that doesn’t bear contemplating. When, if ever, are the big halls going to fill again with enough patrons to at least come close to covering the cost of large-scale live productions? Most likely, audiences for larger companies are going to want to come back, but how close together will people be willing to sit, and how much more will they pay if ticket prices rise to compensate for thinner houses?

Chamber players can at least afford to imagine playing in halls where safely spaced audiences will feel comfortable. This is already happening in Europe, if not locally, where there was a smattering of shows before lockdown measures tightened again in January, but everything since has mostly been back online.

It will not stay that way. It’s not just the players who want to play live, it’s the listeners who want to witness live performances. Besides, overhead is low for chamber groups compared to large companies, so while the income from producing smaller events will likely never be huge, it needn’t be nothing either.

**Straw poll**

I contacted several player/directors of various small-scale ensembles to talk about this; none displayed any degree of pessimism about the near- or mid-term future.

Rory McLeod and Emily Rho of Pocket Concerts expressed confidence that online product can at least partially replace live performance as a source of income for performers, and as a more satisfactory experience for some audience, are gearing up for summer outdoor concerts this year; at the same time, they are contemplating increasing their reach online in the service of accessibility for audiences who might otherwise be shut out from live performances.

Aaron Schwebel, along with being concertmaster of the National Ballet Orchestra and associate concertmaster for the Canadian Opera Company, also runs Echo Chamber Toronto, a collaborative music and contemporary dance company. He expresses little doubt that live shows will again draw audiences. Schwebel and his colleague Les Allt, principal flute in the National Ballet Orchestra, are two of the founders of LARK Ensemble, a Toronto-based group who run a series at the Corkin Gallery in Toronto. They both talked about their reluctance to use crowdfunding to cover their costs. That form of fundraising draws on a limited potential pool, they say, and therefore is better left for musicians not sheltered, as they are (and I am as well), by service contracts with the larger presenters.

**Puzzling it through**

In the longer term, a determining factor will be that electronic media productions, even if offered free, cost money to produce, and that money will need to be recouped eventually by giving concerts to audiences who buy tickets. So far, there’s not much evidence that paywall-protected performances do much besides discourage an already discouraged public. Because it is hard to compensate the listener for the lack of live experience, groups are giving away their online work, in anticipation that their audiences will pay to return when it becomes possible to do so in the flesh.

The days are past when a musician could decide to make a career from recordings only, withdrawing from the live audience à la Glenn Gould. The working model for so many groups is to do what SHHH!! have tried: offer a variety of live performances and use the web for promotion. Once upon a time, a performer would tour to generate record sales, but often nowadays CDs are a marketing tool for performers looking for more live dates. Tech giveth, tech taketh away.

A quinzee is, by definition, temporary, even makeshift. Pulak joked that his mother used to worry, when he was still a kid, that his snow/ice structure would collapse on him (his experience in the craft of building snow structures goes back a ways). All of which makes an untidy metaphor for an arts worker trying to puzzle out what the pandemic means to the music industry. For the time being, big companies have the proper snow to make houses from blocks, but they need a lot of blocks for their large houses. Meanwhile smaller entities, like SHHH!! Ensemble, make the most of it, from the inside out, with what this current storm has dumped on them.

Max Christie is Toronto-based musician and writer. He performs as principal clarinet of the National Ballet Orchestra when restrictions allow, and otherwise spends too much time on Twitter, @chxamaxhc.
Event listings are free of charge to artists, venues and presenters. A reliable monthly calendar of live musical events, in these rapidly changing times is not a realistic goal. Our listings continue to be a work in progress as we all, musicians and presenters alike, explore the best ways to reach audiences.

We process online listings on a weekly basis. The updated listings can be searched at any time using “JUST ASK” under the LISTINGS tab on our website, thewholenote.com.

At the start of every weekend we post a digest of listings for the upcoming six weeks.

The online digest includes newly received listings and updates to listings previously posted – crucial in these volatile times. You can find the digest under the LISTINGS tab by choosing ONLINE STREAMED ETCETERA

Listings by date now include live and/or streamed events instead of only live events. We welcome listings for live-to-air performances and also for previously produced events being streamed for the first time on an announced date. Within reason we will also retain those listings in our updates for the time they remain available on demand to an audience.

We encourage presenters from across Canada to list online events based on availability/interest to our readers,

The printed listings digest on the following three pages is an example of what you’ll find online – it’s based on the online listings update posted on Saturday March 6.

Address all concerns and inquiries to the attention of our listings editor, John Sharpe at listings@thewholenote.com.

IN THIS ISSUE: TWO LISTINGS SECTIONS

- Section 1: Events by date for March 20 – May 7
  These are events with an announced date and time that one could circle on a calendar, in order to “be there” when it happens for the first (or only) time. This includes live and livestreamed performances; first broadcasts and screenings; concerts, workshops, symposia, and so on.
  If the event in question remains available after that first presentation (e.g. online or on demand), this is noted at the end of the listing.

- Section 2: Listings for ongoing events or previously date-related events now available on demand online.
  These are musical activities that readers can access in their own time, usefully identified by the name of the presenter or the nature of the event.

HOW TO LIST:

1. Use the convenient online form at thewholenote.com/applylistings
2. Email listings to listings@thewholenote.com.

Please note, we do not take listings over the phone.

Deadlines

1. Weekly online updates: submission deadline is 6pm Tuesday of the week prior to the event in question, for Friday posting.
2. Print: approximately fifteen days before publication.

Our next print issue covers May and June 2021, and the submission deadline for new listings and updates to listings previously processed is 6pm Tuesday April 20.

PLEASE NOTE our revised magazine schedule! There are 3 print issues left this season, not 4, including this one: March/April; May/June; and July/August.
**Events by Date | March 19 to May 5, 2021**

**PLEASE NOTE:** All times are Eastern Time unless otherwise noted. Listings are based on information sent to WholeNote in advance by event presenters. Due to current COVID-19 restrictions, some events may be cancelled or postponed. Please visit presenters’ websites or contact them directly for updates.


**Mar 20 12:00am: Royal Conservatory of Music/Trigon Festival. Lost in The Desert Sky: Kayhan Kalhor in Memory of Maestro Mohammad Reza Shahjarian. A celebration of Iran’s pre-Islamic and master of Persian traditional music, filmed on location in Kashan, Iran. Visit rcmusiconline.com/livestream. Available until 11:59pm on Mar 21. ONLINE**

**Mar 20 7:30: Theatre Passe Muraille. Speculation. Created through projections and music from both Beethoven & John Cage, this new online experience features experimental film and a collective performance of Cage’s 4’33”. See Mar 19.**

**Mar 20 8:00: Kindred Spirits Orchestra. Passion and Drama. Sarasate: Zigeunerweisen; Prokofiev: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No.2; Mendelssohn: Symphony No.1. J J Jun Li Bui, piano; Claire Pellerin, violin; Kristian Alexander, conductor. Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts, 10268 Yonge St., Richmond Hill. Call 905-604-8339. Free. ONLINE**


**Mar 21 6:30: INNERChamber Inc. A Night in the Salon. Sarasate: Caprice Basque; Albéniz: Tango; and other works. Marcus Nance, baritone; Emily Hamper, piano; Andrew Chung, violin. Revival House, 70 Brunswick St., Stratford. Visit innerchamber.ca. $35(livestream); $10(arts/st). Concert is live and includes a take-out meal for those who live in Stratford. LIVE & LIVESTREAM.**

**Mar 24 4:00: Flato Markham Theatre. Alessio Lax and Lucille Chung: Un Voyage Romantique. Mozart: Sonata in d K381; Mendelssohn: The Hebrides (“Fingal’s Cave”) Op.26 (arr. Mendelssohn); Schubert: Andantino variato from Divertissement on French Themes D823; Debussy: Petite Suite L65; Brahms: Hungarian Dances Wo37 - No 8 in D-flat; No 4 in F; No 5 in sharp. Visit flatomarkhamtheatre.ca. $24.99 USD. Available for viewing on Demand 8 hours after the performance. ONLINE**

**Mar 24 7:00: Magistri Soloists. From Paris to Moscow. Shostakovich: Piano Quintet Op.57, Louriou: Duos; Prin: String Quintet “La barque”. Martin Karklēns, piano. Museum London, Don Theatre, 421 Ridout St. N., London. Call 519-615-0163 or visit magistri.com. $30; $25 (sr); $15 (student with id); $10 (child under 10); $35 (young adult pass-30 years and under); $15 (streamed tickets-adult). All tickets must be purchased in advance. LIVE.**


**Mar 26 8:00: River Run Centre. Sue Smith with The Potion Kings – Digital Performance. Sue Smith, vocals; Jeff Bird, bass; Kevin Brent, guitar; Randall Corry, drums/percussion; Howie Southwood, drums/percussion. Co-operators Hall, River Run Centre, 35 Woolwich St., Guelph. 519-763-3000 or 1-877-520-2408 or visit suesmitch.ca or register at riverrun.ca/whats-on. Free. ONLINE**

**Mar 27 8:00: Array Music. Situated Sounds II: Science of Sound. Situated Sounds is a series of curated performances of sound art through an online platform that will present commissioned new work from a combination of established and emerging artists, both local and international, from various disciplines. Zul Mahmood, Interspecifics, and Carson Teal. Visit livestream.com/accounts/15801205/events/9550428. ONLINE**

**Mar 27 8:00: Tapestry Opera. Where Do I Go? Morgan-Paige Melbourne, piano. Visit Le2ma.net/clip/kyx82d/c/kx49t/gjo0j. Free. ONLINE**


**Apr 02 8:00: Metropolitan United Church. God So Loved the World: Music for Good Friday. Works by Allegri, Bach, Vittoria and others. The Metropolitan Choir, soloists, and organ. Visit metunited.ca/live. Free. ONLINE**

**Apr 02 8:00: Toronto Mendelssohn Choir. Sacred Music for a Sacred Space. Schubert: Stabat Mater; Bach: Christ lag in Todesbanden BWV4; and Brahms: How Lovely is Thy Dwelling Place from A German Requiem. Toronto Mendelssohn Choir; Simon Rvard, conductor; Georgy Szokolay, piano; William Maddox, organ; Laurence Lemieux, choreography and dance. Visit livestream.com/tmchoir/sacred-music. Free. Donations requested in support of TCM programming. Available on demand after the concert date. ONLINE.**

**Apr 03 8:00: Array Music. Array Presents III: Joseph Patrie – 40th Anniversary Concert. Visit livestream.com/accounts/15801205/events/9559455. ONLINE**

**Apr 04 3:00: Trio Arkel. La bonne Chan- son. Beethoven: String Trio in G; Shostakovich: String Quartet No.1; Vaughan Williams: On Wenlock Edge; Fauré: La Bonne Chans- son. Marie Béard, violin; Winora Zelenka, cello; Russell Braun, baritone; Carolyn Maule, piano; Ericka Raum, violin; Rémi Pelletier, viola. Email admin@trioarkel.com or visit eventbrite.ca/e/la-bonne-chanson-tickets-138351562247aff=ebdssbbonlinesee rch. ONLINE**

**Apr 07 7:30: Royal Conservatory of Music. Rebanks Family Fellowship Concert Series: Rebanks Family Fellowship Concert. Call 416-408-0208 or rcmusiconline.com/performance. Free. ONLINE**

**Apr 08 8:00: Tafelmusik Baroque Orches- tra. On the Road: Purcell: Incidental music to The Double Dealer; Biber: Partita for violin & viola scordatura; Brescianello: Sonata for oboe, violin & continuo; Telemann: Quartet in e: Couperin: Sonata “La Sultane”; Vivaldi: Sonata “La Follia.” Email info@tafelmusik.org or call 1-833-964-8337. ONLINE**

**Apr 11 1:00: Royal Conservatory of Music. Sunday Interlude Series: ARC Ensemble: Ottoman Treasures: Seraphic works by Hemsi; Works by Reit. Call 416-408-0208 or visit rcmusiconline.com/performance. Free. ONLINE.**

**Apr 12 16: Canadian Opera Company. Spring Break at the COC: Exploring New Opera. Hosted by COC Opera Teaching Artist Makenzie Morgan, this program gathers a group of artists and creatives to explore what a career in the performing arts can look like. Get a behind-the-scenes look at Fantasma, the company’s upcoming original Opera for Young Audiences for youth ages 12-18. Join us for hour-long sessions with Fantas- ma’s creative team. Free admission. For more information and to receive an alert when registration opens, visit coc.ca/March-Break. ONLINE**

**Apr 12: COC Composer-in-Residence Ian Cus- son takes us through the genesis of the story of Fantasma. Apr 13: Ensemble Studio artists Matthew Cairns (tenor) and Alex Sowally (pianist) share what it is like to work with a living composer, and originating a new role in an opera. Apr 14: Wulf Higgins (COC Props Supervisor) on how Fantasma is created and brought to life. Apr 15: Wig & Makeup Supervisor Sharon Ryan and Costume Supervisor Sandra Corazza give us a sneak peek at the Zombie character in Fantasma, and share some of their backstagetips and tricks. Apr 16: Julie McIsaac, COC Lead Curator, Opera Everywhere, speaks with music therapist Dr. SarahRose Black about her considerations in staging Fantasma, as well as creating an engaging experience for young people from the audience members walk in the door.**

**Apr 14 7:30: Royal Conservatory of Music. World Music & Recovered Concerts Series: Kobo Town & Wesli. Call 416-408-0208 or**

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**March and April 2021 | 25**
Events by Date | March 19 to May 5, 2021

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**Music Toronto Virtual Concert Series**

**April 15 at 7:30 pm**

CASTALIAN QUARTET


- **April 17 7:00:** VOCA Chorus of Toronto. VOCA Cabaret & Silent Auction. A variety of vocal & instrumental folk, pop, jazz, classical & musical theatre selections. Jenny Crober, artistic director; Elizabeth Acker, piano; Emily Vick Agnew & Tom Redding, co-hosts. Call 416-931-0224 or visit vocachorus.ca/cabaret. $25. ONLINE

- **April 21 7:00:** Royal Conservatory of Music. Discovery Concert Series: Glenn Gould School Chamber Competition Finals. Koerner Hall, TELUS Centre, 273 Bloor St. W. Call 416-408-0208 or visit rcmusic.com/performance. Free. TO BE CONFIRMED

- **April 22 7:30:** University Toronto Faculty of Music. U of T Opera: Opera in Miniature. Walton: The Bear & the Hob; Boen Appétit: The Bear – Renee Fajardo (Popova); Nicholas Higgs (Sminov); TBA (Kula); Andrea Grant, music director/piano; Mario Pacheco, director. Boen Appetit: Alexandra Fee, mezzo; Andrea Grant, music director/piano; Mario Pacheco, director. Visit uoftopera.ca/productions. Free. Zoom link will be provided closer to the date. ONLINE

- **April 23 7:30:** University Toronto Faculty of Music. U of T Opera: Opera in Miniature. Wolf-Ferrari: Il segreto di Susanna & Musical theatre selections. Jenny Crober, artistic director; Elizabeth Acker, piano; Emily Vick Agnew & Tom Redding, co-hosts. Call 416-931-0224 or visit vocachorus.ca/cabaret. $25. ONLINE

- **April 24 2:30:** University Toronto Faculty of Music. U of T Opera: Opera in Miniature. David Walsh (Vogel), Vlad Soloviev, piano; Sandra Horst, conductor; Michael Patrick Albano, director. Visit uoftopera.ca/productions. Free. Zoom link will be provided closer to the date. ONLINE

- **April 24 7:30:** University Toronto Faculty of Music. U of T Opera: Opera in Miniature. Dottor Sparada, Rigoletto (Tiberge); Vlad Soloviev, piano; Russell Grieux); Lindsay Connolly (Jean); Angelo Morath (Dontezza); Sacha Smith (Aurore); Parker Clements (Des Grieux); Noelle Slaney (Mme Silberklang); David Walsh (Vogel), Vlad Soloviev, piano; Sandra Horst, conductor & piano; Michael Patrick Albano, director. Visit uoftopera.ca/productions. Free. Zoom link will be provided closer to the date. ONLINE

- **April 25 9:00:** Kindred Spirits Orchestra. Melodies of Emotion. Chopin: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No.1, Prokofiev Symphony No.5. Coral Solomon, piano; Kristian Alexander, conductor. Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts, 10298 Yonge St., Richmond Hill. 905-604-8339. $30-$40; $22.50-$30 (or 15-22/youth). 7:00 pm: Pre-concert recital; 7:20 pm: Pre-concert talk. ONLINE

- **May 01 8:00:** Royal Conservatory of Music. Music Mix Series: SongBird North. Temerty Theatre, Telus Centre, 273 Bloor St. W. 416-408-0208 or rcmusic.com/performances. $40. TO BE CONFIRMED

- **May 02 7:30:** Royal Conservatory of Music. Taylor Academy Concerts Series: Glenn Gould School New Music Ensemble: Sometimes the Devil Plays Fate. Frehner: Sometimes the Devil Plays Fate (world premiere); Works by Bhagwati. Temerty Theatre, Telus Centre, 273 Bloor St. W. Call 416-408-0208 or visit rcmusic.com/performance. Free. TO BE CONFIRMED

- **May 03 7:30:** Royal Conservatory of Music. Discovery Concert Series: Glenn Gould School New Music Ensemble: Sometimes the Devil Plays Fate. Frehner: Sometimes the Devil Plays Fate (world premiere); Works by Bhagwati. Temerty Theatre, Telus Centre, 273 Bloor St. W. Call 416-408-0208 or visit rcmusic.com/performance. Free. TO BE CONFIRMED
New & Continuing ETCeteras

• Arts@Home. A vibrant hub connecting Torontonians to arts and culture. Designed to strengthen personal and societal resilience through the arts. Visit artsathome.ca to learn more about this exciting collaborative initiative. ONLINE

• Esprit Orchestra. SoundBites: RBC Associate Composer/Conductor Eugene Astapov in Conversation with New Wave Composer Stephanie Orlando. Eugene Astapov sits down with composer Stephanie Orlando, whose upcoming Esprit commission will be premiered as part of our New Wave Festival. Find out more about Orlando’s artistic processes and philosophies, and what she is currently working on for Esprit audiences! Visit espiritorchestra.com. ONLINE

• Kingston Symphony. Finale of Beethoven’s Third Symphony (Eroica). Many members of the orchestra perform the finale while in isolation in their homes. To view the virtual performance, visit youtube.com/watch?v=F2eVauBqiAY. ONLINE

• Ottawa ChamberFest. Chamber Chats: At Home / Chez vous. Tuesdays and Thursdays at 2pm. Hosted by celebrated broadcaster/ writer Eric Friesen. Interactive episodes combine chat with pre-recorded and live performances and feature guest artists and lecturers from all over the world. For information call 613-234-8008 or visit chamberfest.com. ONLINE

• Recollective: A unique musical online meeting group made up of people affected by memory challenges caused by illness (such as dementia) or brain injury (stroke, PTSD, etc.) and their care partners. Volunteers of all ages also form part of the band, providing a positive intergenerational experience for all. Participation is free with pre-registration. Contact Recollective by email here for meeting times, information and registration. ONLINE

ON DEMAND

• Toronto Orchestra. Performance from April 2019: Lucia Casarini, soprano (Hanna Glawari). Visit torontoperaopera.com. ONLINE

• Toronto Operetta Theatre. Video Excerpt: The Merry Widow. Performance from April 2019: Margaret Byrnes, soprano (Evelyn); Leigh Sales, mezzo-soprano (Louise); Peter Melnyk, tenor (Zdenko); Michael Epstein, baritone (Andre). Visit torontoperaopera.com. ONLINE

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Saudade is the name of a new album of orchestral works by Lithuanian-American composer Žibuoklé Martinaitytė, and of the most recent composition included on the disc (Ondine ODE 1386–2 naxosdirect.com/search ode 1386–2). According to Martinaitytė, the Portuguese word saudade means “a deep emotional state of nostalgic or profound melancholic longing [...] sad and happy feelings together [...]. For the last decade this thread of longing has been woven into my life, colouring all experiences.” It is a sentiment which I’m sure most of us have been feeling during the past year of lockdown and isolation, so it is interesting that the four works presented were all written in the half dozen years before COVID reared its ugly head. Although evoking stark landscapes, there is a wonderful lushness to the music, which seems to grow inherently out of initial quiet in vast arcs of sustained tones and tremolos, occasionally erupting like bubbles exploding from some primordial soup. The music builds and recedes in many-textured layers with no melodies erupting like bubbles exploding from some primordial soup. The music builds and recedes in many-textured layers with no melodies erupting like bubbles exploding from some primordial soup. The music builds and recedes in many-textured layers with no melodies erupting like bubbles exploding from some primordial soup. The music builds and recedes in many-textured layers with no melodies erupting like bubbles exploding from some primordial soup. The music builds and recedes in many-textured layers with no melodies erupting like bubbles exploding from some primordial soup.

Martinaitytė mentions that one of the works on her disc was inspired by the films Cloud Atlas and The Hours (both based on books) as well as Italo Calvino’s postmodernist novel If on a winter’s night a traveller. I would not normally mention a CD that we have previously reviewed, but I found myself intrigued last month by Adam Sherkin’s review of the Lysander Trio disc mirrors (First Hand Records FHR11 lysandertrio.com). Specifically it was Reinaldo Moya’s Ghostwritten Variations that caught my attention, featuring “reimagined” music of fictional composers from four novels: Thomas Mann’s Doctor Faustus; David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas mentioned above; Richard Powers’ Orfeo; and Kim Stanley Robinson’s The Memory of Whiteness, only the last of which I hadn’t read. With time on my hands I decided to explore this 1985 novel set in a distant future of interplanetary travel and habitation, where the universe is controlled by an enormous synthetic orchestra and its master. Although I found Ghostwritten Variations less than convincing as a depiction of music by these invented composers, it was an interesting premise and a well-crafted result. I actually found the 2010 trio, An den Wassern zu Babel by William David Cooper with its retro-expressionist sensibility, perhaps a more convincing example of what Mann’s character Adrian Leverkühn, loosely based on Arnold Schoenberg, might have written. That being said, I was happy to spend time with this well-performed survey of recent piano trios by contemporary American composers.

Music again led me to literature in the next instance, Taylor Brook’s Star Maker Fragments, commissioned and performed by the TAK Ensemble (takensemble.bandcamp.com/album/star-maker-fragments). I had not previously read Olaf Stapleton’s 1937 speculative fiction novel involving transcendental interstellar and time travel, and the melding of the narrator’s mind with other sentient beings (of all shapes and sizes) from other planets and other galaxies, in a story that encompassed the entire history of the universe. It’s also about galactic consciousness(es) and the creator – Star Maker – told from the perspective of a pacifist philosopher from a time when Europe was headed, seemingly inevitably, toward global conflict. Brook has excerpted fragments of the book for his text, which is narrated by the group’s soprano, Charlotte Mundy, accompanied by flute, bass clarinet, violin and percussion, with electronics by the composer. The piece was written explicitly for recording, making extensive use of multi-tracking, processing, sound synthesis and field recordings, but may also be performed in concert with ensemble and live electronics once COVID is a thing of the past. It is a very convincing encapsulation of the striking landmark book, lasting about 45 minutes and followed by an instrumental postlude. If you’re not familiar with Star Maker, this provides an intriguing introduction to the SF classic, whose more famous admirers include H.G. Wells, Virginia Woolf, Brian Aldiss, Doris Lessing, Stanislaw Lern and Jorge Luis Borges, who called it “a prodigious novel.” Recommended.

I sometimes multi-task, listening to music while reading. Pretty much anything with lyrics, especially narration, is off limits, because I cannot deal with words in my ears and words on the page at the same time. This meant not listening to Star Maker Fragments while reading the book, but I did find some music that seemed a perfect match to those interstellar wanderings. Toronto composer Michael Peter Olsen’s Yearning Flow (handdrawndracula.com/artists/michael-peter-olsen). Olsen plays electric and acoustic cello with electronics throughout, and is joined by guests on four of the six tracks: Chris Evans, synth guitar on MoonMist; Todor Kobakov, modular synth on 7 Days; Brandon Lim, bass guitar on Ours; and Merival, in a beautiful vocalese duet with cello, on Cloud Parade. In addition to providing a marvellous soundtrack for the transcendental journeying mentioned above, Yearning Flow is evocative and visual, “a sonically deep album that layers ambient textures with tension and release,” that also rewards concentrated listening. Perfect music for sitting in the dark and letting your mind go.

Brought to my attention by WholeNote reader and old high-school chum Doug Walker, Self Portrait with Russian Piano by Wolf Wondratschek is a compelling story of the narrator’s friendship with a fictional Soviet pianist Suvorin, and Suvorin’s own friendship with real-life cellist Heinrich Schiff (even including Schiff’s recipe for caramelizing onions!). I find it interesting that a book about a pianist speaks of piano repertoire in only general terms, but when it comes to Schiff and the cello it gets specific, mentioning Beethoven’s cello sonatas and Triple Concerto. This led me to search out
Theodor Kirchner.

Studies in Canonic Form for pedal piano, Op. 56, and Schumann’s Six Vallée d’Obermann S. 723c but is pregnant by another man. She is worried about the ramifications by Richard Dehmel in which a woman is walking with her lover, a purely instrumental work, it explores – verse by verse – a poem times lugubrious, string textures full of Romantic angst. Although is a dense example of Expressionist art with the dramatic, and some-

century. Predating his development of the 12-tone system, this piece

provided my introduction to the music of this icon of the 20th

Boulez’s Domaine Musical recording of the original version that

Tristia conceived by Steuermann ably filling in for the missing strings.

for chamber forces, not full orchestra. Trio Karénine’s perform-

lished by Liszt and later perfected by Richard Strauss, in that it is

their love triumph. This tone poem departs from the tradition estab-

tishments, but ultimately the beauty of the evening and the intensity of

the music of Bill Evans.

What we’re listening to this month:

The WholeNote
Listening Room

Hear tracks from any of the recordings displayed in this section:

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Very Well & Good
Richard Whiteman
Successfully combines the directness and groove of swinging jazz with the lyricism and textural beauty found in classical music and the music of Bill Evans.

Scintillating Beauty
Cat Toren
Pianist/composer Cat Toren conjures music as healing force and hope for the future on the second album by her exploratory quintet HUMAN KIND. “Scintillating Beauty” evokes 60’s spiritual jazz, sound healing techniques and positive activism.

An Atlas of Time
Wang Lu
An Atlas of Time, Lu’s second recording on New Focus, integrates Eastern and Western influences into a cartography of her own personal memory.
mix of Western and Eastern instruments: piano; violin; viola; cello; contrabass; flutes; clarinets; guitar; santoor; oud; tar; marimba; djembe; riq and dumbeck. The title translates to “I arrived a stranger,” the opening line of Gute Nacht, the first song of the Winterreise cycle, and it embodies the spirit of the project as stated in the booklet, “…in view of the homelessness of so many refugees.” It is a haunting and evocative reinterpretation of a timeless classic, firmly rooting it in the troubled 21st century. A stunning addition to my Winterreise collection.

Two Japanese piano concertos complete this month’s column, Dai Fujikura’s Piano Concerto No. 4 “Akiko’s Piano” (daifujikura.com/#shop) and Toshio Hosokawa’s Lotus under the moonlight on Hosokawa / Mozart (ECM New Series 2624 ecmrecords.com/shop).

Fujikura tells us that his “special piano concerto was written for and dedicated to the Hiroshima Symphony Orchestra’s Peace and Music Ambassador, Martha Argerich. [...] In Hiroshima, there is a piano that survived the atomic bomb, the smashed glass window from the blast is still stuck to the piano’s body. This piano belonged to a 19-year-old girl, Akiko [...] who was working as a mobilized student, when the atomic bomb was dropped. She walked and swam, as the bridge had been destroyed, to her home where her parents were that day. Then, the next day, she died [of radiation poisoning] in her parents’ arms.” In this recording, two pianos are used; a grand piano for the body of the work, and then the cadenza at the end of the concerto is played on Akiko’s Piano, the piano that survived the bombing. Fujikura says “To express such a universal theme of ‘music for peace’ the piece should portray that most personal, smallest point of view. I think that is the most powerful way, and only music can achieve this.” I think he has done so admirably. The soloist is Mami Hagiwara and the Hiroshima Symphony Orchestra is conducted by Tatsuya Shimono.

Hosokawa’s concerto was commissioned by the Nordeutscher Rundfunk for the 250th anniversary of Mozart’s birth. The composer was asked to select a favourite Mozart concerto and write a work for the same instrumentation. He chose the Concerto in A Major K.488, and used the “beautiful slow movement” in F-sharp Minor as his point of departure. Hosokawa says “Of all flowers, the lotus blossom is the most highly valued in Buddhism. Many statues of the Buddha show him standing on a lotus blossom. [...] In my concerto, the piano symbolizes the lotus flower (human) and the orchestra the surrounding water and universe. [...] The work does not depict the lotus flower quietly but rather tries to express the mysterious energy of the universe that flows into the blossoming of the flower.” For this purpose, Hosokawa has supplemented the orchestra with percussion instruments; dramatic bass drum explosions and the gentle tinkling of bells and chimes. He dedicated the work to Momo Kodama who premiered it in Hamburg in 2006. Her performance and the gentle tinkling of bells and chimes. He dedicated the work to Momo Kodama who premiered it in Hamburg in 2006. Her performance here is from the Japanese premiere, recorded later that same year, with Seiji Ozawa conducting his Mito Chamber Orchestra. As the premiere, the recording pairs Lotus under the moonlight with Kodama’s performance of the Mozart Piano Concerto in A Major that inspired it.

We invite submissions. CDs, DVDs and comments should be sent to: DISCoveries, WholeNote Media Inc., The Centre for Social Innovation, 503 – 720 Bathurst St. Toronto ON M5S 2R4. David Olds, DISCoveries Editor discoveries@thewholenote.com

TERRY ROBBINS

The Canadian duo of cellist Cameron Crozman and pianist Philip Chiu is in fine form on Tapeo, a delightful recital of popular Spanish pieces (ATMA Classique ACD2 2820 atmaclassique.com/en).

Crozman says that he fell in love with Spain the moment he first stepped into the Tapeo tapas bar on his first day in Barcelona, and when the Canada Council awarded him the loan of the “El Tiburon” cello from around 1769 attributed to the Spanish maker Joannes Guillami he knew he had to make a recording honouring its Spanish origins. Crozman describes the resulting CD as his own “tapas party” of short, diverse Spanish pieces. Included are Cassado’s Requiemos, de Falla’s Suite populaire espagnole, Ravel’s Pièce en forme de Habanera and Albordado del Gracioso, Turina’s Polinmía-Nocturno, Granados’ Intermezzo from Goyescas, Albéniz’s Asturias (Leyenda), Ginastera’s Triste, Estrellita by the Mexican Manuel Ponce and Chants oubliés by the Chilean-Canadian Alberto Guerrero.

The gentle warmth of the Guillami cello’s tone is perfect for this material, with both performers providing beautifully nuanced playing in a top-quality CD.

Violinist Gidon Kremer continues his passionate promotion of the previously neglected music of Shostakovich’s close friend and compatriot with Mieczysław Weinberg Violin Concerto, a live performance of the Concerto in G Minor Op.67 recorded in Leipzig in February 2020 as part of a series of concerts marking the composer’s 2019 centenary; Danielle Gatti conducts the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (Accentus Music ACC30518 accentus.com/discs/518).

Weinberg completed the four-movement concerto in 1959 at the end of a particularly creative phase. Written six years after the death of Stalin, it’s essentially a warmly lyrical work with spikier moments and when the Canada Council awarded him the loan of the “El Tiburon” cello from around 1769 attributed to the Spanish maker Joannes Guillami he knew he had to make a recording honouring its Spanish origins. Crozman describes the resulting CD as his own “tapas party” of short, diverse Spanish pieces. Included are Cassado’s Requiemos, de Falla’s Suite populaire espagnole, Ravel’s Pièce en forme de Habanera and Albordado del Gracioso, Turina’s Polinmía-Nocturno, Granados’ Intermezzo from Goyescas, Albéniz’s Asturias (Leyenda), Ginastera’s Triste, Estrellita by the Mexican Manuel Ponce and Chants oubliés by the Chilean-Canadian Alberto Guerrero.

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Weinberg completed the four-movement concerto in 1959 at the end of a particularly creative phase. Written six years after the death of Stalin, it’s essentially a warmly lyrical work with spikier moments that clearly shows his musical relationship with Shostakovich, albeit without the sense of tension and utter despair that often haunted the latter’s compositions in the Stalin era.

Kremer is joined by Madara Petersone, the leader of his Kremerata Baltica ensemble, in a studio recording of the terrific three-movement Sonata for Two Violins Op.69, also from 1959.

In October 2010 the Italian-American violinist Francesca Degò was given the honour of performing Paganini’s Concerto No.1 in Genoa on Paganini’s 1743 Guarneri del Gesù “Il Cannone” violin, after which she was allowed to record with the instrument in Genoa Town Hall, where it is permanently housed and guarded by a six-person security detail. The result is Il Cannone: Francesca Degò plays Paganini’s Violin, where she is...
accompanied by her regular recital partner Francesca Leonardi in a program of works that pay homage to the famous virtuoso (Chandos CHAN 20223 chandos.net/products/catalogue/CHAN%2020223).

Four of the works here are for solo violin: Kreisler’s Recitativo and Scherzo-Caprice; John Corigliano’s The Red Violin Caprices; Carlo Boccadoro’s Come d’autunno; and Schnittke’s tough and quite abrasive A Paganini.

The works with piano are Clocchette (Kreisler’s arrangement of La Campanella), Rossini’s Un mot à Paganini, and two works, in particular, that showcase the instrument’s glorious singing quality: Boccadoro’s arrangement of Paganini’s Cantabile and Szymanowski’s Trois Caprices de Paganini. The sweeping melodic phrases, the sweetness and strength in the highest register and the crystal-clear harmonics in these settings of Caprices Nos. 20, 21 and 24 complete a dazzling CD.

With Franz Schubert Music for Violin II violinist Ariadne Daskalakis and Paolo Giacometti, on fortepiano, complete their survey of Schubert’s music for violin using a historical approach aimed at understanding the framework of Schubert’s time (BIS-2373 bis.se).

The Rondo in B Minor Op.70 D895 “Rondeau brillant” from 1826 provides a strong opening to the disc, bringing appropriately bright and clear playing from Daskalakis, the full recorded resonance allowing the fortepiano to sound warm and not at all dry.

Two of the three Sonatas Op.137 from 1816 (published by Diabelli in 1836 as Sonatinas) are here, No.1 in D Major D384 and No.2 in A Minor D385 drawing terrific playing from both performers, with lovely definition and dynamics in the former and very effective A Minor D385 drawing terrific playing from both performers, with lovely definition and dynamics in the latter where Daskalakis uses no vibrato. The Duos Sonata in A Major Op.162 D574 from 1817 completes a fascinating CD, full of expansive, visceral music-making.

The fortepiano is by Salvatore Lagrassa from around 1815, so exactly contemporaneous with the music here, and the violin is a 1754 Guadagnini with gut strings and a classical bridge. The instruments are tuned to 430 Hz.

Two instruments from the Paris Musée de la musique provide a fascinating sound on Beethoven Cello Sonatas Op.5, with Raphaël Pidoux playing a 1734 cello by Pietro Guarneri of Venice and Tanguy de Willencourt playing an 1855 piano by Carl Gullius Gebaurh (Harmonia Mundi HMM 920410 store.harmoniamundi.com).

What we’re listening to this month: thewholenote.com/listening

The London Haydn Quartet reaches volume nine in its ongoing set of the complete string quartets of Joseph Haydn with Haydn String Quartets Op.76, a 2CD set priced as a single disc (Hyperion CDA 68335 hyperion-records.co.uk/a.asp?a=A1711).

The six quartets – No. 1 in G Major, No.2 in D Minor “Fifths,” No.3 in C Major “Emperor,” No.4 in B-flat Major “Sunrise,” No.5 in D Major “Largo” and No.6 in E-flat Major – date from 1797 when Haydn was at the height of his creative powers in his string quartet writing; “no set of 18th century string quartets,” notes the excellent booklet essay, “is so wide-ranging in expression, or so heedless of the structural norms of the time.

Using the 1799 editions published by Longman, Clementi & Co. of London and Artaria of Vienna, the players show the same outstanding qualities – the faultless intonation on gut strings, the range of nuances and dynamics, the perfect ensemble feel – that have resulted in this series of quite superb period performances garnering rave reviews.

The Haydn “Fifths” quartet also turns up on Haydn – Bartók – Mozart, the new CD from the Quatuor Modigliani that features three works that each bear witness to a turning point in the lives of their composers and the advent of new horizons (Mirare MIR506 en.modiglianiquartet.com).

Haydn’s String Quartet in D Minor Op.76 No.2 was written when he was free from his service at the Esterházy estate and was the toast of Vienna after his two hugely successful trips to England. The opening tempo is markedly faster than on The London Haydn Quartet CD, but even with the accent more on lightness and clarity there’s no lack of
emotional depth. The political situation in Hungary at the end of the Great War badly hindered Bartók’s folk music research and deeply affected him; he wrote very little until an outpouring of piano music in 1926. The following year saw his String Quartet No.3 Sz.85, the shortest of his six quartets but the one that heralded his mature style.

Mozart’s String Quartet No.19 in C Major K.465 “Dissonance” dates from 1785, and is the last of the six quartets Mozart dedicated to Haydn, whose Op.33 quartets he had heard after arriving in Vienna in 1781. Study of the music of Bach and Handel at that time resulted in a more marked presence of counterpoint in Mozart’s music. There’s outstanding playing throughout the CD, but the Mozart, in particular, is absolutely beautiful, with clarity and warmth and a crystal-clear Allegro final movement.

The terrific performances here certainly make a great start. With Vagn Holmboe String Quartets Vol.1 Denmark’s Nightingale String Quartet embarks on what promises to be an outstanding set of quartets by the Danish composer who lived from 1909 to 1996 (Dacapo 8.226212 dacapo-records.dk/en). Holmboe wrote quartets throughout his life and completed over 30, 22 of which are in his official catalogue. Although his lasting role model was Haydn, Bartók’s quartets also became a big influence.

Holmboe had already written ten unpublished quartets before his three-movement String Quartet No.1 Op.46 from 1949, subtitled In memoriam Béla Bartók. The other two works on this first volume are the five-movement String Quartet No.3 Op.48, also from 1949, and the four-movement String Quartet No.15 Op.135 from 1978, its third movement Funèbre very much of Shostakovich’s sound world.

Interestingly – in 2010 – Dacapo, Denmark’s national record label, issued a 7CD box set of the complete 22 Holmboe quartets, apparently assembled from individual issues from the late 1990s and performed by the Kontra Quartet, who “enjoyed a close collaboration with the composer.” This new project promises “fresh, new performances that support the idea that the deeper you dig into Holmboe’s music, the more you find.”

The terrific performances here certainly make a great start.

The Oculi Ensemble is a flexible string ensemble comprised primarily of members of leading string quartets and dedicated to exploring string repertoire for two to seven players. Metamorphosen – Strauss Chamber Works is their debut CD as a stand-alone ensemble (Champs Hill Records CHRCD155 champshillrecords.co.uk).

The Prelude to the opera Capriccio Op.85 from 1940-41 opens the disc, followed by two works for string quartet: the extremely brief fragment Quartettsatz in E-flat Major TRV85 from 1879 (recorded with the permission of the Strauss family) and the String Quartet in A Major from 1880. Three brief works for piano quartet follow: Ständchen from the early 1880s; Festmarsch AV178 from November 1886; and the Two Pieces AV182 – Arabischer Tanz and Liebesliedchen from 1893.

The excellent new CD by the Jupiter and Jasper String Quartets, music by Mendelssohn – Visconti – Golijov simply abounds with familial relationships, three Freivogel siblings (a brother and two sisters) and two spouses making for a remarkably close connection between the two ensembles (Marquis 81613 marquisclassics.com/index.html).

A luminous opening to the Mendelssohn Octet in E-flat Major Op.20 sets the tone for a simply thrilling performance – vibrant, pulsating and dynamic with a dancing Scherzo and a sweeping Presto finale.

Dan Visconti’s quite beautiful Eternal Breath, envisioned as a work that would involve their four children and their musical spouses, was commissioned in 2011 by the Freivogel parents (who also funded the recording) for their 40th wedding anniversary. Originally for three violins, a viola, three cellos and a drone box, it is heard here in the later adaptation with a second viola replacing the third cello.

Osvaldo Golijov’s two-movement Last Round from 1996 is a tribute to Astor Piazzolla, the octet being joined by a string bass in Last Round – Movido, urgent and Muertes del Angel, the whole work described by Golijov as “an idealized bandoneon.”

What we’re listening to this month:
Michelangelo’s Madrigal
Kate Macoboy; Robert Meunier
Etcetera KTC 1623 (etcetera-records.com)

VOCAL

Poignantly, by their colleagues elsewhere in Europe.

From this CD to imagine that these Italian later stages of the Renaissance. It is difficult of the greatest Italian madrigalists of the haunting, quality to it which is reminiscent me bagno il viso, listen to Bartolomeo Tromboncino’s this CD is really about its soprano. For the full cate quality ably brought out by Meunier. But Milano’s personal favourite from these pieces, Da it is once again difficult to select a overlooked by contemporary audiences!

Then there is the lute playing. While it is once again difficult to select a personal favourite from these pieces, Da Milano’s Fantasia 42 has a soothing and intricate quality ably brought out by Meunier. But this CD is really about its soprano. For the full range and power of Macoboy’s singing, listen to Bartolomeo Tromboncino’s Per dolor me bagno il viso, with its plaintive demands on both singer and instrumentalist.

Michael Schwartz

Beethoven – Leonore (original 1805 version)
Nathalie Paulin; Jean-Michel Richer; Opera Lafayette; Ryan Brown
Naxos 2.110674 (naxosdirect.com/search/2110674)

Staging the very first (1805) version of Beethoven’s only opera, then still referred to as Leonore, begs some questions: Why now, in its three-act format, when the maestro himself revised it and reduced it to two-acts, when Leonore failed twice before finally getting the recognition it deserved in 1814 and that as a considerably revamped Fidelio?

You will find several answers in the meticulously detailed booklet notes by Nizam Kettaneh, co-executive producer of this performance. A more compelling historical reason comes from Beethoven himself who, while forever wrestling with a political-philosophical credo, quite fittingly continued to refer to the opera using its full, preferred, name: Leonore, oder Der Triumph der ehelichen Liebe. The original production may also have been shortened for political and commercial rather than purely artistic reasons; after all, it first played to a French audience which reportedly didn’t care much for German opera. Thus Beethoven may have reacted by making the 19th-century version of what composers today might call a “radio-friendly edit.”

And then there’s this compelling performance itself. At the hands of Opera Lafayette, Leonore flares to life as if for the first time. Ryan Brown conducts the opera with a muscular fervour to proclaim the youthfulness of Beethoven’s masterpiece. Jean-Michel Richer’s Florestan is splendid and Nathalie Paulin’s Leonore/Fidelio is breathtaking. The prisoner’s chorus is soul-stirring. Best of all, the themes of unselfish love, loyalty, courage, sacrifice and heroic endurance all shine brilliantly throughout.

Raul da Gama

Schubert’s Women
Klaudia Tandl; Gabriele Jacoby; Niall Kinsella
Gramola 99223 (gramola.at)

In his songs, Schubert reveals uncanny empathy for women – not just for the Romantic ideal of the eternal feminine, but for authentic, individual women. Irish pianist Niall Kinsella has put together this program of songs to feature some of those complex women Schubert was drawn to, from Goethe’s Gretchen and Mignon to Kosegarten’s Louisa and Schiller’s Thekla. Austrian mezzo-soprano Klaudia Tandl voices their thoughts and feelings with both tenderness and drama. Austrian actor Gabriele Jacoby’s recitations of texts are rich with colour and insight, though it can be jarring to encounter them interspersed among the songs.

In the narrative songs, Tandl uses her considerable expressive powers to convey the vivid atmosphere Schubert evokes. Goethe’s ballad Der Fischer tells of a seductive water nymph who lures a fisherman into her deadly waters. Tandl captures the jaunty but chilling atmosphere, while Kinsella delves into Schubert’s endlessly inventive images of swelling, surging water.

But Tandl is at her most moving when Schubert is directly describing the characters’ own suffering and joys in the first person. In Die junge Nonne, a young nun

thewholenote.com/listening

Lineage
Julia Den Boer
Performed “with a sensitive touch vibrating with many colors” these contemporary piano works by Cherney, Ricketts, Yamada and Harman show their “evanescent poetry”.

HAPPIESS in a TROUBLEd WORLD
Frank Horvat
Inspired by the words of The Dalai Lama, this surprise new release by composer Frank Horvat brings us soothing and meditative sounds.

Saturation Velocity
MC Maguire
... lucid textures and a variety of tonal colour; that certainly occurs in this bold and compelling music.

True Stories & Rational Numbers
Chris P. Thompson
“A futuristic blend of Aphex Twin, Roger Eno, and Erik Satie” (an Earful). Available now on CD and 12” Vinyl.

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describes the turbulent longings which lead her to rapturous visions of the divine. Kinsella conjures up storms and church bells, while Tandl achieves sublimity with the closing repeated “Alleluia.”

Tandl and Kinsella’s perspective is so fresh and fruitful, I’m looking forward to hearing more of Schubert’s women-focused songs from them – especially the 12 songs he set to texts by women poets.

Wagner – Tristan und Isolde

Juyeon Song; Roy Cornelius Smith; Ostrava Opera Men’s Chorus; Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra; Robert Reimer

Navona Records nv6321 (navonarecords.com/catalog/nv6321)

>> It’s a plausible idea to remove opera from the opera house to the concert stage. It makes it more accessible to the public, much less expensive and musically just as satisfying. (I recall seeing Nabucco for the first time in New York, Carnegie Hall, with Tito Gobbi and Elena Suliotis in concert form and still treasure the memory). In this instance, Tristan und Isolde was performed in concert under the aegis of the Claude Heater Foundation of San Francisco at the Penderecki Cultural Center in Poland with the forces noted above. And what a performance! Thanks to Facebook I actually saw excerpts from it on a wide stage with the full symphony orchestra and soloists all at the same level and a large screen behind with projected images following the mood of each scene.

The result is this audio recording with young singers, largely unknown, and a wonderful orchestra from the nearby Czech Republic enthusiastically and passionately conducted by Robert Reimer, an up-and-coming young German conductor, well known and already very successful in Europe.

Tristan was sung by American heldentenor Roy Cornelius Smith with amazing vocal power and total emotional involvement shaping the difficult, strenuous role. Isolde is a big surprise: largely unknown Korean mezzo, Tamara Gallo, a thoroughly convincing Brangäne, shines in her soliloquy warning the lovers of the coming danger, and American basso John Paul Huckle as King Marke is perfect as the wronged husband. Excellent spacious sound favours the singers. An impressive new issue, highly recommended.

Pamela Margles

Nick Cave; Nicholas Lens – L.I.T.A.N.I.E.S

Various Artists

Deutsche Grammophon 483 9745 (deutschegrammophon.com/en)

>> Dark, intimate and beautiful – the music on this album flows like the fragmented pieces of night’s shadows in search of belonging to a world that is no more. Featuring four voices and an 11-piece instrumental ensemble, this chamber opera is simply breathtaking. There are no big arias here and no extravagant operatic gestures; instead, the melodies are unpretentious and the music is dreamy, almost transexual, creating a self-enclosed world of small wonders.

Belgian composer Nicholas Lens and Australian rock icon Nick Cave’s second opera collaboration unfolded during the lockdown in 2020. The album was recorded in Lens’ home studio where he and his daughter, Clara-Lane Lens (who accidentally found herself in Brussels during the lockdown), stepped into the singing roles, along with fabulous Denzil Delaware and Claron McFadden. The understated voices added a beautiful and real vulnerability to both the music and lyrics. Cave’s libretto cuts through the tonal layers like a well-honed knife; his poetry is both haunting and relentless in its chase of divine recognition for humankind. The sparsity of the music proved to be advantageous in this opera – even though every phrase, every word, has a visible meaning. From the opening Litany of Divine Absence, to the gorgeous violin lines in Litany of the First Encounter and Litany of Godly Love, to the cinematic Litany of Divine Presence, the 12 movements unravel stories of the human condition.

Ivana Popovic

What we’re listening to this month:

Five Compositions (2009-2019)

Louis Karchin

“The Chamber Symphony is certainly a masterpiece. This is a superbly recorded and expertly performed recording.”

- MusicWeb International

A Present from a Small Distant World: Vocal Music by Alex Eddington

Kristin Mueller-Heaslip; Daniel Ramjattan; Jennifer Tran; Joseph Ferretti; Elaine Lau; Alex Eddington

Redshift Records TK483 (alexeddington.com)

>> It’s a plausibly idea to remove opera from the opera house to the concert stage. It makes it more accessible to the public, much less expensive and musically just as satisfying. (I recall seeing Nabucco for the first time in New York, Carnegie Hall, with Tito Gobbi and Elena Suliotis in concert form and still treasure the memory). In this instance, Tristan und Isolde was performed in concert under the aegis of the Claude Heater Foundation of San Francisco at the Penderecki Cultural Center in Poland with the forces noted above. And what a performance! Thanks to Facebook I actually saw excerpts from it on a wide stage with the full symphony orchestra and soloists all at the same level and a large screen behind with projected images following the mood of each scene.

The result is this audio recording with young singers, largely unknown, and a wonderful orchestra from the nearby Czech Republic enthusiastically and passionately conducted by Robert Reimer, an up-and-coming young German conductor, well known and already very successful in Europe.

Tristan was sung by American heldentenor Roy Cornelius Smith with amazing vocal power and total emotional involvement shaping the difficult, strenuous role. Isolde is a big surprise: largely unknown Korean mezzo, Tamara Gallo, a thoroughly convincing Brangäne, shines in her soliloquy warning the lovers of the coming danger, and American basso John Paul Huckle as King Marke is perfect as the wronged husband. Excellent spacious sound favours the singers. An impressive new issue, highly recommended.

Pamela Margles

Nick Cave; Nicholas Lens – L.I.T.A.N.I.E.S

Various Artists

Deutsche Grammophon 483 9745 (deutschegrammophon.com/en)

>> Dark, intimate and beautiful – the music on this album flows like the fragmented pieces of night’s shadows in search of belonging to a world that is no more. Featuring four voices and an 11-piece instrumental ensemble, this chamber opera is simply breathtaking. There are no big arias here and no extravagant operatic gestures; instead, the melodies are unpretentious and the music is dreamy, almost transexual, creating a self-enclosed world of small wonders.

Belgian composer Nicholas Lens and Australian rock icon Nick Cave’s second opera collaboration unfolded during the lockdown in 2020. The album was recorded in Lens’ home studio where he and his daughter, Clara-Lane Lens (who accidentally found herself in Brussels during the lockdown), stepped into the singing roles, along with fabulous Denzil Delaware and Claron McFadden. The understated voices added a beautiful and real vulnerability to both the music and lyrics. Cave’s libretto cuts through the tonal layers like a well-honed knife; his poetry is both haunting and relentless in its chase of divine recognition for humankind. The sparsity of the music proved to be advantageous in this opera – even though every phrase, every word, has a visible meaning. From the opening Litany of Divine Absence, to the gorgeous violin lines in Litany of the First Encounter and Litany of Godly Love, to the cinematic Litany of Divine Presence, the 12 movements unravel stories of the human condition.

Ivana Popovic

What we’re listening to this month:

Five Compositions (2009-2019)

Louis Karchin

“The Chamber Symphony is certainly a masterpiece. This is a superbly recorded and expertly performed recording.”

- MusicWeb International

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Pamela Margles
Rising w/The Crossing
The Crossing; Donald Nally
New Focus Recordings FCR281
(newfocusrecordings.com/catalogue/?artist=11549)

- Living in the throes of a raging global pandemic we all experience our “new normal” differently. If ever we could imagine a soundtrack that unites us through the silent roar of isolation it would be one that reflects both the hopelessness of it all as well as the uplifting energy of hope itself. With its soul-stirring music, Rising w/ The Crossing certainly qualifies to provide powerful anthems for our self-isolating sensibilities.

The choral ensemble conducted by Donald Nally brings uniquely thoughtful and penetrating insight to music by John Talbot, Eriks Ešenvalds, Dieterich Buxtehude, Paul Fowler, Alex Berko, Ted Hearne and Santa Ratniece; works that follow in the wake of David Lang’s powerfully prescient protect yourself from infection, the text of which was inspired by instructions that rose out of the last pandemic: the Spanish flu.

The sense of awe and wonder which hovers over this entire recital is particularly close-focused in Lang’s work. It is echoed in the ever-shifting heartbeat of the wonderfully supple voices of the singers who make up The Crossing; voices that ceaselessly and eloquently trace the melodies of other stellar miniature too.

Much of the music is performed a cappella and this gives the works in question a wonderfully spectral quality. This is certainly true of Hearne’s 2016 work What it might say. But equally, it is Buxtehude’s Baroque period works featuring the Quicksilver ensemble that enliven the elusive moments of this ethereal music’s whispered breath.

Raul da Gama

Poul Ruders – The Thirteenth Child
Soloists; Odense Symfoniorkester; Bridge Academy Singers; David Starobin; Benjamin Shvartz
Bridge Records 9527 (bridgerecords.com)

- The Thirteenth Child is an opera in two acts by Danish composer Poul Ruders (The Handmaid’s Tale) with a libretto by Becky and David Starobin. Performed by a large cast of excellent soloist singers, the Odense Symfoniorkester and the Bridge Academy Singers, the opera is based on the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, The Twelve Brothers.

The Thirteenth Child follows Princess Lyra’s quest to find her 12 exiled brothers and bring them home to save the kingdom. The singers are all excellent and their vocal abilities are displayed throughout the opera via the modern and challenging parts written for them, often covering extreme tessitura on both sides of their vocal range. This is especially evident in the several falsetto effects sung by the two bass-baritones. The opera is fast paced and action packed with spells and adventures of good versus evil mixed in with tragedy and triumph. The cast of principals is large and the opera runs a short 77 minutes. As a result, the characters are not as well-developed as they could be and this makes meaningful audience engagement challenging. It may be that adding a third act could not only resolve this but would allow for the story to be modernized and for Ruders to showcase more of his capable writing as he does for Princess Lyra and her suitor Frederic.

Commissioned by the Santa Fe Opera and the Odense Symfoniorkester, The Thirteenth Child was recorded in Denmark and New York. It was premiered in Santa Fe, July 2019.

Sophie Bisson

Cooperstown – Jazz Opera in Nine Innings
Danil Montenegro; Carin Gilfry; Rod Gilfry; Daniel Favela; Julie Adams; Band; Sasha Matson
Albany Records TROY1848 (albanyrecords.com)

- Cooperstown: Jazz Opera in Nine Innings, is scored for a 1950s-style jazz quintet and five singers. The composer is Sasha Matson with libretto by Mark Miller, inspired by A. Bartlett Giamatti’s essay The Green Fields of the Mind. Although this story takes place at the ballpark, it features all of the elements of a great opera: Angel, from impoverished Santo Domingo and newly raised to the majors as a pitcher, falls in love with Lilly from the Upper East Side. Undermining their romance is Marvin, the aging pro catcher and Jan, the jealous sports agent in love with Angel. The dual love of baseball and romantic love stories unfolds as the team manager, Dutch, attempts to manage the relationship struggles to focus on winning games.

In the liner notes Matson describes in detail the recording process that allowed his team to capture sounds reminiscent of the original Blue Note recordings (microphone choices, specific recording and mixing equipment). The result is an outstanding listening experience: the sounds are rich and full but the music is as close and detailed as it would be in an intimate luscious jazz lounge. The classically trained voices are gorgeous and skillfully blend in with the jazz quintet. Each scene (inning) is bookended by a short and seamless transition in the form of an instrumental jazz chart played with impressive skills by musicians of the jazz quintet. Cooperstown might perhaps be more at home on a theatrical stage than at the opera house but it is a top-shelf musical experience.

Sophie Bisson

The Months Have Ends
Paolo Marchettini
Composer, clarinetist, and pianist Paolo Marchettini releases his debut recording of works for orchestra that are characteristic of his lush, lyrical style.

Monday Nights
Sophie Bancroft
Reimagined classics and original compositions featuring Scottish singer-songwriter Sophie Bancroft on vocals and guitar alongside Canadian expat Tom Lyne on acoustic & electric bass.

Surfboard
Brandi Disterheft
Surfboard is a Brazilian Jazz album showcasing Brandi’s inventive writing, power-socket bass playing, and sweet ethereal vocals. Featuring saxophonist George Coleman, Portland on drums and Klaus Mueller on piano.

Klaus Treuheit with Lou Grassi
Klaus Treuheit
Two performances recorded by Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation that are just too good to be relegated to once-a-year midnight transmissions.
Earth Voices
Amanda Tosoff
Empress Music EMG702
(amanatosoff.com)

- Toronto-based piano player and composer, Amanda Tosoff, has just released a stunning new collection of songs that blurs the lines between jazz and art song. Cleverly marrying texts by classic poets such as Pablo Neruda and Rumi, with her own and others’ compositions, plus drawing on the talents of seven different singers, a string quartet, two sax players and a jazz trio, Tosoff has given us a very rich body of work.

Opening with the powerful combination of Tosoff’s composition, Edgar Alan Poe’s words and Emile-Claire Barlow’s singing, A Dream Within a Dream is one of the jazzier pieces on the album. With sax by Kelly Jefferson and Allison Au, and Jon Maharaj (bass) and Morgan Childs (drums) filling out the rhythm section, it’s lively, complex and thought-provoking. The middle part of the album is another art song and I found myself especially drawn to these songs with their interplay of piano and strings and voice.

Birdwings, based on a Rumi poem and beautifully sung by Alex Samaras, also has Tosoff stretching out a bit with a lyrical piano solo. Oh, Life (written by Mike Ross), featuring cello (Beth Silver) and violin (Aline Homzy) plus Laila Biali’s and Samaras’ beautifully blended voices add to the poignancy of the lyrics. To a Stranger, written by Tosoff and based on a Walt Whitman poem, is spare and gorgeous with just a string quartet and Felicity Williams’ ethereal singing. A Canadian album devoted to poetry wouldn’t seem complete without a Joni Mitchell tune and her early anti-war song, Fiddle and the Drum gets a strong reworking centred around Lydia Persaud’s solid vocals.

Cathy Riches

The One and the Other
Lara Solnicki
Outside In Music OiM 2013
(larasolnicki.com)

- Multi-gifted vocalist, composer and poet, Lara Solnicki, has just released a compelling and kinesthetic recording project, utilizing her considerable gifts to manifest a cinematically framed collection of original post-modern art songs. Solnicki has said, “I call these songs ‘tone poems,’ because they are governed and held together by a ‘poetic logic.’” Produced by eminent multi-instrumentalist and film composer Jonathan Goldsmith, the CD also features performances by skilled musicians Peter Lutek (alto sax/electro-acoustic clarinet and bassoon); Hugh Marsh (electric violin); Rob Pilitch (electric and acoustic guitar); Scott Peterson (acoustic and electric bass); Rich Brown (electric bass); and Davide DiRenzo on drums.

Well recorded by Jeff Wolpert, the first offering is Bit Her Sweet Christopher Street, where Solnicki’s poetic lyrics and her gorgeous, sonorous vocal tone evoke stark images that speak to diverse emotional reactions in a physical space of contrasts. This song seems to address the dense, urban zones where many of us live our lives, and that there can still be beauty, mystery and the deep presence of nature. Goldsmith’s acoustic piano work here is mesmerizing, as is Pilitch’s masterful contribution on both electric and acoustic guitar. The Embrace is a composition of incredible beauty and Solnicki brings to mind the incomparable Norma Winstone as she wraps her warm voice around each intriguing musical nuance and syllable.

This inspired song cycle concludes with the three-movement The One and The Other. It is described as an allegory and tragic story in which a man ironically drown’s in the image of love. 1) Pass a Glass, is a free-form tour-de-force for both Marsh and DiRenzo. 2) Auce of the Sea effectively incorporates pizzicato strings and the entire ensemble to evoke waves, motions, seagulls and unfathomable depths. 3) Hollow the Need, leaves the listener washed up on a paradisiacal shore, having passed through a vortex of emotions, images and the sublime glory of words and music. Lesley Mitchell-Clarke

CLASSICAL AND BEYOND

Antonio Vandiini – Complete Works
Elinor Frey; Patxi Montero; Marc Vanscheeuwijck; Federica Bianchi
Passacaille 1079 (elinorfrey.com)

- The prolific Canadian-American cellist Elinor Frey adds another impressive release to her discography. This new record features the complete works of the regrettably little-known Italian cellist and composer, Antonio Vandiini. In mighty musical company with the likes of Tartini and Vivaldi, Vandiini proved himself a virtuoso in his own right, touring Europe as a celebrated cellist; he also wrote music that has remained inexplicably neglected, even in the 21st century.

Six sonatas and one concerto adorn this attractive disc, exquisitely conceived, researched and recorded alongside Frey’s collaborators Patxi Montero, Marc Vanscheeuwijck and Frederica Bianchi. The collaborative voices of contrabass, viola da gamba and harpsichord complement these cello-centric works to salient effect. Vandiini himself boasted top-drawer musical partners, the most famous of whom was Giuseppe Tartini. Vandiini also taught at La Pietra in Venice, alongside Vivaldi. As mirror to the artistic comradesy Vandiini enjoyed in his own lifetime, Frey has assembled an expert group of musicians here – friends and colleagues – to help realize these colourful, inspired scores. Some highlights include: the duo Sonata in C Major, Van.2 and the sunny Concerto in D Major, Van.7 which features the entire ensemble with two added violins and viola.

The final work on the record, the Sonata in E Major, Van.7 has a particular depth of expression, exemplifying the verdant key of E Major. Frey’s flawless focus and confident musicality leads us through an 18th-century cave of wonders: a joyous, antique grotto where others fail to tread.

Adam Sherkin

Mozart – Complete Piano Sonatas, Volume 1
Orli Shaham
Canary Classics CC19 (canaryclassics.com)

- Young Mozart, the proverbial wunderkind, was known primarily as a performer rather than a composer – one of the greatest exponents of the then, relatively new fortepiano. The antithesis of Franz Liszt, who rose to pianistic eminence almost a century later, Mozart encouraged simplicity and clarity over wizardry. This is perfectly reflected in his sonatas, which he only began writing in 1774.

Strangely, virtually all 18 of Mozart’s piano sonatas are neglected by pianists and listeners although Mitsuko Uchida, Maria-João Pires and Glenn Gould (who famously dispered Mozart in one of his CBC broadcasts) have recorded interpretations of the complete sonatas. And now the brilliant young Orli Shaham gives notice that she intends to follow suit with the first of her recordings Mozart – Complete Piano Sonatas (Vol.1). In the wrong hands Mozart’s outwardly simple sonatas can, indeed, sound simplistic and uninteresting – even formulaic. But Shaham brings out all the delights of the sonatas in this recital that features one early and two late works. Her delicate phrasing creates a feeling of innocent melodiousness, yet each movement is intelligently worked out, and Shaham’s subtle manipulation of timing conveys a strong sense of Mozart’s puckish and quick-witted compositional approach.

Shaham’s interpretation of the early Sonata in B-flat Major No.3 K281 is gritty. Meanwhile the B-flat Major No.13 K333 and B-flat Major No.17 K570 have been infused with great depth of colour, emotional range and well-tuned melodious elegance.

Raul da Gama
Louis Lortie Plays Chopin, Volume 6
Louis Lortie
Chandos CHAN 20117 (naxosdirect.com/search/chan+20117)

▶ The music of Chopin is, for Louis Lortie, a voca-
tional hallmark and the making of his career. Now,
six records deep into the compos-
er’s catalogue,
Lortie includes a fantasy; an early set of vari-
ations and assorted Polish national dances on
his latest release. For the dances, an objective,
no-nonsense approach is favoured. His sense of
rhythmic continuity betrays an aspiration
to expose the inherent structures just as they are,
without affectation or personalized dilu-
tion. The results seem born of the first half of
the 20th century – Lortie never handles this
music too preciously, with the essence of the
dance always at the fore.

When considering Chopin, contrast
between dark and light is essential. Lortie
excels at the conveyance of Slavic expression
through the lens of extreme sentiment, often
using fine-tuned pacing, silence and varied
dynamics to admirable effect. Of unexpected
delight is the “Military” Polonaise, Op.40
No 1. Not such a fashionable thing to record
these days, Lortie offers it up with unabashed
affectation and aristocratic poise. Arguably
saving best for last, the Fantasie in F Minor,
Op.49 concludes the album, highlighting
the attributes for which Lortie is celebrated.
Lucid and buoyant, it is music sculpted with
chiseled lines and acute structural sense.
At moments on this disc, a seasoned sort
of beauty takes hold of our ears, wherein a
spirit and soul of Poland, but lived his
all-too-brief life in France? 170 years after
his passing, his music continues to enthrall
connoisseurs and amateurs alike; this disc
on the Champs Hill label, presenting a new
artist in her debut recording, is bound to
be welcome.

Lara Melda was born in England of Turkish
parentage. She studied at the Royal Academy,
winning the BBC Young Musician competi-
tion in 2010 and since then, has continued to
appear in recital throughout Europe and in
other parts of the world.

The thoughtfully chosen program
comprising seven nocturnes and the four
ballades is a delight. Melda approaches the
music with an elegant sensitivity, her warm
tone coupled with just the right degree of
tempo rubato. The technical challenges
inherent in these pieces, particularly the
ballades, are daunting enough for any pianist,
but she conquers them with apparent ease.
There are times when her tempos – such as
in the Nocturnes Op.9 No 3 or Op.48 No.1
– may seem a little brisk, but this is a minor
issue and certainly doesn’t mar her fine
performance.

Of the 11 tracks, among the highlights is
the glorious fourth Ballade Op.52,
considered by many to be one of Chopin’s
greatest compositions, and also one of his
most difficult. Melda does it full justice, from
the lyrical and delicate opening measures to
the frenetic coda which brings the disc to a
satisfying conclusion. If this recording is any
evidence of her musical stature, we can surely
hope to hear from Lara Melda again in the
near future.

Richard Haskell

Chopin
Lara Melda
Champs Hill Records CHRCD153
(laramelda.co.uk)

▶ The poet of the piano! What more can
be said about this composer – born
in Żelazowa Wola
to a French father
and a Polish mother
– who embodied
the spirit and soul of Poland, but lived his
all-too-brief life in France? 170 years after
his passing, his music continues to enthrall
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What we’re listening to this month: thewholenote.com/listening

13 Lunar Meditations:
Summoning the Witches
Ayelet Rose Gottlieb
New album by vocalist/composer
Ayelet Rose Gottlieb, featuring Jay
Clayton, an improvisers’ choir; a
quartet and poetry by women from
around the world.

EL CURRUCHÁ
Eliana Cuevas &
Aquilas Báez (guitar)
A new, intimate collection of
traditional Venezuelan folk songs
that will take you to Latin America.
AVAILABLE NOW on all digital
platforms.

CONCERTO 2000
Jan Järvepp
Composer Jan Järvepp presents
CONCERTO 2000. These tonal
works are performed by world
class ensembles the Janáček
Philharmonic, Moravian
Philharmonic, and Zagreb Festival
Orchestras.

FLIGHTS OF FANCY
Jan Järvepp
Fusing European and American
traditions, composer Jan
Järvepp’s FLIGHTS OF FANCY
pairs the excitement of rock and
jazz rhythms with classical music
forms.
over-wrought bloviators Rachmaninoff’s music seems perennially entrapped by. In the hands of Babayan, the listener finally beholds an inheritance: a musical – cultural – inheritance that is fierce yet fragile, at moments comprised only of single, radiating strands. Transmuting this elusive, quintessential expression, Babayan fully fathoms this coveted lineage and his own recent contribution to it.

Adam Sherkin

The Romantic Piano Concerto Vol.82: Stéphan Elmas – Piano Concertos Nos.1 & 2
Howard Shelley; Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra
Hyperion CDA68319
(hyperion-records.co.uk/dc.asp?dc=D_CDA68319)

Stéphan Elmas? Who? One could be forgiven if the name seems unfamiliar, but during his lifetime, this Armenian pianist-turned-composer was a respected musician and pedagogue. Born into a well-to-do family in Smyrna (now Izmir) in 1862, he showed musical promise at an early age and later studied in Vienna, making his debut in 1885 to great acclaim. Elmas ultimately turned to composition, writing in a conservative style not dissimilar to that of Anton Rubinstein – and with more than a passing nod to Chopin. His style is perhaps nowhere better represented than in the two piano concertos featured on this Hyperion disc with Howard Shelley performing and also directing the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, the latest in the Romantic Piano Concerto series.

The Concerto in G Minor from 1882 is very much a product of its time. Encompassing a large canvas – the first movement is 19 minutes alone – the work allows the soloist plenty of opportunity to display their technical prowess, juxtaposed with sections which are quietly introspective. The formidable technical demands should come as no surprise – after all, the composer was also a virtuoso pianist. Throughout, Shelley performs with a solid conviction at all times demonstrating carefully nuanced phrasing and a flawless technique, while the TSO proves to be a solid and sensitive partner.

The second concerto, written five years later, contains the same degree of attractive interplay between piano and orchestra. Once again, Elmas’ profound gift for melody shines through brightly – particularly in the second movement Andante – and more than makes up for any shortcomings the piece may have with respect to form and thematic development.

While these concertos aren’t in the same league as those of Brahms or Rachmaninoff, they’re worthy examples worth investigating. Thanks to Shelley and the TSO, they’ll be prevented from languishing in undeserved obscurity.

Richard Haskell

Florent Schmitt – The Tragédie de Salomé
Susan Platts; Nikki Chooi; Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra; JoAnn Falletta
Naxos 8574138
(naxosdirect.com/search/8574138)

JoAnn Falletta’s conducting career goes from strength to strength: music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic; myriad recordings for Naxos; a 2019 Grammy Award. The four works on this disc by Florent Schmitt (1870–1958) demonstrate Falletta’s ability to attain expressive, assured results with complex scores for large orchestra. The composer’s style extends the scope of French Impressionism, with rich and fluid sonorities but also with passages that feature more dissonant writing.

Musique sur l’eau (1898) is sung by mezzo Susan Platts with a full and seamless tone that goes well with Schmitt’s lush, colourful setting. The symphonic poem La Tragédie de Salomé (1910, revised from the earlier ballet) opens with an evocative prelude out of which a wonderfully played English horn solo takes the lead. In the succeeding dances, menacing strings and violent brass interpolations prefigure a horrific ending. Another ballet-based work is the Suite – Oriane et le Prince d’Amour (1934–37). In this later work, Schmitt’s harmonic language has advanced considerably, with lush and complex chords and figurations that Falletta and the excellent Buffalo players navigate with well-paced clarity. The dance in 5/4 time in this work is a motivic and rhythmic tour de force. Finally, the violin-orchestra version of Légende, Op.66 (1918) receives its recording premiere here. Légende is a staple of the alto saxophone repertoire, but with the well-modulated, expressive tone of Canadian violinist Nikki Chooi it also comes across exceedingly well in this version.

Roger Knox

Entente Musicale – Music for Violin and Piano
Simon Callaghan; Clare Howick
SOMM Recordings SOMMCD 0625
(naxosdirect.com/search/sommcd+0625)

Entente translates as a friendly understanding or informal alliance between two people or states. SOMM has titled a new CD Entente Musicale, which qualifies appropriately the collaboration of violinist Clare Howick and pianist Simon Callaghan and indirectly, the English and French repertoire included. Howick is acknowledged as being in the forefront of a generation of inspired violinists. The Strand is not stinting in their praise, finding her “playing with beguiling warmth and affection.” The American Record Guide qualifies her as “simply spectacular.” Callaghan has been commended in The Strad for his “velvet-gloved pianism of ravishing sensitivity.” Together they give shining performances of these well-chosen works: Delius – Violin Sonata in B Major; Cyril Scott – Cherry Ripe and Valse Caprice; Debussy – Violin Sonata in G Minor; John Ireland – Violin Sonata No.1 in D Minor; Ravel – Pièce en forme de Habanera; Bax – Mediterranean.

Some of the works may be familiar and others will surely find new fans. New to me is the Delius sonata, published after his death. Delius, born in Bradford, Yorkshire in 1862 but preferring to live in France, had three violin sonatas published, but this one, written in 1892–93 in Paris where he had taken up residence in 1888, was turned down by his publisher. Perhaps it was because of the unusual key of B Major, muses the author of the comprehensive booklet. Delius held on to it and here it is. The first movement, Allegro con brio, is dramatically optimistic. The second movement, Andante moto tranquillo, is typical Delius and exquisite beyond words, resolving in the third movement, Allegro con moto. The duo plays the Jascha Heifetz arrangements of the Ravel Pièce and the joyful Bax Mediterranean.

Bruce Surtees

Villa-Lobos – Complete Symphonies
São Paulo Symphony; Isaac Karabtchevsky
Naxos 8506039
(naxosdirect.com/search/8506039)

Among the amazingly prolific Heitor Villa-Lobos’ 2,000-plus works are 11 audacious, spellbinding yet little-known symphonies, composed at
opposite ends of his career. Except for the epic Symphony No.10, they sort themselves into pairs, stylistically and by date of composition.

As a boy, Villa-Lobos learned to play clarinet and cello from his father. Adding guitar to his skills, he performed Brazilian popular and folkloric music with salon ensembles, and symphonic and operatic repertoire as an orchestral cellist. Slighting institutional composition study, Villa-Lobos absorbed Vincent d’Indy’s pedagogical Cours de Composition Musicale, leading to his trademark mix of European late-Romanticism with Brazilian melodic and rhythmic exoticism.

Symphonies No.1 “Unforsseen” (1916) and No.2 “Ascension” (1917, revised 1944), with their lush sonorities, gorgeous, broadly flowing string melodies, chattering woodwinds suggestive of an active Brazilian rain forest, brass fanfares and throbbing percussion, find the young Villa-Lobos effectively creating a stereotypical “Hollywood sound” well before sound’s arrival in Hollywood.

After World War I ended, Villa-Lobos was commissioned by Brazil’s National Institute to compose three celebratory symphonies: No.3 “War,” No.4 “Victory” and the now-lost, never-performed No.5 “Peace,” perhaps unfinished. Requiring huge forces, “War” and “Victory” (both 1919) contain martial fanfares, angushed dirges and percussion-heavy, explosive battle music, “Victory” ending in a triumphal fortississimo.

Villa-Lobos wouldn’t produce another symphony for 24 years, while composing many other orchestral, chamber and vocal works, eight of his nine Bachianas Brasileiras, all 17 Chóros and dozens of piano pieces, also serving as director of music education for Brazilian public schools.

The angular themes of Symphony No.6 “On the Outlines of the Mountains” (1944) were derived by tracing the contours of photographed mountaintops. The opening movements conjure foreboding, rugged, desolate vistas; the Allegretto and final Allegro bathe the vast panoramas in bright sunlight. The four movements of Symphony No.7 “Odyssey of Peace” (1945) closely mirror those of No.6, with similar tempo markings, timings and moods. Here, turbulence and slowly drifting tonal centres precede two buoyantly joyous movements, the closing seconds echoing the bombast of the “Victory” finale after World War I.

The unsubtitled Symphonies No. 8 (1950) and No.9 (1952) are Villa-Lobos’ most concise – No.9, just under 22 minutes, is the shortest of all. Both are infused with confident, upbeat melodies, mechanized urban rhythms and dense metallic textures, reflecting the revitalized post-war sense of optimism and material progress.

After these two succinct symphonies evoking modern technology, Villa-Lobos about-faced with the grandiloquent, hour-long Symphony No.10 “Amerindia” for large orchestra, tenor, baritone and bass soloists and chorus singing in Portuguese, Latin and indigenous language Tupi. (In this performance, the entire tenor section sings the tenor solo.) Commissioned for São Paulo’s 1954 quadricentennial, “Amerindia” also bears the designation Oratório and a second subtitle, “Sumé, Father of Fathers.” Sumé, the mythical bringer of knowledge to pre-Columbian Brazil, is here conflated with the 16th-century Jesuit missionary St. José de Anchieta. The music for this sonic extravaganza creates a blazingly coloured tapestry weaving paganism, Christianity, mystical lamentation, ecstasy and exultation. It’s totally thrilling!

The opening fanfares, lush melodies and exotic colours of Symphony No.11 (1955) recall Villa-Lobos’ cinematic early symphonies, now with even greater rhythmic, harmonic and textural complexity. No.12 (1957), completed on Villa-Lobos’ 70th birthday, features more fanfares, vibrant rhythms and colours, a mystery-shrouded, near-atonal Adagio and a final, multi-thematic, kaleidoscopic display of orchestral fireworks.

Further enriching this six-CD treasure-trove are two folklore-inspired works depicting mythical jungle spirits: the tone-poem Urupuru (1917) and the choral cantata Mandu-Carará (1940), sung in indigenous language Nheengatu. (Texts and translations for this and “Amerindia” are provided.)

With definitive, super-charged performances by the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra conducted by Brazilian-born Isaac Kabatchevsky, this set is most enthusiastically recommended!

Michael Schulman

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY

Piazzolla & Galliano – Concertos Jovica Ivanovic; Ukrainian Chamber Orchestra; Vitaliy Prostasov

Pavana Records nv6317 (navaronrecords.com/catalog/nv6317)

Serbian-Austrian classical accordionist Jovica Ivanovici and his colleagues, concert-master/violinist Valeri Sokolov and the Ukrainian Chamber Orchestra under conductor Vitaliy Prostasov, shine in their collaborative performances of concertos by prominent composers Astor Piazzolla and Richard Galliano. Each three-movement, fast/slow/fast, thoughtful, detailed concertos illuminate Ivanovici’s talents and the tight ensemble playing of all the musicians.

Piazzolla’s Aconquaga, a concerto for bandoneón, percussion and string orchestra, was a favourite of Piazzolla himself and it encapsulates his characteristic rhythmic tango nuevo melodies and orchestral sonorities. The bandoneón part translates well onto accordion as Ivanovici’s intuitive musical performance is highlighted by his detached notes, florid ornamentations and clear fast runs. The orchestral balance is perfect, especially during the ringing, low-pitched string-bass accompaniments.

French composer/accordionist Galliano’s Opale Concerto for accordion and string orchestra is a mix of French, American and Balkan styles. The first movement is slightly more atonal, with such accordion specialities as bellows shoves, accented chords and wide-pitched lines alternating with string solos. The slower second movement starts with a lyrical solo, until the orchestral entity creates a “merry-go-round” reminiscent soundscape. The faster third movement builds excitement with conversational shorter accented melodies until the final ascending accordion glissando ends it with a decisive bang.

Ivanovici is a superb accordionist, well-matched to the string players’ collective musicianship. Their interpretations make the Piazzolla and Galliano compositions resonate with permanent eloquence.

Tiina Kik

Editor’s Note: March 11, 2021 marked the centenary of Piazzolla’s birth. He died in 1992 at the age of 71.

Godfrey Ridout – The Concert Recordings Various Artists

Centrediscs CMCCD 28220 (cmcccanada.org/shop/cmccd-28220)

Godfrey Ridout (1918-1984) was “an old-school gentleman,” conservative in deportment, attire (three-piece suits) and compositional style. I knew him also to be very accessible, forthright and warm-hearted – just like his music! This welcome CD presents concert performances from 1975-1993, drawn from the CBC archives.

Cantiones Mysticae No.2 – The Ascension (1962) is set to a sixth-century hymn sung in English by sunny-voiced soprano Janet Smith, Brian Law conducting Ottawa’s Thirteen Strings. As the text proclaims, it opens “with a merry noise and... the sound of the trumpet” (played by Stuart Douglas Sturdevant). One line in the serene second section – “Rescue, recall into life those who are rushing to death” – was, wrote Ridout, his son critically ill during its composition, “a cri de coeur... that really struck home.”

The darkly dramatic Two Etudes for string orchestra (1946) comprise the sepulchral No.1 (Andante con malinconia) and the chugging freight train of No.2, briefly stalled by a misterioso passage. Mario Bernardi conducts the CBC Vancouver Orchestra. Violinist
Mixing serial, modal and tonal languages, it’s Pentaèdre delivers. 

Demands a high level of musicianship and stretching their technical, colouristic, expressive modernist musical universe. The discover afresh his idiosyncratic and imaginative Quebec-based Pentaèdre currently straddling the extended Mahlerian area universities. 

Hétu composed primarily for established forces including piano, string quartet, orchestral winds, symphony orchestra and opera in a style he once described as “incorporating neo-classical forms and neo-romantic effects in a musical language using 20th-century techniques.” His post-Alban Bergian idiom made him one of the most frequently performed Canadian composers during his career. 

Commemorating the tenth anniversary of Hétu’s death, this album presents the Pentaèdre wind ensemble and pianist Philip Chiu in a program reflecting the composers of his generation, spending his academic career at several Montreal-area universities. 

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Jacques Hétu – Musique pour vents Pentadèbre; Philip Chiu
ATMA ACD2 2792 (atmaclassique.com/en)

Jacques Hétu (1938-2010) was among the leading Canadian classical composers and music educators of his generation, spending his academic career at several Montreal-area universities.

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Commemorating the tenth anniversary of Hétu’s death, this album presents the Pentaèdre wind ensemble and pianist Philip Chiu in a program reflecting the composer’s keen and abiding interest in both wind instruments and the piano. The brilliant Quebec-based Pentaèdre currently comprising Ariane Brisson (flute), Élise Poulin (oboe), Martin Carpenter (clarinet), Louis-Philippe Marsolais (horn) and Mathieu Lussier (bassoon) takes centre stage on the album.

Hétu’s Wind Quintet and compositions for solo winds and piano invite us to discover afresh his idiosyncratic and imaginative modernist musical universe. The works draw out the best qualities of each woodwind instrument at the same time stretching their technical, colouristic, expressive and ensemble capabilities. This music demands a high level of musicianship and Pentaèdre delivers.

The 12-minute 1967 Quintet is a standout. Mixing serial, modal and tonal languages, it’s skillfully scored, effectively showcasing each instrument and subgrouping. No wonder this dramatic work has become a favourite among Canadian wind quintets. 

Andrew Timar

Jaap Nico Hamburger – Chamber Symphonies 1 & 2
Ensemble Caprice; Matthias Maute; l’Orchestre Métropolitain de Montréal; Vincent de Kort
Leaf Music LM235 (leaf-music.ca)

Interesting, musical, inventive and new original Canadian classical music is a reason to celebrate indeed! Here, with two chamber symphonies, composer Jaap Nico Hamburger finds inspiration in honour of Remembrance Day and the 75th anniversary of the Liberation of the Netherlands to create beautiful and well-executed long-form pieces that, while dealing with the difficult theme of the brutality of war, leave listeners with an appreciation of musical excellence and a lingering sense of hopeful optimism.

Recorded in Quebec in 2019 by Ensemble Caprice under the direction of Matthias Maute, Chamber Symphony No. 1 “Remember to Forget,” explores, as a tone poem, the metaphor of a train journey in sound, highlighting the teleological nature of life as we, individual agents, push forward through times of challenge and adversity towards forgiveness, atonement and a life worth living. Inspired by the sounds and biography of composer György Ligeti (1923-2006), the offering here is as complex and nuanced as the subject theme itself; Strid- dent at times, then mitigated by moments of tranquil introspection. Percussion heavy, the piece dips occasionally into carnivalesque sounds and emotions that imbue a playful and irreverent spirit into this otherwise serious piece.

Chamber Symphony No. 2 “Children’s War Diaries” features l’Orchestre Métropolitain de Montréal and explores one of the darkest periods of history, the Holocaust, channeling the writing of Hamburger’s grandmother, Jannie Moffle-Bolle, whose autobiography Een hemel zonder vogels (“A sky without birds”) documented her experiences as a teenager in Nazi Germany. As the liner notes attest, the themes explored are sobering but important. These two Chamber Symphonies add much to the canon of Canadian classical composition and are well worth your time.

Andrew Timar

John Robertson – Symphonies 4 & 5
Meditation: In Flanders Fields
Bratislava Symphony Orchestra; Anthony Armore
Navona Records nv6325 (navonarecords.com/catalog/nv6325)

Anachronism is no sin nor is theft a crime when it comes to making art, not if they are accomplished with subtlety or humour. My favourite 20th-century tomb raider was Alfred Schnittke, who suffered modernity’s loss of innocence, together with nostalgia for past forms. The suffering served as impetus for his most tragic and comic utterances. Which brings me to New Zealand/Canadian composer John Robertson, and his Symphonies 4 and 5.

This music seems happily, painlessly anachronistic, full of bright orchestral effects and warm, tonal harmonies. The second movement of Symphony No. 4 is a Sicilienne, a gently progressing dance in 12/8 metre, wherein an oboe laments sweetly over ghostly strings and celesta. The familiar character in the opening of the same work’s first movement recalls so much the writing of Carl Nielsen. For a brief moment one hears Shostakovich call out a trill from his own Fourth Symphony at the opening of the third movement. Coincidence? Homage, perhaps, although the body of the theme sounds more like Holst: a jocular, folksong-march.

The Fifth Symphony revisits Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Samuel Barber as well. Included with the symphonies is a threnody: Meditation: In Flanders’ Fields. Leaving my thoughts on the poem out of this, I’ll say the music accompanying the recited text is fitting, including the requisite bugle call. Take up a quarrel with me on this if you must.

Robertson is a capable composer, and not, apparently, a suffering genius à la Schnittke. The works are substantive and also pleasurable to hear, which is a refreshing anachronism in and of itself.

Max Christie

Lineage
Julia Den Boer
Redshift Records TK476 (redshiftrecords.org)

French-American pianist Julia Den Boer confidently delivers Lineage, an album of contemporary solo piano music with ties to Montreal. Den Boer’s impressive technical prowess is brilliantly revealed from...
several angles as each piece on this recording presents high degrees of challenging material.

First, Chris Paul Harman’s 371 Chorales (2016) is a wonderful gem full of shimmering charm and glistening high-register counterpoint—a delightful miniature that expands upon the composer’s predilection toward recontextualizing old material. Brian Cherney’s multi-movement Tombeau (1996) is a mature work of a modernist approach that sends the listener through a gamut of contrasting expressive landscapes—terrain that Den Boer handles with world-class musicianship. The serendipitous monophony of Matthew Ricketts’ Melodia (2017) is a deeply original work that relies on decidedly exposed lines. This music allows the piano to sing wonderfully in the hands of Den Boer, and is a refreshing reminder that newly composed piano works do not require a maximal approach to produce successful results.

Lastly, Reiko Yamada’s Cloud Sketches (2010) is a substantial work comprised of scalar flourishes and prickly interruptions that evoke a series of conversations and contemplative interludes. With such contrasting works, each demanding in wildly different ways, this release is a strong statement showing Den Boer’s importance as a contemporary music interpreter.

**Adam Scime**

Martin Arnold – Stain Ballads
Apartment House
Another Timbre at166 (anotheritimbre.com)

Canadian composer Martin Arnold’s illustrious compositions over the decades are so very much his own sound. Here UK-based ensemble Apartment House perform four works in which Arnold strives to combine lyricism with formlessness in his self-described “stain ballads.” As Arnold explains on the Another Timbre label’s website, “Stains are... always stain-shaped but don’t present a form... form and content are the same thing.”

Opening track Lutra (2017) for cello and humming is given a slow and reflective performance by Apartment House founder and director, Anton Lukoszevieze. The high-pitched cello opening leads to a lower-range bowed melody, with alternating high and low pitches united by humming and delicate cello lyricism. Stain Ballad (2016), for seven-piece orchestra, also encompasses the contrasting ideas of held string notes, here versus detached piano lines and percussion throbs, as all the instruments are musically balanced and blended in Arnold’s expert “story-telling” orchestration.

Arnold’s understanding of held string capabilities makes the cello/violin duet Trouser’s (2017) sound like a full orchestra.

A more fragmented work with minimalistic touches, quiet breaks between phrases, bowed strings, pitch slides and mid-piece dissonant lines are just a few sounds Lukoszevieze and violinist Mira Benjamin play, sparking listening interest! Great inclusion is Arnold’s earlier career quartet Slip (1999), a jig-like dance with opening bass clarinet/violin/cello uneven phrases until the accented piano chordal entry adds percussive flavours.

Arnold’s tightly interwoven “form-less” lyricism, combined with these dedicated performances, create captivating colourful music.

**Linda Catlin Smith – Meadow**

Mia Cooper; Joachim Roewer; William Butt
Louth Contemporary Music Society
LCMS202021 (louthcms.org/recording)

The enchanting stillness and hypnotic beauty of sprawling mossy fields has been captured ever so deeply by Linda Catlin Smith in her new work, Meadow, for string trio. This gentle music paints an endless moment amid the green-lit swaying turf. Sonorous pulsating chords and brief melodic offerings envelop the ears much like cascading grassy plains wrapping around bark and stone. Smith’s unparalleled command over the fusion of colour and harmony is immediately captivating. This sound world is a tapestry woven with delicate care and personal magic. At times, the distinctly fragmentary material forms echoes in the mind’s eye: glimpses of forgotten images begin to surface and radiate throughout the heath. The trio’s performance (Mia Cooper, violin; Joachim Roewer, viola; William Butt, cello) on this release was accomplished with extraordinary intimacy. The pureness of tone and capacity for expression result in a profoundly successful interpretation of Smith’s poetic intention.

This recording comes as the first release in an initiative from the Louth Contemporary Music Society, titled out of silence, to produce meaningful recordings under the exceptional conditions of the pandemic. While the pandemic continues to be a struggle for many, we thank artists for their commitment toward creation and for reminding us why we need art in our lives. When listening to the striking grace of Smith’s Meadow, many things come to mind and many emotions are felt throughout – I suppose this can all be summarized with the phrase “Thank you.”

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**Happiness in a Troubled World**

Frank Horvat
Independent (frankhorvat.com)

Written as an offering to a world in need of healing, Happiness in a Troubled World is a potent mixture of ambient sounds and well-thought-out musical ideas. This music has the potential to shift your energy, calm your mind and expand your awareness.

Frank Horvat’s latest album is inspired by the Dalai Lama’s book The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World. Six compositions bear the titles of the final six chapters of the book and each is inspired by a quote from that book. Choosing an ambient electronic genre allowed Horvat to create a perfect musical vessel for expressing the noble ideas of empathy and compassion, hope and optimism. The building and ever-changing layers of sound generate the feeling of being in the womb of the world that is mending and healing. The textures throughout are smooth, unperturbed. In each of the compositions Horvat creates the safe space for a listener to expand their own aspirations for the world we share.

The album opens with peacefully neutral Coping with a Troubled World. It then continues with pulsing sounds and bright piano in Hope, Optimism and Resilience. The lightness and joyful increase with each composition until the final number, Empathy, Compassion and Finding Happiness in the Troubled World, brings an incredible sense of peace.

If you are looking for a meditative, calm sonic space that induces happiness and optimism, this album is perfect for you.

**Ivana Popovic**

MC Maguire – Saturation Velocity
MC Maguire; Keith Kirchoff; Bryan Holt
Albany Records TROY1843 (albanyrecords.com)

Toronto composer/producer M.C. Maguire is a music alchemist, making sophisticated post-modern musical hybrids combining Western classical, jazz and electro-acoustic elements. His works often transform electronics, samples and acoustic instrument soloists into an intense wall of sound, accumulating up to 300 tracks.

Maguire’s fourth album, Saturation Velocity, is no exception, though it’s important to observe that his compositions
are centred on carefully notated sheet scores, for the solo acoustic instruments at least. According to the composer’s notes, the first track A Teenage Dream for piano & CPU (“central processing unit”) for the less-computer-savy like me is based on four songs by pop singer/songwriter Katy Perry. Other source material used – to contrast the pop elements – are bits of Thomas Tallis (“for religiosity,” comments the composer), plus two passages from Wagner’s Das Rheingold. The structure of the work consists of four large murals each inside an Alban Berg-ian “forward/retrograde ordering,” that formally connects the murals. But what I hear is essentially a complex, nearly 29-minute piano concerto with CPU accompaniment, featuring four solo piano cadenzas which Maguire cheekily calls, “Bill Evans plays Schoenberg.” American experimental music virtuoso, pianist Keith Kirchoff, turns in a spectacular performance here, though some of his pianism gets lost among the dense sonic jungle overgrowth.

Sade auf Kashmir, another concerto – this for cello with CPU – is based on the sonic interweaving of singer Sade’s No Ordinary Love and rock band Led Zeppelin’s Kashmir. Toronto cellist Brian Holt lifts his technically demanding part off the page with accuracy and panache.

Will this music be your cup of tea? I don’t know, but now it is mine.

Andrew Timar

**Bruits**

Imani Winds
Bright Shiny Things
(brightshiny.ninja/imani)

The American quintet Imani Winds present Bruits, the title work on their new release. Vijay Iyer’s title references medical terminology for sounds caused by arterial blockages. The theme of the disc is social/racial injustice. The ensemble playing is superb; individually and collectively the group is strong; the material they champion is compelling. Four of the five members of the group are people of colour, whose own writing in the accompanying notes underlines how they are affected by their country’s ingrained injustices.

Polemics that entertain are rare, but Bruits bridges the divide; the first movement, Gulf, is exhilarating writing brilliantly covered by the quintet and pianist Cory Smythe. In the second movement, Force, ensemble members recite the U.S. “Stand Your Ground” law over a percussive ostinato, performed by the members of the quintet. Iyer wrote the work during the period of the murder trial of George Zimmerman, killer of Trayvon Martin. Thus the meaning of the piece comes into focus: Bruits as a blockage, not of the circulatory system but of justice in the U.S. It’s shocking, and riveting. The five movements carry tremendous emotional power.

The Light Is The Same (2016) by Reena Esmail, is a single-movement work reflecting unease felt in the wake of the U.S. presidential election that year. The material, two distinct ragas, attempts to depict reconciliation between them. In Sometimes, Frederic Rzewski makes various affecting uses of a deconstructed melody: Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.

Max Christie

**Songs of Insurrection by Frederic Rzewski**

Coviello Contemporary COV92021
(covielloclassics.de/en)

Veteran American composer and virtuoso pianist Frederic Rzewski (b. 1938) stated in 1976 that, “It’s still true that most Americans care more about the price of meat than they do about the exploitation of Bolivian miners.”

Already 45 years ago Rzewski set the bar high in his 1975 The People United Will Never Be Defeated, an hour-long piano tour de force of 36 variations on a Chilean workers’ song. It has received over 15 commercial recordings to date, the first of which garnered a 1979 Grammy nomination. His even more epic Songs of Insurrection (2016) is Rzewski’s eloquent sequel to his 1975 masterwork. Presented here in its first recording by brilliant early-career American pianist Thomas Kotcheff, the composition reaches to the music of the world’s peoples for inspiration. Each of the seven movements is inspired by a song from a different country.

For example Die Moorsoldaten (The Song of the Departed) was written by prisoners of the Börgermoor concentration camp, Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around is an American civil rights hymn and Oh Bird, Oh Bird, Oh Roller dates from the Korean Peasant Rebellion of Donghak.

On one level Songs of Insurrection takes us on a global journey through social uprising. On a musical level the work is a sophisticated compendium of multiple piano idioms. They range from 19th-century romanticism, modalism, to pantonality, serialism and haunting experimental sounds coaxed from inside the piano.

Rzewski hailed this performance as “magnificent.” I too was swept away by the emotion in this work brought to life by Kotcheff’s passion and authoritative command of his instrument.

Andrew Timar

**E Pluribus Unum**

Liza Stepanova
Navona Records nv6300

Although COVID is first and foremost a global health issue (and a crisis), it is also a political one. Without a doubt, there has been, and will continue to be, robust artistic responses to the virus, the mounting death toll and the ongoing lockdown. While the dissemination of artistic expressions are suffering at the moment – given furloughed touring and venue closure – the coalescing of political commentary and artistic expression has birthed a renaissance of music of all genres whose practitioners try and make sense of the current state of affairs in sound.

While 2021 may go down in history as achieving a high-water mark of politically inspired music-making practices, pianist Liza Stepanova was ahead of the curve when she looked somewhat earlier to the turbulent American political landscape of 2017 when then-President Trump’s isolationist immigration policies were demonizing foreigners and breaking cross-border families apart. In response, Stepanova programmed a sprawling and challenging, but always musical, set of solo piano pieces composed by American composers of immigrant backgrounds. In part, her effort here was an attempt to shine a light on the contributions that immigrants make to the fabric of American musical life. But what is achieved is far greater than a political statement. As the album title (E Pluribus Unum – “Out of many, one”) suggests, Stepanova has taken a diverse range of composers with no other connection than a shared immigrant past and created a singularly unified, coherent and beautiful statement that stands up not just politically, but musically and artistically.

Andrew Scott

**American Dream**

Amstel (saxophone) Quartet
Amstel Quartet AR018 (amstelquartet.nl)

The Amstel Quartet is based in the Netherlands and describes itself as “the world’s most colourful saxophone quartet.” They have an active concert schedule (currently employing livestreaming) and have released over ten albums of music in many genres including classical, contemporary and popular music. American Dream is their survey of selected American composers who represent different aspects of musical culture.
which (the quartet writes) include the influence of jazz, working from modernism to post-modernism and employing unique rhythms.

Paul Creston (1906-1985) is well known to saxophone players for his Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano which is a mainstay of the repertoire. His Suite for Saxophone Quartet, Op.111 was written towards the end of his career and illustrates his craftsmanship in the opening fugue, the rhythmic elements and the Pastoreale written, strangely, in 15/12. Michael Torke’s May, June and July come to demonstrate the “rhythmic dynamism” of his writing. May is sprightly and leaping with lush and melodic interplay; June is more sombre and July returns to a lighter form. John Cage’s Four is a series of instructions that can be played by almost any four instruments and includes percussive and tonal parts. The YouTube video the quartet produced playing this piece is well worth enjoying: it is the perfect COVID-era work combining Cage’s structure with the quartet’s own musical proficiency, isolated performances and sense of humour. American Dream is rounded out by Marc Mellits’ Tapas and Christian Lauth’s Mambo.

The Amstel Quartet plays precisely and warmly and this collection of American saxophone quartet music is thoughtfully assembled.

Ted Parkinson

Personal Demons
Lowell Liebermann
Steinway & Sons, STNS 30172
(steinway.com/music-and-artists/label)

Composer pianist Lowell Liebermann has just released a two-disc testament, expertly curated and impressively executed. It is a witness statement to five decades of life in music – a glimpse into an artistic practice that consistently hits its creative stride, fuelled by flames that still burn bright. The album has been adroitly produced, edited and mastered by Sergei Kvïtko of Blue Griffin Recordings (featured in the November 2020 issue of The WholeNote.)

Three of Liebermann’s own works are included in his debut solo recording as a composer and pianist. Each composition highlights a particular brand of pianism, one with roughcast textures and crystal-clear melodic lines, obliging our ears toward resonant, robust and irresistible soundscapes. We perceive a virtuosic abandon, underpinned with an urgent, restless vitality.

Such forthright modes of expression carry into the next tracks: the Eight Preludes, Op.30 by Kabeláč. These pieces are especially significant for Liebermann and he unveils them to us consummately. Finely etched, bearing echoes of Benjamin Britten, these evocative miniatures have absorbed models at which to marvel. The final work on Disc One is Liszt’s stalwart Totentanz, S225, a vivid, dazzling pianistic essay. The music’s economy of means – characteristic of Liszt’s best writing – remains of discernable influence for Liebermann hinting at the American composer-pianist’s own Lisztian lineage.

Disc Two’s Four Apparitions, Op.17 are followed by the extemporaneously tender Variations on a Theme of Hüttenbrenner, D376 by Franz Schubert. This unfamiliar set proves an ideal platform for Liebermann’s lyrical abilities at the keyboard. Next is Busoni’s Fantasia Contrapuntistica BV256. Likeining it to “a Mount Everest that he wanted to climb – a challenge in a way,” Liebermann’s affinity for Busoni is striking, with an audible reverence for the Italian master’s intellect and formalism on full display.

Finally, the intimately benevolent Nocturne No.10, Op.99 ushers in a denouement. Highly personal for Liebermann, this music hums and swells, waxing poetic like a lucid conversation between lovers, revealing truths of a lifetime. Shades of Samuel Barber and Carl Vine drift in a dusky, sonic bloom as Liebermann’s piano now quietly sings this album to a whispered, nocturnal close.

And so, what might the morrow bring, we wonder?

Adam Sherkin

True Stories & Rational Numbers
Chris P. Thompson
Independent (christopthompson.com)

New York-based percussionist Chris P. Thompson is a longtime member of Alarm Will Sound, the American Contemporary Music Ensemble and other groups. His album True Stories & Rational Numbers, a nine-move 43-minute work, however showcases him as composer and pianist. True Stories & Rational Numbers reflects Thompson’s large-scale exploration of piano music in just intonation, the tuning system based on tuning notes to simple mathematical ratios of the natural harmonic series. He also employs whole-number rhythmic and harmonic relationships in his score.

Taken together, he likens listening to this music to having his “eyes re-opened to music and seeing it in colour for the first time.”

In addition, the music was composed and programmed in modern piano roll notation, an extension of how 20th-century commercial piano rolls were made. Thompson’s main inspiration here was American composer Conlon Nancarrow’s boundary-pushing experimental player-piano compositions. Other influences were German scientist and philosopher Hermann von Helmholtz, the author of the landmark book, On the Sensations of Tone, and the music of Aphex Twin and modern drumline. The chamber music of Ben Johnston, which liberally employs unorthodox tunings, is cited as another important influence, as is Johnston’s elegant notations of just intonation.

Thompson states his goal in True Stories... was “to marry the machine with the warmth of human emotion...” Listening to it not only gradually reveals an unorthodox musical mind, but also invites us to contemplate what “in tune” in music is.

Andrew Timar

Flery Songs
Melia Watras
Planet M Records (meliawatras.com)

While we continue to endure the extended shutdowns and performance cancellations, there was particular joy in discovering Melia Watras’ Firefly Songs. Listening to what feels like a personal diary of her inner thoughts, one could almost call this album of accompanied poetry, yet it is so much more. At times deceivingly simple, more often there are complex musical pairings to thoughts, poems, literary references, inspirations and memories. American violist and composer Watras wrote these 13 individual pieces between 2015 and 2018 for combinations of violin, viola, cello and voices, and the flow of the album is both unique and comforting.

Full of surprises, from the charming Mozart Doesn’t Live in Seattle to the trancelike tones and rhythms of overlapping voices in Seeing Cypresses with Catherine C, this is an album of singular gems as well as a complete collection. A work belying its complexity, Firefly Songs also stands strongly, piece by piece as beautifully expressed miniatures, each feeling free and spontaneous. Watras’ solo viola piece, Lament, written for the passing of her father, expresses a delicate nuance of emotion delivered with depth and presence. In William Wilson, the complexities hidden between the lines of Edgar Allan Poe are beautifully unveiled both with voice and on the violin by Michael Jinsoo Lim. Lim also stands out in the operatic (one). It would be
hard to pick a favourite from this box of gems, but Vetur öngum lánar lió (Winter aids no one) was the perfect accompaniment to my icy walks on the beach. This collection would be enjoyable either in the suggested order or as random treats that would slip easily into any playlist.

Cheryl Ockrant

**Against Method**

The five players, augmented by guests, playing music composed by members and other guests, perform six fascinating pieces all challenging, all worth the time and effort. As one reviewer has already commented, writing anything useful about the disc is beyond challenging; best just take the thing and hear for yourself.

Clarinetist Benjamin Fingland and Caleb van der Swaagh, on cello, split the greater part of the playing. In the opening track, The Hunt by Night by Douglas Boyce, they are joined by pianist Ning Yu in a rollicking fun exploration of rhythmic, unison pointillist melody. “Ransack” describes the method: the three characters turn over every note with happy frantic energy, perhaps looking for Messiaen. The closing unisons between cello and clarinet are breathtaking.

Fingland performs a solo piece for bass clarinet and loop pedal, written by his life partner Jessica Meyer. Intimate and mysterious, the repeated breath effects sound like nothing so much as sobbing. The title is a giveaway: Forgiveness.

Each piece is my favourite. I love Ein Kleines Volkslied, the piano quartet by Alvin Singleton. Born in 1940, he’s three decades older than the rest, but his piece kicks it like it’s 1966. They close with the brilliant Scherzo by Argentine composer Diego Tedesco. Plucks, slaps, pitch-bends, melodic fragments, col legno... all in an ABA format. Great fun, fantastic disc.

**Max Christie**

The New York new music collective counter) induction celebrates 20 years of committed contemporary musical performance with the release of Against Method. The five players, augmented by guests, playing music composed by members and other guests, perform six fascinating pieces all challenging, all worth the time and effort. As one reviewer has already commented, writing anything useful about the disc is beyond challenging; best just take the thing and hear for yourself.

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**Max Christie**

The illustrious German accordionist Stefan Hussong’s audio catalogue was launched with his audacious 1987 recording of Bach’s Goldberg Variations and has since grown to an impressive discography of some 40 albums, many of which feature his mastery of the most challenging contemporary works. This latest album opens with Magnus Lindberg’s Metal Work (1984) for percussion and accordion, originally commissioned by the pioneering Finnish accordionist Matti Rantanen. This dazzling and virtuosic work features a swiftly evolving kaleidoscopic duel to the death between the accordion and an arsenal of ten metal instruments, effortlessly dispatched by percussionist Rumi Ogawa.

Among the subsequent solo works expressly written for Stefan Hussong, one finds Elena Mendoza’s Découpé (2017), an essay derived from the Dadaist tradition of the random cutting and mashing up of fragments of text, or in this case, a random jumble of hackneyed clichés that, for my taste, went on a bit too long. Much more compelling is Martin Smolka’s intimate Lamento melodico (2000), in which strongly contrasting melodic elements are paired against each other in an expressively memorable composition.

Two Canadian works are featured from the husband-and-wife team of composers Hope Lee and David Eagle. Lee’s work, Imaginary Garden V (2016), scored for accordion with Yumiko Meguri on piano, is part of an ongoing series of works under that title; this installment features seven contrasting scenarios demonstrating an admirable stylistic diversity that kept this listener thoroughly engaged. Eagle’s innovative Refracted Tones (2016) for solo accordion involves replacing the normal reed ranks of the accordion with inserted sets of quarter-tone tuned reeds, creating an exotic, hallucinatory 24-tone octave guaranteed to bend your ears. Betwixt these two we find Heera Kim’s finely crafted The Art of Shading II (2019), which adroitly exploits the deepest registers of the accordion interspersed with percussive assaults on the instrument.

Hats off to Herr Hussong for yet another well-balanced and compellingly performed album.

**Daniel Foley**
instrument.” Sparkling opening arpeggated tonal flourishes and tempo and instrumental contrasts lead to a march-like section with intermittent horn lines building tension. The slower second movement, scored for smaller ensemble, has calming tonally diverse pitches and piano-pedalled note vibrations. Karchin’s accurately self-described “rambunctious” third movement is in modified rondo form with energetic instrumental chordal interplays, flourishes and dramatic low-pitch held notes.

Rochester Celebration (2017) is a solo piano commission celebrating Karchin’s undergraduate Eastman piano professor, Barry Synder. A “must listen to” virtuosic Romantic-feel composition for all pianists, as Karchin’s thorough piano high/low pitch sounds and effects knowledge are captured in Margaret Kampmeier’s exquisite performance.

Postlude (2019) has Sam Jones on trumpet with bucket mute play beautiful slower melodic lines with resonating high-pitch held notes to pianist Han Chen’s accompaniment. Love Alice Teysier’s flute trills emulating Ashley Jackson’s harp rolls in Quest (2014). Violinist Renée Jolles and harpist Susan Jolles drive the exciting closing track Barcarole Variations (2015) forward with their sensitive instrumental effects.

Louis Karchin is a fabulous contemporary composer with thorough instrumental knowledge.

Paolo Marchettini: The Months have ends Various Orchestras and Conductors New Focus Recordings FCR280 (newfocusrecordings.com/catalogue)

The Months have ends sets five Emily Dickinson poems for soprano and orchestra. Alda Caiello has the necessary vocal power to match the forces accompanying her, but the mix sometimes favours the instruments to the point of overpowering the voice. I find the brashness of the music at odds with my feeling for Dickinson’s words, but it is bracing to hear her poetry brought into the contemporary idiom. There are audible artifacts of live performance here and elsewhere, some emanating from the podium!

Notturno follows the pattern of Mercy, exploring relationships of pitches and tone within a limited frame, here juxtaposing a perfect fourth against a contrasting whole-tone dyad. Marchettini performs ably as soloist in his Concertino for Clarinet, an effective introspective addition to the contemporary rep for the instrument. The orchestra of the Manhattan School of Music mostly keeps their end of the bargain in these two pieces. Aere perpetuum is an homage to Marchettini’s compatriot colleague, Ennio Morricone; it alternates between melancholy and bombast.

Max Christie

JAZZ AND IMPROVISED MUSIC

Honeysuckle Rose
Aubrey Wilson Quartet
AW Music AWM001 (aubreywilsonmusic.com)

Vocal standards albums get a worse rap than they should. Sure, it can sometimes be monotonous to hear the same old songs sung by a vocalist who sounds like about a thousand other vocalists. However, I would argue that for every derivative example there’s an original take on the style, and the latter can be some of the more exhilarating music that exists. Aubrey Wilson and company’s renditions may help refresh the listener’s memory of what makes these standards so standard in the first place. In terms of staying faithful to the tunes, starting with the opener Nature Boy, it becomes pretty plain that this is a group that won’t allow the pressure to compromise their sound. The quartet of Wilson, pianist/arranger Chris Bruder, bassist Tom Altobelli and drummer Sean Bruce Parker have been going strong for nearly a decade and they have honed an effortlessly prodigious feel for each other. Bruder’s arrangements are tight, danceable and audacious. The band’s interpretive abilities are most notable during the melancholic title track, completely turning Fats Waller’s masterpiece on its head in a way that would almost be sacrilegious, if it didn’t work so well. That isn’t to say there are no bones thrown for the more traditional-leaning consumers, but even when the ensemble isn’t subverting, they’re grooving. Wilson constantly impresses, both with her improvisational savvy and chutzpah. Well executed all around.

Yoshi Maclear Wall

Monday Nights
Sophie Bancroft; Tom Lyne
LisaLeo Records LISALEO 0901 (bancroftlyne.com)

Scottish singer/songwriter/guitarist Sophie Bancroft and her husband, Canadian bassist/songwriter Tom Lyne, are respected UK-based musicians whose latest release was inspired by their weekly COVID-isolation, Monday night livestream sessions from their living room begun in spring 2020. The five originals and five covers here were recorded perfectly at Castlesound Studios.

The covers are their own very personal take of famous tunes. Highlights include Cole Porter’s You’d Be So Nice To Come Home To, with a moving bass backdrop supporting the virtuosic scat singing and subtle vocal back phrasing; and a happy and positive feel for their difficult times in their rendition of Lerner and Lowe’s On The Street Where You Live. Bancroft sounds like she is singing only to her husband in the folksier emotionally charged Tom Waits’ tune Grapefruit Moon.

Lyne’s composition, Far From Mars, is a great jazz tune featuring his electric bass playing. Wish it was longer!! Bancroft’s Fragile Moon is slow, peaceful and delicately performed. Her Miles Auclair is so COVID-isolation, with its storytelling lyrics about love at a distance and pitch leaps adding to the feeling of loneliness. Blue Room is mellow and enticing. Comfort, with more folkly sing-along qualities and repeated descending vocal melody, has a stress-busting calm, controlled feel.

Bancroft and Lyne are first-class jazz performers, improvisers and songwriters. Their performances here are upbeat, musical and subtle, and surprisingly made me totally forget our COVID outbreak isolation lockdown.

Yoshi Maclear Wall

Vegetables
Lina Allemano Four
Lumo Records (linalamano.com)

These two CDs, both recorded by jazz quartets in Toronto in winter 2020 at Union Sound Company, both featuring trumpeter Lina Allemano as a lead voice, suggest very different approaches to...
band formation and conception.

The Lina Allemano Four’s Vegetables is the sixth CD by a band that’s been together since 2005 without a change in personnel, still made up of alto saxophonist Brodie West, bassist Andrew Downing and drummer Nick Fraser. Allemano’s compositions are touchstones, brief but distinctive rhythmic and melodic patterns that shape some of the patterns of development, but the group is tied together by a telepathic understanding of one another’s spontaneous processes. On Brussel Sprouts, Maybe Cabbages, it’s hard to draw a line between composition and improvisation in West’s dancelike repeating figure, even more so when he and Allemano happily land on exactly the same spot. Much of the music is conversational collective improvisation, whether it’s West’s whispered lyricism, Allemano’s exploration of mutating timbres, Downing’s spontaneous counter melodies or Fraser’s creative rhythmic chatter. Then there are the inspirations. I’m not sure how one might make sonic distinctions between Onions, Champignons and Leafy Greens, but I know all three are organic and their precise forms vary from any one to another, functioning as metaphor for the group’s interwoven creative evolution.

A bassist may be the least conspicuous member of a band, usually the quietest, confined to a fundamental role, and often the last to solo. Bassist-composer Pete Johnston, however, stands out as his See Through 4’s one consistent element. Last year, the quartet – all first-rank Toronto musicians – released False Ghosts, Minor Fears. A year later, there’s another CD, but the other members have changed; while roles remain the same, the lead instruments have changed too. The place accorded saxophonist Karen Ng now belongs to trumpeter Lina Allemano; the choral element is no longer Marilyn Lerner’s piano but Michael Davidson’s vibraphone; drummer Jake Oelrichs replaces Nick Fraser. There’s little change in quality, but there’s a completely different collective sound, with trumpet and vibraphone bringing a brighter sonority, even a certain brassiness.

Those “permanent moving parts” are also the building blocks of Johnston’s evocative compositions. True to its title, Weathering Teenage Hopes is a study in evolution, Allemano’s melancholy trumpet initially accompanied by Johnston’s empathetic bass alone; Davidson eventually enters, the vibraphone’s bell-like brightness carrying the piece and the band to a certain comfortable groove, which continues right down to Allemano’s ebullient bursts and wandering, scintillating lines. Other pieces may eschew such narrative development, but Johnston’s compositions seem knitted from experience, expressing ambiguous states of mind, here conveniently named, whether it’s Everything Happens Once, Possible Daylight Dreams or the tone painting of Imperfect Sunlit Room. Allemano, Davidson and Oelrichs are here to provide colour, bringing each piece to life, but the forms and their patterns of development are definitely Johnston’s department.

Stuart Broomer

Proof BLOOP
Lumo Records (linaallemano.com)

► An awkward name for adroit innovators, BLOOP is actually Toronto trumpeter Lina Allemano extending her horn’s timbres with muted, percussion and whistling as well as having them live-processed with effects by Mike Smith. Playful, pugnacious and profound, the eight improvisations multiply and muck with textures so that Allemano often seems to be playing more than one horn simultaneously, with a singular mid-range narrative and at least one other tone squeaking and peeping at elevated pitches. Below and beside this are percussion additions created by her maracas-like shakes, cow bell raps, bolo-bar-like smacks and synthesized rumbles, which are concurrently inflated electronically in real time. The trumpet bell shoved against the mic or metal, plus mouthpiece sucking and tongue pops, add to the jolting progressive impact.

Digging deep into the horn’s body tube to produce growls and whines as on Recanting or propelling fluid melodies on tracks such as Actual Bloop, Allemano never really creates alone. Palimpsest-like, grainy processed pitches are always present, undulating below the narrative surface at the edge of hearing. She can dip to Taps-like ennui at points or inflate notes balloon-like to pressurized bubbles, but she – and Smith – never lose the thread of communicative connections.

Want Proof of this local trumpeter’s skill as a soloist? You’d do well to investigate BLOOP.

Ken Waxman

Reflections of the Invisible World
Colin Fisher
Halocline Trance HTRA017 (haloclinetrance.bandcamp.com)

► Colin Fisher has been a dynamic and industrious part of the Canadian music community for 20 years. He is a multi-instrumentalist with remarkable facility on saxophone, guitar, drums, electronics and other musical objects. With Brandon Valdivia he formed Not the Wind, Not the Flag, fronts the Colin Fisher Quartet and has played in many other groups and produced solo projects like his Gardens of the Unknowning. The new vinyl and digital-only release, Reflections of the Invisible World, is another solo project with Fisher playing guitar, saxophone and electronics. Each of the seven pieces creates its own sonic environment and the tone and architecture is determined by the structure of the electronic sounds. The guitar and saxophone performances waft amongst the walls and corridors of those sounds which are sometimes melodic, other times primarily rhythmic. Sulient Charm begins with a pulsing rhythm which develops into wafting, ephemeral melodies where the saxophone is barely discernible as a colour. Double Image has a moody, noir vibe with some edgy background sounds, while Fisher’s tenor saxophone plays great jazzy longer tones with just a touch of vibrato and eventually works into some full-blown wailing. It could be an updated Blade Runner soundtrack, though more experimental than Hollywood usually ventures. The sounds and shapes in Fisher’s album drift between ambient and arresting with each “reflection” offering its unique glimpse of another “invisible” world.

Ted Parkinson

Kind Mind
Josh Cole
Independent (kindmind.bandcamp.com/ album/kind-mind)

► Kind Mind is Josh Cole (bass), Karen Ng (alto saxophone) and Michael Davidson (vibraphone). Recorded live on January 4, 2020 at the Open Waters Festival in Halifax, the music wastes no time getting straight to the point. The opening track, Inside Voices, begins when you press play. There is no prolonged silence and no gradual introduction of each musical element. There is Cole alone for exactly a second, and then the ensemble takes off.

One thing that stood out for me is how effectively space and subtlety are used throughout the duration of this project. Despite being a trio, there are long stretches where only one or two instruments can be heard simultaneously. Phrases often seem deliberately tentative, and exclamations sometimes evaporate into question marks. Part of this phenomenon comes from impeccable listening on the part of all three players. The sparsity seems even more intentional when you hear the end of each idea, as the musicians step aside, allowing the person behind them to take centre stage. Karen Ng, especially, proves to be a master of restraint,
really only contributing texturally at many points, and her astonishing timing is really the adhesive that makes this recording so seamless. The group’s use of space allows for their improvisations to possess distinctive shape and structure, so that when Kind Mind goes full throttle the element of surprise is on their side.

Yoshi Maclear Wall

Surfboard
Brandi Disterheft
Justin Time JTR 8626-2 (justin-time.com)

► The theme of bassist-vocalist Brandi Disterheft’s fifth album as a leader, Surfboard, is ostensibly Brazilian jazz, but this writer finds the recording’s second underlying theme to be a love note to New York City. This could be a projection on my part, but hear me out, as it nonetheless provides an interesting lens through which to listen. Disterheft, special guest drummer Portinho, and pianist Klaus Mueller are all transplants to this “jazz mecca.” The move is a logical choice for many musicians, in this case Disterheft hailing from Canada, Mueller from Germany (via Asia and South America), and Portinho leaving Brazil in the 70s for the U.S. The second featured guest, Memphis born saxophone legend George Coleman, who made a name for himself playing with B.B. King, Ray Charles and later Coleman, who made a name for himself as I’m concerned, music doesn’t get much higher musical dimension. Takes a

or therapy. Trinidadian-born Toronto saxophonist Jesse Ryan’s debut recording as a leader can serve all of these purposes. As far as I’m concerned, music doesn’t get much more mood-enhancing than this. First and foremost, Ryan’s compositions are consistently melodious, melodicus and memorable. Perhaps too consistently, as singing out a highlight has proven to be a difficult

undertaking.

The music is never challenging per se, but Ryan shows an incredible range as a writer and evokes a variety of moods throughout. Each track is well thought out, and the amount of labour that went into the arranging is quite evident. The unison lines written for the rhythm section are a great touch, as they provide each passage with an extra layer of vitality. Overall, I find that the rhythm section is the main driving force behind what makes this music so mesmerizing. There are three guitarists on the record, each with distinct musical personalities that complement Ryan’s sound perfectly, in different ways. Vocalist Joanna Majoko also shines, especially her harmonizations on Zambian Offertory.

Ryan’s debut features an incredible roster, showcases his ingenious approach to songwriting and is profoundly enjoyable. It is everything a debut should be.

Yoshi Maclear Wall

Arancina
David Restivo Trio
Chronograph Records CR-082 (chronographrecords.com/releases/arancina)

► Arancina is jazz pianist and composer David Restivo’s album about “meditations on home” and includes stops in Italy (Sicilian Suite), Nova Scotia (Raven’s Wing) and more metaphorical inspirations like Baby Steps (based loosely on Coltrane’s Giant Steps) and It’s You or No One (a standard which showcases his “bebop roots”). There are also two songs co-written with Fawn Fritzen (and featuring her exquisite vocals). Kintsugi and Bittersweet Goodbye originally appeared on Fritzen’s own release, How to Say Sorry and Other Lessons.

Arancina’s strengths include its originality, diversity of the works and the supportive musical family Restivo has collected to perform. Some highlights include Sicilian Suite which has four movements exemplifying different scenes inspired by travelling through that area: Train to Catania begins with a lilting and circular melody and works into some fast and nuanced keyboard gymnastics, as if the train is picking up speed. It then has a rest stop with a thoughtful bass solo from Jim Vivian before returning to the melody. Palermo Street Scenes does a great job of reflecting the busy bustle of an urban centre and begins and ends with invigorating drum solos from Alyssa Falk.

Kintsugi – the Japanese word for repairing pottery – is a beautiful meditation which delicately and poetically extends that image to describe a failing relationship and hope for

Relive the Moment
Larnell Lewis
Independent LLM 002 (larnellewismusic.com)

► Born and raised here in Toronto, internationally famed drummer Larnell Lewis has released a scintillatingly snazzy new album of funk and neo-soul goodness that has the power to bring any listener right out of the day-to-day rut brought on by everything that’s going on in the world right now. Featuring legends such as fellow Snarky Puppy band members Mark Lettieri and Shaun Martin, as well as renowned names like Robi Botos and Rich Brown, the album has a star-studded lineup that carries Lewis’ compositions to new heights. The record acts as a “reimagining of six compositions from [his] debut album In The Moment,” in Lewis’ own words, with most pieces having updated drum tracks recorded and only one composition being completely new.

Right off the bat, the first track, Rejoice, starts the listener off on a funk-filled journey with Andrew Stewart’s catchy bass line and Lettieri’s soulful guitar riffs taking us to a higher musical dimension. No Access takes a different turn, diving full force into modern jazz with soaring trumpet melodies courtesy of William Sperandei and Botos’ pianistic skills being brought clearly to the forefront throughout the fast-paced piece. Closing out the album is the aforementioned new composition, The Forgotten Ones, a piece that is essentially one long drum solo showcasing the drummer’s percussive talents and highlighting an Afro-Caribbean drum groove that serves as a fitting end to a stunning collection of compositions.

Kati Killaspea

Bridges
Jesse Ryan
FWE Culture (jesseryanmuzik.com)

► People call upon music for a multitude of reasons. Those reasons can take the form of motivation, social fulfilment, spirituality, intellectual stimulation and/
an artful rebuilding of love. Restivo balances a fine jazzy solo with an accompaniment that throws in some subtle pop licks; and Restivo even provides a nice harmony vocal part. Arancina is an Italian snack which can include different combinations of ingredients, so it is an apt metaphor for this compelling collection of music and musicians.

Ted Parkinson

Dreaming: The Prague Sessions
Allan Gilliland
James Campbell; PJ Perry; Chris Andrew;
Neil Swainson; Dave Laing; Prague
FILHarmonic Orchestra; Raymond Baril
Bent River Records BRR-202001CD
(allangilliland.com)

Appraising through-composed music with an improviser’s bent of mind can prove to be quite a daunting task, especially when composer and improvisers are separate entities. Allan Gilliland is, however, eminently qualified to make this work with first-hand knowledge of both aspects of the musical process. This he certainly does on Dreaming: The Prague Sessions, featuring a Canadian quintet and the Prague FILHarmonic Orchestra.

Dreaming of the Masters I and Dreaming of the Masters IV suggest that Gilliland is drawn to the heritage of jazz music from New Orleans Second Line to swing and the legendary idiom of bebop. But these compositions are much more than trace elements of historic African American music melded together with orchestral music. Gilliland also makes clever use of contrafacts in Dreaming I, for instance, and he also goes further in Dreaming IV by building into that composition some very challenging rhythmic variations.

While Gilliland had access to an orchestra of conservatory-trained musicians adept at reading, he also landed in Prague with a highly literate Canadian jazz quintet comprising clarinetist James Campbell, saxophonist PJ Perry, pianist Chris Andrew, bassist Neil Swainson and drummer Dave Laing. Both quintet and orchestra seem made for each other. The result is thoughtful, melodic soloing bolstered by superb ensemble playing. A considerable degree of balance and integration of melody, harmony and rhythm, of composition and improvisation, of exploration, individuality and tradition are also impressively maintained throughout.

Raul da Gama

The Jazz Composers Alliance Orchestra – Live at the BPC
JCA Orchestra; String Theory Trio
JCA Recordings JCA1805
(jazzcomposersalliance.org)

Founded in 1985, the Jazz Composers Alliance (JCA) Orchestra feeds off the inspirational energy of its founder and director, Darrell Katz. However, over the years it has also played host to an impressive roster of (other) composers from Muhal Richard Abrams to Wayne Horvitz, thus earning itself an impressive reputation for growing and enhancing the art of orchestral jazz music.

This live recording from the Berklee Performance Center features repertoire that is an extraordinary testament to the lengths to which this collective will go to bring each contemporary large-ensemble work to life, while blurring boundaries between genres and challenging its musicians to interpret music with a view to expressing what they play with idiomatic grace and power.

The performance is bookended by two compositions by Mimi Rabson: Romanople a mesmerizing and rhythmically challenging tale of the two cultures of Rome – Latin and Byzantine – and the rhapsodic Super Eyes – Private Heroes, which closes the set. Meanwhile, more magical moments come to life during each of the works in between; David Harris’ inspirational melding of jazz and the sounds of a gamelan orchestra on The Latest; Bob Pilkington’s The Sixth Snake that marks his 60th birthday, Japanese Kanreki-style; Harris’ mystical Orange, Yellow, Blue which pays tribute to composer and revolutionary conductor Butch Morris; and Katz’s reworking of his iconic composition A Wallflower in the Amazon, a remarkable musical setting of the late Paula Tatarunis’ poem, eloquently sung, aria-like, by Rebecca Shrimpton. A rather compelling album indeed.

Raul da Gama

Togetherness Music For 16 Musicians
Alexander Hawkins
Intakt CD361 (intaktrec.ch)

A six-part work composed by British pianist Alexander Hawkins, Togetherness Music synthesizes multiple methodologies, from free improvisation to orchestral composition, with Aaron Holloway-Nahum conducting an ensemble that includes the string quintet Riot Ensemble, several improvising soloists of note and a further assortment of strings, winds, percussion and electronics. A distinguished improviser himself, Hawkins appreciates the distinct qualities of his soloists, sometimes matching complex, varied improvisations against clarifying structural elements.

The opening movement, Indistinguishable from Magic, begins with one of Evan Parker’s spectacular soprano saxophone solos, combining circular breathing with multiphonics to suggest a flock of birds in a dome. He’s eventually joined by a cluster of electronics and strings that gradually ascend in pitch, creating tremendous tension. Sea No Shore foregrounds the varied timbres and attacks of percussionist Mark Sanders and trumpeter Percy Pursglove with a series of brief and melodic string figures that later reappear fully developed in Ensemble Equals Together. Hawkins wittily plays with expectations in Leaving the Classroom of a Beloved Teacher, setting his own kinetic piano improvisation against a wobbling “walking bass” with uneven rhythms and spontaneously determined pitches played by the Riot Ensemble with additional bass and cello. The composed materials of Ensemble Equals Together return in the concluding segment, layered with improvisations.

Compositions melding diffuse methodologies are increasingly common, but Hawkins’ effort is a fully realized work, a celebration of possibilities by a musician versed in diverse musical dialects who is finding new ground in the mix.

Stuart Broomer

Goebbels/Glass/Radigue
Erwan Keravec
Buda Musique cd 860368
(budamusique.com)

Having unshackled Breton bagpipes from its role in traditional music by creating settings for chorographers and dancers, improvising alongside free players and interpreting notated sounds, Erwan Keravec takes the next step and commissions works for solo bagpipe from modern composers. This CD preserves his newest iterations as the French innovator premieres dedicated originals from German composer Heiner Goebbels (N2/o/58), French composer Éliane Radigue (OCCAM OCEAN OCCAM XXVI); and recasts for bagpipes American composer Philip Glass’ piano continuum Two Pages.

Goebbels’ piece is the most challenging since it was recorded outdoors with Keravec’s stridently pitched drones and eerie chanter whistles sharing space with, and reacting to, aleatoric insertions of pouring rain and thunder claps. As focused bagpipe variations trill, the percussive external forces are solidly subsumed by Keravec’s shaking drone.
Bagpipe buzzing is omnipresent on Radigue’s extended composition as well, since the initial crackling textures are soon replaced by a sturdy drone which undulates without pause, until a brief final transformation into a more distant dissident motif. Glass’ repetitive theme is craftily adapted to bagpipes with Keravec using the properties of the instrument’s airtight bag to continuously echo the note pattern. Eventually, by also emphasizing the bottom drone, he enlivens the initial theme with fiddle-like sweeps, adding kinetics to minimalism.

Creating a unique and compelling solo recital, the bagpiper confirms the 21st-century shibboleth that any instrument can actually perform any type of music.

Ken Waxman

**Prickly Tenacity Sublime Sensations; Serracapriola - Live**

Klaus Treuheit Trio with Lou Grassi

Independent KPMP 2020 CDD

(klaustreuheit.de)

- The physical qualities of time – that indefinite, continuous progress of existence from past to future – seem ever-present in the conception and execution of the art of Klaus Treuheit. You hear it in the sound and silent spaces of his soundscapes, as the black dots of the page leap and gambol in linear and elliptical arcs, propelled forever forward.

- A highly imaginative thinker, Treuheit utilizes form and space to innovatively develop musical architecture seemingly created in spectral dimensions.

- Sound also has a natural momentum in Treuheit’s world; dynamism seems to grow out of his atomic pianistic pulses. All of this is superbly reflected in the music of Prickly Tenacity/Sublime Sensations and Serracapriola - Live, a double album he shares with the deeply empathetic percussion-colourist Lou Grassi, who sounds as if he has a similar philosophical bent of mind.

- Treuheit is also supported on Prickly Tenacity/Sublime Sensations (the first of the two discs) by Georg Wissel who is known to be a master of sculpting compressed air by means of reeds and other devices. Grassi plays drums, cymbals and miscellaneous percussion on this trio disc. The repertoire here is split between the six movements constituting Prickly Tenacity, followed by four sections that form Sublime Sensations. A kind of invisible propulsive force shapes the massive architecture of the music.

- Grassi and Treuheit return to perform an extended, live duet in Serracapriola (disc two). This improvised musical dialogue, is created in the spur of the moment by two like-minded artists. Grassi bends and shapes time with sticks, mallets and brushes, alternately caressing the skins and stirring up moments of rumble and thunder on a myriad of drums and orchestral timpani, his phrases often punctuated by the sizzle and swishing of cymbals. Treuheit joins in the proceedings on an organ producing cascades of tumbling arpeggios, great wheezing, thumping chords and short stabbing gestures which punctuate the music. Together, the musicians challenge us to listen, with wide-open ears, to music that references the past, but is rooted in the moment, while all the time charging relentlessly into the future.

- This is truly impactful and memorable music by Grassi and Treuheit (with Wissel’s contributions on disc one). It is an idiomantic musical palimpsest; a triumph of time created with uncommon musicality and delivered in performances of monolithic, yet superbly dynamic power.

Raul da Gama

**Molecular**

James Brandon Lewis Quartet

Intakt CD 350 (intaktrec.ch)

- With musical impulses directed towards both exploratory improvisation and the modern mainstream, tenor saxophonist James Brandon Lewis seems destined to be one of jazz’s defining musicians during the next decade. On Molecular, the Buffalo-born saxophonist’s 11 originals work within the standard quartet configuration of piano (ArzuÁn Ortiz), bass (Brad Jones) and the percussion of his long-time associate Chad Taylor, following the double helix concept expressed in varied rhythms and harmonies.

- More esoteric in theory than practice, frequent walking bass lines and drum backbeat keep the tunes ambulatory and chromatic, while on one tune does a tinge of Ortiz’s Cuban background affect his comping. What’s more, Lewis’ reed excursions usually remain as flutter tongued sheets of sound, with smears and vibrations extending the melodies. Though many tunes flourish with a steady groove and recapped heads, the composer also displays his command of atmospheric and mercurial writing. In fact, An Anguish Deported is the most outside track, with Ortiz kinetically smashing bottom-pitched notes while swirling elevated tones, Jones projecting isolated buzzes, Taylor popping reverbounds with Lewis shrieking split tones ricocheting from doits to scoops with plenty of echoes. More restrained in development, Helix also stands out since its powerful theme stretches far enough to allow for defining solo breaks from each quartet member.

- Swinging, sensible and stopping.

**POT POURRI**

Ayelit Rose Gottlieb – 13 Lunar Meditations: Summoning the Witches

Ayelit Rose Gottlieb; Jay Clayton; Choeur Luna; DB Boyko

Orchard of Pomegranites (ayele.t.bandcamp.com/yum)

- Jerusalem-born, Montreal-based composer and vocalist Ayelit Rose Gottlieb’s latest release is a landmark, female-centric project with breathtaking scope. Gottlieb approached over 20 women and girls from around the world, and asked them to contribute their poetry, with a loose theme of the moon as a female symbol. Co-producers Gottlieb and DB Boyko have also included an improvisational choir and the talents of acclaimed free-jazz vocalist/educator Jay Clayton. With poetic and musical contributions from nine different countries, this compelling project is an acoustic exploration focusing on the moon and our relationship to it. Gottlieb has said, “The moon speaks to the universal and to the intimate female presence.”

- Boyko also serves as conductor here, and the double LP was expertly recorded by Padraig Buttner-Schnirler. The impressive musicians include Eylem Basaldi on Turkish violin, Aram Bajakian on guitar, Stéphane Diamantakiou on acoustic bass and Ivan Bamford on drums. The improvisational Choeur Luna is comprised of a number of guest voices in combination with the Joker Choir, Elements Choir and Choeur Maha. Of the 13 works, first up is Lotte and the Moon, with poetry by New Zealand’s Anna Small, in which Gottlieb and Clayton negotiate their entwined voices around quirky, soulful, exotic motifs and mesmerizing percussion work. A true highlight is Venus and the Moon, with poetry by Australia’s Bes Davies. A lilting melody, Gottlieb’s delightful vocal, a stirring bass solo by Diamantakiou and some sweet spoken words make this track highly memorable.

- Patience, with poetry by Turkey’s Sems-i Tebrizi, evokes visceral images of jinn moving through skeleton-like trees, while spirits and desires form out of mist and moon glow. Moon Over Gaza/Almost Summer/I Come From There, with poetry by Israelis and Palestinians, is a groovy, bop-ish, irresistible, three-movement piece, in which Clayton shines. The song cycle is punctuated by tasty
guitar licks from Bajakian that eventually metastasize into a primal scream for mutual human respect and oneness.

Lesley Mitchell-Clarke

A Muffled Snore
Friendly Rich; David Sait; (An) Eel
Independent (friendlyrich.bandcamp.com/album/a-muffled-snore)

Three Ontario artists collaborate in this exciting COVID isolation-time project of 12 attention-grabbing, twisted, out of this world contemporary tracks.

This is strange, dreamy, dramatic and intriguing music. Friendly Rich speaks and sings ten tracks composed by musician David Sait to daidyst lyrics/texts by (An) Eel. Creepy opening track, The Dainty Dandies, features Rich's resonant spoken text, Sait's 12 -string guzheng and closing sound effects, opening the sonic door to the subsequent tracks which also include piano, guitar and percussion. Grumpy vocals and tempo-setting, single-tone strings drive Dig. Eerie Higgily Piggily Rig answers my question of what COVID-19 sounds like with low -pitched words, taps and echo effects. Loud, disturbing Lick Your Eyeballs has such angry spoken words as “I wanna taste the dirt” reinforced by Sait’s held sonic sounds and effects. Dramatic closing track Take Time reinforces the previous tracks' sounds with more clear spoken words, string vibrations, electronic sounds and tonal touches until the so memorable closing line “Will always love you.”

(An) Eel performs lyrics by Friendly Rich, set to music by Friendly Rich and Cheldon Paterson, on two tracks. Love the extremely avantgarde You Smelt It. We Dealt It with its delicious crunchy potato-chips-munching sound effects, low vocals and string twangs, heavy metal touches and short “flavourful” sung melodies.

As Sait wrote: “We all recorded alone in separate locations and corresponded online.” Their combined creative musical, performance and technological expertise make this a unique must listen!

Ttina Kilk

El Curruchá
Eliana Cuevas featuring Aquiles Báez
Alma Records (almarecords.com)

With her sixth release, luminous Toronto vocalist and composer, Eliana Cuevas, has crafted a celebration of Venezuelan music and culture – replete with fresh, creative, acoustic arrangements of much-loved Venezuelan popular songs. This song collection (from primarily the past 30 to 50 years) reflects traditional Venezuelan music as Cuevas experienced it on the radio, and in singing and playing with her family and friends growing up. A solitary voice and solo instrument duo is a bold choice – but a powerful one, and is a manifestation of the type of recording, instrumentation and content that Cuevas had envisioned. In an inspired pairing, Cuevas is joined by iconic, internationally respected Venezuelan guitarist, composer and national hero, Aquiles Báez.

The title track has special meaning for Cuevas, in that her late father frequently grabbed his cuatro and launched into this tune at family gatherings. Written in 1928 by Juan Bautista Plaza, this folk song was written in the joropo tradition, and is presented here at a quicksilver pace with Cuevas and Báez flying through space-time. Cuevas’ breath-taking vocal skill takes the listener on a roller-coaster ride of emotions and intensity. Flor de Mayo is heartbreaking beautiful and Caramba easily conveys its message of melancholy passion. Among the 13 delights here (well-produced by Jeremy Ledbetter), Báez has contributed one original tune, the delightful San Rafael (one of the most exciting tracks on the recording), and Cuevas contributed a fresh, more elemental version of her previously recorded composition, Un Pedacito de tu Corazón.

Other triumphs include Acidito, where Cuevas' sumptuous, warm, pitch-perfect voice and stunning, sibilant Spanish connects with Báez's sonorous and dynamic guitar work on every level. The musical, interpretive and artistic skill of Cuevas and Báez on this recording surpasses any written descriptives, and welcomes us “con un abrazo grande” to lavish in the full spectrum of the diverse musics of Venezuela.

Lesley Mitchell-Clarke

Tonight We Sail
Sue Smith and The Potion Kings
Independent SS002 (suesmith.ca)

Singer and songwriter Sue Smith is an accomplished and multi-faceted artist based in Guelph, Ontario. Together with remarkable instrumentalists The Potion Kings, a collaboration of contrasts develops on Tonight We Sail, where her attractive, reserved vocal presentation receives fluent and sometimes even aggressive backing. For example, in the introspective If I Am Sleeping, masterful electric guitar work builds up the song through an increasingly fiery night world to daylight and renewal. Nine of the 11 songs are original. Musically they source familiar genres of blues, rock and pop, but here they are also adorned in striking clothes and evoke unusual time frames. Patient, spare lyrics are given plenty of time in their musical settings to reverberate in the listener’s mind.

On the opening track, Night Skies, images of nature gradually accumulate toward the refrain – “Night skies, come closer” – which binds the song together and reinforces its hypnotic feel. The images are archetypal and we can, without difficulty, place our own experiences around them. One of my favourite songs is You Come Calling, an affecting, spiritual track with searching lyrics given an extra edge by indistinct fuzz-tone support. The last two songs, Beloved, Scorned and Church of Beauty also seem oriented to a spiritual journey. It took a while, but I find the disc grows on me and look forward to more from Sue Smith and The Potion Kings: Jeff Bird, Kevin Brett, Randall Coryell and Howie Southwood. Highly recommended.

Roger Knox

Concert note: Sue Smith and The Potion Kings celebrate the release of Tonight We Sail in a digital event from the River Run Centre in Guelph on March 26 at 8pm.

Welcome to the Garden
Emily Steinwall
Independent (emilysteinwall.bandcamp.com/album/welcome-to-the-garden)

There is much depth to this album, yet the second time I listened to it I nearly missed it. This is not because the content is forgettable, nor is it the result of a vignette-type album that lacks the stamina to round out an 80-minute CD length, rather it’s a testament to the curation of the recording’s seven intriguing, yet smooth, tracks. I am thinking more of the production and programming when I say smooth, as the tracks presented contain far more depth than the type of music we tend to associate with smoothness. That being said, the instance in which I “nearly missed” this album was a result of being preoccupied with some household tasks. To fit this much artistry into a release that can also be enjoyed in a casual background context speaks volumes about the mastermind behind it: Emily Steinwall.

I have known Steinwall’s saxophone playing and brief forays into singing for close to a decade now, so it is exciting to hear her original compositions and ample vocal chops shine on this debut release. Excellent programming results in two of my favourite songs being the title track and the closer, Courage My Love, which fades into a lovely half-minute soundscape of birdsongs. Exactly what we need to hear in the middle of a dark pandemic winter, but I would recommend listening any time!

Sam Dickinson

I/ R
**Something in the Air**

Guitar-oriented Sessions String Together Sounds in Varied Fashions

KEN WAXMAN

Despite the growth of computer and Internet-related sound production, the guitar in all its manifestations arguably remains the world’s most popular instrument. But its universal appeal also creates almost boundless opportunities to use the six-string instrument in unique ways. This is especially true when it comes to creating alongside other players, most frequently in jazz and improvised music, as these sessions demonstrate.

The most straightforward application of the electric guitar as a sound-colouring agent occurs with the improvisation on the Lisbon-recorded *Anthropic Neglect* (Clean Feed CF 551 CD cleanfeedrecords.com) where Jorge Nuno adds his psychedelic, contorted string motifs to what otherwise would be extrapolated jazz-like instigations from saxophonist José Lencastre, electric bassist Felipe Zenicola and drummer João Valinho. The result is a program midway between free and fusion. Prime instance of this synthesis is on the concluding *Concept 3* where the saxophonist’s high-pitched horizontal exposition is interrupted by jagged string stabs and buzzing frails from the guitarist. Backed by bass thumps and cymbal echoes, Nuno’s and Lencastre’s output moves in and out of aural focus with jet-plane-barrier-breaking flanges, pressurized strums abut snake-charmer-like reed trills and split tone variables before reaching a final confluence. This arrangement is broached on earlier tracks as the guitarist’s flying jet plane-like noises frequently interrupt irregularly vibrated reed bleats or hulking saxophone multiphonics which swirl, echo and vibrate against guitar frails and fills. Finally loosened, arena-rock-like note shredding from Nuno reaches a climax alongside shaking altissimo spews from Lencastre. Still the expansion into multi-timbres during singular solos signals that this is a head-expanding not head-banging meeting.

Coming from another angle is a trio made up of French guitarist Serge Lazarevitch plus Belgians, drummer Teun Verbruggen and saxophonist/flutist Ben Slijis on *Still Three, Still Free* (Rat Records Rat 046 teunverbruggen.bandcamp.com). It balances on the thin lines separating pop, jazz and even notated music, with interpretation of themes by Thelonious Monk, Ornette Coleman, François Couperin and György Ligeti mixed with light swing originals, either composed by Lazarevitch or group improvisations. Although all three have experience in big band, combo and even rock-designated projects, the CD’s 12 tracks are probably lighter than they imagined. Unlike Nuno, Lazarevitch, at least here, is a finger-styled guitarist whose pacing owes more to Jim Hall than Jimi Hendrix. Overall the most rhythmically moving tracks are Monk’s *Evidence* and Coleman’s *Law Years*, with the first a jumping foot tapper amplified with low-pitched string strums, hurried drums pops and slippery saxophone vibrations that extend to a slowed-down ending. *Law Years* maintains its blues bass through multiple variations contrasting the guitarist’s supple fingers and the saxophonist’s heavier slurs. Meanwhile, the bows toward concert music are given unique arrangements; Couperin’s *Les Bucicades Mystérieuses* becomes an exercise in folksy smoothness, not unlike the other brief tone poems on the disc, while Lazarevitch’s homage to Ligeti, *Georgy on My Mind* (sic) is most notable for how the crackle of Verbruggen’s electronics makes a languid connection with the simple theme expansion from saxophone and guitar. The other originals are most notable for how Verbruggen tempers his usual rock-like energy to fit in with the guitarist’s more delicate comping that atmospherically expands and contracts riffs. The three turn Lazarevitch’s *It Should Have Been a Normal Day* into a gracious bossa nova whose lilt comes as much from the saxist’s logical and light blowing as the expansive string patternning. Even when the trio touches on atonality, as on the improvised *Empty Space*, rim clanks and reed squeaks are secondary to guitar plinks, with the piece ending as a call-and-response connection between strings and reed.

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**African Routes**

**Al Qahwa Ensemble**

Independent AlQahwa02 (alqahwa.ca)

Talented world music group, Al Qahwa Ensemble, has just released their third exceptional recording. The diverse musicians are all based in Toronto: Maryem Toller on vocals and riqq (Arabic tambourine) and qanun (Arabic table harp); Ernie Toller on wind instruments; Greek/Canadian Demetri Petsalakis on oud (Arabic fretless lute) and Iranian/Canadian Nagmeh Farahmand on Middle-Eastern percussion. The group’s esteemed special guests include Waleed Abdulhamid, Fethi Nadjem and Roula Said.

The program begins with *Marrakesh* – which was inspired by the all-female ensemble, B’Net Marrakesh. Having seen them perform, Maryem utilized their unique chant “Hey Hey Hey Hey” in this piece, which instigates an incendiary energy through call and response, hypnotic rhythms and dynamic, mesmerizing vocals. Also thrilling instigates an incendiary energy through chant “Hey Hey Hey Hey” in this piece, which them perform, Maryem utilized their unique ensemble, B’Net Marrakesh. Having seen Abdulhamid, Fethi Nadjem and Roula Said. This is especially true when it comes to creating alongside other players, most frequently in jazz and improvised music, as these sessions demonstrate.

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**Lesley Mitchell-Clarke**

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In another variation on comprehensive sound additions, Swede David Stackenäs gives the Ballrogg trio a new sound when he adds folk-traditional variations to the already Arcadian sounds of Norwegians, clarinetist Klaus Ellerhusen Holm’s and bassist Roger Arntzen’s duo on Rolling Ball (Clean Feed CF 558 CD cleanfeedrecords.com). Working with an intu-pective interface, Arntzen’s fluid pulse is the secret weapon here giving the selections enough understated oomph so that Holm’s and Stackenäs’ sometime harmonized and sometime singular motifs become neither overly soporific or unconscionably spiky. With most of the tracks oriented towards pastoral reflections characterized by wispy or sour clarinet splutters and off-centre, but complementary, twangs, Collage Casual and Miami Weekend stand out since staccato dynamics are more evident, but without upsetting the program’s flow. On the former, the duo’s counterpoint takes the form of clarion clarinet shrills and sluicing guitar strokes locked in a stop-time do-si-do, anchored by rhythmic double-bass pumps. Even more bracing, Miami Weekend nearly attains folk-rock power as speedy electrified output from Stackenäs meets up with equivalent allegro flutter-tonguing from Holm’s reed refections.

One deciding test of a guitarist’s adaptability as a responsive improviser is when he or she goes on one on another instrumentalist. This is especially true for Swiss guitarist Florian Stoffner on Tetratet (ezz-theletics 1026 hathut.com) where his six-strings and amplifier are matched against the drum set, cymbals and gongs of German percussionist Paul Loven, who was working alongside free music mavens like Evan Parker and Alexander von Schlippenbach before Stoffner was born. Luckily this in-the-moment live session, captured exactly as it evolved, is simpatico. During the brief four-part dialogue the guitarist concentrates on spiky twangs and metallic clangs, created by taps or hand pressure on the strings and often strumming below the bridge or high up on the neck.

Old Wine, New Bottles
Fine Old Recordings Re-Released

BRUCE SURTEES

I was not surprised when I searched for Percy Grainger in Amazon to be faced with so many pages of CDs devoted to this ex-pat Australian composer. In addition to this, Chandos has issued The Complete Grainger Edition (CHAN 20196(21) naxosdirect.com/search/chan+20196) on 21 CDs at a special price to commemorate the 60th anniversary of his death with definitive new recordings.

As a composer, he was largely self-taught and he wrote some larger works including an imaginary ballet, The Warriors, and instantly attractive, beautifully crafted works in various forms. In the age of AM radio, every station had a library of Grainger’s recordings to please and reward their listeners’ attention. Listeners recognized the tunes and many became Grainger fans. His works fall into these groups: works for orchestra; for chorus; for voice and piano; for piano solo and four hands; and chamber music. As expected, these groups have sub-groups, all of which are contained here in performances that are idio-matic and reflect an esprit de corps in this most welcome project.

One of the more interesting recording labels is SOMM, situated in Surrey, England. Many long years ago we looked to SOMM for resurrecting out-of-print perform-ances conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham, Hamilton Harty, Constant Lambert and others. Recently SOMM has been responsible for a host of CDs of irreplaceable performances by contralto Kathleen Ferrier and here is another, 20th Century British Treasures (SOMM Ariadne 5100 somm-recordings.com). These are settings of 28 verses written by Tennyson, Rossetti, Keats, Shakespeare, Brooke, Robert Duncan and many others including St. Teresa of Ávila and the Psalms. The composers are Parry, Quilter, Vaughan Williams, Stanford, Bridge, Warlock, Jacobson, Rubbra, Wordsworth and Ferguson. These are for voice and piano plus two with orchestra, Britten’s Flower Song and Berkeley’s Four Poems. The initial audition became an unexpected 80-minute session of simply listening for pleasure. There is Ferrier’s presence in every phrase in these fine-sounding recordings made by Decca and the BBC between 1946 and 1952. She was and remains a treasure.

So, who was Percy Grainger? What kind of music did he write?

George Percy Aldridge Grainger was born in Brighton, Victoria, Australia on July 8, 1882 and died in White Plains N.Y. on February 20, 1961. He studied piano for five years with his brother who was a professional teacher and then in Melbourne with Louis Pabst. When he was ten, he gave a series of recitals that earned him the money to study in Germany. From 1894 to 1900 he was a pupil of James Kwast in Frankfurt and following this he had some instruction from Busoni in Berlin. Think of that: he worked with Busoni! He made some appear-
ances conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham, Hamilton Harty, Constant Lambert and others. Recently SOMM has been responsible for a host of CDs of irreplaceable performances by contralto Kathleen Ferrier and here is another, 20th Century British Treasures (SOMM Ariadne 5100 somm-recordings.com). These are settings of 28 verses written by Tennyson, Rossetti, Keats, Shakespeare, Brooke, Robert Duncan and many others including St. Teresa of Ávila and the Psalms. The composers are Parry, Quilter, Vaughan Williams, Stanford, Bridge, Warlock, Jacobson, Rubbra, Wordsworth and Ferguson. These are for voice and piano plus two with orchestra, Britten’s Flower Song and Berkeley’s Four Poems. The initial audition became an unexpected 80-minute session of simply listening for pleasure. There is Ferrier’s presence in every phrase in these fine-sounding recordings made by Decca and the BBC between 1946 and 1952. She was and remains a treasure.
Making full use of unattached cymbals and gongs, tonal springiness adds an energetic dimension to Lovens’ drumming. At the same time he counters harsh string frails with shimmering ratchets and occasionally, as on the third section, turns from his evolving pulse to challenge Stoffner’s emphasized fingering with a solid bass drum plop. Circling one another with emphasized tones during these improvisations, the two finally settle on a climax of affiliated rumbles and bumps from Lovens and folksy frails and picking from Stoffner.

A novel challenge faced by an improvising guitarist is when the pulsations and resonations are generated electronically, which is what transpires on Pavilion (UnSounds 65U CD unsounds.com). Created in a studio/pavilion that was part of the Venice Art Biennale, British guitarist Andy Moor and his longtime musical associate, Cypriot composer Yannis Kyriakides, using computers and a collection of synthesizers, incorporate spatial dimensions and (luckily silent) input from the crowds moving in and out of the pavilion as they play. Self-contained during six selections, the two concentrate on contrapuntal motifs suggested by synthesizer hisses, pseudo-percussion whacks and bell-ringing timbres to colour the duet as Moor’s solid frails and jiggling plinks sound out straight-ahead expositions. On Camera, the first track, the exposition threatens to break into the hands of inventive musicians, the possibilities for innovation can be endless.

There are times when I am of the mind that Tchaikovsky is the greatest, especially when listening to the ballets, the six numbered symphonies, Manfred and the concertos. I am listening, for the umpteenth time, to the last three symphonies, this time in a budget reissue Kubelik conducts Tchaikovsky – The Last Symphonies with the Vienna Philharmonic (Urania WS 121.391 naxos-direct.com search.ws121391). The enthusiastic performances by the orchestra are polished and dynamic. These thrilling recordings from 1960 are thoroughly recommendable. Possibly EMI originals. There is a bonus... a passionate Romeo and Juliet Overture from 1955. A first-class bargain. I should mention that these Urania CDs are made in Italy and are the finest quality.

Fans of Herbert von Karajan will be surprised and delighted at the works in a new budget-priced 2CD set titled Karajan Rare Documents. Compiled by Urania (WS 121-389 naxosdirect.com/search/ws121389), it presents the late maestro in, not his usual staples, but performances of works new to his enormous recorded repertoire. Heinrich Sutermeister (1910-1956) was a Swiss composer best known for his opera Romeo und Julia. We hear his Missa da Requiem as performed in Rome on November 21, 1953. The soloists are Elizabeth Schwarzkopf and bass Giorgio Tadeo with the RAI Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. The work is cast in the usual sequence of Introitus, Dies Irae, Offertorium, Sanctus and Agnus Dei. The performance is intense, with the large, full-throated chorus in perfect ensemble and what amounts to duets between the soloists in the final movement. The mono sound is impressive with a you-are-there perspective. Next up on this most unusual collection is the William Walton Symphony No.1 with the same orchestra on December 5, 1953, followed by Giorgio Federico Ghedini’s Musica da Concerto per Viola e Orchestra with soloist Bruno Giuranna from the same date. Finally, from Berlin in 1963, the Berlin Philharmonic in Hans Werner Henze’s Antifone. Unfortunately there are no liner notes enclosed, not a word beyond the performance dates.

Josef Lhévinne was a Russian-American pianist who was one of, or as his contemporaries openly avowed, the finest of his generation. Born in Oriol (near Moscow) in 1874, he was the ninth of 11 children of Arkady Levin, a trumpet player. Josef was already playing the piano at the age of three. At a gathering when aged 11 he played Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata and the Liszt transcription of the Pilgrims’ March from Tamishäuser. Present at the soiree was the Grand Duke Constantine who asked the young pianist if he wanted to study at the Moscow Conservatory. Upon an enthusiastic reply, the Duke influenced a wealthy munificent banker to make it so and Lhévinne became a pupil of Vasily Safonov. He received daily lessons that dramatically transformed his whole approach to piano playing. Josef graduated from the conservatory – where his colleagues and fellow students included Rachmaninoff and Scriabin – in 1892 with the gold medal.

He made his American debut on January 27, 1906 playing with the Russian Symphony Orchestra. When he began playing in Europe, his manager altered the spelling of his name to Lhévinne, to sound a lot less Jewish. Josef insisted though, that it was to be pronounced Lay-VEEN. There is a wealth of biographic material in the liner notes... too many events to cover here including interment during WWI and the events that led him to teach at Juilliard in NYC.

Marston Records has meticulously restored all the known recordings of this legendary figure, including all the published discs and private recordings, in the best possible sound on The Complete Josef Lhévinne (53023-2 marstonrecords.com). The earliest performance we have is from December 1920 – recorded by American Pathé in New York – of the Trepak from Tchaikovsky’s Op.72. Acoustic and non-electric, we can quite clearly hear every note, albeit bathed in the expected 78 rpm shellac sound. After three more tracks from Pathé recorded in successive years comes his first from marvellous Victor electrical recordings. On May 1, 1929 he recorded the Arabesques on Themes from the Beautiful Blue Danube followed by pieces by Schumann and Chopin. On this first disc his wife Rosina joins him in the first of four duets in Debussy-Ravel Fêtes and two versions of Mozart’s Sonata for Two Pianos K448 in two sets of masters recorded on the same day. Included on the second disc is the piano concerto K442 arranged for two pianos with John Barbirolli conducting the New York Philharmonic in 1939. In total there are 39 tracks of Mozart, Brahms, Schumann, Chopin, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff on these three discs, a must-have for collectors.
Toronto ‘woke leftist’?

Sounds like a plot for an opera

ROBERT HARRIS

Here’s a reminder for those of you who think we Canadians have no substantial international intellectual clout. You are wrong. So wrong. And how do I know? Because Le Monde, France’s leading newspaper, told me.

You see, Paris is up in arms these days because our Alexander Neef, now running the Paris Opera, has decided to stop ballet performances in blackface, and pledged to improve the racial balance in the makeup of members of his companies. He’s even wondered out loud whether certain pieces might be permanently retired from the Opera’s repertoire. (Please, take Madama Butterfly, please.) Everyone from the President of the Republic to the monstrous Marine Le Pen is beside themselves with alarm. “Woke, leftist ideas” they shudder, are from the President of the Republic to the monstrous Marine Le Pen is beside themselves with alarm. “Woke, leftist ideas” they shudder, are intruding into the rarefied world of French intellectual life.

But, as Le Monde pointed out, what can you expect? Neef spent more than a decade in Toronto, they note, where, clearly, his mind and soul were permanently debilitated. In other words, it’s not Neef’s fault he has been polluted with these new ideas. It’s our fault. Take a bow, Toronto, we are corrupting the whole world! And maybe, just maybe, the world is ready for it.

As expected, or at least hoped, the pandemic has encouraged musical institutions everywhere to reevaluate conventions, practices, repertoire and ways of thinking, decades, if not more than a century old. In mid-February, Anthony Tommasini, The New York Times’ chief music critic wrote a fascinating column espousing some of the same ideas we’ve been talking about here for months. He hoped out loud that when the pandemic finally runs its course, we wouldn’t just return to business as usual with symphonic music. He’s encouraging more creative presentation techniques, a less predictable, more nimble scheduling policy that would allow programs to be put in place weeks in advance of performance, rather than years, as is now the case. He wants to hear works by new composers, see more racial and gender balance in performers and creators – all in all, bear witness to a more responsive, more relevant art form.

Yes, even here, in bad old “woke, leftist” Toronto (who knew?), things seem to be pivoting as well. Two new appointments to major Canadian musical institutions suggest that changes in thinking in musical leadership are on the horizon. The first was the announcement in November of Perryn Leech, currently managing director of Houston Grand Opera, as Neef’s replacement as general director of the Canadian Opera Company, with a clear focus on community outreach and financial stability central to his mandate. But perhaps the more interesting hire was the appointment of Ellie Hisama to be dean of the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto, effective July 1.

According to her Columbia University bio, where she currently teaches, Hisama’s research and teaching “have addressed issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and the social and political dimensions of music.” She has published volumes on Ruth Crawford Seeger, and on hip-hop, and in her welcoming statement, she said that she was looking forward to “opening and leading conversations about how students, staff, faculty, alumni and administrators can work together towards greater diversity, equity and inclusion...”

A more comprehensive and bold statement of changing directions for the U of T faculty would be hard to find. Hisama’s appointment puts U of T firmly on a new footing as regards the presentation, repertoire and performance of classical music. And while it can be easy to chalk up such an appointment to “political correctness” (something of an intellectually lazy phrase), it’s important to note that the education system is by far the weakest link in the entire classical music superstructure. By and large, classical music education is intensely conservative, primarily because, as someone once brilliantly noted to me, students today are not learning their teachers’ technique, but their teachers’ teachers’ technique. In other words, most classical conservatories and faculties are rooted in ideas about music three or four generations old. And when you realize how few musicians ever think beyond what they learn in their student years (when many of them are still in their teens), it’s obvious that reform of music education is central to reform generally in classical music.

But what, you may ask, do issues of “diversity, equity and inclusion” have to do with ... the nuts and bolts of musical technique?
Well, if you've read any of the “new” musicology over the past 30 or 40 years, you'll know the answer is: quite a lot. Hidden deep within what we think are socially and musically neutral aspects of classical music are many, many structures and ways of thinking about the art that are highly political and socially distinct, very much of their own time, not of all time.

Exposing these taken-for-granted ideas about music to the light of contemporary analysis does many things at once - and one of them is to produce fresher, more animated, better performances. Better by current standards. Sort of what happened when the fresh wind of period performance practice blew the cobwebs off the previously stultifying conventions of Baroque music-making back in the 1970s and 80s.

That is to say, the main reason to make diversity, equity and inclusion the goals for a music faculty – other than the obvious moral worth of the undertaking in and of itself – is to expand the range and breadth of what is considered valuable and beautiful in music. It’s an aesthetic argument in the end, not a social one. Or both equally. Art will die if excellence isn’t its watchword, but excellence is not a singular, uniform concept. Excellence dies if dancers or players or composers are denied opportunities to exhibit their excellence because they have the wrong skin colour or gender. Excellence dies when creators are not encouraged to express themselves because their means of expression fall outside a very narrowly defined universe of acceptable creative avenues. The social and the aesthetic are powerfully linked, and always have been.

When we resist the socially new in art, we don’t call it revolutionary. We call it ugly. That’s what they called Debussy’s. It’s true that art has its origins in ritual, so we love the things we know, need the things we know. But that shouldn’t blind us to the possibilities of renewal and the value of the future in artistic enterprise. And there are few better ways to engage that future in art than by expanding the range of people who make it. That’s especially true of classical music, which, let’s face it, hasn’t cared much for the future for quite a while. It’s time to free up an art form which has been tightly and determinedly clenched-closed for a long time, to its detriment.

I can’t say I envy Hisama’s position. I’m guessing she will have many battles to fight as she tries to reorient her new Faculty, although, to be fair, I may be underestimating the desire for the new at U of T. But I’m with Anthony Tommasini about the importance of using the pandemic to force a reset in classical music. (Our own Tricia Baldwin, director of the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts at Queen’s University, outlined many of the same thoughts in a fascinating article she wrote for International Arts Manager magazine in December.)

Making classical music more inclusive, and thus more relevant, isn’t the only thing on the table in that enterprise, but it’s an important component. So it will be interesting to see how Ellie Hisama, on our smallish local stage, and Alexander Neef, on quite literally, tout le monde’s stage, manage in their efforts. Personally, I wish them the best. I think they’re waging a battle on behalf of us all.

Robert Harris is a writer and broadcaster on music in all its forms. He is the former classical music critic of The Globe and Mail and the author of the Stratford Lectures and Song of a Nation: The Untold Story of O Canada.
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2020

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