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FEATURED 25 EXCEPTIONAL SOLOISTS ALONE IN AN EMPTY ROY THOMSON HALL


MUSIC FOR SELF-ISOLATION
composed by Frank Horvat

It takes a special skill to be able to create a whole atmosphere in a work that is just 2 minutes long. I really liked that.

– BBC Radio 3
This inlay is based on a painting by my lovely friend Henry Hassan who died of AIDS in the mid-80s. When he found out he had terminal illness he left his teaching job to pursue his real passion - painting. “Floating Man” is in a series of paintings depicting what he felt was happening to his body/soul. He used a fascinating technique: he cut different levels into the plywood and painted them - it’s actually relief painting. So I layered different types of wood on this peghead, including purpleheart, maple and ebony and then I cut into them and painted his image. This is my tribute to Henry. — Linda Manzer

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MATTHEW LARKIN

Plays Casavant Opus 550 at St. Paul’s Anglican Church, Toronto

ATMA Classique is pleased to present the label debut of Canadian organist Matthew Larkin.

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BACK IN THE DAY (almost 20 years ago), flushed with the success of our annual fall BLUE PAGES directory of presenters (aimed at readers looking for music to listen to), we decided to start an annual spring choral directory (aimed at readers searching for opportunities to sing). Calling it our YELLOW PAGES was an obvious choice – you know, “let your fingers do the walking ...” But it was pointed out to us that “Yellow Pages” was already taken as a name, by an organization with lawyers.

So “Canary Pages” it became instead. Truth be told, the necessity was a virtue, because not only did “canary” keep the “yellow pages” allusion alive, but it also straight out said “songbird,” which made it an even better fit. It also carried with it another, somewhat grimly useful undertone: after all, in society, as in coal mines, as long as the canaries are still singing, everything is relatively fine.

**The canary underground**

As far back as the 1880s, canaries (along with collins) had become part of the regular supply lists for coal mines in Britain, Canada and the United States. The vast amounts of air the canaries took in with every breath to fuel their singing made them highly sensitive to poisonous gases of one kind or another, and in particular to carbon monoxide, the miner’s most insidious and dangerous airborne enemy. When the canaries fell silent, or dropped from their perches, there was just enough time for miners to down tools and reach for respirators. But as long as the canaries were singing, it was business as usual, for better and for worse.

To be clear, coal mine canaries were not volunteers the way the vast majority of choristers are, at least in these parts. And, not your standard choral practice, the better the canary sang the less likely they were to get the job, because the birds with the best voices (the males, according to the usual reliable sources), fetched prices too rich for coal mine budgets – like aspiring tenors, dreaming of gilded rather than miners’ cages.

It took a lot longer for the coal mine canary to be rendered redundant than it did for Paul Bunyan’s ox to be railroaded by technology. They were only outlawed from British coal mines in 1986, for example. But slowly and surely “canary in the coal mine” as a phrase has become almost universally metaphorical and detached from its origins. Interestingly, the less rooted in particularity it has become, the more easily it can be used with an equally straight face by doomsayers across the entire socio-political spectrum, and up and down the scale from the momentous to the trivial.

Dire seems to be the only requirement. “Are car sales the canary in the post-pandemic coal mine?” asked one recent headline. “Australia may be the canary in the climate-change coal mine” said another. And my most recent favourite: “Is Alberta the coal miner’s canary in the great Canadian environmental divide?”

Here at The WholeNote, mind you, we have, for almost two decades, happily, and only slightly manipulatively, stood the metaphor on its head – pointing to the dozens and dozens of choirs signing up for our choral canary pages every May as a significant sign of the music community’s good health.

But this year, since early April when the invitations to join the 19th annual Canary Pages went out, we have for the first time since we adopted the Canary Pages name, had to face up to the grim side of the “canary in the coal mine” metaphor we so cheerfully cocked a snoot at all these years. We’re holding our breath and hoping for the best while choirs and choral societies make up their minds again about whether it might be wiser to hunker down and say nothing at all, rather than run the risk of getting it wrong. Or, worse, that the silence will be broken not by song but a series of little thuds as one by one they fall from their perches.

**Full circle**

Just over a year ago, choirs were among the first musical collectives forced by a different kind of noxious air to fall silent. So, rather than flocking to our directory in droves in early spring, they struggled in all the way from May to September, determined to to say something about their upcoming plans, best laid or wishful as the case may be, but jinxed every time they did, it seemed, by another twist or turn to the plot.

And a year later, here we are again facing the reality that it’s still going to take months for a clear picture to emerge of a path forward for live collective community arts. So we’ve put the Canary Pages online again, making it possible for choirs to join whenever they are ready, all the way through to the fall, and, just as important, to be able to say “oops” when COVID makes liars of us all, and to update the information they gave us on an ongoing basis.

We all have our dark moments these days. But slowly and steadily our canaries are finding their way back to us, and what was a trickle is becoming a steady flow. The stories they are bringing with them, tentative as they may be, speak to the hard-won resiliency of the past year. And to a determination to keep collective singing alive, for those of us who need to hear the singing, and just as important for those of us who need to sing.

It’s an odd kind of metaphorical full circle to have come when it’s the canaries that are the “canaries in the coal mine” for the entire live performing arts sector! But it’s a small ray of hope, at a time when the air we breathe in common cannot be taken for granted, that they are still perched and prepared to sing.

publisher@thewholenote.com
If one were to compile an orchestra and soloists to perform a religious work by Georg Frideric Handel, audience members could be forgiven for thinking that Messiah was on the program, so synonymous has this oratorio become with both the Christmas and Easter seasons. Despite this strong connection, there is another large-scale piece written by Handel that combines his uniquely dramatic style with Christian theology.

La Resurrezione is a two-part oratorio, or liturgical drama, focused on the resurrection of Jesus after his crucifixion and burial, detailing the events between Good Friday and Easter Sunday through the eyes of Lucifer, an Angel, Mary Magdalene, John the Evangelist and Mary Cleophas. Composed when Handel was only 23 years old, it is one of the composer’s earliest surviving works, preceded only by the opera Almira and a single oratorio, Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno.

Although an early-career work by a relatively junior composer, La Resurrezione was premiered in grand fashion on Easter Sunday, April 8 1708 in Rome, with the backing of the Marchese Francesco Rospoli, Handel’s patron at this time, featuring lavish staging and scenery as well as four-tiered seating for the orchestra. In an interesting convergence of significant musical figures, Arcangelo Corelli led the orchestra in this premiere performance, a large ensemble (by early music standards) consisting of 39 strings of varying types, one viola da gamba, two trumpets, one trombone and four oboes.

Unlike the later Messiah, which features soloists and choir in an equally dramatic capacity, La Resurrezione features the five aforementioned character-soloists who carry the action through recitative, arias and smaller ensembles, with the full group coming together only in the concluding movements of each section. In this way, La Resurrezione is more operatic than its later counterpart and more Italianate in style, with demanding and florid vocal writing requiring both sensitivity and agility from its performers. Opera was forbidden during Holy Week by the Roman censors, but by taking this liturgical drama and cloaking its operatic contents in seasonally relevant religiosity, Handel evaded this ban while incorporating operatic style and substance.

What makes La Resurrezione a notable work, apart from the high quality of the music itself, is the way in which events are portrayed on two levels, in the earthly and supernatural realms. Earthly events are documented through recitative, moving the drama along, while arias provide an opportunity to engage with the characters themselves, exploring individual affects and moods as snapshots within the larger dramatic work. The supernaturally based Lucifer, for example, takes credit for Christ’s death at the beginning of the work, claiming triumph over the forces of good; by the end of the oratorio, however, he is once again banished into Hell, Christ proving victorious through the resurrection. Combining Handel’s musical skill with this remarkable libretto (written by Carlo Sigismondo Capece, who was living in exile in Rome) is indeed a recipe for success, and La Resurrezione is still considered one of the finest and most ambitious products of Handel’s years in Italy.

Despite the acknowledged success of this work, La Resurrezione had yet to be performed on Canadian soil – until now. On May 27, Opera Atelier will release the Canadian film premiere of this hidden gem, featuring an all-star roster of soloists, artists of the Atelier Ballet, and musicians drawn from the Tafelmusik orchestra. This
performance, originally intended to be live and in-person, was initially scheduled for April 2020, but the pandemic-related state of emergency declared in that month necessitated the cancellation of those concerts.

One year later, however, Opera Atelier is soldiering on. Recorded in late March of this year at both Koerner Hall and St. Lawrence Hall, Resurrezione performers faced the unusual challenge of capturing Handel’s vision in two parts: through sound, by first recording the audio alone; and then through action, staging the production to their previously recorded tracks, acting, lip-synching and dancing to their own sounds and voices. While such an extraordinary break from normalcy would be inconceivable at any other time, these are the demands placed upon performers amidst unprecedented pandemic circumstances. (For an in-depth look at Opera Atelier’s process, watch The Making of the Resurrection, a marvellously informative and interesting 30-minute documentary available for free on their website.)

As much as this performance of La Resurrezione is a testimony to Handel’s enormous artistic achievements, it is also a testament to the resilience, endurance and creativity of performing artists during one of the most challenging times in modern history. Through perseverance and skill, the artists of Opera Atelier have triumphed over ongoing pandemic adversity and are, at long last, able to present this extraordinary work to Canadian audiences, not just those within commuting distance of Toronto, but around the country.

I encourage you to support La Resurrezione and tune in for what will undoubtedly be a musical highlight of the season. It is an exciting opportunity to encounter a new piece of music, even more so when the novelty comes from the pen of such a familiar figure as Handel, and we are gifted to partake of such undiscovered treasures.

The film premiere of Opera Atelier’s La Resurrezione takes place May 27, 2021 at 7pm EDT (available until June 10, 2021). Carla Huhtanen, soprano, is the Angel; Meghan Lindsay, soprano, is Mary Magdalene; Allyson McHardy, mezzo-soprano, is Mary Cleophas; Colin Ainsworth, tenor, is John the Evangelist; and Douglas Williams, bass-baritone, is Lucifer.

Matthew Whitfield is a Toronto-based harpsichordist and organist.
Anyone who witnessed the first concert in June 2001 – a miserable rainy evening with only a handful of people in the audience – might have been forgiven for thinking the Summer Music in the Garden series was doomed to failure. But that first concert didn’t daunt Tamara Bernstein, the founding artistic director of the series. Nor were the audiences deterred. In its 20-year history, the free concert series grew to become one of the most popular on the Toronto summer festival roster.

By its name, you would think that a venue called the Toronto Music Garden was made for live music, but that wasn’t the case. Perched on the inner harbour of Lake Ontario near the foot of Spadina Avenue, and designed in consultation with famed cellist Yo-Yo Ma, the Toronto Music Garden interprets, through the landscape of its six different garden sections, the six movements of J.S. Bach’s Suite No. 1 in G Major for Solo Cello.

It’s an idyllic natural setting with the breezes off the lake and the rustling of the trees, or so it seems, but for some of the performers it could be both a blessing and a curse. Flamenco dancer Esmeralda Enrique, who has been a regular performer there from the early days of Summer Music in the Garden, remembers how challenging those first performances were.

“At first, it was quite difficult technically. Outdoors, the sound dissipated and it’s difficult for musicians and dancers to hear each other, which is vital in live flamenco performances,” said Enrique. “The mist coming in later in the afternoon muffled the sound quite a lot and at times there were a lot of bugs flying around. I remember one flew into my mouth once! Ugh!

“As we came to know the physical limitations and sound level limits, we programmed performances more suited to the environment and temperature,” Enrique explained. “Despite some challenges, I have always loved performing outdoors. In the Music Garden we were inspired by the trees and the wind and felt like they were part of our set.”
The Festival That Almost Wasn’t

Don Shipley was the creative director for performing arts at Harbourfront from 1988 to 2001 and was responsible for starting up the Summer Music in the Garden series and bringing Tamara Bernstein on board to program it.

“I was familiar with Tamara through her writing for The Globe and Mail and I was very impressed by her breadth of knowledge and musical intelligence,” said Shipley. “Her pure love for music was apparent and her interests stretched beyond classical and included contemporary genres. I felt she was the right person at the right time.”

Bernstein recalls how completely out of the blue the call was from Shipley to take on the programming; and how she immediately agreed despite never having done work of that nature or having even gone to the Music Garden. “Once or twice in your life you just say yes to something, and this was one of those times,” she said.

Bernstein cites the way she herself was recruited as an object lesson for how to develop a diverse program and how to find interesting underexposed talent. “It was always in the back of my mind as a programmer that, yes there'll be pitches from performers, but you always have to look for people who might not contact you,” said Bernstein. “Younger artists and people who might not think of playing at the Garden or who had never even heard of it.”

However, Summer Music in the Garden almost didn’t come to be. Shipley recounts how there was major opposition to having live music in the garden from a condo building nearby, due to noise concerns, and from one condo owner in particular who was very vocal.

“Jim Fleck, who was a major benefactor and fundraiser for the Garden, had the brilliant idea of asking Yo-Yo Ma himself to meet with the condo owner,” recalled Shipley. “So when Yo-Yo Ma was in town to play a concert, arrangements for a meeting and private concert at the condo were made. After that, the opposition magically melted away and the music series went ahead.”

Development of New Works

One of the key contributions Bernstein made to the cultural landscape during her tenure was the commissioning of new works. This enabled artists to explore ideas in a safe and unique space.

Composer and performer Barbara Croall recalls being invited by Bernstein to compose a new work back in 2008. Titled Calling From Different Directions, it was planned as a commemoration of the 9/11 attack in New York City and the loved ones of those lost.

It was a short, arresting piece invoking the four sacred directions, featuring Croall (cedar flutes and First Nation drum) and Anita McAlister (trumpet and conch shell), and bringing together instruments from different cultural “directions”: trumpet, conch shell, traditional cedar flutes and First Nations hand drum.

“Thinking of the trumpet and its ancestry, I immediately thought of how the conch shell goes back very far in many cultures globally,” said Croall. “Many Indigenous cultures for thousands of years have used it as an instrument of healing through sound. I mentioned this idea to Anita and by a really neat coincidence it turned out that her husband owned a conch shell that was playable and that I could use as one of the instruments in the piece.”

“Tamara was so excited by this idea, and the location of the TMG worked perfectly for Calling From Different Directions, as the sound really carried across the water,” explained Croall.

“Tamara takes great care, sensitivity and detailed planning with everything she does,” Croall continued. “She truly supports the artists that she invites, treating them with respect and kindness.”

All Were Welcome

Another feature of Bernstein’s tenure was the ahead-of-the-curve programming of a range of musical cultures and genres. Although multiculturalism and Indigenous and women artists are featured...
much more these days, in those early days of Summer Music in the Garden, it wasn’t so usual.

Eric Stein has performed at the Garden for many years both as leader of the Brazilian choro group Tio Chorinho and as the artistic director of the Ashkenaz Festival.

“I’ve always admired the eclecticism of the programming,” said Stein. “And I especially appreciate how, although she maintained classical music as the core genre, she was clever about how she expanded it to other styles of music. Choro is a good example of that as the chamber music of Brazil.”

Classical Persian music, Taiko drumming, traditional Chinese stringed instruments and Indigenous music all had prominent places on the roster next to the Baroque and classical works.

“In 2000, I was totally new to the Toronto music scene,” said tabla player Subhajyoti Guha. “And the performance at the Music Garden gave me immediate access to a mainstream audience which later helped me to build up my career there and also to get students for teaching tabla.

“Tamara always made it a point to present the best of the diverse cultures in her festival and it was a sheer joy for me when she included my band in her festival in 2011.”

Women Rule

Looking back over the rosters of performers during the 20-year history of the music series, it’s striking how many women appeared – not only as performers, but as leaders and composers. From musicians presenting more traditional repertoire such as violinist Erika Raum – who played on the very first evening of the series in 2001 – and cellist Winona Zelenka, to improvisers like pianist Marilyn Lerner and clarinetist Lori Freedman, to Sarangi virtuosa Aruna Saroyan performing North Indian ragas.

“There was an obvious depth of thought Tamara put into the choice of acts and the balance she would strike by including many cultures and lots of female performers, long before it was mandated or popular,” said Eric Stein.

The all-woman Cecilia String Quartet is a prime example. The group played at the Music Garden every year from 2006 until they disbanded at the end of the 2017/2018 season. Violist Caitlin Boyle recalls that it was her first paying gig with the quartet.

“As a young musician just graduating, there aren’t tons of opportunities to get paid and recognized,” said Boyle. “And I know within Toronto, Tamara has given chances to many young artists, plus the freedom to choose their repertoire, which isn’t always the case.”

The Future of Music in the Garden

So the big question now is “what’s next?” In these pandemic times, uncertainty is the word of the day, especially when it comes to the performing arts. “We believe that this summer we will not be able to properly gather in large numbers in public places,” said Iris Nemani, chief programming officer for Harbourfront Centre. “So we’ve decided to put our efforts into commissioning new works that we hope will be performed in person in the Music Garden in 2022.

“Tamara has left a legacy of exemplary programming, created opportunities for hundreds of artists and presented beautiful music and dance performances for thousands of patrons,” said Nemani. “Summer Music in the Garden is a beloved, free program and we are looking forward to welcoming audiences back to the Garden next summer.”

Last words go to another contemporary composer whose work has shown up often across the life of the series, Quebec-based Michael Oesterle (although he characterizes his involvement as being more by chance than by design). “It’s not so much that I was specifically commissioned for the series but because musicians invited to perform there already had works by me in their proposed repertoire, and as luck would have it Tamara found the pieces interesting as well. And the feedback I got from those musicians after their performances there was always joyous and positive.

“Some of what Tamara brought to her 20-year tenure,” he continues, “is that she’s intelligent and knows music, but beyond that she is extremely curious, and has found courageous and wonderful ways of drawing audiences into music you might think wouldn’t have a hope in a challenging acoustic environment – ranging far, but never losing touch with the solo cello intimacy which inspired the place and the series all along.”

“I am sad to hear her time there is at an end.”

Cathy Riches is a self-described Toronto-based recovering singer and ink slinger.

Terry McKenna shows off his lute.
As I write this while an early spring blooms beyond my locked-down window, music presenters are trying their best to surf COVID-19’s Third Wave. The venerable Women’s Musical Club of Toronto – founded in 1898 – calmly announces on its website, “We’ve been here before… and we’ve survived.” After all, they have been holding Music in the Afternoon concerts since well before the flu pandemic of 1918/1919, enduring two World Wars, depressions and recessions, and our current devastating virus. “We will survive this one too.”

Their 2020/21 season has pivoted to live streaming and video on demand. 2019 Banff International String Quartet Competition winner, Viano String Quartet, has just concluded an on-demand run from April 1 to 25. May is devoted to Lebanese-Canadian soprano, Joyce El-Khoury, and Armenian-Canadian pianist, Serouj Kradjian, in an on-demand recital that mixes songs by Bizet, Fauré, Chausson, Ravel and Saint-Saëns with 20th-century Lebanese songs in Arabic. El-Khoury and Kradjian are preparing an extensive project involving music and instrumental artists from their home countries culminating in a CD that will include these Lebanese songs.

Serouj Kradjian (above), Joyce El-Khoury

The Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM)

“If I’m walking down the street, the rhythm of my walk will set off a tune in my head,” Eugene Levy said during an entertaining conversation on April 22 with RCM president and CEO, Peter Simon. “I’m always humming something – a lot of time I’m making things up.”

The multi-talented comic actor – known worldwide for Schitt’s Creek – was helping to launch the new online RCM series Music of My Life, a free continuing event featuring well-known performers in conversation illustrated with musical excerpts. The series is accessible at RoyalConservatoryLive, the new digital channel of the Royal Conservatory. At the time of writing, four more episodes have been confirmed: celebrated pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim (April 29); Steven Page, founding member of the Barenaked Ladies (May 6); Cynthia Dale, star of music theatre (May 13); and Paul Shaffer, best known as David Letterman’s musical collaborator for more than three decades (May 20).

Surprisingly – considering Levy’s memorable musical roles in Waiting for Guffman and A Mighty Wind as well as his accordion-playing Shmenge brother duo with John Candy on clarinet – there was no music played in his house until he was 12, which he attributed to the busy lives of his parents. Eventually, his brother took piano lessons and he dabbled in the accordion; in high school he took music as an option for five years, choosing tenor saxophone. He played in a full orchestra (“Wow! This is a whole new world here,” he thought) and also a 12-piece dance band (“You gotta do the standing-up thing”).

During the 48-minute conversation, Levy spoke about the origin...
of the Shmenge brothers in Candy’s hotel room while shooting SCTV in Edmonton; and about faking live concerts backed by a polka band, with his accordion gutted so it couldn’t make a sound. Prompted by Simon, Levy talked about the origin of his character’s two left feet in Christopher Guest’s film Best in Show. And how his love of Bach (“I just loved the cluster of notes in a fugue”) grew out of watching a friend (Bob Morrow, who later became Hamilton’s longest-serving mayor) play Bach on the piano. That anecdote was the cue for Glenn Gould School student Godwin Freisen to perform Bach’s Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp Major in an empty Koerner Hall.

Nowadays, music is a big part of the Levy household. His wife Deborah puts music on in the morning – “usually a classical station” – and plays piano most days. Simon prodiged Levy for his take on Gershwin (“I love the intricate rhythms, the dynamic piano; it kind of says New York to me”) – which set up Anagnoson & Kinton who delivered a spirited two-piano version of Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue from an empty Koerner Hall.

The new channel features hundreds of hours of performances filmed in Koerner Hall with its superb acoustics, as well as engaging talks, documentaries (including the Music of My Life series) and celebratory events. New content will be added weekly.

Also from the Royal Conservatory, it’s always noteworthy hearing what Marc-André Hamelin is up to. His consummate musicianship fuelled by seemingly effortless technique will be on display in a livestream from Koerner Hall on Sunday, May 30, 2021 at 3pm and available for seven days for ticket holders (the concert has already been rescheduled twice). It’s a classical lineup with a C.P.E. Bach Rondo, a Haydn Fantasia and two Beethoven sonatas – No.3 in C Major, Op.2 No.3 and the justly celebrated, dynamic No.23 in F Minor, Op.57 (“Appassionata”). Rounding out the program is the world premiere of a new work Hamelin commissioned from Canadian composer John Oswald.

TSYO

During this unusual season, the 89-member Toronto Symphony Youth Orchestra (TSYO) – made up of talented young musicians under the age of 22 – has maintained a commitment to learning and developing their craft. The students have continued to practice and work hard from the safety of their homes, with regular online workshops, lectures and masterclasses with TSYO Conductor Simon Rivard and TSO musicians and staff. Ordinarily, the TSYO would give performances throughout the season, culminating in a finale at Roy Thomson Hall. But this year, the young musicians came together online, giving a virtual recital for family and friends.

“Thanks to the efforts of the TSYO, we have all remained motivated and musical throughout these difficult times,” said 16-year-old cellist Antika Grieve, a member of the TSYO for two years, who performed in and co-hosted one of the recitals.

Gemma New

Earlier this year, New Zealand-born Gemma New, music director of the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra and principal guest conductor of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, was named the 12th recipient of the Sir Georg Solti Conducting Award, the second woman to be so honoured. She had previously earned Solti Foundation U.S. Assistance Awards in 2017, 2019 and 2020.

The Solti Foundation U.S. is currently the only American foundation to grant these kinds of awards each year to young conductors. American citizens or permanent residents of the United States, 38 years of age or younger, who are career-ready artists in the field of conducting are eligible. The award comes with a $30,000 prize “to provide the recipient means to continue to master their craft.” The winner is selected “based on their skills and abilities, as well as their passion for communicating through music.

Music Toronto

Music Toronto’s free virtual concert series continues May 13, 2021 at 7:30pm (available until 7:30pm May 15) with a representative program of new music by the celebrated JACK Quartet. Included are works by Rodericus (arranged by Christopher Otto), Ruth Crawford Seeger, Elliott Carter and Tyshawn Sorey. Two weeks later at 7:30pm, May 27 (and available until 9:30pm May 29), clarinetist Julian Bliss joins the UK-based Carducci String Quartet in a performance of Mozart’s sublime Clarinet Quintet K581 and David Bruce’s Gumboots (2008) - the title refers to South African labourers’ footwear in flooded gold mines. The York Press described it in 2019 as having a deceptively
calm opening leading into a “whacky dance that grows increasingly wild.”

**Rituels**, a concert film featuring the engaging Quebec ensemble collectif9, with interpretive dance, stage movement and visuals and music by Hildegard von Bingen, Arvo Pärt, Michael Tippett, Nicole Lizée, Jocelyn Morlock and more, will be streamed June 17 at 7:30pm (available until 9:30pm, June 19). The St. Lawrence String Quartet presents a new Haydn Discovery, a lecture/demonstration followed by a complete performance of Haydn’s String Quartet Op.20, No.5 on June 30 at 7:30pm (available until midnight July 3).

**Einaudi**

The Ludovico Einaudi Seven Days Walking Tour, originally set for Roy Thomson Hall on April 25, 2021, has now been rescheduled to July 6, 2022 at 8pm. Excerpts from *Day One* and *Day Three* of Einaudi’s Seven Days Walking were crucial to the artistic success of *Nomadland* which won three historic Oscars on April 25 (during what would have been the RTH concert). Frances McDormand became the first Best Actress winner to also win Best Picture – McDormand was one of the film’s producers – and Chinese-born Chloe Zhao became the first woman of colour (and only the second woman) to win Best Director. Zhao recently spoke to Joe Dempsie, the host of *Experience: The Ludovico Einaudi Story* podcast about discovering Einaudi’s music for the first time. “I went online to search for classical music inspired by nature... I then started listening to Seven Days Walking and was so amazed by how I felt Ludovico was walking in the Alps. I felt like he and Fern [Frances McDormand’s character] were walking in parallel; their love of nature connects them, and I knew then his music would fit perfectly with our movie.”

*Paul Ennis is the managing editor of The WholeNote.*

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**KINDRED SPIRITS ORCHESTRA**

Saturday, May 29, 2021 at 8 p.m. (EST)
Streamed live from the Richmond Hill Centre

**CHOPIN, Piano concerto No. 1**
**MENDELSSOHN, Symphony No. 1**

Coral Solomon pianist
Kristian Alexander conductor

**PROKOFIEV, Symphony No. 5**
**TAN DUN, Piano concerto “The Fire”**

Tuesday, June 22, 2021 at 8 pm (EST)
Bartosz Żurakowski conductor

Saturday, June 26, 2021 at 8 pm (EST)
Kristian Alexander conductor

Tickets: $15/line
KSORchestra.ca
905.604.8339

**Ontario**

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Ever since I began writing this column four years ago, I have searched out and championed companies and artists exploring and breaking down the barriers between musical theatre, opera and dance. Imagine my delight when I discovered a new festival debuting in the last week of May this year dedicated to the same goals, to “reimagining the future of music theatre” and to building a new community of artists, scholars, journalists and students from across genres and generations.

The Watershed Festival, given this name to symbolize the coming together of these many streams of interconnected art forms, is helmed by prolific Canadian composer Dean Burry, now also an assistant professor at Queen’s University in Kingston, where the idea of the festival was born. Burry has been a friend of mine since I directed the world premiere of his opera Pandora’s Locker at the Royal Conservatory of Music’s Glenn Gould School in 2008; I got in touch to find out more about both the inspiration behind the festival and how the pandemic might be affecting plans for participants and attendees.

One thing that is clear right away in speaking to Burry about Watershed is how closely the goals of the festival align with his own belief in the need to break through the long-standing walls between the worlds of opera and musical theatre: in both the professional and academic worlds. As he told me, “I feel as though this is something that my heart has been in for a very long time. I work a lot in the opera field, but never did think that opera had to be one boxed-in thing. I have had some professional musical theatre shows, as well, and I’ve found that as much as we all try to be open, a lot of people in those two fields have strong feelings about what ‘opera is supposed to be’ as opposed to what ‘musical theatre is supposed to be’. The reality, though, as far as I am concerned, is that they are all on the same spectrum; both are methods of storytelling that use every art form: drama, literature, music, movement and design.”

Timing is sometimes the essence of alignment. Burry was just finishing up his doctorate at the University of Toronto, and Queen’s was looking for the right person to take up the reins of the new festival. In 2016, Queen’s had taken the unusual step of merging their previously separate drama and music schools – a move that still surprises many people – and inaugurating an academic program that integrates drama and music in a program focused more on an overview of creation than on learning specific technical skills. With a large donation (five million dollars) that followed shortly after from the Aubrey & Marla Dan Foundation, this became the Dan School of Drama and Music. “When I came to Queen’s,” says Burry, “there was a real desire to capitalize on the gift and to really explore the concept of what music theatre is.” The Watershed Festival is, in effect, the spearhead of this mandate.

Opera and music theatre creation programs abound, especially at the company/collective level – Tapestry Opera, the Musical Stage Company and Loose Tea Music Theatre come readily to mind – but
as a festival Watershed brings something new to the mix, sitting as it does at the cusp of art and academia. Along with a showcase of recent new work from around the country and further afield, there will be a full-fledged accompanying symposium where scholars from around the world will present and exchange views with established and emerging music theatre thinkers, practitioners and writers engaged in the field. And anchoring it all, each year, will be a newly commissioned large work.

Enter Leslie Arden

For the debut festival commission Burry turned to acclaimed Canadian musical theatre creator Leslie Arden “as the perfect person for our first outing because we wanted to do a big musical and she has such a grasp of working at that scale, and would be wonderful to have as a mentor for our students.” The one caveat was the need to create a lot of female roles – a typical need in a university setting. Arden quickly said “Yes” and set to work creating The Lancashire Lass which tells the tumultuous story of the British suffragette movement through the eyes of a conflicted young woman, Annie Kenney.

Two professional musical theatre performers lead the otherwise student company. Queen’s alumna Tracy Michailidis (Life After at Canadian Stage, Kiss of the Spider Woman and Sunday in the Park with George at Eclipse Theatre Company) plays the role of Mrs. Pankhurst, and multi-talented performer, musical director and Queen’s faculty member, Melissa Morris, is Annie. Given current restrictions, this first festival is promising “a substantial online sneak peek” at The Lancashire Lass as the final evening event of the 2021 festival, with a full in-person production in 2022.

The Symposium

Daytime during the festival, which runs from May 25 to 28, the inaugural symposium will take place – all on Zoom this year – featuring both presentations (15 minutes at most, followed by Q&A) and panel discussions. Most of these sessions will be hosted by the symposium organizer, Queen’s professor, Dr Colleen Renihan, whose wide-ranging knowledge of the music theatre field as both a musicologist and trained singer has drawn in many participants from not only Canada, but the US, England and the Netherlands. With the festival taking place online, many more people from around the world will be able to take part as both participants and attendees.

The title of the very first panel, Reimagining The World of Music Theatre Together, sums up Watershed’s raison d’être. Burry will host it, bringing in leading professionals from the worlds of musical theatre, opera, operetta and avant-garde music theatre to speak passionately, and perhaps even argue, about the extent to which the two genres’ shared interests in song, theatre and story, can transcend what divides them, at this watershed moment in time and world history. Storytelling, representation, teaching, spectatorship and dramaturgy, reimagining the future of opera, and decolonizing music theatre: all these and more will come into play during the symposium.

New Works Showcase

Burry will be a busy man throughout the festival, hosting live discussions with the artists, and live chat question and answer sessions.
sessions following each of the evening New Works Showcase performance events. Already announced are 15-minute filmed excerpts of new works from three different teams including Afarin Mansour (Zuleykh), Jake Schindler and Sam Boer (Ursa), and Kevin Skelton (Pulse). Also already announced, Montreal’s Musique 3 Femmes, with a filmed workshop presentation of three of their most recent commissions (all by women), followed by a livestreamed discussion and live chat Q&A.

The festival launch on the evening of May 25 is also, in a manner of speaking a “new works” event – the Gala Launch of Julie Salverson’s new book Seven Canadian Libretti. It was going to be, festival organizers thought, a quiet, intimate event, until the number of people wanting to be involved increased dramatically: it will be hosted by Salverson and Tapestry Opera artistic director Michael Hidetoshi Mori, and will now feature readings by several of the creators of those libretti, including, so far, Ann-Marie MacDonald (Nigredo Hotel), George Elliott Clarke (Beatrice Chancy) and Marie Clements (Missing).

It’s a case in point for what Burry calls “opening the doors and welcoming everyone in”: scholars, practitioners at every level, journalists and other writers, interested audience members and students, “in order to shine a light on the exciting work that is being done in Canada and around the world and to look at how it is all connected.” Sparking conversation among participants and attendees is at the heart of it – about all the facets and permutations of music theatre, past, present and future, with the future paramount, as Watershed explores what music theatre needs to become as it moves towards a more complete inclusion of all histories and viewpoints, and styles of storytelling theatre.

As Burry said to me, “Music Theatre” is opera and musical theatre and everything in between and everything beyond. Everyone is welcome under this tent, we have no walls.”

The Watershed Festival at Queen’s University runs from May 25 to 28, 2021.

All events will be online and free to attend. Free registration is required.

For more details and to register, please visit the festival’s website at www.watershedmusictheatre.com or email watershed.mt@queensu.ca

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**QUICK PICKS**

**Ongoing:** The new online version of the popular in-person SINGular Sensation open mic shows at Statler’s Piano Bar and then the 120 Diner, SINGular Sensation Online! offers biweekly programming combining performances, conversations, and new segments on wellness and world events. Starting May 17, they are adding an Open Mike’ show on every third Monday of the month on their YouTube channel, hosted by the charismatic Jennifer Walls. All shows are free to watch, and stay online after their first broadcast. Find them on Instagram at @singular_sensation, or on Facebook at Singular Sensation Online!

**Mid-June:** Nightwood Theatre’s annual fundraising The Lawyer Show presents an audio recording version of Stars from Mars, the new Canadian musical comedy set inside the first human colony on Mars, about a mother and daughter who are worlds apart. Book and lyrics by Ashley Botting; music by Daniel Abrahamson. This Toronto-born musical was developed for Sheridan College’s Canadian Music Theatre Project; nightwoodtheatre.net

**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.**

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**MUSIC AND FILM**

**A Concerto is a Conversation counters a limiting trope**

**GLORIA BLIZZARD**

A Concerto is a Conversation is this complex tale of two men – their vision, resilience and successes – told in exactly 13 minutes. In this story of family, transcendence, love and the pursuit of excellence, we follow a young Black American classical pianist and composer, Kris Bowers to the premiere of his violin concerto, For a Younger Self, at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. The story is told in parallel with the journey of his grandfather, Horace Bowers Sr., from Jim Crow-era Florida to the position of highly successful businessman in California.

Often when I watch films about Black people, I do not recognize myself or anyone I know in the stories and perspectives presented for consumption. I know that film is not always meant to be “the whole truth” or “the story of a people”, but what is often presented as Black is a limited trope, is unbeautiful, is a sidekick for a white lead.

This documentary, co-directed by Kris Bowers and L.A.-based Nova Scotia-transplant Ben Proudfoot, counters that vision, centralizing the story of the Black leads without compromise and with what I can only call love.

Within the first few minutes, Bowers questions whether he belongs in the traditionally whitespaces and professions of classical music. Bowers’s query is startling given his list of achievements: collaboration on Jay-Z and Kanye West’s 2011 joint album Watch the Throne; scores for Gotham Chopra’s Kobe Bryant’s Muse (2015) and the multiple Oscar-winning Green Book (2018); and the series music for Ava DuVernay’s When They See Us (2019), Justin Simien’s Dear White People (2014); and Chris Van Dusen’s period romp, Bridgerton (2020), all on Netflix.

His response is not so surprising when seen in context, though. It can be hard to maintain a feeling of surety when one’s position can be so constantly precarious.

Pianist Morgan-Paige Melbourne, for example, in a previous story of mine, described some of her experiences as a young, Black classical pianist in competition in Canada, facing hostility.

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You did it, you did it. Horace and Kris Bowers

from teachers, adjudicators, other performers and their parents, who questioned her right to be in that environment. A piece by composer Daniel Bernard Roumain, was recently decommissioned, when Tulsa Opera in Oklahoma, decided one crucial word in the lyrics of his work was offensive.

Granted, artist responses to this constant feeling of pressure can be very different. Melbourne developed deep concentration, and the ability to block out these experiences. Her recent short film, Where Do I Go?, with Tapestry Opera director Michael Hidetoshi Mori, relates her journey into resilience. The documentary Disruptor Conductor, directed by Sharon Lewis, shows conductor Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser transferring the discomfort by disrupting the conventional use of space: taking a string quartet to a women’s prison in Kitchener, Ontario; bringing drag queen and violinist Thorgy Thor into a Halifax concert hall to play with the Nova Scotia Symphony Orchestra; and creating concert experiences tuned to the needs of audiences inclusive of anyone with any kind of neurodiversity.

What film can be

I generally write about music, dance, art and literature. Watching A Concerto is a Conversation reminded me how film (with its vast vocabulary of pacing, angles, framing and editing) has complex and amazing possibilities for storytelling. There has always been within it, the potential to expand the limited stories told to date of Black people.

What comes to mind is Frances-Anne Solomon’s full-length docudrama HERO, where archival black and white footage is spliced in to fill our historical perspectives of the pan-African movement. In A Concerto is a Conversation, Horace Bowers Sr.’s journey from Jim Crow Bascom, Florida, his

motivation to get out of there, and his arrival as a successful L.A. businessman are similarly elucidated.

To me, this short feels like an antidote to the peripheral placement of the classical pianist Don Shirley in Green Book, or the limited vision accorded to Miles Davis in the bio-flick Miles Ahead. The centralization of Bowers Sr., the Black musician and the tenderness of the relationship between the two men is something that I have not seen before, and that I do recognize.

Both Bowers and his grandfather somehow manage to speak directly to the audience through the camera and to each other at the same time. According to Proudfoot, in a wide-ranging interview with POV Magazine, it’s an approach to filming he has used before, notably in his Almost Famous short film series for The New York Times. Known as the Interrotron technique, it was developed by award-winning documentarian Errol Morris – a method of rigging the camera so that, in looking straight at the questioner, the subject is also looking straight through the camera at the audience.

As Bowers points out to Ava DuVernay, Concerto’s executive producer, in an interview, most people now view media on their phones and this Errol Morris technique creates an uncanny intimacy with the interlocutor. With warm lighting and soft voices, every flicker of emotion or almost imperceptible flinch is revealed. The audience feels invited into dialogue, into the skin of Bowers and his grandfather.

The conversation must continue

As I said earlier, I often experience a cognitive disconnect when I watch Black people on film. I must first de-centre myself in order to engage with someone else’s limited vision of who we might be. Film itself is not the culprit, though. It offers the full range of methodologies needed to portray the infinite voices of Black artists. This includes everything from Melbourne’s iPad-filmed, single-take creations, to the multi-dimensional Where Do I Go? with Tapestry Opera that combines lyrics, dance, poetry and improvised piano, to A Concerto is a Conversation’s 13 brilliant minutes – which tells of the lives of two Black men, with beauty and warmth, from loving angles, a perspective that is deeply needed and rarely seen.

The men in the film experience racism, but racism is not solely what the film is about. If it were, it would of necessity centralize the system and the perpetrators. It is also about the capacity for excellence, about living well, being happy, about transformation. It is about how we, as humans, stand on the shoulders of those who went before us. It is about how we can transcend. At time of writing this, the film is up for an Academy Award in the short documentary category. By the time this is published, we’ll know if it has won that award. Whether it does or not, it is an outstanding remedy for our times, and the reward will be that it will be more widely seen.

Throughout the score of the film (composed by Bowers, of course), we hear what he calls “loose variations” of How Great Thou Art, gospel music as familiar to Bascom, Florida as it is to Hollywood. As the credits roll, the grandfather sings the full melody and lyrics as Bowers accompanies him. “You did it, you did it,” the elder man exclaims as they finish the piece. Perhaps he is talking to the man he coached and mentored, no longer a boy, but a fully realized and successful musician. Perhaps he is talking to himself.

I recall a children’s board book by Vera B. Williams that I used to read to my daughter when she was very little. I’d carefully chosen it because amongst the illustrations was one Black child doing perfectly ordinary things. The baby, when tickled or hugged or given something precious, would say, and we, my daughter and I, would repeat together with great enthusiasm, “More. More. More.”

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.
“Click Unmute!”
How the Zoom Boom is Shifting the Choral World

Lockdowns! Vaccines! Homemade focaccia! Yes, we are still talking about the pandemic. The media cacophony rises like the tides: job losses, school closures, suspension of hobbies, failing businesses, whole sectors with the rug swept out from under them, including live performance and gathering to make music.

Happily, with survival depending on reevaluation, creativity and adaptation, we are witnessing an unexpected resurgence among musical ensembles finding ways to get together, even at a time when gathering in person is met with finger-wagging (not from the conductors) and hefty fines.

Regular readers know that May is usually the month when The WholeNote publishes its Canary Pages Choral Directory, but that in May 2020 the period for joining the directory was extended from May right through September, with choral profiles being posted to the website as soon as received. Well, it’s May again, and while uncertainty still prevails for many choirs, a heartening number have already signed up. So I reached out to several of these “early adopters” who have already submitted profiles for this year’s Canary Pages, to try to get a feel for how they weathered the past year and how, if at all, their plans for the coming season are further along than at this time last year.

Many expressed frustration, mostly due to the shift of being predominantly online. Most are in agreement, however, that the show, and the opportunity to sing together, must go on. And although more muted than usual, choral directors and choristers are still working together behind the scenes to keep the music in the air. Figuratively speaking, of course.

Keeping a Sense of Community
A choir is not just a performing ensemble, it is a community, synonymous with togetherness: the weekly rehearsals, members shoulder to shoulder or facing one another, breathing in unison, voices harmoniously creating magic ... all in the current context a condemnable germ-y activity.

When the first lockdown was announced, choristers were faced with a tough decision: interrupt the choral season or sing on whilst learning to navigate unfamiliar territory. Like true leaders, many choral directors forged on and took their choirs online. It wasn’t perfect; memberships decreased and singers were initially skeptical about singing virtually, some choosing to pull back altogether until in-person rehearsals resume.

I asked the directors I reached out to how they had kept their members engaged in a time that saw a decline in motivation. The general consensus was that the pandemic, although unwelcome, prompted them to be even more creative in their approach in order not to stagnate.

Pauline McKenzie is the advertising representative of the Jubilate Singers, a community choir of between 25 and 50 singers, conducted by Isabel Bernaus. She mentioned integrating social activities into their rehearsal time. An example she gave was holding “pot lucks”, where snacks or full meals were eaten “companionsally with others”. She also detailed breaking out into “rooms” to allow for small group interactions on assigned topics, [such as] “show-and-tell” where members would share a personal item with their groups.

Peg McCracken, business manager of the Peterborough Singers, an auditioned choir of over 100 singers under the direction of Sydney Birrell, acknowledged that “there was a definite decrease in attendance at [their] virtual events; but for those who wanted to stay connected [they] created things like a singer’s buy-and-sell page and have intentionally been very active on social media and YouTube with trivia contests and information sessions.”

Les voix du cœur is a vocal ensemble of over 40 amateur singers, dedicated to showcasing French popular songs from Canada and Europe; they pride themselves on being a prominent fixture in Toronto’s French-speaking cultural community. Catherine Chereu-Sharp, vice-president and secretary of the board of directors, described a similar approach to McCracken’s, “offering workshops on music theory, breathing, acting techniques and regular virtual meetings to keep everyone informed and stay in touch.”

Zoom Adventures: the Good, the Bad and the Pantless
From business meetings, to parties, to dates, Zoom became the leading online platform for video conferences during the pandemic, so it is no surprise that Zoom was unanimous as the chosen method of practice for the choirs I contacted. Unsurprisingly, it comes with its challenges, some recognized benefits and many humorous anecdotes. One thing is for sure, when this is all over, there will not be a shortage of awkward Zoom tales.

When asked about the most challenging aspect of an online environment, Jenny Crober, artistic director of the VOCA Chorus of Toronto, an auditioned, inclusive ensemble, comprised of 50 to 100 singers, detailed it perfectly. “The first thing that comes to mind is the heartache of not being able to enjoy the simple, irreplaceable joy of singing together with each other […] and missing the simple, incredibly powerful physical connections with each other … like a hug, and monthly pub night at a real (not virtual) pub.”

Additionally,
she mentions “dealing with the occasional vagaries of technology, including Zoom, where calls of ‘You’re still muted!’ ‘My Internet just died!’ and ‘Could you put me back into my Breakout Room please?’ were aplenty. Crober spoke highly of Zoom’s ‘Breakout Rooms’ feature as a method used to organize the choir into smaller, more manageable sectionals, led by herself, the accompanist, and the professional section leads accordingly.

Each VOCA session begins together in the main room, where a variety of warm-ups are conducted and one of their six professional section leads teaches the rest of the choir about specific musicianship skills. (And on Monday nights yoga sessions with their accompanist, Elizabeth Acker.) They then separate into pre-assigned breakout rooms, “absolutely invaluable each week for fine-tuning and providing detailed coaching sessions.”

Crober finds a silver lining to their new online practice, sharing that “many choristers, who had initially doubted the effectiveness of Zoom at the beginning of the season, began to really enjoy and look forward to [their] Monday night sessions” – partly for the coaching, but also very much for the camaraderie. She has no shortage of humorous anecdotes from choristers: loud pets, swearing neighbours and interminable construction. All are entertaining after the fact, but she emphasizes that “all manner of poorly timed incidents made [our] virtual choir recording experiences unforgettable!”

**Virtual fatigue**

Running a smooth online rehearsal requires technological savvy, and awkwardness is an unavoidable aspect of the past year’s learning curve. Was that a delay in the soprano section, or did the Internet just cut out for a second? Albert Wong, musical director of the Harbourfront Chorus, a non-auditioned community choir with under 25 singers, preaches to the choir (in every sense of that phrase) about recognizing “Zoom fatigue.” Being a smaller, more intimate group, as Wong points out, “the community aspect of [the] choir is very strong.” He, therefore, was adamant on ensuring they had “some sort of continuity” as the isolation has dragged on, with two Zoom sessions every month. He is quick to acknowledge that they were not for everyone, noting a decrease in attendance during online sessions compared to the normal number with in-person rehearsals. On the plus side, he says, a benefit of Zoom has been the ability to reconnect with members of the choir who had moved to different provinces, and have now been able to rejoin the group.

The Peterborough Singers, Peg McCracken says, had to take a slightly different approach to maintain the Singers during the
Mikeal Swaminathan is a chorister and soloist on hiatus, eager to get back to a singing groove. She is currently a writer and student of Vision Therapy, based in Toronto.

Moving Forward
While some choirs simply decided against putting on concerts entirely until given permission to perform live again, others dug deep into the virtual world and produced online concerts and other productions online, learning along the way. Tedious and extensive as the process might have been, it’s a true testament to the tenacity of these choral communities, and the strength of their support for one another, that they were able to accomplish as much as they did. We’ll dig deeper into progress being made in regard to this aspect of things as 2021/22 takes clearer shape.

It was certainly very unbecoming of March 2020 to have all of us strap ourselves into a rickety, year-long roller coaster ride, including loops we really did not want to go through. But, a year later, nauseated, and with our knuckles turned white, we have at least figured out the mechanics. Safe to say, however the coming year unfolds, we will all be better equipped to enjoy the ride.

Menaka Swaminathan is a chorister and soloist on hiatus, eager to get back to a singing groove. She is currently a writer and student of Vision Therapy, based in Toronto.

MEET THE MAKERS

Michael Sankey and Linda Manzer
Master Builders

While the focus in this magazine is typically on the musicians, venues, and institutions that comprise our shared musical community, it seemed like the time was ripe to focus on something a bit different: master builders who create exceptional instruments, beloved by players and audiences alike.

This month, I interviewed two notable Ontario guitar luthiers: Michael Sankey and Linda Manzer. Sankey - whose business, Sankey Guitars, is based in Ottawa – builds forward-thinking instruments, with an emphasis on ergonomic shapes, unique wood, and cutting-edge design. Manzer, based in Toronto, has long been a world-renowned guitar maker; her instruments can be heard in the hands of luminaries such as Pat Metheny, Julian Lage and Bruce Cockburn.

In my interview with Manzer and Sankey below, we discuss the effects of the pandemic on their practices, their exciting upcoming projects (including a new Manzer guitar for Metheny), and their hopes for the post-pandemic future.

WN: In March of last year, when the pandemic first broke and quarantine protocols began, how were your operations affected? How have the ongoing workplace COVID protocols affected the way that you do business?

LM: When the pandemic broke last March, I was actually visiting a guitar-maker friend (Steve Grimes) in Hawaii to celebrate his 1000th guitar. I returned about a week before Canadian travel restrictions were being seriously put in place. The reality of what was happening in the world was just settling in. Travelling was pretty wild. The morning I arrived home I had what I thought was a really bad cold, but I was quite sure I would never get an order for another guitar. Then, about four months in, that flipped on its head and I suddenly got a flurry of guitar orders.

MS: COVID hit me personally and professionally at the same time. I have a shop in Toronto but also in Almonte, Ontario, which is where I do the bulk of my work these days. I completely stopped working for about two-plus months. Every working musician I know suddenly lost their jobs and suddenly stopped touring, and it was pretty shocking and devastating for them. There was no end in sight and as time marched on it became obvious things weren’t going to change anytime soon and they had to make huge adjustments. I was quite sure I would never get an order for another guitar. Then, about four months in, that flipped on its head and I suddenly got a flurry of guitar orders.
One of the main avenues for marketing and selling my instruments is to display and present them at musical-instrument trade shows around the world. And one of my favourite things to do is travel to interesting cities and connect with the people there who love the art of the guitar. I had a few of those planned, and of course with the travel bans (not to mention bans on gatherings) those shows had to be cancelled, perhaps never to return.

It could have been worse, though. My workshop is in my home, so with nowhere to go I could devote extra time to building guitars. I did run into a few issues with suppliers having difficulty fulfilling my orders for parts and sometimes shipping instruments internationally took a lot longer than expected. But overwhelmingly, my clients have accepted and understood when my delivery timelines had to be extended.

Contrary to initial expectations at the outset of quarantine in March 2020, large instrument companies such as Fender, Taylor, Martin and others experienced a major boom in sales during much of last year. This boom, however, is largely attributed to a surge in casual hobbyist musicians buying low- and mid-price instruments. As a luthier who makes specialized, pro-level instruments, how has the pandemic affected your sales?

MS: I don’t have the volume or the consistency of output to be able to draw such precise conclusions as the big companies, but I also felt a substantial boost in demand at the beginning of the pandemic. It may have tapered down to “business as usual” by now, but, given the rather long lead time it takes for me to build guitars, I get to keep riding this wave longer than them. Many of the guitar makers I chat with have noticed the same thing. I suppose a lot of folks have found that working from home gives them more free time to do the things they want to do, like play guitar!

LM: The first few months I got no inquiries at all, and then suddenly I was flooded with orders. I’m now booked a full year in advance. I’ll be 100% honest: I was actually starting to think of other projects I’ve been putting off for years and looking forward to having the time to work on them, but that evaporated.

How would you describe the target market for your instruments?

LM: I build for guitar players who know what they want in an instrument and feel an affinity to my building style. If someone comes to me for a guitar they usually know about my work and have a pretty good idea of what they will be getting acoustically. I try to make the best instrument I can to suit their playing style and their needs.

MS: Typically, people who are interested in my guitars are not just musicians, they are connoisseurs of the art of fine guitars. That’s the funny thing about guitars: they are not just a means of making music; they are expressions of identity, vessels for sonic exploration, visual inspiration and tactile satisfaction.
music: they are expressions of identity, vessels for sonic exploration, visual inspiration and tactile satisfaction. So my instruments need to be highly functional, but also succeed at engaging the other senses of highly discriminating individuals. They are simultaneously art and tools for making art.

The relationship between specialized builders and professional musicians is often close. Of the musicians playing your instruments, what current (or upcoming) projects are you most excited about?

LM: I’m working on a guitar for Pat Metheny right now that is very close to being finished and I’ll be sending it to him within the month. He always surprises me with what he does with my instruments. He is so adaptable to whatever I make for him and he finds ways to musically explore it that I usually can’t imagine. He’s such a pleasure to work with.

And I’m working on a series of archtop guitars for some really wonderful players who have been patiently waiting. Some supplies have been a little harder to get, and with the lockdowns on and off in Ontario it’s made everything a little more cumbersome, but I’m one of those lucky people who gets to work at home so absolutely no complaints from me. I am extremely grateful to the people on the front lines keeping everything working and adapting to the ever-changing rules and protocols. These people are heroes.

MS: 2022 is going to be the 100th anniversary of the modern archtop guitar, as exemplified by the first Lloyd Loar L-5. I really enjoy making archtop guitars and pushing the boundaries of what they can be and what they can do; I have a couple of very special projects in mind to celebrate that milestone. So far they’re just on the drawing board, but I can’t wait to start sharing their progress!

Final reflections, on the pandemic and the future:

MS: As a very (very!) small business I can’t really separate the company from the person – they are the same entity. Always have been. And that entity is looking forward to backyard BBQ dinners with friends and family – the kind where you just relax and accept all the noise, mess and chaos as an inevitable part of life. Because now I know that it’s not.

LM: While this year has been incredibly challenging and nightmarish for a lot of people, there’s some aspect to what has happened to all of us socially that may change us all forever. Some for the better, I think. Marish for a lot of people, there’s some aspect to what has happened that I know that it’s not.

LM: I have talked about that tour, looking back in stunned wonder that we got it in just under the wire and how strange it was to go from so much to nothing. I’m reminded of comedian Denis Leary’s dark line about Lou Gehrig: “The guy died from Lou Gehrig’s disease. How did he not see that coming?” But of course none of us did, not really. Only hindsight is 20/20 and predicting history is a mug’s game at best.

So This Is How It’s Going to Be

Not long after I got home the pandemic became a reality. I’m not sure what it says about our society, but what made it all hit home for me was the NBA calling off a basketball game just as it was about....
I've come to realize that playing the bass, at least playing it the way I do, is like being a shark. Sharks have to swim constantly to live.

To start because one of the players tested positive, then suspending the entire season the next day. The other major sports rapidly followed suit and that’s when we knew we were in trouble: when multi-billion dollar industries relying on ticket sales suddenly shut down, it gets your attention. Opera companies closing? Who cares? Theatre seasons cancelled? So what? Jazz clubs shuttered? Please. I’m kidding of course, with some bitterness, but it was professional sports shutting down that signalled we weren’t in Kansas anymore, and wouldn’t be for some time.

The night the NBA suspended that game my wife Anna developed a sudden, severe cough and chest tightness and we both thought, “Uh-oh, she has it.” I was supposed to teach private lessons the next day and wondered about the wisdom of going in because if she had it, I likely did too. But she had no fever or other symptoms and in the end I did teach the next day, a case of “If I knew then what I know now, I never would have done it.” Anna made an appointment with her doctor that day – probably the last day she could have – and in between lessons I got a text from her saying, “Honey, great news! It’s only pneumonia!” surely the only time anyone was ever relieved to have pneumonia.

Laughin’ to Keep from Cryin’

One of the great side benefits of being a jazz musician is that underdog gallows humour becomes second nature: jazz players are used to being marginalized and beating their heads against the wall, so having a mordant sense of humour is a necessary defense. A good example was an early pandemic cartoon showing a pre-lockdown jazz club with six people in the audience and a post-lockdown club with the same six people. COVID Shmovid, bring it on, we’re used to losing. Or a musician friend’s declaration that whoever amongst us had the most cancelled gigs was “the winner.” Or that before COVID, non-audiences or adjudicators can be present at the recitals; the ensembles livestream their concerts on a YouTube channel; and the performances are archived so they can also be watched later. Being naturally distrustful of digital technology I had my doubts, but while there were reportedly some glitches early on, it was seamless. At the appointed hour the camera went live to show bassist Afif with his quartet of tenor saxophone, piano and drums, the rhythm section in masks and everyone distanced. I felt for them playing in such a vacuum, but it didn’t seem to faze them at all. They began to play Herbie Hancock’s Toys and within seconds the magic spell of live music took over, even with no one physically present. And the spell deepened over the next hour or so, their concentration and interplay and intense listening winning the day – a real band playing music for keeps.

Being and Nothingness

After the March 16 lockdown, I spent a lot of time doing what I uncomfortably came to realize I’m pretty good at: nothing at all. It was like the reverse of those sports car ads – from 100 to zero m.p.h. in three seconds flat. I came to realize that my closest practical involvement with music would be through teaching and spent a lot of the summer trying to sort out the challenges of what that would look like, without really knowing what changes might lie ahead. And to be sure there were some, mostly a switch from a hybrid of in-person and remote teaching to remote only. It involved some compromise, adaptation and outside-the-box thinking, but given the trying circumstances, I would say the year was successful; my students all made good progress and still learned a lot. Congratulations to my fellow teachers, the support staff and, most of all, the students for their efforts in making it all work.

As for playing? Not so much. In earlier articles I wrote about playing with Mark Eisenman and Mark Micklethwaite and streaming our efforts to a subscribing audience, but that shut down in early November once we entered the second (?) wave. Now that we’re in the third, or ninth, or wherever the hell we are, this won’t resume anytime soon. So my relationship with the bass has been reduced to practising, with mixed success. I end up working on intricate things like playing the melodies to songs in all 12 keys, which is a workout and useful to an extent, but doesn’t really address the nuts and bolts of what I mostly have to do: bang out hard, fat quarter notes till I’m blue in the face. I know I should be practising that but the trouble is it’s too boring without the presence of a drummer to make me bear down. I’ve come to realize that playing the bass, at least playing it the way I do, is like being a shark. Sharks have to swim constantly to live and bassists need to play with people continuously or else they wither. Playing jazz bass alone doesn’t mean much, not even to me.

Hope Dawns

So, where are we? What do we do? How do we keep faith as this mess goes on longer and seems to be getting worse and worse? Just the other day I received some answers to these questions along with a glimmer of hope from the teaching front.

I was asked to adjudicate the recital of a fourth-year bassist named Ian Afif, whom I know but hadn’t heard play yet. I’ve done this work many times, but this round would be different. No audiences or adjudicators can be present at the recitals; the ensembles livestream their concerts on a YouTube channel; and the performances are archived so they can also be watched later. Being naturally distrustful of digital technology I had my doubts, but while there were reportedly some glitches early on, it was seamless. At the appointed hour the camera went live to show bassist Afif with his quartet of tenor saxophone, piano and drums, the rhythm section in masks and everyone distanced. I felt for them playing in such a vacuum, but it didn’t seem to faze them at all. They began to play Herbie Hancock’s Toys and within seconds the magic spell of live music took over, even with no one physically present. And the spell deepened over the next hour or so, their concentration and interplay and intense listening winning the day – a real band playing music for keeps.

It was a beautiful presentation of a nicely varied program involving thoughtful, interesting and engaging improvisation; perhaps necessarily a little more subdued than usual, but riveting nonetheless. I was stunned and grateful, as this concert made me forget the pandemic for a while. How could I have forgotten that’s what good music is supposed to do? Stopping time and lifting you up hard, fat quarter notes till I’m blue in the face. I know I should be practising that but the trouble is it’s too boring without the presence of a drummer to make me bear down. I’ve come to realize that playing the bass, at least playing it the way I do, is like being a shark. Sharks have to swim constantly to live and bassists need to play with people continuously or else they wither. Playing jazz bass alone doesn’t mean much, not even to me.

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Event listings are free of charge to artists, venues and presenters.

Our listings continue to be a work in progress as we all, musicians, presenters and media alike, explore the best ways to reach audiences in a timely fashion, and for us a comprehensive and reliable monthly calendar of live musical events, in these rapidly changing times is not a realistic goal. What you see here is a snapshot, dated May 1, of our new WEEKLY UPDATES, available both as a regular e-letter and on our website.

In these volatile times, readers are encouraged to check weekly for changes and updates to existing listings, and for the numerous new listings being added each week, both current and further into the future.

IN THIS ISSUE: TWO LISTINGS SECTIONS

- **Section 1: Events by date for May 1 – July 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 July and August 2021, and the submission deadline for new listings and updates to listings previously processed is **6pm Monday June 7.**

Events by Date | May 1 to July 7, 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.

- **May 02 1:30:** Elin Soderstrom. *Bicinial!* Two-Part Didactic Music from the 18th Century and Beyond. Call 416-337-661! or email info@tempotoronto.net. ONLINE
- **May 02 7:00:** TD Niagara Jazz Festival. Twilight Jazz Series: 40 Years With Music. Vox Violini; Youth Performers Alex George and Dexter Frank. Visit niagarajazzfestival.com/twilight $15(adv); $19(in May 2); $29(dinner & show). Discounts available for musicians, arts workers and students. ONLINE
- **May 02 8:00:** New Music Concerts. Broadcast: The Ice Is Talking. Works for violin & percussion by Georges Aperghis, Vivian Fung, Lei Liang, Sophie Dupuis, and others. Mark Feser, violin; Aiju Yuan, percussion. Available on Facebook and YouTube. Broadcast links available closer to the date. ONLINE
- **May 03 7:30:** Toronto Consort. A Stellar Evening of Premium Wine Tasting, Treats, and Musical Delights. Join wine and music enthusiasts for guided tastings by winemaker Adnan Icel. The Toronto Consort’s Artistic Associate Esteban La Rotta rounds out the evening with unveiling and musical demonstration of his latest lute acquisition. Visit torontoconsort.org. $109 for a single package $175 for two packages (single delivery required). Open to adults over 19 years of age. ONLINE
- **May 06 7:30:** Art of Time Ensemble. A Singer Must Die. Works by Leonard Cohen: Anthem (arr. Andrew Downie); Come Healing (arr. Robert Carelic); Famous Blue Raincoat (arr. Jonathan Goldsmith); Dance Me To The End of Love (arr. Steve MacKinnon); Hal lelujah, and others. Sarah Harmer, Gregory Hoskins, Stephen Page, Sarah Slean, Tom Wilson, singers. Visit artoftimeensemble.com or call 647-344-2254. Free. Available until May 9 at 7:30pm. YOUTUBE
- **May 08 University of Toronto Faculty of Music. Spotlight on Diversity. Curated by U of T Opera Director Corin Thomas-Smith, this initiative details the diverse and rich history that traditionally marginalized groups have to Classical music, and the contributions they have made and continue to make in the operatic world. The program theme “Connection” is expressed in three ways: how we relate to others, to our space, and to the land we occupy; how our diverse identities connect with what is seen as a static and archaic art form; and the connection of traditionally othered people to a musical future, and also to a developed past. The contributions they have made and continue to make in the operatic world. The program theme “Connection” is expressed in three ways: how we relate to others, to our space, and to the land we occupy; how our diverse identities connect with what is seen as a static and archaic art form; and the connection of traditionally othered people to a musical future, and also to a developed past. Pre-registration is required for this free, pre-recorded concert. Visit music.utronto.ca/mob-concerts-events.php for details. ONLINE
- **May 09 7:00:** INNERchamber Inc. Souvenirs. Bernard Hermann: Souvenirs de Voyage for Clarinet Quintet; Beethoven: String Quartet in G Op.59 No.2. Peter Schackleton, clarinet; INNERchamber String Quartet (Andrew Chung, violin; Julie Baungartel, violin; Jody Davenport, violin; Ben Bolt-Martin, cello). Revival House, 70 Brunswick St., Stratford. Visit innerchamber.ca. $35; $10(arts workers). Pre-show 6:30pm. A light take-out meal is provided by Revival House for patrons living in Stratford. LIVE & ONLINE
- **May 12 7:00:** Small World Music/Inara Arts. Hasheek Raqaq/Sai. Presented as a part of Small World’s Asian Music Series. Visit SmallWorldMusic.ca or call 416-925-9405. Available after live streaming date. ONLINE
- **May 15 7:00:** Rezonanceensemble.com /concerts.
  - **May 15 7:00:** Rezonance Baroque Ensemble. Universal Harmony. Chamber works by Bach & Vivaldi. Rezan Ozen-Lapointe, baroque violin; David Podgurski, harpsichord. Visit rezonanceensemble.com/concerts. ONLINE
  - **May 15 8:00:** Array Music. Array Ensemble – Baroque Reflections: Sheila Jaffé. Ligeti: Sonata for Solo Viola; Bach: Chaconne in D; Saarioha: Frises for violin and electronics. Sheila Jaffé, violin & viola. Visit arraymusic.ca for details. ONLINE
- **May 16 8:00:** New Music Concerts. Broadcast: The Ice Is Talking. Works for violin & percussion by Georges Aperghis, Vivian Fung, Lei Liang, Sophie Dupuis, and others. Mark Feser, violin; Aiju Yuan, percussion. Available on Facebook and YouTube. Broadcast links available closer to the date. ONLINE
May 27 at 7:30 pm
CARDUCCI QUARTET
with clarinetist JULIAN BLISS

Details available soon. ONLINE


May 30 3:00: Trio Arkel. On Northern Shores. Works by Grieg, Röntgen and Walker, Marie Bérard, violin; Winona Zelenka, cello; Emily Krupse, violin; Rémi Pelletier; viola. Visit trioarkel-annorthershores.eventbrite. ca. ONLINE

June 03 8:00: Royal Conservatory of Music. Journey – Week 6. Bartók: String Quartet No.6 Sz.119. Tesla Quartet; Gabriela Lena Frank, composer & guest speaker. YouTube. ONLINE

June 12 8:00: Array Music. Virelai for Virus Days: Sandeep Bhagwati. Visit arraymusic.ca for details. Also Jun 11. ONLINE

June 14 12:15: Music Mondays. Impressions. Works by Xinyan Li, José Rio-Pareja, Chen Yi, Guillermo Lago, and Viet Cuong, aks s quartet (Nicole Tse, soprano sax; Jesse Mo, alto sax; Christopher Jones, tenor sax; Jennifer Tran, baritone sax). Visit a440.live/artists for details. PWYC. Suggested donation $10. ONLINE

June 17 at 7:30 pm
RITUÆLS
Concert film featuring collectif9

June 30 at 7:30 pm
ST. LAWRENCE QUARTET


Jun 22 8:00: Kindred Spirits Orchestra. Bruckner’s First Symphony. Prokofiev: Symphony No. 5 in B-flat Op. 100; Tan Dun: Concerto for Piano and orchestra “The Fire”. Christina Petrowska-Quilico, piano; Bartosz Zurakowski, conductor. Call 905-604-8339 or visit ksorchestra.ca or rhcentre.ca. $15. ONLINE

Jun 24 8:00: Tafelmusik Baroque Orches-tra. Spotlight 15. Fifteen sopranists and fourteen concertos are featured in this playful mix-and-match showcase of Tafelmusik’s art-istry. Elisa Citterio, director. Information at info@tafelmusik.org or call 416-533-9637. ONLINE

Events by Date | May 1 to July 7, 2021

A concert of women composers. Dr. Joseph-anne Powell: To Sit and Dream; Sarah Quartel: Snow Angel; Carlotta Ferrari: O Splendid Gem (arrangement of O splendidissima gemma by Hildegard von Bingen); Vittoria Alleotti: Two Renaissance Madrigals; Elaine Hagenberg: The Music of Stefan Prins and other works. Laura Evan Fraser, conductor; Hye Won Cecilia Lee, piano. Visit uppercanadachoirs.org, or call 416-255-0510. Free. Donations welcomed. Streamed from Grace Church on-the-Hill. Toronto. Visit YouTube at youtu.be/CSBSBY7FQf4 or Facebook at fb.me/e/SjG0v4a63. ONLINE

● Jun 28 8:00: Array Music. Situated Sounds III: Sound as Contact. Visit arrarymusic.ca for details. ONLINE

● Jun 28 8:00: Kindred Spirits Orchestra. Grace, Fire and Beauty. Tan Dun: Concerto for Piano and orchestra “The Fire”; Prokofiev: Symphony No. 5. In B-Flat Op.100. Christina Petrovska-Qulico, pianist; Kristian Alexander, conductor. Call 604-604-8359 or visit ksorchestra.ca or rchcentra.ca. $15. ONLINE


New & Continuing ETCeteras

AWARDS & COMPETITIONS

● May 10-30: International Music Festival & Competition. Piano, voice, strings, woodwinds, brass, harp, guitar, percussion, conducting, composition, chamber music, masterclasses. Jury members from University of Toronto, York University, Royal Conservatory of Music, Glenn Gould Professional School, and musicians from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and the Canadian Opera Company Registration deadline: May 16. Visit intermusic.ca, email office@intermusic.ca, or call 604-885-854.

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

● Ottawa ChamberFest. Chamber Chats: At Home with... every Tuesday and Thursday 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: 613-234-8008 or visit chamberfest.com. ONLINE

● Soundstreams. Composer Spotlight: Melissa Hui. Watch two movements from Map of Reality for string quartet. Ecology of Being for violin and piano and listen to (1) Lament for soprano, clarinet and piano; (2) And blue sparks burn for violin and piano; and (3) Come as you are for pipa and nine instruments. ONLINE

● Toronto Consort. Explorer: Discovering the World of Early Music. Explorer is a blog for the curious; a place of learning, sharing, and community. This all-new offering will present an assortment of curated content in a range of formats, like original short- or long-form articles, original video and audio recordings, and educational content on relevant topics relating to Early Music, history, and world music, as they relate our beloved repertoire.
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If you can read this, thank a music teacher. (Skip the hug.)

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May and June 2021
Editor’s Corner
DAVID OLDS

During the pandemic I have been spending some of my enforced stay-at-home time digitizing material from my archives, specifically composer interviews recorded during my tenure as producer and host of Transfigured Night on CKLN-FM (1984-1991). One of the earliest I have unearthed comes from January 1986, on a show previewing an event marking the 15th anniversary of the founding of New Music Concerts (NMC). On that occasion I devoted an hour to young composer and guitarist Tim Brady who discussed, among other things, the Chamber Concerto – commissioned by NMC – which would be premiered during that celebratory concert. That was Brady’s first of many appearances with NMC over the ensuing years, and my first encounter with one of this country’s most prolific and eclectic composers and musical entrepreneurs. His discography includes some 25 compact discs and the pandemic has not succeeded in slowing him down. Most recently he released a virtual edition of Instruments of Happiness 100 Guitars 2021 produced in isolation (youtube.com/watch?v=yODkTMXqFKg) and a three-CD set of mostly new material Tim Brady – Actions Speak Louder (redshiftrecords.org).

Act 1: Solos and a Quartet, is subtitled “Simple Loops in Complex Times,” which describes not only the process involved but also the temporal context in which the seven works were composed. Brady is a master when it comes to the technology available to extend the potential of the electric guitar. It’s hard to conceive of these works as solos with all the multi-layering and timbral complexity on display, but I realize that Brady can indeed perform these works by himself in real time using a plethora of looped devices and effects pedals. The final piece, Uncertain Impact (Quartet), was recorded one month into the COVID quarantine, with distanced, virtual performances featuring the members of his guitar quartet, Instruments of Happiness. On Act 2: v-Orchestra: Triple Concerto “Because Everything Has Changed”, Brady is joined by Helmut Lipsky on violin and Shawn Mativetsky, tabla and percussion. The three improvising soloists are known collectively as Of Sound, Mind and Body. Brady says the title of the concerto “refers not only to the nature of the social and political landscape of 2020, but also to how our relationship to music is continuing to be transformed by technology.” The virtual orchestra consists of sound files produced by Brady using NotePerformer 3.3.2 (an artificial intelligence instrument) to which the soloists reacted with improvised harmonies, melodies and rhythms recorded in their home studios. The result is a stunning reimagining of the orchestral experience in the context of current lockdown protocols. Act 3: Voices: Revolutionary Songs / As It Happened is comprised of an archival recording from 1995 of Brady’s setting of poems inspired by the Russian, Angolan, French and Nicaraguan revolutions featuring Bradyworks with soprano Nathalie Paulin; and an orchestrated radio documentary using a 2000 CBC interview with Linda MacDonald, who had been the subject of horrific drug and shock therapy experiments funded by the CIA at the Allen Institute in Montreal in the 1960s. The latter, Brady’s most ambitious studio production to date, is a powerful and devastating document that has to be heard to be believed. Actions Speak Louder may well be Brady’s own motto. It’s obvious that it will take more than a global pandemic to stifle his creativity.

Juilliard String Quartet – Beethoven: Quartet Op.59 No.2 “Razumovsky”, Bartók: Quartet No.3, Dvořák: “American” String Quartet (Sony Classical juilliardstringquartet.org) marks the 75th anniversary of the founding of the iconic group. The Juilliard made history in 1949 as the first quartet to publicly perform all six Bartók quartets, committing them to disc the following year. By the time of their second recording of the cycle in 1961, founding second violinist Robert Koff had been replaced by Isadore Cohen and cellist Arthur Winograd by Claus Adam. By the mid-70s, when I had the seminal experience of hearing them perform the cycle at the Guelph Festival, the only remaining original member was Robert Mann who would continue to sit in the first chair until 1997, when he retired after more than half a century at the helm. ‘Over the years there have been nine different violinsts, three violists and four cellists, but always with a substantial overlap of personnel whenever changes were made. Now the “old hand” is Ronald Copes who was enlisted as second violin in 1997 when Joel Smirnoff moved from second to first upon the departure of Mann. The other members are Roger Tapping, violinist since 2013, Astrid Schween, cellist since 2016 and the new first violinist, Areta Zhulla, who joined in 2018. This is their first recording together, but there is no sense of that in the performances; they sound as if they have always been together, a testament to the group’s ongoing legacy. The introductory notes explain the choice of repertoire. Franz Kneisel, a young German hired as concertmaster of the Boston Symphony in 1885, would later become the first head of the violin department of the Institute of Musical Arts in NYC that would evolve into the Juilliard School. His Kneisel Quartet gave the premiere performance of Dvořák’s “American” string quartet in Boston in 1894. Bartók’s Third was the first of the cycle that the Juilliard learned shortly after their founding in 1946, and Beethoven has always been an integral part of their repertoire, including two complete recordings of his legendary 16 quartets. The performances are fresh and convincing, everything we’ve come to expect over the past three quarters of a century from this masterful ensemble.

Speaking of Beethoven, last issue I mentioned Heinrich Schiff and his out-of-print recording of the cello sonatas. I’m pleased to note that a very fine new recording arrived on my desk this month, Beethoven Cello Sonatas 3 and 4 performed by Amit Peled accompanied by Noreen Polera (CTM Classics amitpeled.com). The Israeli-born cellist is on the faculty of the Peabody Institute in Baltimore and has a dozen previous recordings as soloist and chamber musician to his credit. Peled’s Giovanni Grancino instrument (c.1695, on loan from the Roux Family Foundation) provides the perfect depth and range of sound for the lyrical and dramatic Sonata No.3 in A Major, Op.69, in perfect balance with Polera’s deft touch on a modern grand piano. Together they shine on the Sonata No.4 in C Major, Op.102 No.1, the two movements of which each begin in a contemplative slow tempo, much darker in mood than the sunny key signature might suggest. The clouds roll away, however, during the Allegro vivace finale of the second movement bringing this recital to a playful end.

28 May and June 2021
thewholenote.com
Beethoven's late works form a bridge from the Classical era to the Romantic, and the next disc has some striking works for cello from this latter period. **Romantic Cello on KNS Classical** features works by Schumann, Brahms and Brahms' only composition student, Gustav Uwe Jenner, performed by young Toronto-based cellist **Thomas Charte** (thomaschartre.com) and Ukrainian-born pianist **Serhiy Salov** (serhiysalov.com).

Among Charte's accolades is a first prize in the Canadian Music Competition, the Syvia Geller Award, and the loan of the "Gand Pere" cello from the Canada Council Instrument Bank in 2016. He currently plays a Giovanni Battista Ceruti cello (1815) on loan from Canimex which is perfectly suited to the repertoire on display here. Salov also has many achievements and awards, but surely a highlight of his young career was touring South America with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra and Kent Nagano, as soloist in Liszt's Second Piano Concerto. I must confess that Jenner's name was new to me, but what a wonderful expansion of my knowledge of the period. It was thanks to a recommendation from Brahms that Jenner was appointed music director at the University of Malmburg in 1895, a position he held until his death 25 years later. The *Sonate in D Major* was first performed by Jenner and cellist Hugo Becker in 1904, and although quite Brahmsian in its sensibility, it is infused, in Charte's words, "with Jenner's distinctive artistic voice."

The three-movement work in the traditional fast-slow-fast form is lyrical and at times dramatic, if a bit anachronistic – nothing forward-looking here. Of particular note is the *Andante con variazioni* played with tasteful expression and restrained use of vibrato. Jenner's piece is followed by Schumann's *Adagio and Allegro Op.70* composed in 1849. Although originally for French horn, a relatively new invention at the time, and taking advantage of the chromatic possibilities of that valved instrument, the composer also intended it for performance on violin, viola or cello. It works especially well in the warm, rich range of the cello in the hands of Charte. Brahms' *Cello Sonata No.1 in E Minor, Op.38* features works by Schumann, Adagio and Allegro Op.70 composed in 1849. Although originally for French horn, a relatively new invention at the time, and taking advantage of the chromatic possibilities of that valved instrument, the composer also intended it for performance on violin, viola or cello. It works especially well in the warm, rich range of the cello in the hands of Charte. Brahms' *Cello Sonata No.1 in E Minor, Op.38*.

**Rossini – 6 Sonate a Quattro (leaf-music.ca)** features two musicians who need no introduction, violinist **Mark Fewer** and bassist **Joel Quarrington**, and two rising stars, violinist **Yolanda Bruno** and cellist **Julian Schwarz**. They were recorded in conjunction with residencies at the Lunenburg Academy of Music Performance in Nova Scotia in 2017. I had the pleasure of working with Bruno in May 2018 when her Iris Ensemble participated in New Music Concerts' "Zipangui!" as part of the 25th Festival.

On that occasion she played both violin and viola. Coincidentally, she was the recipient of the loan of the Stradivari Taft violin (1700) from the Canada Council Instrument Bank the same year that Charte had the “Gand Pere” cello. Schwarz, scion of the famed American musical family, made his US touring debut in 2010 with the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra and was the recipient of the first prize at the inaugural Schonfeld International String Competition three years later. Rossini’s *sonate a quattro* are youthful works, disavowed by the composer as "dreadful sonatas composed [...] at a most infantile age, not even having taken a lesson in accompaniment." That being said, they are charming works that must be a lot of fun to play – it certainly sounds like these musicians are having a good time at any rate.

Written at the estate of Rossini’s friend Agostino Triossi at the age of 12, the unusual instrumentation - two violins, cello and contrabass - reflect the resources available there: Triossi played the bass, his cousins violin and cello, and Rossini took second desk. Rossini’s scorn notwithstanding, these pieces have been in the repertoire ever since he wrote them. They were first published as traditional string quartets and later in an arrangement for wind quartet; it was not until 1954 that the original manuscript came to light. These performances use the 2014 Critical Edition published by the Fondazione Rossini Pesaro and as such I am willing to declare them definitive. Although there are few indications of the operatic writing to come from one of the giants of that form, these are delightful works played with a twinkle in the musicians’ eyes and a sparkle in their step. One more personal note: after reading Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music* which mentioned a “lost” string quintet arrangement of one of Beethoven’s piano trios, I had the temerity to ask Fewer whether he would be willing to read through the piece with me and a group of my friends. He agreed and it remains one of the highlights of my amateur music making to have spent an afternoon working on this rarely performed piece with such a consummate musician. As I recall, he did not think very highly of the string writing adapted from the piano part, but was gracious about it all and the afternoon provided me a treasured memory.

Although I’ve never been to the South Pacific, there is a connection for me with the next disc. **Rapa Nui Odyssey (Rubicon RCD 1066 rubiconclassics.com)**. Last issue I mentioned Liszt’s transcription for piano trio of *Vallée d’Obermann* from one of his *Années de pèlerinage*. I was not familiar with the original and wondered how all that was going on between the piano, violin and cello could have been realized in a solo piano performance. My answer came in the form of this double CD featuring **Mahani Teave** performing that work by Liszt and other staples of the repertoire by Bach, Handel, Scriabin, Chopin and Rachmaninoff. Teave was born on Easter Island (Rapa Nui) to an American mother and a local singer-songwriter. Music was in her blood, so to speak, and when the opportunity came to study piano – there was none on the island until a visiting teacher brought one when Teave was a young girl – she took to it like wildfire. The teacher, a violinist by profession, did not have any simple piano music and Teave’s introduction to the instrument was Mozart’s *Sonata in C Major* – considered easy, but by no means a beginner’s piece – and Beethoven’s *Für Elise*. She practised incessantly and at such a degree that just a few months after those lessons Roberto Bravo, a well-known pianist from Chile who visited the island and heard her play, suggested she move to the mainland to study. She spent nine years there, receiving a degree from the Austral University of Chile in Valdivia and eventually won first prize at the Claudio Arrau Piano Competition in 1999. Teave left Valdivia with the intent to study in Europe, but a stop off in the US for a masterclass turned into a six-year stint at the Cleveland Institute of Music as a pupil of Sergei Babayan. From there she was off to Berlin to build her performing career under the wing of Fabio Bidini. This is certainly the stuff on which major careers are built, but after a few years of successful concertizing in Europe Teave decided it was more important to return to her native island to give back to the land that fostered her interest and her talent in the first place. Since then she has established an arts and culture centre to serve all the children of Rapa Nui. Her crusade for musical culture could be favourably compared to Venezuela’s El Sistema in my opinion, but her vision goes beyond culture to encompass ecology and to making the island self-sufficient. There is a wonderful film by John Forsen, *Song of Rapa Nui*, available (exclusively unfortunately) on Amazon Prime Video that documents her life in music, but more importantly her vision for the future of Rapa Nui and its people. Fortunately, her work there has not compromised her own performance abilities and this wonderful 2CD set, recorded in Seattle in November 2018, is a fine testament to her art.

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

There are two fascinating CDs from Canadian guitarist Emma Rush. On Fandango by the Azuline Duo she is joined by flutist Sara Traficante in a program of mostly contemporary works for flute and guitar (azulineduo.com). The title track is the duo’s own arrangement of a piece for solo Baroque guitar by Santiago de Murcia (1673-1739), the duo also arranged the two works by the Brazilian Chiquinha Gonzaga (1847-1936). Traficante plays alto flute in Miroslav Tadić’s Macedonian Pieces and wooden flute and tin whistle in Five Celtic Pieces, Gerald Garcia’s striking arrangements of traditional Irish and Scottish melodies. Maximo Diego Pujol’s Nubes de Buenos Aires and Jeffrey McFadden’s Aguardiente complete a refreshingly different and quite beautiful CD.

Rush’s solo CD Wake the Sigh – 19th Century Music for Guitar (emma-rush.com) opens a window on a world we rarely encounter with a collection of works for both accomplished amateur guitarists and professional players, all written by women, five of whom were renowned soloists in their own right. Featured are: Emilia Giuliani-Gaglielmi (1813-1850), Angiolina Panormo Huerta (1824-1895); Susan C. Domett (1826-1911); Julie Fondard (1819-1850); Angiolina Panormo Huerta (1811-1900); Catharina Pratten (1824-1911); Julie Fondard (1819-1864); Julia Piston (1800-1842); and Madame Delores de Gofri (1813-1842).

As with the Fandango CD, there’s clean, sensitive playing of an intriguing program. No information on when or where they were recorded, other than “in Hamilton Ontario, produced and engineered by Kirk Starkey,” who clearly did a terrific job.

Italian music, with its strong bel canto vocal influence, dominated the early-19th-century virtuoso guitar repertoire, and Valois uses period-appropriate elements of the style to highlight the lyrical nature of the music. Niccolò Paganini’s Grand Sonata, Mauro Giuliani’s Sonata Op.15 and Ferdinando Carulli’s Six Andantes Op.320, his Sonatina Op.59 No.1 and Sonata Op.159 No.1 – the latter two in world-premiere recordings – make an attractive and finely played recital.

There’s more Beethoven on another Mirare CD with Liya Petrova playing Beethoven & Mozart Violin Concertos in D with the Sinfonia Varsovia under Jean-Jacques Kantorow (MIR552 mirare.fr).

The trio’s own arrangement of a piece for solo Baroque guitar by Santiago de Murcia (1673-1739), the first two of his four quartets, Jurgis Karnavičius String Quartets (Ondine AN 2 9195 analekta.com). There’s more Beethoven on another Mirare CD with Liya Petrova playing Beethoven & Mozart Violin Concertos in D with the Sinfonia Varsovia under Jean-Jacques Kantorow (MIR552 mirare.fr).

The Trio Arnold is in outstanding form on its debut CD for the Mirare label, Beethoven String Trios Op.9 (MIR530 mirare.fr).

The three works – No.1 in G Major, No.2 in D Major and No.3 in C Minor – were written as Beethoven sought to establish himself as a chamber music composer, the risk of comparison with the string quartets of Haydn and Mozart leading him to choose the safer option of string trios. They clearly act as preparation for the string quartets, and indeed sound like quartets at times.

The release sheet cites “beauty of sound and a high degree of instrumental virtuosity” in the works, and that’s also exactly what the Trio Arnold displays in superb performances.

The Partitas, all consisting of eight, nine or ten very short movements, are described as “an extraordinary bridge” from the solo compositions of German composers like Biber to the later masterpieces of Bach and Telemann. They receive beautifully nuanced performances in a generous CD of almost 82 minutes.

As always, Sheppard Skærved’s booklet essay is remarkably erudite and informative, examining the use of scordatura and the emotional effects attached to specific key signatures in order to understand the physical and emotional structure of the music.

The 20-year-old Swedish violinist Johann Dalene, winner of the 2019 Carl Nielsen Competition, is joined by Norwegian pianist Christian Ile Hadland on Nordic Rhapsody, his second CD on the BIS label (BIS-2560 naxosdirect.com/search/bis-2560).

A dazzling Presto from Sinding’s Suite Im alten Stil Op.10 sets the tone for a recital bursting with strong, brilliant tone and outstanding technique, with Hadland an excellent partner. Stenhammar’s Two Sentimental Romances Op.28, three of the Six Pieces Op.79 by Sibelius, Nielsen’s Romance in D Major, Rautavaara’s Notturno e Danza and Grieg’s Sonata No.1 in F Major Op.8 complete an impressive recital disc from a player from whom we will clearly be hearing a lot more in the future.

On *A French Connection* violinist Daniel Rowland and pianist Natacha Kudritskaya present what the violinist calls “two wonderful, luminous, gorgeously romantic pieces, one a perennial favourite, the other still all too rarely heard” (Champs Hill Records CHRCD157 champshillrecords.co.uk).

The latter is Chausson’s *Concerto for Violin, Piano & String Quartet*, the duo being joined by violinists Francesco Sica and Asia Jiménez Antón de Vez, violist Joel Waterman and cellist Maja Bogdanović in a passionate performance to open the disc.

World première recordings of effective arrangements of three Debussy Preludes by Craig White precede the “perennial favourite”: the Franck A Major Sonata. It does indeed turn up regularly on CD, but is nevertheless always welcome, especially in warm, sensitive performances like this.

Cellist Yi-wen Zhang and pianist Nanyi Qiang have been collaborating since 2002 and founded the DUO SHU in 2019. Their self-titled debut CD on the Blue Griffin label features two songs by Fauré, Schumann’s Five Pieces in Folk Style Op.102, Rachmaninoff’s Valse Op.34 No.14, Dvořák’s Four Romantic Pieces Op.75 and Bartók’s Romanian Folk Dances, together with Longing for SHU by Weijie Gao (BGR581 bluegriffin.com).

It’s a very pleasant disc with some passionate playing, particularly in the Dvořák, with a singing cello tone and crystal-clear piano playing, although the double-stopping passages in the cello sound a bit laboured in places.

Chances are you’ve never heard Boccherini cello concertos sound the way they do on *Cadenza*, the new CD from cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton that features the concertos No.3 in D Major G476, No.4 in C Major G477 and No.6 in D Major G479 in small combo arrangements by Wieder-Atherton and cimbalom player Françoise Rivalland. The other players are Amaryllis Billet (violin), Rémi Magnan (double bass) and Robin Billet (bassoon) (ALPHA667 naxosdirect.com/search/alpah667).

Wieder-Atherton says that incorporating the cimbalom results in our “hearing the dances, the infinite colours and the bursts of rhythmic music,” but it does seem an odd way to present Boccherini, especially when you add the lengthy cadenzas from various contributors with – at times – cimbalom, drones and finger cymbals, and musical material from Handel and Stravinsky.

Guitarist Aaron Larget-Caplan follows up his 2010 CD *New Lullaby – 14 Enchanting Ways to Fall Asleep with Nights Transfigured – Vol.2 of the New Lullaby Project*, a second collection of short pieces by 14 different composers written for Larget-Caplan between 2009 and 2020 (Stone Records 5060192781106 stonerecords.co.uk).

Don’t be misled by the title. Although there’s obviously a general sense of calm throughout the CD, this isn’t a disc of music for children but a fascinating collection of exquisite contemporary miniatures for classical guitar that explore a wide range of musical languages and often employ extended guitar technique, all of it beautifully played and recorded.

Greek guitarist Pavlos Kanelakis is the soloist on *Kaleidoscope*, a recital of world-premiere recordings of works by George Kontogiorgos (Naxos 8.579084 naxosdirect.com/search/8579084). The music is essentially tonal and very accessible.

The five-movement Sea Vespers from 2015 takes melodies from the composer’s songs from the 1960s and 1970s. Kanelakis is joined by cellist Vangelina Nina in the four-movement *Cansonauta* from
2014. *Elegy* was written in 1980 and revised for Kanellakis in 2006 when Kontogiorgos was written in the commissioned guitar suite that gives the CD its title, the four-movement *Kaleidoscope* consisting of multi-coloured fragments that shift and dance as if viewed through a kaleidoscope.

The darker *Emotions* from 2018 completes a recital of performances that can be considered definitive, Kanellakis having worked closely with the composer.

**Mirror Images**, the latest album from violinist, violist and vocalist Violeta Vici, features world-premiere recordings of solo works by Ragnar Söderlind, Imogen Holst and Jean-Louis Florentz, plus related compositions. First, *Agnus Dei* is performed admirably, notably in its soprano part. Then there are the five parts of *Ave verum corpus*. Josquin relished the more complex structure: the Studio rises to the challenge with its appropriately celestial singing. Josquin was a contemporary of the re-volution in music printing. His sheer musical genius and the printing press ensured his influence on composers for at least a century.

**VOCAL**

**John Eccles – Semele**

*Academy of Ancient Music; Cambridge Handel Opera*

AAM Records AAM012 (aam.co.uk)

What looks like Handel, sounds like Purcell and is a world premiere recording? If you guessed the answer to be the latest release from the Academy of Ancient Music, you win! Any mention of the words “opera” and “Semele” together immediately turns minds to Handel’s frequently performed 1744 masterwork, but there is another elder, lesser-known Semele living in the operatic world, written in 1707 by the English composer John Eccles.

Eccles’ Semele provides fascinating insight into how opera in England might have developed after Henry Purcell’s death had Handel not moved to London in 1712, for this *Semele*’s musical vocabulary is indeed a slightly more advanced and refined adaptation of Purcell’s own lexicon; if one were to select a pinnacle of the English Baroque, they would be hard-pressed to find a more representative example than this. Despite his indebtedness to Purcell, Eccles achieves even greater depths of expression and extremes of emotion than his predecessor, utilizing similar forms and expanding their structure, so that Semele ends up being more than double the length of *Dido and Aeneas*, for example, but without once feeling overspun.

What is most remarkable about *Semele* is the way in which music and text receive equal attention. The delivery of William Congreve’s libretto and forward motion of the drama is never interrupted, suspended or usurped by over-composition. Director Julian Perkins and the Academy of Ancient Music in turn keep the opera moving forward, selecting tempi that lend the necessary affect to these dance-based arias and overtures while keeping the text constantly intelligible.

With world premiere recordings being issued with ever-greater frequency, it can be challenging to find those works that contribute something worthwhile to the canon, much less provide an eye-opening exploration of something revelatory, but *Semele* does just that. The saying “just because you can, doesn’t mean you should” is correct more often than not, but in this case, we are grateful that those behind this recording could, and did.

*Matthew Whitfield*

**L’homme armé – La Cour de Bourgogne et la musique**

*Studio de musique ancienne de Montréal; Andrew McNerney ATMA ACD2 2807 (atmaclassique.com/en)*

The Court of Burgundy’s powers extended well beyond the borders of the modern French region. Its musical brilliance obviously affected the Studio de musique ancienne de Montréal: with eight composers on one CD, it is difficult to think of a major segment of the liturgical year as its theme. At the heart of the CD is the Missa *L’homme armé*, itself set 40 times from roughly 1460 to 1550. Track one is the Anonymous/Morton interpretation, featuring not only the original words to *L’homme armé* but also a contemporary twist willing on a crushing defeat (in three passionate and imploring voices) for those fearsome Ottoman Turks on their way to destroy Christendom.

Not everything, though, is so belligerent. Listen to the ethereal *Kyrie Eleison* from Antoine Busnois’ own Missa *L’homme armé*, uplifted by the sackbut playing of the Studio. Then be inspired by the delicate performance of Gilles Binchois’ *Motet Asparges me*. It may have been Binchois who taught and inspired Jacques Offenbach, who in turn did teach Josquin des Prés. This comes out in this CD: in addition to the pieces by Binchois, the Studio performs Ockeghem’s Sanctus, a full-blooded performance combining sometimes stark singing with the Studio’s sackbuts.

As for Josquin, he is remembered by two works by Bach and Ysaye and six interspersed improvisations (two of them vocal) by Vicci (Gramola GRAM98010 naxosdirect.com/search/gram98010).

Bach’s *Partita No.3 in E Major* (with hardly any repeats, lasting just 14 minutes for all seven movements) and Ysaye’s *Sonata in A Minor* are given competent if somewhat mundane performances; the Söderlind is the brief *Elegia* in A Minor and the Florentz an equally-brief *Vocalise*. By far the most interesting work, though, is the 1930 Holst *Suite for Solo Viola*, which also draws the best playing from Vicci.

*Michael Schwartz*

**And the sun darkened**

*New York Polyphony Bis BIS-2277 (bis.se)*

For as long as music has been written down, the Catholic Church has provided inspiration to composers for at least a century. Whether directly, as in early monodic plainchant and Palestina’s polyphony, or tangentially, for example in post-Reformation works by Tallis in England and Bach in Germany, the influence of the Catholic Church has provided inspiration to composers for centuries.

New York Polyphony’s *And the sun darkened* surveys a range of Catholic-centric works, ranging from the 15th century to the 20th. With such an enormous body of material to work with and choose from, this release focuses its attention on music for Passiontide, the last two weeks of the Lenten season, using this specific and narrow segment of the liturgical year as its theme.

The focal point of this disc is the world premiere recording of Loyset Compère’s *Officium de Cruce*, a multi-movement motet cycle based upon a set of devotional texts focused on the Cross. A contemporary of Josquin who followed a similar career path, Compère was a Franco-Flemish composer who worked in Italy for the Duke of Milan (where Josquin would arrive a decade later).

*Officium de Cruce* is expressive in its simplicity, exploring the text’s facets through spacious and effective settings, and New York Polyphony’s poised performance is a fine
introduction to Compère and his works.

In addition to music by Compère’s contemporary Josquin, Willaert and de la Rue, And the sun darkened contains two striking works by much more recent composers. Cyrilis Kreek’s Psalm 22 (1914) is a striking and evocative setting by one of Estonia’s greatest musical figures, while Andrew Smith’s Psalm 55, written in 2011, synthesizes old and new harmonic languages to produce a remarkably organic blend of medieval, Renaissance and modernist lexicons.

Far more than just a seasonal listen, And the sun darkened is a worthwhile exploration of fascinating composers and musical works expertly and sensitively performed by New York Polyphony, well worth listening to regardless of the time of year.

Matthew Whitfield

Pietro Antonio Cesti – La Dori

Ascioti; Enticknap; Mazzulli; Baráth; Accademia Bizantina; Ottavio Dantone

Naxos 2.110676 (naxosdirect.com/search/2110676)

> Making peace, the Nicaean and Persian kings pledge the marriage of their infants, Dori and Oronte. In Egypt, Ardete’s wife accidentally kills the king’s baby daughter, also named Dori. Ardete ransoms Nicaean Dori from her pirate kidnappers, bringing her to Egypt where the king, unaware of his daughter’s death, believes this Dori to be his. Years pass. Oronte, now betrothed to Dori’s sister Arsinoe, visits Egypt. Inevitably, he and Dori fall in love. Fleeing Egypt to follow him, Dori is captured and, disguised as a man, becomes Arsinoe’s slave “Ali,” while Egyptian prince Tolomeo, in love with Arsinoe, disguises himself as Arsinoe’s female slave “Celinda.” All this happens before the curtain rises! The ensuing comedy-drama of concealed identities is no less convoluted until all ends joyfully.

La Dori was a 17th-century hit, with over 30 productions throughout Italy. This 2019 production in Insbruck, site of its premiere in 1657, is as unrealistic as the libretto, with timeless indeterminate sets and costumes, stage director Stefano Vizioli contributing innumerable comedic touches.

Cesti’s richly melodic, often beautiful score mixes frivolity with pathos, vigorously performed by Accademia Bizantina conducted by Ottavio Dantone. Mezzo-soprano Francesca Ascioti (Dori), counter-tenor Rupert Enticknap (Oronte) and sopranos Francesca Lombardi Mazzulli (Arsinoe) and Emőke Baráth (Tolomeo) head the excellent cast of eight soloists.

With its fine music and singing, La Dori is a pleasure to listen to and its silly goings-on make it great fun to watch as well.

Michael Schulman

Gounod – Faust

Michael Fabiano; Erwin Schrott; Irina Lungu; Royal Opera House; Dan Ettinger

Opus Arte OA1330D (naxosdirect.com/search/oa1330D)

> The Faust legend and the idea of man bargaining with the devil has always fascinated artists, writers and composers. Goethe’s metaphysical play inspired Berlioz, Liszt, Wagner and Busoni towards various musical forms, but Gounod’s opera became so beloved and successful that for 150 years it never left the stage in France and even in England where it became Queen Victoria’s favourite opera. So it’s no surprise the ROH would create a lavish, over-the-top and “theatrically exuberant” new production in the hands of their star director, David McVicar. The original German medieval tale is catapulted into the French Second Empire, in fact into Gounod’s lifetime with opulent sets and costumes. A real extravaganza.

The adaptation had some interesting, albeit questionable, features such as the beautiful village walliz in the second act turned into a wild, frantic cabaret can-can and the famous ballet later in the fourth act seen as a horrifying, infernal nightmare that I am sure Gounod never intended. Musically however we are amply compensated with a superb cast, chorus and orchestra. With brisk tempi, young and energetic conductor Dan Ettinger is thoroughly engaged with full control of the score.

American tenor Michael Fabiano (whose debut disc I reviewed here in November 2019) as Faust has some difficulties acting as a decrepit old man, but quickly becomes a dashing young lover with a voice to match. Particularly his third act Cavatina, Salut, demeure chaste et pure is wonderfully sung with the concluding high C almost ethereal. With Russian soprano Irina Lungu (Marguerite) they make a wonderful couple and their love duet is sheer delight. Mephisto, the devil, a rather youngish Uruguayan powerful bass-baritone, Erwin Schrott, is very friendly and debonair in the first half of the opera, but gradually turns dark and menacing as the action descends into a terrible tragedy. Interesting and thought-provoking, this new production is a visual delight.

Janos Gardonyi

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

Duo Shu

Nanyi Qiang (piano)

& Yi-wen Zhang (cello)

Works by Faure, Schuman, Rachmaninoff, Dvorak, Gao and Bartok that calm and soothe the mind, reflect on yearning for homecoming, and charm the spirit.

L’homme armé

Studio de musique ancienne de Montreal; Andrew McNamerney

A musical journey into the music of the Court of Burgundy in the 15th century, a program of motets by the first Franco-Flemish polyphonists.

Boundless

Sirens Choir

Prince Edward Island’s award winning women’s vocal ensemble have debuted their first full-length album of a cappella choral music. Available at www.sirenschoir.com

Cavatine

Duo Stephanie & Saar

Nathalie Warmerdam, a victim of domestic violence.

With a concept inspired by Schubert’s Winterreise, Songs for Murdered Sisters follows Hopkins on his journey of seven short songs: Empty Chair, Anger, Dream, Bird Soul, Lost, Rage and Coda: Song. Hopkins is beyond moving in his vulnerability and willingness to address the complicated and disorderly feelings of grief, the grieving process, and the loss of a loved one under tragic and violent circumstances. Atwood’s experience in writing opera libretti comes through with evocative and heartrending singable texts: Who was my sister is now an empty chair... You opened the door... I was too late... so many sisters lost. Heggie’s seasoned writing skills are also on display throughout, especially in the setting of texts, the skillful use of Hopkins’ vocal register and colours, the compelling dynamic choices, and, most powerful, the deafening silences.

With this 27-minute song cycle, Atwood, Heggie and Hopkins use their collective voices to raise awareness about violence against women from an intimate or former partner. To many sisters lost to gender-based violence. Hopkins invites the listener to take the white-ribbon pledge to end violence against women and girls (white-ribbon.ca).

Co-commissioned by Houston Grand Opera and Canada’s National Arts Centre, Songs for Murdered Sisters is offered in digital format. The NAC plans to premiere an orchestral version when concert halls reopen.

Sophie Bisson

Murdered Sisters
Jake Heggie; Margaret Atwood – Songs for Murdered Sisters
Joshua Hopkins; Jake Heggie
PentaTone PTC 5186270 (songsformurderedsisters.com)

Péter Eötvös – Senza Sangue
Viktória Vizin; Jordan Shanahan;
Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra; Péter Eötvös
BMC Records BMC CD 278 (bmcrecords.hu)

Chaya Czernowitz – Heart Chamber
Patrizia Ciofi; Noa Frenkel; Dietrich Henschel; Terry Wey; Ensemble Nikel; SWR Experimentalstudio; Deutsche Oper Berlin; Johannes Kalitzke
Naxos 2.110673 (naxosdirect.com/search/2110673)

In collaboration with Margaret Atwood and Jake Heggie, Canadian baritone Joshua Hopkins delivers both a call to action and a powerful homage to his sister.

Senior post-modern Hungarian composer-conductor Péter Eötvös (b.1944) is among today’s most active opera composers. His 12th stage work, Senza Sangue (2015), is an opera in one act with libretto by Mari Mezei after a novel by Alessandro Baricco.

Eötvös’ first large-scale compositions were for film and his feel for drama and pregnant atmosphere is amply reflected in the premiere live 2018 recording of Senza Sangue starring mezzo Viktória Vizin and baritone Jordan Shanahan. The composer conducts the Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra in his colourful score for an orchestra and cast very similar to the one in Béla Bartók’s weighty and difficult to program single-act opera, Bluebeard’s Castle. It’s no coincidence; according to Eötvös, he expressly composed Senza Sangue as a concert companion to Bluebeard.

The resemblances extend to their librettos. As in the Bartók opus, love, sex and death go hand in hand in the Eötvös opera, except that multiple deaths precede the narrative unfolding in Eötvös’ 45-minute work. Entwined themes of war-fuelled cruelty, violence, compassion, trauma and above all revenge, transform into a kind of parable of reconciliation as the last mysterious low chord dies out.

As for the musical language, it is expressionistic, with splashes of bold emotion, though Eötvös insists that “there are no avant-garde endeavours whatsoever [in it]. I’d like my work to be performable in 50 years too.” Judging from the performance on this album chances are very good that it will.

Eötvös’ subsequent opera, Sleepless, composed in 2020, is scheduled to premiere in Berlin later this year, with additional performances slated for Geneva in 2022.

Andrew Timar

A woman drops a jar of honey on a busy stairway. A stranger picks it up and gives it to her. Their hands touch. From that chance encounter results the complicated love affair that the much-performed Israeli-American composer Chaya Czernowin explores in her brilliant new opera, Heart Chamber.

With tangible immediacy, she tightly interweaves her music with her own libretto. It feels organic, pertinent and real – like life itself. Past traumas and present dreams drive the two unnamed characters to ask each other tough questions like “Will you open up my life?” and “Will you always stay?” Layers of gorgeous sonic textures suggest the possibility of happiness for them. But there’s a lot of pain as well, reflected in angular, primal episodes.

I can’t imagine these characters portrayed with more conviction and poignancy – and technical dazzle – than by soprano Patrizia Ciofi and baritone Dietrich Henschel. Ciofi wears her apprehensions with playfulness and, in spite of her unfortunate costuming, allure. Henschel shows how charismatic vulnerability can be.

As the woman’s internal voice, contralto Noa Frenkel eloquently exposes her most intimate subconscious feelings. The man’s internal voice, powerfully sung by counter-tenor Terry Wey, is as candid as his female counterpart. But he’s less demanding, so causes less trouble for his character.

This is the third opera by Czernowin that Claus Guth has directed. Like his production of Mozart’s The Marriage of Figaro seen at the Canadian Opera Company in 2016, it’s set on a stairway. But here, unlike the controversial Mozart production, the relationship between Guth’s concept and the work itself is seamless.

Conductor Johannes Kalitzke deftly commands the large assemblage of remarkable musicians, with the orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin and Czernowin’s frequent collaborators, the new music group Ensemble Nikel, enhanced by vibrant electronics from SWR Experimentalstudio.

Pamela Margles
Dreams of a New Day – Songs by Black Composers
Will Liverman; Paul Sánchez
Cedille CDR 90000 200 (cedillerecords.org)

Dreams of a New Day – Songs by Black Composers is an album that features art songs by eight composers. From Henry Burleigh (1866–1949) to Shawn E. Okpebholo (b.1981), the album showcases several generations of composers and a repertoire that offers an honest, and, at times, devastating, account of life for African Americans in the United States. Composers set music to texts of raw poetry by American poets and artists such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes and Adela Florence Nicolson.

Paul Sánchez captures our attention with a breadth of pianistic sonorities and timbres while baritone Will Liverman’s skilled and beautiful singing elicits all of the nuances of challenging topics that include the Middle Passage, Civil Rights, past and present injustices, and Black pride. Most poignant are Okpebholo’s Two Black Churches songs (Ballad of Birmingham and The Rain, commissioned for the album) and Birmingham Sunday (Richard Farinha 1937–1966). Whereas the first pair combines several tragic events and deals with race-based violence, the last song reminds us that while dreaming of a new day, the road to equality for all is still ahead of us.

The booklets included with the album provide both context and the rich history behind the repertoire with a 15-page songbook and a 20-page extensive program note booklet written by Dr. Louise Toppin, a specialist of African American composers’ concert repertoire.

Sophie Bisson

Ghost Light
Akropolis Reed Quintet
“Akropolis Reed Quintet have evolved a collective voice that appears to be organically integrated.”
- The Wire, review of Ghost Light

The Recombinant Trilogy
George Lewis
Works for instrument and electronics that use interactive digital delays, spatialization and timbre transformation to transform acoustic sounds into digitally created sonic personalities.

The Hunt by Night
Douglas Boyce
A collection of his finely wrought chamber music. Boyce’s music balances an affinity for subtle motivic development with vigorous rhythmical energy.

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

The ethereal polyphony of the Sirens Choir is absolutely bewitching on Boundless. You would be forgiven for falling prey to the charms of the women of this Prince Edward Island-based choir as they wax eloquent with their celestial 11-voice harmonies on this disc. So perfect is this programming that it is surprising to note that this debut didn’t happen much earlier.

This is a quietly potent recording. Its feminism is whispered rather than broadcast, with all the singers conveying a sense of strength, joy and spontaneity. Ensemble director Kelsea McLean guides, with a firm hand, the often delicate musicality of the group. Together with the rest of Sirens, she is able to inspire a performance where balanced rhythm, soaring harmonies and subtle dynamics are both flexible and dramatic. The overall sound is highly translucent, made more memorable in the meditative atmosphere of St. Bonaventure’s Church, where the recording took place.

The music of Selene’s Boat and of Boundless is utterly captivating. Turlutte acadienne montréalaise may be the disc’s apogee. By the time you get here, however, you may wish that you had a booklet of lyrics with which to follow the vocalists; it’s a small price to pay for listening to this outstanding music. Odysseus may have resisted the mesmerism of the Sirens of the Aegean Sea, but you will not be able to resist the charms of these Canadian singers.

Raul da Gama

May and June 2021
American professional chamber choir The Crossing, conducted by Donald Nally, is a multi-Grammy-winning ensemble dedicated to new music, collaboration and modern day social, spiritual, environmental and cultural issues. In these two recordings, they perform recent works with in-depth understanding of the music and issues the composers explore.

The Crossing commissioned three composers on The Tower and the Garden. Estonian Tolto Tulev set Walt Whitman’s words in the slow new music-flavoured, haunting A child said, what is the grass? (2015). Almost shrill attention-grabbing opening vocals lead to contrasting high female and low men’s interval patterns and drones in fluctuating tonal/atonal segments to the final hopeful long note. The Tower and the Garden (2018) for choir and string quartet by Gregory Spears, is a more tonal four-movement setting of poems by Keith Garebian, Denise Levertov and Thomas Merton. The shorter movement can be heard in longer, full harmonic flavors, haunting in an inspired setting of poems by Whitman’s words in the slow new music-flavoured, haunting A child said, what is the grass?.

The tower and the garden

The Tower and the Garden

The Crossing conducted by Donald Nally

Navona Records NV6347
crossingchoir.org

A child said, what is the grass?

Composer Joel Puckett’s In these two

Classical and Beyond

CLASSICAL AND BEYOND

Au Monde

Daniel Zapico

Alborada editions ALB001

(alborahada-editions.com)

Daniel Zapico explains that, as soon as he picked it up, the theorbo was to be his instrument. Such is his dedication to it that he takes manuscript of compositions for inter alla harpsichord, viola da gamba and guitar and transcribes them for theorbo.

Taking inspiration from the Vaudry de Saizemay manuscript of 1669, Zapico performs pieces from six composers in Au Monde. From the start, the theorbo demonstrates capabilities in excess of its younger sister the lute, in the shape of a more resonant, mellow and deeper tone, the instrument being perfectly suited to Zapico’s interpretations. Robert de Visée’s Prelude brings out this very deep and resounding sonority.

There are the longer and more demanding compositions. Zapico selects Couperin’s Les Bergeries and de Visée’s Pastorale to demonstrate his forceful technique. Contrast these with the sensitivity of Monsieur du Buisson’s Plainte sur la mort de Monsieur Lambert (one of the other composers featured on this CD). This piece is complex and makes real demands on Zapico’s technique.

Of course, there is always the Bournée by de Visée for a lighter enjoyment of this CD, which is sufficiently varied to show Zapico’s mastery of an instrument overshadowed by the lute in popularity and ultimately by the harpsichord. Zapico’s love for the theorbo is brought home by the highly complex tablature he works from – printed in copper-coloured ink to grace even further this very sumptuously presented CD.

Michael Schwartz

Telemann – Polonoise

Holland Baroque; Aisslinn Nosky

PentaTone PTCS516878 (naxosdirect.com/search/827949087868)

One walks a fine line when performing early music. Often, musicians and audiences who perform, record and appreciate early music are, and I say this kindly, authenticity fetishists who value the period veracity of everything from the repertoire, tempo and interpretation of the music to, in some cases, the lineage and pedigree of the instruments played, to the ensemble dress. Holland Baroque, led by Judith and Tineke Steenbrink (who supply new arrangements of Georg Philipp Telemann’s familiar music for the recording here), manages to thread the difficult needle of adhering to the purity and concretized tradition of German Baroque performance while imbuing a flair for innovation that places this musical style in a contemporary setting that includes elements of improvisation and innovative collaboration. It is little wonder then that the ensemble has won fans worldwide.

Here, on their second strong release for PentaTone Records, the group is sure to earn even more accolades and listeners. Joined by Canadian early music violinist Aisslinn Nosky, the group explores Telemann’s Danses d’Polonie (TWV 45), which the composer wrote during his Polish travels, and which had a lasting impact upon his compositional style and artistic output. Cinematic and rich in its thematic mining of the imagery, landscape and nature of Poland and its surroundings, this recording is a winner. Sure to delight connoisseurs of early music while making fans out of other listeners too.

Andrew Scott

The Tower and the Garden

The Crossing; Donald Nally

Navona Records NV6303
crossingchoir.org

Gavin Bryars – A Native Hill

The Crossing; Donald Nally

Navona Records NV6347
crossingchoir.org
Johann Georg Pisendel – Neue Sonaten
Scaramuccia
Snakewood Editions SCD202001
(snakewoodeditions.com)

► The name Johann Georg Pisendel is perhaps not all that familiar today, but during his lifetime he was highly acclaimed as a violinist and concertmaster. Born near Nuremberg in 1687, Pisendel studied at the Royal Chapel at Ansbach where among his teachers was Giuseppe Torelli. He continued his studies in Leipzig and ultimately enjoyed a long and successful career in Dresden as leader of the Dresdner Hofkapelle, an ensemble that won the praise of no less a figure than J.S. Bach.

Pisendel’s own output was small, but among his compositions are four chamber sonatas scored for violin, cello and continuo, discovered in the immense assemblage of scores that he amassed during his lifetime and which now comprises the esteemed Schrank II collection in the library of Dresden University. These Neue Sonaten are presented here for the first time ever on this splendid Snakewood label disc performed by the ensemble Scaramuccia.

Under the leadership of director/violinist Javier Lupiáñez (performing on a 1682 instrument), the four-movement miniatures truly come alive – what a joyful sound these musicians produce! Lupiáñez’s skilful playing – his phrasing always carefully articulated and artfully nuanced – is complemented by the solid performances of cellist Inés Salinas and harpsichordist Patrícia Vintém. Many of the ornaments in the form of cadenzas and passagework were added by the musicians themselves, based on a thorough study of Pisendel’s performance practices. Indeed, the melding of Pisendel’s solid compositional style exemplified in these recently discovered works with Scaramuccia’s careful and intelligent approach is a fortuitous one. An added bonus is a charming but anonymous harpsichord sonata in D Major that Vintém performs with much flair.

The attractive slipcase and artwork further enhance an already appealing disc.

Richard Haskell

Cavatine
DUO Stephanie and Saar
New Focus Recordings FCR274
(stephsaarduo.com)

► This piano duo disc by Stephanie Ho and Saar Ahuvia (DUO) has expressive virtuosity written all over it. It’s not simply four-hands piano that has been captured on disc, but repertoire as poignant as it is rare. Its late Beethoven is paired with late Schubert. And its music is evocative of the unrequited love both men lived with. In Schubert’s case, it was also a life lived in the permanent and towering shadow of the master, so much so that he – in an almost Shakespearean kind of twist – was even buried next to Beethoven.

All of this spills over into the highly charged program on Cavatine. DUO Stephanie and Saar has completely subsumed every emotive aspect of this music. There is even an extraordinarily eerie seamlessness of how Beethoven’s String Quartet in B-flat Major Op.130 slides into the Cavatine, then into the Grosse Fuge Op.133, before ending up in Schubert’s Fantasie in F Minor D940.

This is a made-for-each partnership. The amazing rapport between Ho and Ahuvia and their impeccable style unite to produce winning results. The warmth and tangible empathy on display here bring out all of the music’s emotive aspects – especially in the intensely lyrical movements of the Quartet in B-flat and the Cavatine, which gives way to the chromatic boldness of the Grosse Fuge and finally in the rhapsodic features of Schubert’s Fantasie. All of this makes a disc to absolutely die for.

Raul da Gama

Schubert: Explorations
Mathieu Gaudet
Analekta AN 2 9184 (analekta.com/en)

► One year ago, in May 2020, this reviewer wrote of a new release from pianist Mathieu Gaudet. Late Inspirations was the second installment of an ambitious project to record the entirety of Franz Schubert’s sonatas and major works for piano. Since then, Gaudet has added another two discs to the anthology: The Power of Fuge in October 2020 and Explorations in March 2021. What a thrill it has been to discover each of these records in an alimentative journey comprised of attentive listening. From its wondrous, heights to its simplest of gifts, Schubert’s art is a way of life for Gaudet.

As a fulltime emergency physician, Gaudet has persevered through a harrowing year for human beings on our planet, combatting a health crisis on a magnitude not seen for a century. The compassion, care and healing that Gaudet surely delivers to his patients is transfused – enviably – to his musical artistry. As listeners around Gaudet’s keyboard, we are in safe hands. His deeply empathic connection with Schubert is genially revealed, phrase by phrase, piece by piece, as we are led through a lifelong tended garden, ever-watered with a sublime Schubertian prowess.

A consistent feature of each disc thus far is a blending of the known with the unknown. From its wondrous, heights to its simplest of gifts, Schubert’s art is a way of life for Gaudet.

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

borne by a wind
Sid Richardson
Boston-born composer Sid Richardson releases his debut recording, shaping the program around literary influences that have had a strong impact on his work.

no bounds
Caity Gyorgy
A swingin’ new release of jazz standards and original compositions from one of Canada’s exciting new rising stars in vocal jazz!

dream logic
Sarah Jerrom
Adventurous and exciting, showcasing Jerrom’s formidable skills as a vocalist and songwriter/composer. Featuring Harley Card (guitar; vocals), bassist Rob McBride and drummer Jeff Luciani

entering utopia
TuneTown
NEW! From Three Pines Records: “Fun stuff for anyone that knows how to let their non-linear freak flag fly.” Chris Spector – The Midwest Record

May and June 2021
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is unexpected: three fleeting German Dances, Diary that sway and yodel with a folksy kind of charm.

Of Gaudet’s many attributes, his rhythmic sense of rightness remains high atop the list. With a shrewd savvy for pulse on the highest order, Gaudet sculpts phrases and perfectly arranges accompaniments. Such rhythmic irresistibility – such fantastic finesse – provokes trips of light indeed. His pianism is capable of casting spells of merriment, akin to the province of tunsmiths who magically set their songs ablaze, dancing and frolicking in the hot sun. Daylight ordains such tales of love and loss, of anguish and dubiety. And yet, a celestial certitude hovers over such oases of musical expression. Such is the stuff as Schubert’s art is made on.  

Adam Sherkin

Correspondances
Aljoša Jurinić
KNS Classical KNS A/097
(knsclassical.com)

The professional relationship of Chopin and Schumann was a curious one. Both composers were born in the same year, and while Schumann greatly praised the music of his Polish colleague, Chopin rarely, if ever, responded with similar sentiment. Whatever dissimilarities the two may have had, the Schumann Fantasy Op.17 and Chopin’s set of 12 Etudes Op.25 make a formidable pairing on this KNS live recording featuring Croatian-born pianist Aljoša Jurinić who came to Toronto in 2019.

To say the least, Jurinić’s credentials are impressive. Not only was he the winner of the Schumann Piano Competition in 2012, a laureate of the Queen Elisabeth and Leeds competitions in 2016, but also a finalist in the International Chopin competition in 2015. He has since appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Wiener Musikverein and the Tokyo Opera City Concert Hall.

The Fantasy is regarded as one of Schumann’s finest compositions and among the greatest in the entire Romantic repertoire. With its contrasting rhythms and tempi, the piece is not easy to bring off, but Jurinić’s performance is nothing less than sublime. He approaches the score with a true sense of grandeur, the broad sweeping lines of the opening, the stirring second movement and the introspective finale tempered with a flawless technique.

In the set of Chopin Etudes Jurinić breathes new life into this familiar repertoire, once again demonstrating full command of the technical challenges; from the graceful first etude in A-flat Major right to the thunderous No.12 which brings the set, and the disc, to a most satisfying conclusion.

How fortunate for Toronto that an artist of Jurinić’s stature has chosen to settle here – we can only hope his residency will be a lengthy one and that we may hear him perform in concert when conditions allow.

Richard Haskell

Lineage – Tracing Influence
Deborah Grimmett
New Classic Records NC01
(deborahgrimmettel.com)

The full range of both the beautiful – and beautifully recorded – Glenn Gould Studio piano, and a solo piano repertoire that spans the historical continuum from Brahms and Debussy to such contemporary composers as Iman Habibi and the little-known Rhoda Coghill (this may be the recording premiere of any of Coghill’s compositions) is on full display here with this wonderfully expressive FACTOR and Canada Council for the Arts-supported 2021 release. Exhibiting a deft touch and clear musicality, Toronto pianist Deborah Grimmett presents an intimate view into not only her own considerable musical talent, but her biographical story of overcoming a repetitive strain injury from over-practising as a music student, to stepping away from the piano in order to heal and then, finally, returning to the instrument to make what is clearly a meaningful and deeply personal recording.

This is one of those presentation formats (solo piano) and recordings (live off the floor, close-miked instrument) that when you take away any other extraneous factors, all that is left is the musicality and interpretive power of the performer and the music itself. As such, Lineage: Tracing Influence does a fine job, offering one of those listening experiences where fans of classical music, solo piano or just those who need some auditory solace from the everyday banality of life (particularly so during yet another lockdown) can immerse themselves in order to derive pleasure, meaning and inspiration.

Andrew Scott

Mahler – Symphony No.10 in F-sharp Major
Minnesota Orchestra; Osmo Vänskä
Bis BIS-2396 (naxosdirect.com/search/bis-2396)

Mahler’s final work lay hidden for decades as shorthand sketches still awaiting a full orchestration. Alas, the completion of the work was tragically cut short by the composer’s premature death from a broken heart at the age of 50. Fragments of this manuscript were subsequently revealed over the decades by his imperious widow Alma Mahler-Gropius-Werfel, who considered the work to be a private love letter to herself and only relented to allow the work to be published after listening to a BBC broadcast tape of the “performing edition” that Deryck Cooke prepared for the Mahler centenary in 1960. Cooke’s realization underwent subsequent refinements and his third and final 1976 edition, incorporating previously suppressed materials, has become the preferred version among several alternatives. Recordings of the work are relatively rare, as a fair number of conductors have questioned the legitimacy of the score. These skeptics will, I hope, be won over by this commanding performance from the Minnesota Orchestra, which ranks among the finest available. The work is in five movements, similar in structure to Mahler’s Seventh Symphony. The slower first and fifth movements are tragic cries of despair while the inner, faster movements are comically sarcastic, echoing the scherzo and rondo movements of his Ninth Symphony. This is a wonderful spontaneity to Osmo Vänskä’s choice of tempos in these central movements, strikingly so in the accelerations of the unusually asymmetrical measures of the second movement, which tumble over themselves in a delightful confusion. The longer outer movements feature the highly refined playing of the string section, hovering at times at a nearly inaudible level, with superlative contributions from the solo wind instruments. Add to this excellent program notes and stellar sonics from the BIS recording team and you have yourself an outstanding addition to the discography of this passionate, autobiographical masterpiece. Not to be missed!

Daniel Foley

Rachmaninoff – Symphony No.1; Symphonic Dances
Philadelphia Orchestra; Yannick Nézet-Séguin
Deutsche Grammophon 12192

Imagine you have the entire Deutsche Grammophon catalogue, a whole wall covered in shelving designed for CD’s, each spine of every disc displaying the well-known colours. Lucky you! Just now, taking pride of place is this sparkling new release, the Philadelphia Orchestra led by Yannick Nézet-Séguin performing Rachmaninoff’s First Symphony Op.13 and Symphonic Dances Op.14 (his final published work). What to praise first? Recording quality,
which whisks you around the sections of this fabulous orchestra as, one by one, they show off their mastery of dynamics, technical agility, musical insight; and most of all, the unheard presence channelling the composer through the players before him, the young (still young!) maestro from Quebec. Possibly no composer offers better witness to Nézet-Séguin’s mastery. With seamless logic, he links the furioso character of the Allegro ma non troppo first movement to its episodes of pathos. Every detail is considered and brought forth. This recording is an encounter with deep Russian melancholia, and Philadelphia’s legendary warm sound is the perfect medium for the maestro’s skill.

Interesting to pair this youthful early symphony, from 1895, with the Symphonic Dances, composed in 1940, when Rachmaninoff was living in California. Poorly received as it was at the premiere, it shows full maturity of his creative powers. It has a “sustained vitality, richness of lyrical invention and a glowing eloquence capable of rising to extraordinary power” (Robin Hull). Rattle conducts the entire uncut version from memory and it’s such a relaxed and spontaneous reading aided by the highest quality HD sound that so reverberated throughout the house that I was wholly enchanted.

János Gardonyi

Richard Strauss – Complete Tone Poems
SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden and Freiburg; François-Xavier Roth
SWR Music SWR19426CD
(nxosdirect.com/search/swr19426cd)

▶ When searching for the performance of Also Sprach Zarathustra that would mightily reinforce the opening of 2001, A Space Odyssey, Stanley Kubrick finally selected, presumably on its impact, the Decca version with the Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Herbert von Karajan. After much negotiating, it was agreed that Kubrick may use that performance under the condition that it is never identified (perhaps I should have prefixed with “spoiler alert”). I am quite sure that if that were today, the power of the vehemence timpanist in the opening of the SWR version in this outstanding new set could very well be the choice.

At the helm is François-Xavier Roth, the French conductor who is best known as the director of Les Siècles, an original instrument orchestra that he founded in 2013, and which has recorded many stunning versions of Baroque and early–20th-century favourites, including Stravinsky’s Le Sacre du Printemps. Among his myriad appointments and awards are general music director of the City of Cologne and principal guest conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra. Undoubtedly his activities in the field of historically informed performance have attuned his ear to ensure every instrument in the orchestra is audible as these performances of familiar and perhaps less familiar tone poems demonstrate. They are Ein Heldenleben, Sinfonia Domestica, Also Sprach Zarathustra, Tod und Verklärung, Metamorphosen, Don Juan, Don Quixote, Eine Alpensinfonie, Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streich, Aus Italien and Macbeth. Strauss is well served by performances of commitment and intensity, passages where winds, brass and percussion appear... not spot-light but there. The perfectly recorded performances dating from 2012 to 2015, as in earlier recordings from this source, are convincingly live.

Roth’s same meticulous attention to detail and perfect balances may be viewed and heard conducting different orchestras in diverse repertoire on the optional music channels available on cable TV and YouTube.

Bruce Surtees

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

LEAHY

Good Water
Leahy

"Tradition with edge.” A thoughtful varied collection of original music that adds new dimensions to Leahy’s folk/roots/trad/Celtic influenced work. Produced by David Bottrill.

Speaking Hands
Curtis Andrews

Roots
Ventus Machina

Reflecting the strong artistic voice of Ventus Machina, this music was chosen by the ensemble: representing both their musical heritage and current musical influences.

In D
Brooklyn Raga Massive

A minimalist suite of 3 Ragas performed by 25 musicians on sitars, bansuris, tabla, vocals, violins, cellos, and harmonium, in homage to Terry Riley.
Uncovered, Vol. 1: Samuel Coleridge-Taylor
Catalyst Quartet; Stewart Goodyear; Anthony McGill
Azica ACD-71336
(catalystquartet.com/uncovered)

The late-19th-century British composer, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, conquered the United States with his musical ingenuity. But could his being billed somewhat patronizingly as the “African Mahler” have blunted his singular musical achievements? We will never really know, and it may even be unimportant now as with Uncovered, Vol. 1: Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, the Catalyst Quartet turns the marquee lights on to illuminate his elegant music, and not the colour of his skin.

But poetic justice must also come by way of inviting pianist Stewart Goodyear and clarinetist Anthony McGill — two prodigiously gifted Black musicians — to participate in this significant musical project. The association with Mahler does have some significance however, because it took decades of proselytizing by conductors such as Bruno Walter, Wilhelm Mengelberg and Leonard Bernstein before Mahler’s symphonies became audience-pullers.

These are über-articulate readings of the Quintet in G Minor for Piano and Strings Op.1 featuring Goodyear, Quintet in F-sharp Minor for Clarinet and Strings Op.10 featuring McGill and Fantasiestücke for String Quartet Op.5. The Quartet’s musicians shape phrases with attention paid to every nuance of the scores, while the music’s grand sweep remains paramount throughout; Goodyear’s pianism sings in the piano quintet and McGill’s clarinet does likewise in Op.10. The Catalyst’s performance is marked by a wide range of touch and timbre, with extraordinary emphasis on the inner voices of Coleridge-Taylor’s eloquent music.

Raul da Gama
Symphonic Roar – An Odyssey of Sound from the Paris Conservatoire
Yuri McCoy; Brady Spitz
Acis APL92957 (acisproductions.com)

Inspired by French composers’ exploitation of the organ’s myriad sonorities in these “symphonic” works, Houston-based Yuri McCoy says he feels “free to orchestrate... in many different ways,” often making “many more registration changes than indicated in the score.” (As for the “roar,” wait for it!) McCoy and console assistant Grant Wareham collaborate in Jean-Louis Florentz’s Poème Symphonique “La Croix du Sud” (2000), named for the constellation. With influences from Florentz’s teacher Messiaen, and Tauerq and Suli music, it grows, chirps, and surges around disquieting interludes that conjure mysterious, desolate landscapes. A noble central anthem illuminates the celebratory Allegro Vivace from Felix Alexandre Guilmant’s Organ Sonata No.2 (1862). Joseph Bonnet’s brief Elles from his 12 Pièces (1910) is a gossamer swirl of shimmering light, rendered in sound. Fantaisie, Op.101 (1895) by Camille Saint-Saëns comprises a murmuring, gentle andantino, a tempestuous fugue and a calm, reassuring finale. Clair de Lune from Louis Vierne’s 24 Pièces, Suite No.2 (1926) paints a secluded nocturnal scene in muted pastel watercolour.

At nearly 28 minutes, the CD’s longest and most “symphonic” entry is a remarkably effective arrangement by McCoy and percussionist Brady Spitz of Edgard Varèse’s Amériques (1921), the original version requiring 27 woodwinds, 29 brass and an immense percussion battery. Colin Boothby assists McCoy on organ and Spitz on percussion, employing all of Varèse’s noisemakers — lion’s roar (!), siren, rattles, cyclone and steamboat whistles, etc., etc.

Fascinating listening, from mystery-laden start to roaring finish! Michael Schulman

In a Time of War
Phillip O. Paglialonga; Richard Masters
Heritage HTGCD 173 (heritage-records.com)

In a Time of War, featuring clarinetist Phillip Paglialonga and pianist Richard Masters, professors works by two composers suffering exile during WW2. An odd pairing to be sure, but it’s possible to hear some common ground between Serge Prokofiev and John Ireland. If you listen to the late moments of Ireland’s Fantasy-Sonata for Clarinet and Piano there’s an argument to be made. Written in 1943, the same year as Prokofiev’s Flute Sonata Op.94, the Ireland work does what a lot of mid-century English music does: explore modernity and expression, but also in a way that might evoke Prokofiev the man, although not his music.

I think clarinetists should leave well enough alone when it comes to poaching repertoire, especially in the case of the Prokofiev, which after all was more or less stolen from flutists for the already-crammed violin library by David Oistrakh (with Prokofiev’s complicity!). Sorry, flutes, it’s a better piece in the second take. Opus 9.4 is heard as often, if not more than the original. The clarinet version here should maybe be called Opus 9.4(b), I don’t know. It’s very dicey, range-wise, and hardly idiomatic for the clarinet. Paglialonga manages the high tessitura quite well, but most tempos are slower than you might be used to, and the balance has his sound too far in front of Masters, which jars a bit at the opening. The duo’s rendition is a work apart from the original, as a quick reference to Oistrakh’s recording will confirm.

A third work is included, also from 1943. Ireland’s Sarnia: An Island Sequence, a solo Masters performs with more freedom than the other tracks demonstrate. These are good performances, if somewhat staid.

Max Christie

Classical Kids: Gershwin’s Magic Key
Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras
Classical Kids Music Education 270541 (classicalkidsnfp.org)

Gershwin’s Magic Key is the first new album in 20 years from the award-winning platinum-selling Classical Kids, most famous for Beethoven Lives Upstairs. This high quality, dynamic studio recording features the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestras conducted by Allen Tinkham, voices of professional actors Elic Bramlett and Leslie Ann Sheppard, and head writer/music supervisor/featured pianist Will Martin, who premiered the original live concert.

Set in 1920s New York, the three-act story revolves around a newspaper boy’s chance meeting with composer George Gershwin, leading to the two travelling through New York, verbally telling stories based on Gershwin’s life and the times, intertwined with his music. The opening attention-grabbing string swirls, clear spoken words, piano solo and wailing clarinet set the stage for a fast-paced, exciting fact-based production both children and adults will love. The supportive spoken tips from Gershwin, such as “I was a changed person learning piano;” “Every sound is music; Do not let anyone tell you what you can or cannot be;” are positive reinforcement for the boy, and all children listening and reading the liner notes. Gershwin’s compositions featured include fabulous orchestral renditions of Summertime, An American in Paris and the upbeat singalong/dance-along I Got Rhythm.

Educational musical outtakes from other composers include Dvořák’s Humoresque, the Tin Pan Alley hit Take Me out to the Ballgame, and 1920’s Baby Face. Finale recreates the world premiere of Rhapsody in Blue, from the piano/orchestra exuberant performance to the recording’s closing audience cheers. Bravo!

Tiina Kiik
To Anatolia – Selections from the Turkish Five
Beyza Yazgan
Bridge Records 9549 (bridgerecords.com/collections/catalog-all)

A love letter to Anatolia (Asia Minor), this album introduces young artist Beyza Yazgan, a Turkish pianist now based in New York. Yazgan expresses immense pride for her homeland and gentle longing for her homeland through a wonderful selection of piano pieces by a group of 20th-century composers known as the Turkish Five. She also includes her own illustrations and detailed liner notes on Turkish music traditions, thus making this album even more personal.

Yazgan’s interpretation of these compositions is simply lovely. Her heartfelt approach brings out beautiful colours from gentle and melancholic pieces. On the other hand, she engages masterfully with complex rhythms in more percussive compositions, making her performance well balanced and charming.

The Turkish Five – Ahmet Adnan Saygun, Ferid Alnar, Ulvi Cemal Erkin, Necil Kazim Akses and Cemal Reşit Rey – transformed the music of their time by introducing Western compositional styles and forms and blending them with rhythms and modes of traditional Turkish folk music and dances. Just as Anatolia itself has been the land of many cultures and flavours, so is the music on this album. From the beautifully atmospheric Little Shepherd by Erkin and feet-stomping Horon by Reşit Rey, to the elegant Zeybek Dance by Alnar, the pieces tell stories of the unique and rich musical heritage of this land, its people and customs.

Ivana Popovic

Alexander Mosolov – Symphony No.5; Harp Concerto
Taylor Ann Fleshman; Moscow Symphony Orchestra; Arthur Arnold
Naxos 8.574102 (naxosdirect.com/search/8574102)

Russian composer Alexander Mosolov (1900–1973) was active in the early Soviet era, and his artistic voice sits somewhere between Shostakovich and Prokofiev. The latest recording of director Arthur Arnold and the Moscow Symphony Orchestra is a dedicated release of the lesser-known composer’s Fifth Symphony and Harp Concerto. In the former, never performed during the composer’s lifetime, Arnold and the Moscow Symphony deliver the work with subtle musician-ship and crisp articulation – aspects that are needed to execute the contrasting three movements.

Mosolov’s Harp Concerto is a delicate and beautiful work in four movements that takes the listener on a journey from contemplative sustained atmospheres in the first movement, through a mysterious Nocturne, to a charming Gavotte, and finally a flashy Toccata. Harpist Taylor Ann Fleshman’s technique and phrasing are outstanding in this performance. Her captivating interpretation leaves no doubt that this work deserves a lasting place in the harp concerto repertoire.

It is always nice to encounter an effort to keep lesser-known composers’ music alive – Arnold and the Moscow Symphony certainly make a strong case for increased future performances of Mosolov’s music.

Adam Scime

Frank Horvat – Music for Self-Isolation
Various Artists
Centrediscs CMCCD-28521 (cmccanada.org/shop/cd-cmccd-28521)

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Toronto composer and pianist Frank Horvat observed fellow musicians struggling to cope with loss, precarity triggered by cancelled gigs and the strain of isolation. Wondering how to effectively respond, his answer: write new compositions to counter self-isolation. Thus, during the spring of 2020 he composed 31 short classical-style pieces, shared immediately with the international community on social media. They were an instant hit. Numerous performance videos were posted on the Internet and Horvat made plans to record them on the album Music for Self-Isolation at Toronto’s Roy Thomson Hall. The session wrapped the day before Ontario’s stay-at-home order came into force on January 14, 2021. The album also includes the ensemble composition Together in Spirit, using overdubbing technology to effectively bring together the 22 talented musicians who played solos and duos on the other tracks of Music for Self-Isolation.

Part two of the album comprises eight nuanced The Idea of North-style audio documents titled Pandemic Stories. These layered monologues, each by a different musician, are deeply personal stories about impacted careers and lives during the pandemic, accompanied by Horvat’s instrumental music. The aim: to present “the hopes, dreams and fears,” of each musician, and their views on the arts and culture sector, “in order to heal and move forward together.”

Taking the two sections together – the 32 music miniatures and eight audio reports – the 40-track Music for Self-Isolation offers accessible, soothing music, plus international voices of resilience during this time of plague. The album reminds us that music is among the most mysterious and highest order of human skills.

Andrew Timar

#4
Andrzej Pietrewicz
Independent (soundcloud.com/andrzej-pietrewicz/setsets/4a-1/s-h6vzd1kkm)

Andrzej Pietrewicz is an independent musician, small instrumental ensemble composer and producer based in Port Credit, near Toronto. His unique inspirational compositional and performing sound makes this six original-song, self-produced—during-COVID—lockdown creation, unforgettable! Pietrewicz clearly has a comprehensive technical understanding of diverse musical genres such as Baroque, jazz, blues, folk, classical and contemporary. He draws on this knowledge to develop his own vibrant sound performed here by talented instrumentalists on piano, strings, percussion, guitar, winds, programming and, in the closing track, vocalists.

Multi-instrumental track 1 is a great introduction to his music, combining quasi-orchestral tonal sounds with modern touches such as interval jumps and tweeting bird-like piano sounds. The faster, happier track 2 with its rhythmic piano interval patterns, instrumental held notes, simultaneous tonal/modern effects and high-pitched woodwind sounds creates a musical pre/post-COVID sunny warm spring day for me!

Track 3, with a nod to Baroque keyboard music, yet so modern in tonality, moves from the contrapuntal mood-changing opening lines to subtle dissonant intervals, steady rhythms and detailed phrasing, performed with sensitivity, passion and hope by the composer. Nice addition of singers Nacre, Timbre, Laura and Caroline Joy Clarke to track 6 as their high pitches alternating with tight string, flute and piano parts create a captivating positive soundscape.

This is uplifting, joyful, beautiful music to be enjoyed over and over again.

Tilina Kilk
Claire Chase
Corbett vs Dempsey CvsD CD076 (corbettvsdempsey.com)

CJ Claire Chase is a force. Our modern understanding of contemporary music performance is pushed forward with artists of this calibre. The eminent flutist’s latest release comes as a monumental four-disc statement toward why Chase is one of the world’s most celebrated performers. As one would expect, the execution on this release is extraordinary. That said, expected excellence must not be confused with anything inherently predictable: each piece is delivered with a stunning level of musicianship that demands attention and respect. Titled Density 2036, this release represents the first five years (2013-2017) of a 24-year project through which Chase will commission new pieces for solo flute each year until the 100th anniversary of Edgard Varèse’s seminal flute composition Density 21.5, written in 1936.

The first disc begins with Marcos Balter’s Pessoa for six bass flutes – a piece that embodies a rather meditative atmosphere with shakuhachi-like gestures. There are two pieces by Brazilian-American composer Felipe Lara, the second of which, titled Parábolas na Caverna, is wonderfully mysterious in its richness, drawing the listener into a highly successful soundworld and unusual invocations for the flute. Chase takes command of the extended techniques to such a world-class level that I had to listen several times to believe what was being heard.

It is not simply technical fireworks on display that makes Chase’s playing so compelling: it’s technical wizardry combined with a level of care, dedication and nuance that makes a recording like this so important. George Lewis’ Emergent for flute and electronics is a true gem of the repertoire. This highly original music is stunning for its thrilling otherworldliness. An Empty Garlic for bass flute and electronics written by Chinese-born composer Dun Yun is exquisite. It is a lush garden of undiscovered essences producing an irresistible listening experience. The first CD caps off with Chase’s own interpretation of Varèse’s Density 21.5 that may objectively be considered a seminal recording of this early-20th-century masterpiece.

We also receive a dynamic and adventurous piece from Dai Fujikura and an engagingly hip work from Francesca Vernuneli. Pauline Oliveros’ Intensity 20.15: Grace Chase – a work inspired by a text written by Chase’s grandmother – is 20 minutes of pure ingenuity suspended in a realm beyond imagination.

Suzanne Farrin’s The Stimulus of Loss is an expressive and delicate work with an appearance by the ondes Martenot; the playful energy in Tyshawn Sorey’s Bertha’s Lair is a magical landscape with percussive edges; Pauchi Sasaki’s Gama XV: Piece for Two Speaker Dresses makes brilliant use of technology in a highly evocative soundscape where the ears become enveloped within an airy expanse. The fourth CD contains an eight-movement work by Balter, titled Fun, which is a substantial journey inspired by memory. This work embodies a rather theatrical aesthetic and is written with an intense and luminous brilliance and with clever novelty of material.

This first installment of Chase’s Density 2036 project is impressive, and a profound affirmation of why Chase is one of the most important champions of contemporary music. Her tremendous musicality and breathtaking command of the flute is dramatic and remarkable. As the CD liner notes remind, density is a matter of scale; this release deserves 10 out of 10 with any metric I can think of.

Adam Scime

Echos et résonances
Martine Vialatte (piano)
CIAR CC003 (ciar.e-monsite.com)

Debussy’s piano preludes have become staples of the repertoire and with so many fine recordings, it is difficult to say something different – a fact that virtuoso Martine Vialatte achieves with sublime mastery. The phrasing and careful use of the pedals creates a sonorous palette not heard in many recordings of Debussy’s set of Préludes (Premier livre).

Also found on this release, aptly titled Echos et résonances, are two pieces by French composer Tristan Mural – a short piece titled Cloches d’adieu et un sourire and the spectral masterpiece, Territoires de l’oubli. In the former, a piece dedicated to Messiaen, chords swing before the listener like memories becoming ever more elusive. In the latter, Vialatte’s delicate touch provides a stunning resonance necessary for this hypnotic and intriguing work. In spite of the composer’s reluctance to be labelled an impressionist, the two pieces by Mural do make for perfect companions to Debussy’s preludes with clearly similar evocations of the natural world. Vialatte delivers world-class interpretations of some of the most resonant works written for her instrument, making for a rich and rewarding listen.

Adam Scime

Alvin Lucier – Music for Piano XL
Nicolas Horvath
Grand Piano GP857 (naxosdirect.com/search/gp857)

American composer Alvin Lucier has found an impressive exponent in pianist Nicolas Horvath. An artist regarded for a dizzying variety of musical tastes, Horvath is especially celebrated as a leading interpreter of Franz Liszt and yet he has recorded the music of Philip Glass, Cornelius Cardew and Jaan Ruüts, to critical acclaim.

In his latest release, Horvath dives headlong into Lucier’s music, presenting a varied collection of pieces that span the composer’s career from the early 1960s to the present. The album begins with the seminal work “Music for Piano XL,” an homage to Liszt that explores the instrument’s capacity for both virtuosity and expression.

Moving on to the second disc, Horvath performs Lucier’s “Five Animals,” a set of variations that transform Liszt’s famous “Hungarian Rhapsody No. 1.” The piece is a meditative exploration of Lucier’s fascination with the sounds of nature, evoking images of animals through the piano’s timbral range.

The album concludes with Lucier’s “40 Minutes for Piano,” a piece that challenges the pianist to explore the limits of physical endurance and concentration. Horvath’s performance is a testament to Lucier’s visionary score, capturing the piece’s subtleties and nuances.

Overall, Horvath’s interpretation of Lucier’s music is a masterful achievement. His playing is both technically proficient and emotionally immersive, bringing Lucier’s work to life in a way that is both accessible and thought-provoking. This album is a must-listen for anyone interested in modern piano music and a testament to Lucier’s enduring legacy.
into a vast, single-movement work for piano and wave oscillators. He is no stranger to such endeavours, having staged past live performances running up to 12 hours in length. Here, Horvath (via Lucier) offers a sprawling brand of listening experience, supported by “slow sweep pure wave oscillators.” Only single acoustic piano notes are struck throughout, echoing for minutes at a time over a backdrop of acoustic beating. (Two pure waves move up and down with a range of four octaves. The beats are directed by the piano tone’s proximity to pitches from the oscillator.)

While the resulting soundworld is undeniably retro, such creations can reward the assiduous listener. This aesthetic urges a holistic mode of attentiveness. One has to empty the ears of preconceived notions of structure, melody – and even of texture. These tones and beats sear through a vacuum of space on their own sort of photon, commingling and naturalistic: unhindered sonic spectres that speak truly. In what realm.

My Heart Comes Tender and yearning, words used in the fragrance industry (Freezycwater), a lexicon of words used in the fragrance industry (Vapour Descriptors) or a stream of consciousness (The Indistinguishables), topographical features encircling London (Freezycwater), a lexicon of words used in the fragrance industry (Vapour Descriptors) or a stream of consciousness (The Halogens). The words are spoken theatrically or in a musical way, always with restraint. Some are sung, understatedly, such as words of Mao Zedong in X Chairman Mao. The instruments are intertwining in and out, mostly supporting, sometimes questioning, making up meanings of their own. The textures created are beautiful in their sparse-ness. The result is a floating dialogue that is hypnotizing and luring, stripped of drama, smooth, as if outside of this world.

Slower/Talker engages the listener in a subtle way. It is a sonically explorative journey, one worth taking.

Cheryl Ockrant

In Your Hands

Lavena

Bright Shiny Things BSTC-0145 (brightshiny.ninja)

Another stellar offering from the label Bright Shiny Things, American cellist Lavena’s début album already feels like a veteran project.

Lavena champions powerfully through one perfect piece after another – a diverse and colourful collection, each as interesting and compelling as the next.

Beginning with Gemma Peacocke’s Amygada! (“an exploration of the way in which anxiety comes in waves...” – oh, how timely!) this work for solo cello and electronics perfectly delivers its description. The duos by Jessie Montgomery, for cello and violin, and Ted Hearne, a powerful and dynamic setting for cello and percussion, are outstanding compositions beautifully delivered. In between is in manus tuas, a rich and melodic composition in Caroline Shaw’s classic multi-layered chordal style for singing cellist, based on a 16th-century Thomas Tallis motet.

The piece Tusuula, by the brilliant and multi-talented American composer Bryce Dessner, anchors the album’s solo content. Written in 2015 during the week Dessner spent as composer-in-residence at Finland’s Meldán Festivaali, Tusuula is destined to become an outstanding addition to the solo cello repertoire. Lavena leaves no doubt of her commitment to every note. Tender and yearning, My Heart Comes Undone, a valentine gift to the artist from her composer husband Judah Adashi, inspired by Björk’s Unravel, gently closes the album. In this iteration it’s played by solo cellist with loop pedal. This is an adventurous yet cohesive brand of compositions that manages to remain totally accessible to the contemporary newbie.

Adam Sherkin

Leo Chadburn – Slower/Talker

Apartment House; Quatuor Bozzini;

Gemma Saunders

Library of Nothing Records CD06 (leochadburn.com)

The wild card of the British contemporary classical music scene, composer Leo Chadburn (aka Simon Bookish) widens the scope of his musical experimentation with this remarkable new release. Featuring performances by Quatuor Bozzini (Canada) and Apartment House (UK), and the voices of actress Gemma Saunders and Chadburn himself, the album combines minimalism with spoken word in a way that is symmetrical in form, yet inquisitive and uninhibited in its expression.

The six compositions included on Slower/Talker span a decade of the composer’s work. All explore the relationship between found text and its instrumental counterpart, made up of mostly strings and keyboard instruments. The text’s subjects are comprised of lists of a kind – names of moth species (The Indistinguishables), topographical features encircling London (Freezycwater), a lexicon of words used in the fragrance industry (Vapour Descriptors) or a stream of consciousness (The Halogens). The words are spoken theatrically or in a musical way, always with restraint. Some are sung, understatedly, such as words of Mao Zedong in X Chairman Mao. The instruments are intertwining in and out, mostly supporting, sometimes questioning, making up meanings of their own. The textures created are beautiful in their sparse-ness. The result is a floating dialogue that is hypnotizing and luring, stripped of drama, smooth, as if outside of this world.

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Cheryl Ockrant

Ghost Light

Akropolis Reed Quintet

New Focus Recordings FCR292 (newfocusrecordings.com/catalogue)

I was thinking about the Crash Test Dummies’ The Ghosts that Haunt Me, when the eerie, first moaning microtonal chord from the Akropolis Reed Quintet’s Ghost Light sounded in my headset. Spooky! This fantastic group of woodwind players from Detroit explores life and death at the far end of the musical spectrum: toe-tapping, mysterious, in tune and in synch. The cover art of the disc brought to mind the Dummies’ release from long ago. Look carefully, there’s purpose to the whimsy.

All the music was commissioned. Unusual? No, but the instrumentation is: two clarinets (soprano and bass), plus an oboe, a bassoon, and... saxophone! Here is range, here is agility and grace, here are complementary colours, never the cloying homophony of a saxophone quartet or worse, clarinet choir. Listen to the blends intentionally exploited by Michael Gilbertson in the brief and chipper Kinda of Light.

That opening moan is from Rites for the Afterlife, a four-movement work inspired by ancient Egyptian rituals guiding the soul from this world to the next. Composer Stacy Garrop’s unearthly timbres of microtonal clusters, executed with clean precision, draw the listener into the mystery. Unpitched whispey effects evoke reed beds by a river. Styx or Nile?

Iranian Niloufar Nourbakhsh based Firing Squad on the greatest opening sentence in literature, from Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude. This melancholy, melodic one-movement work explores mortality and memory.

Jeff Scott, French horn of the Imani Winds, wrote the disc’s most substantial work: Homage to Paradise Valley. This is activist music, composed to poems by Marsha Music, commissioned to commemorate the destruction of Detroit neighbourhoods and landmarks taken from the African American community during the mid-20th century, in the name of urban renewal.

Max Christie

Ivana Popovic
George Lewis: The Recombinant Trilogy
Claire Chase; Seth Parker Woods; Dana Jessen
New Focus Recordings (newfocusrecordings.com/catalogue)

Few musicians have explored the relations between instrumental music and computer programming with the creative zeal of George Lewis, from Rainbow Family, the recently released IRCAM works from 1984 (Carrier Records), to his various interactive works with his Voyager program. His Recombinant Trilogy shifts from works employing improvisation to compositions that apply “interactive digital delays, spatialization and timbre transformation to transform the acoustic sounds of the instrument into multiple digitally created sonic personalities.”

Each of the three pieces combines a soloist with computerized electronics, in the process creating a kind of malleable ensemble that achieves often startling effects within seemingly acoustic timbres, including parallel microtonal lines. Materials are reworked out of sequence, liberating time and continuity in the process. The opening Emergent (2014), performed by Claire Chase, flute, and Levy Lorenzo, electronics, is the sunniest of the three, exploiting and expanding the flute’s mimetic powers to summon up flocks of birds that sing, soar and swoop. Not Alone (2014-15), with cellist Seth Parker Woods operating electronics as well, pushes the cello well beyond its typical sonic contour, pressing far into violin, contrabass and vocal arenas. For sheer evocative power, Seismologic (2017), performed by Dana Jessen on bassoon and Eli Stine on electronics, stands out, magnifying both the bassoon’s range and Jessen’s trio’s extended techniques to create an underground labyrinth of menacing roars, Doppler-effect turns and sudden haunted choirs.

As with his earlier interactions with improvisers, Lewis’ computer compositions effectively extend music’s expressive range in fascinating ways.

Stuart Broomer

Douglas Boyce – The Hunt by Night
counter)induction; Ieva Jokubaviciute; Schuyler Slack; Trio Cavatina
New Focus Recordings FCR 278 (newfocusrecordings.com/catalogue)

Released as a part of the “Albert-Roussel International Festival” collection, Éloge de la candeur by Anthony Girard is an offering of his works for oboe. The title piece for oboe and piano is a floating dreamscape of colours and emotions. With the use of ascending lines and the high register of the oboe, this piece uses a range of colours that seem to be influenced by the modern French school. Very close in affect to the Sonate pour hautbois et piano by Dutilleux, Éloge de la candeur paints an inspiring scene of serenity and purity in a dreamlike atmosphere.

Anthony Girard – Éloge de la candeur
Jean-Pierre Arnaud; Geneviève Girard; Patrice Kirchhoff
CIAR CC 004 (ciar.e-monsite.com)

Released as part of the “Albert-Roussel International Festival” collection, Éloge de la candeur by Anthony Girard is an offering of his works for oboe. The title piece for oboe and piano is a floating dreamscape of colours and emotions. With the use of ascending lines and the high register of the oboe, this piece uses a range of colours that seem to be influenced by the modern French school. Very close in affect to the Sonate pour hautbois et piano by Dutilleux, Éloge de la candeur paints an inspiring scene of serenity and purity in a dreamlike atmosphere.

Anthony Girard

Raul da Gama

Sid Richardson – Borne by a Wind
Various Artists
New Focus Recordings FCR285 (newfocusrecordings.com/catalogue)

Sid Richardson has an eloquent answer to the question: “How do you make art?” He comes together with poet Nathaniel Mackey and others to create this music. The black dots leap off the page entwined with Mackey’s lyrical recitations and the sound of horns, percussion and bass performed by the Deviant Septet. The searing heat of an artful sirocco, titled Red Wind, begins a memorable disc of Richardson’s music.

The repertoire of Borne by a Wind features three other works by Richardson. There is no sleep so deep is a gentle, reassuring work that gets a suitably sensitive performance from pianist Conrad Tao, whose fingers seem to caress the notes of the melody. LUNE follows with the mystical high and lonesome wail of Lilit Hartunian’s violin. It is a brilliantly conceived tone poem that soars skyward, evocative of a crepuscular musical event under a cloudless celestial canopy.

Richardson’s music is highly imaginative and reflects his singularly ecstatic taste. The curved lenses and mirrors of a myriad of contemporary styles and movements in the arts have been telescoped into these works. The glue is, of course, Richardson’s spectral voice, somewhat reminiscent of Gerard Grisey and Kaija Saariaho. These uncanny parallels are, perhaps, most discernable in Astrolabe where the Da Capo Chamber Players’ performance is interwoven with Walt Whitman’s and Geoffrey Chaucer’s poetry, the whispered climax of which brings this remarkable disc to a dramatic end.
That Which Has Remained ...That which Will Emerge
Lukas Ligeti
Col Legno WWE 1CD-20452 (col-legno.com)

Described as a meditation on aural memory, this CD presents the electroacoustic sound installation percussionist Lukas Ligeti created for Warsaw’s POLIN Museum. Designed to comment on Polish Jewish life, the project weaves locally recorded interviews and songs in Polish, English and Yiddish triggered and mixed by Ligeti’s Marimba Lumina (MIDI) with improvisations suggested by those recordings by clarinetist Paweł Szamburski, violinist/violist Patryk Zakrocki, cellist Mikołaj Pałosz, soprano Barbara Kinga Majewska plus Wojtek Kurek’s drums and synthesizer.

Juxtaposing folk songs with instruments means that the often melancholy, sometimes freylekh melodies, suggest responses that range from stomping string thrusts and barbed reed flutters to sequences which expand on klezmer and pre-War cabaret tunes. Majewska’s bel canto lyricism is most effective in unadorned recitations or personalizing familiar tunes. Modernism isn’t pushed aside for nostalgia though, as sections find her ululating voices framed by clanking percussion vibrations. The keenest musical commentary is by inference on the connected City of the Damned and Elusive Counterpoint. With thick drum beats and pressurized string stops alongside the snatch of a Yiddish song, Warsaw’s pre-Holocaust Jewish ghetto and its destruction are suggested by City of the Damned. Harsh spicewave from the strings are notable in Elusive Counterpoint. The sorrowful exposition gradually fades to ghostly echoes as the Yiddish tune becomes fainter subtly questioning what contemporary life holds for Jews in Poland.

Lacking the interactive element possible in the museum’s spatial atmosphere, the disc is still a superlative listening experience.

Ken Waxman

JAZZ AND IMPROVISED

No Bounds
Caity Gyorgy Independent (caitygyorgy.bandcamp.com/album/no-bounds)

With having a beautiful voice is plenty to recommend any singer, also knowing how to use it in the myriad ways that Caity Gyorgy does puts her high up the list of young singers to watch.

Although the debate about what is and isn’t jazz is an old and often tedious one, it becomes especially tricky to nail it down when it comes to vocalists. Is covering standards enough to call yourself a jazz singer? Well, that’s all moot when it comes to Gyorgy because she is unmistakably a jazzier. Just head over to her Instagram account, @caitygyorgy (sarahjerrom.com)

Despite the serious skills Gyorgy possesses aren’t jazz is an old and often tedious one, it becomes especially tricky to nail it down when it comes to vocalists. Is covering standards enough to call yourself a jazz singer? Well, that’s all moot when it comes to Gyorgy because she is unmistakably a jazzier. Just head over to her Instagram account, @caitygyorgy

Sarah Jerrom
Three Pines Records TPR-002 (sarahjerrom.com)

With the release of her latest recording, Sarah Jerrom has reminded us that she is one of the most interesting, talented and creative vocalist/composers on the scene today. All of the 13 compositions on the CD were written by Jerrom, except for two (Illusions and Plastic Stuff) by ensemble member and gifted guitarist, Harley Card. Jerrom is also featured on piano and, in addition to Card, is joined by the uber-skilled Rob McBride on bass, Jeff Luciani on drums/percussion and Joe Lipinski (who also co-produced and engineered this project brilliantly) on acoustic guitar/vocals.

The opening salvo, Snowblind, has a silky, languid opening, featuring Jerrom’s pitch-perfect, clear tone – reminiscent of the great Jackie Cain or Norma Winstone. Cleverly arranged group vocals join in, followed by Card holding forth on an exquisite solo, ripe with emotional and musical colours. An intriguing inclusion is Accolade Parade. Percussive and noir-ish, it deftly explores the desire for recognition – earned or not – and Jerrom shows herself to be a fine pianist on this harmonically dazzling tune. She also displays her vocal and compositional versatility on this well-written track. All is punctuated by the fine work of McBride and Luciani, who drives the ensemble down the pike with pumppitude to spare.

A highlight of the recording is the poetic, sultry, diatonic Fata Morgana. Again Jerrom dons another vocal guise with the deft use of her warm, lower register and her fine time feel. Card – this time on electric guitar – adopts a free, Bill Frisell-ish motif, set against the throbbing percussion of Luciani and the dynamic, soul-stirring bass of McBride. Another standout is Fergus – an unselfconscious, swinging, head-over-kicksong – elegant in its simplicity and mysterious in its meaning.

Lesley Mitchell-Clarke

Into the Daybreak
Mike Freedman Independent (mikefreedman.com)

A very welcome and positive pick-me-up to balance out these grayer times, local Toronto guitarist Mike Freedman’s latest release (and debut as a bandleader) is a rhythmically and melodically pleasing album that you would be hard pressed not to want to dance or at least tap along to. Spanning and mixing genres from Latin to blues and jazz to R&B, this record would be a great addition to the collection of listeners who tend to lean towards a classic sound or are looking for a modern take on the genre. All pieces are penned by Freedman himself and are given life by a sublime backing band with well-known names such as Chris Gale on tenor saxophone, Kobi Hass on bass and Jeremy Ledbetter on piano.

Samba on the Sand is definitely a standout on the album, a Latin-flavoured piece with
Entièrement unanimes
Klaxon Gueule
Ambiances Magnétique AM 259 CD
(actuellecd.com)

While this session may at first appear to be a traditional guitar (Bernard Falaise), electric bass (Alexandre St-Onge) and drums (Michel F Côté) creation by Montreal’s Klaxon Gueule, the addition of synthesizers and a computer means it relates as much to metaphysics as to music. That’s because programme alters the sound of each instrument, blending timbres into a pointillist creation that brings in palimpsest inferences along with forefront textures.

A track such as Continuum indifférencié for instance, features a programmed continuum with concentrated buzzing that moves the solid exposition forward as singular string slides, piano clicks and drum ruffs are interjected throughout. In contrast, la mort comme victoire malgré nous finds voltage impulses resembling a harmonized string section moving slowly across the sound field as video-game-like noise scraping and ping-ponging electron ratchets gradually force the exposition to more elevated pitches. Although aggregate tremolo reverb frequently makes ascribing (m)any textures to individual instruments futile, enough timbral invention remains to negate any thoughts of musical AI. Singular guitar plucks peer from among near-opaque organ-like washes on Société Perpendiculière and a faux C & W guitar twang pushes against hard drum backbeats on toute ça, glh.

During the CD’s dozen selections, the trio members repeatedly prove that their mixture of voltage oscillations and instrumental techniques can create a unique sonic landscape that is as entrancing as it is expressive.

Kati Killuspea

Live from Frankie’s & the Yardbird
Al Muirhead Quintet
Chronograph Records CR082
(chronographrecords.com/releases)

There is an eloquent maxim in many musical discussions that “improvised music ought to sound written and written music should sound improvised.” In a similar vein I would argue that most studio jazz recordings benefit from a live energy, and most live recordings can sound as polished as their studio counterparts when well executed.

The Al Muirhead Quintet strikes this balance beautifully on Live From Frankie’s & the Yardbird, performing a collection of jazz standards, one Muirhead original and Jimmy Giuffre’s Four Brothers; hardly a standard, but part of the jazz lexicon nonetheless. The album comes to a brief midway pause with the vocal Intermission Song, a showbiz-style way to end sets that only someone with Muirhead’s long connection to the music could pull off in such a fun and endearing manner.

The recording features Muirhead on bass trumpet and trumpet, Kelly Jefferson on tenor saxophone, veteran bassist Neil Swainson and drums (Michel F Côté) creation by Montreal’s Klaxon Gueule, the addition of synthesizers and a computer means it relates as much to metaphysics as to music. That’s because programme alters the sound of each instrument, blending timbres into a pointillist creation that brings in palimpsest inferences along with forefront textures.

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Ken Waxman

This Song Is New
Lorne Lofsky
Modica Music (modicamusic.com)

The late Ed Bickert set the model: Toronto’s most distinguished jazz guitarists tend to be self-effacing, blending in, enhancing the music of which they’re a part, rarely assuming the foreground. It’s certainly true of Lorne Lofsky (and Reg Schwager, for another). Lofsky spent eight years co-leading a quartet with Bickert and a few years in Oscar Peterson’s quartet, but his last recording under his own name was Bill, Please, released in 1994, before his term with Peterson.

This Song Is New presents Lofsky in a quartet with longtime associates playing five of his compositions, as well as two modern jazz standards that establish his frame of reference. The opening Seven Steps to Heaven, associated with its co-composer Miles Davis, suggests Lofsky’s biases: his strongest associations are with the subtle explorations, harmonic and melodic, of musicians like Bill Evans and Jim Hall, articulated with a beautifully even, glassy electric guitar sound. It’s even more pointed on his own compositions, like the ballad The Time Being, on which tenor saxophonist Kirk MacDonald finds a stunningly unified sound despite these personnel and venue changes, evidenced by the two contrasting versions of Sonny Rollins’ Tenor Madness. I recommend this album as a great example of Canadian jazz in a nutshell: easy to listen to, but far from devoid of depth.

Sam Dickinson

Entering Utopia
TuneTown
Three Pines Records TPR-001
(tunetownjazz.com)

A plethora of situations resemble utopia when compared to the pandemic conditions we currently find ourselves in, but TuneTown’s latest release, Entering Utopia could bring a listener in that kind of positive direction even under normal circumstances. This is true musically, and makes sense in the greater timeline as well, being recorded at the same session as the trio’s previous release There From Here.

This album is my second review this month to prominently feature saxophonist Kelly Jefferson, and his grounded approach across genres is simultaneously unique and authentic. I know of his comrades Artie Roth on the bass and drummer Ernesto Cervini from their ample work with other projects, but TuneTown gives them unique space and freedom by removing a chordal instrument from the equation. This leaves the rhythm section more room for exposed harmonic and percussive moments, like Roth’s informative double stops on Layla Tov, and Cervini’s intro to Hello. Today, the album’s opener that introduces the band one member at a time.

Performing together for more than a decade and a half has given the group a very cohesive sound, bringing a sense of unity to this album as it traverses originals, free improvisations and even a Charlie Parker blues. Entering Utopia gives listeners an excellent earful of what to expect when we next hear TuneTown in person.

Stuart Broomer

Live from Frankie’s & the Yardbird
Al Muirhead Quintet
Chronograph Records CR082
(chronographrecords.com/releases)

There is an eloquent maxim in many musical discussions that “improvised music ought to sound written and written music should sound improvised.” In a similar vein I would argue that most studio jazz recordings benefit from a live energy, and most live recordings can sound as polished as their studio counterparts when well executed.

The Al Muirhead Quintet strikes this balance beautifully on Live From Frankie’s & the Yardbird, performing a collection of jazz standards, one Muirhead original and Jimmy Giuffre’s Four Brothers; hardly a standard, but part of the jazz lexicon nonetheless. The album comes to a brief midway pause with the vocal Intermission Song, a showbiz-style way to end sets that only someone with Muirhead’s long connection to the music could pull off in such a fun and endearing manner.

The recording features Muirhead on bass trumpet and trumpet, Kelly Jefferson on tenor saxophone, veteran bassist Neil Swainson and drums (Michel F Côté) creation by Montreal’s Klaxon Gueule, the addition of synthesizers and a computer means it relates as much to metaphysics as to music. That’s because programme alters the sound of each instrument, blending timbres into a pointillist creation that brings in palimpsest inferences along with forefront textures.

A track such as Continuum indifférencié for instance, features a programmed continuum with concentrated buzzing that moves the solid exposition forward as singular string slides, piano clicks and drum ruffs are interjected throughout. In contrast, la mort comme victoire malgré nous finds voltage impulses resembling a harmonized string section moving slowly across the sound field as video-game-like noise scraping and ping-ponging electron ratchets gradually force the exposition to more elevated pitches. Although aggregate tremolo reverb frequently makes ascribing (m)any textures to individual instruments futile, enough timbral invention remains to negate any thoughts of musical AI. Singular guitar plucks peer from among near-opaque organ-like washes on Société Perpendiculière and a faux C & W guitar twang pushes against hard drum backbeats on toute ça, glh.

During the CD’s dozen selections, the trio members repeatedly prove that their mixture of voltage oscillations and instrumental techniques can create a unique sonic landscape that is as entrancing as it is expressive.

Ken Waxman
Wrongs
Dan Pitt Quintet
Dan Pitt Music DP003 (dan-pitt.com)

The tracks on Wrongs, from the Dan Pitt Quintet, are moody and textured as they move forward through shifting soundscapes that are intense and intriguing. Pitt, a guitarist/composer living in Toronto, has put together a cohesive and talented group including bassist Alex Fournier and drummer Nick Fraser from his trio. The addition of Naomi McCarroll-Butler on alto sax and bass clarinet, and Patrick Smith on tenor and soprano saxophones, creates some fabulous textures. For example, on Shadows Loom, the bass clarinet and tenor sax combine organically for a nice mid-range opening harmony; then we have a nuanced bass clarinet solo followed by Smith’s wailing tenor with a few multiphonics thrown in. The piece ends with a blistering and over-driven guitar solo by Pitt.

Wrongs’ tracks evolve from one mood and collection of sounds to another which makes the listening experience a series of discoveries. Hunter’s Dream begins with a long, bowed bass intro, What Is opens with a whispery guitar solo. Wrongs starts with a funky and off-kilter guitar and closed hi-hat/snare rhythm which persists under a bowed bass and sax/clarinet riff. Soon Pitt has changed to an ostinato pattern, Fraser is tearing through another terrific hi-hat/snare rhythm which persists under the quintet’s superb musicianship, and Smith is tearing through another terrific propulsively swirling through his entire kit. And Smith is tearing through another terrific and intense solo. And then sudden quiet and introspection, before building towards its kinetic, yet tight ending. Pitt’s seven compositions are inventive and subtle; they, along with the quintet’s superb musicianship, make Wrongs so very right!

Ted Parkinson

Night Cravings
Matty Stecks & Persiflage
(persiflage.bandcamp.com)

It was Thelonious Monk who once said “a genius is the one most like himself.” In my eyes, that’s the goal: to acquire a distinct sound. Playing with technical prowess is impressive on its own, but knowing all the notes is only half the battle. It’s what you do with said notes that defines your artistry. Saxophonist Matt Steckler and his quintet Persiflage certainly exhibit an immense command of their sound on this latest effort. As he often does, Matty Stecks beautifully showcases the sheer range and breadth of his compositional talents. Not only are his melodies ingenious and wonderfully complex, but the way he manipulates form in each composition makes for a consistently exhilarating listen. There seems to be a curve ball thrown around every corner. I find myself particularly blown away by my initial listen of Agriturismo. The tune kicks off with a slightly disconcerting march, reminiscent of Henry Threadgill. Once a natural climax is reached, they hastily dissolve into a guitar/drum duet, which transitions seamlessly into an open trombone/bass improvisation and saxophone solo.

The textures accomplished on this album are something else, which can be largely attributed both to the group’s general attentiveness and specifically the Herculean efforts of percussionist Satoshi Takeishi. Persiflage is simply an astounding band, and the results on this recording speak for themselves.

Yoshi Maclear Wall

Facets
Hafez Modirzadeh
Pi Recordings (pirecordings.com)

Hafez Modirzadeh, an American composer and saxophonist, has a musical vision he calls “chromodal” merging modal Persian music and the harmonic language of jazz as embodied in the work of John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk. Hafez, he’s created several pieces, Facets, combining his own and others’ works, in which eight of the piano’s keys have been lowered in specific pitch values, creating an available series of microtones and radically altering the piano’s resonance. The 18 pieces heard here have been divided equally among three pianists who readily blur composed and improvised musics to Davis, Tsyshawn Sorey and Craig Taborn. Facets joins in on tenor saxophone on ten pieces. No description can account for the numerous variations in approach or the strangely playful eeriness and structured refractions that arise. Facet 33 Tides achieves a strange, limpid and previously unknown, watery beauty. Facet 34 Defracted has Davis improvising on two Monk compositions, Ask Me Now and Pannonica, each performed later by the duo of Modirzadeh and Taborn. Facet 39 Mato Paho is a superb reverie by Modirzadeh and Sorey in which the strange colouring of pitches transforms the initial mood, while Davis makes Facet 32 Woke an epic of transforming approaches. In Facet 32 Black Pearl, Modirzadeh creates a variation on Bach’s Goldberg Variation No. 25. As novel as this wedding of cultures might seem, there’s real substance here, combining rich and related inheritances in ways that underline distinctions and highlight concordances.

Stuart Broomer

Lost Within You
Franco Ambrosetti Band
Unit Records UTR 4970 (unitrecords.com/releases)

World-renowned Swiss trumpeter and flugelhornist Franco Ambrosetti has released a sultry and smooth collection of jazz ballads that take you to a faraway musical world into which it’s easy to escape in these trying times. The flowing and pleasant notes that the gifted musician conjures from his golden horn perfectly mimic and showcase his “refined and poised” nature and beautifully simplistic yet poignant approach to making music come alive. Supported by a sublime backing band featuring equally famed names such as John Scofield on guitar and Scott Colley on bass, Ambrosetti’s own tunes as well as classics by Horace Silver and Miles Davis, among others, are taken to new heights.

The record opens with Silver’s jazz standard Peace, a song that positively makes you sway along as Scofield’s melodic riffs and a softly soaring horn tune layered over Renee Rosnes’ mellow chords on the keys take you on a velvety musical journey. Silli in the Sky is a Latin-flavoured piece lovingly written about Ambrosetti’s actress wife Jack DeLamette’s quietly sizzling drum groove combined with lovely guitar and horn solos add just the right amount of edge to give a fiery undertone to the tune. Closing out the album is You Taught My Heart to Sing, tinged with slight melancholy but just the right amount of movement in the more up-tempo parts of the song to convey hope, ending it all on a positive and warm note.

Kati Killiaspea

Maquishti
Patricia Brennan
Valley of Search VOS 005 (valleyofsearch.com)

Making a convincing statement without raising your voice is the mark of a sophisticated conversationalist. With solo vibraphone and marimba, New York’s Patricia Brennan expresses the same concept on compositions and improvisations which rarely rise past hushed tones and evolve languidly. Additional torque comes from the judicious use of electronic effects.

This is all done so subtly that those few instances in which the squeaky wave forms are obvious are no more disruption to

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the compositional flow than the tremolo pressure Brennan asserts with multiple mallets or varied motor rotation. Avoiding glittering statements, Maqushi’s 12 tracks are a study in pastel blends. This unhurried program isn’t sluggish however. I Like for You to Be Still for instance, is pulled out at a near lento tempo, but the thematic thread is never broken. Brennan also extends her idiosyncratic timbres by creating tones that could come from bell ringing or gourd scratching. In fact, Magic Square, the most spirited tune, only picks up speed at midpoint after a series of echoing pops. It reaches a crescendo of merry-go-round, calliope-like sounds created by rolling mallets across the vibraphone’s metal bars, not striking them. Meanwhile the tracks built around more deliberate woody reverberations from the marimba evolve with similarly measured light touches.

The cornucopia of shimmering sound timbres projected is best appreciated by responding to the cumulative afflications of this well-paced date and not expecting to hear the equivalent of a shouted argument.

Ken Waxman

Hanamichi – The Final Studio Recording
Masabumi Kikuchi
Redhook Records 1001
(redhookrecords.com)

The subtitle of Hanamichi is “The Final Studio Recording.” Reading this adds significant weight to the music. There’s something about the context of finality that makes a piece of art feel much more emotional, much more sensitive or fragile, and there is certainly a somber component to this recording, though it doesn’t sound like a weathered musician looking back on his career and trying to recapture some of the magic. It could never be that simple with Poo (pianist Masabumi Kikuchi’s affectionate alias). As the great Gary Peacock said in the liner notes, “It wasn’t until a few years before he died [in 2015] that his ‘voice’ found him.”

Kikuchi was never one to stagnate. When he took a solo, the direction of his music was more likely to veer into uncharted territories than to revert to its original state. His wanderlust took him to countless destinations, both in terms of his sound and his life. He constantly reached beyond his own parameters, and this recording is no exception. He takes My Favourite Things and turns it into two completely contrasting spontaneous compositions. The track titled Improvisation sounds like the most calculated piece on the set. As always, Little Abi is his calling card, while also being his mode of transportation to previously undiscovered planets. In his swan song, Kikuchi still looks forward.

Yoshi Maclear Wall

Uma Elmo
Jakob Bro; Arve Henriksen; Jorge Rossy
ECM ECM 2702 (ecmrecords.com/shop)

In the 50 years of producing music for his ECM label, Manfred Eicher has established a rubric that almost no one thought to create before him. It is characterized by a minimalistic aesthetic, with sonic works delivered in almost pristine digital sound. There is almost always superb, impressionist cover photography, rarely any liner notes (except for the odd Egberto Gismonti album). Booklets often feature graphics and an oblique, poetic line or two that seem illuminated by a translucent and shy ray of the sun.

This is exactly the feel of Uma Elmo by Jakob Bro, Arve Henriksen and Jorge Rossy. Put together, the two-word title might be translated as “the splendour or tranquillity (Uma) of love (Elmo).” The music has a profound and meditative quality; songs bloom into a series of exquisite miniatures. Bro’s single-note lines are spacey; they shimmer and gleam, occasionally warmed in the blue flame of Henriksen’s horns. Meanwhile Rossy bounces brushes and sticks in rhythmic flurries and glancing blows across the skins of his drums.

Songs such as To Stanko – a doffing of the hat to the late horn player Tomasz Stanko, beloved by ECM – Morning Song, Music for Black Pigeons (in memory of Lee Konitz) and Sound Flowers, are typical of this musical performance in the splendid isolation of a studio in Switzerland. Purity of sound and an enduring love of artistic expression are all over the music of this album.

Baarae
Andreas Willers
Evil Rabbit Records ERR 31
(evilrabbitrecords.eu)

As the COVID-19 lockdown settled in spring 2020, German guitarist Andreas Willers began a solo recording, the same kind of project with which he had debuted 40 years earlier. He’s playing two steel-string acoustic flat top guitars here, usually one at a time, though there are pieces when there may be two involved, and he’s playing them in a number of ways, whether traditional or employing extended techniques.

Willers clearly loves the guitar as an instrument, exploring its nooks and crannies and the myriad sounds they harbour, many of which usually avoided: the metallic slap of detuned lower strings against the fretboard; likely the rustle of a plastic bag covering the picking hand; strings scratched longitudinally with fingernails or maybe rubbed with a moistened thumb; some hard material with some weight, probably plastic, dropped on the strings of a horizontal instrument. None of these things appear in isolation but arise in making spontaneous music, each piece developing a rich, varied life of its own in which evolving timbres and events create a sonorous whole. Sometimes he plays guitar in a conventional way, as in the three movements of langh’s arm 6-8 which abound in brilliantly articulated runs, dense chordal passages and singing, reverberant highs; there are dashes of blues, flamenco and slide with strange mergings of idioms.

While its likely audience is attuned to free improvisation, there’s enough exuberant guitar exploration here to appeal to any adventurous enthusiast of the instrument.

Stuart Broomer

POT POURRI

Good Water
Leahy
North 28 Music Inc. N28MR0001LP
(leafymusic.ca)

It would be redundant to attempt to summarize the incredible musical contribution that has been made to Canada, and to the world, by this award-winning, exceptionally talented Celtic-Canadian family. On this latest Leahy release, every track is a rare emerald. Although perhaps not totally in the traditional bag, it’s still a trans-world-folk family affair – featuring Denise on vocals; Erin on piano, fiddle and vocals; Frank on drums; Julie Frances on vocals, piano, keyboards and acoustic guitar; Maria on acoustic guitar, mandolin and vocals; and Siobhane and Xavier on accordion. Produced by the iconic David Bottrill, Leahy manages to blur all of the lines, and in so doing, manifests a technoc -organic masterpiece.

The title track has a sumptuous, angelic vocal intro followed by a contiguous, poetic vocal line of almost unbearable beauty – an uplifting feeling of an ancient one-ness... a statement that moves beyond the Irish diaspora. No doubt, the ancient Leahy DNA is rife with incredible instrumental technique, as well as the rare gift of being able to transmute and share emotion.

Other brilliant tracks include Friend, which invokes the heartbeat of Mother Earth herself, blissfully intermingled with an ecstatic wall of sound and rich, layered “blood harmony” and also Star of the Sea, which is a radiant highlight of fiddling, odd measures and a
ballistic arco attack that channels the Tuatha de Dannan themselves. Of special significance is My Old Man – a lush, sonorous, melodic reverie, filled with ethnic memory and longing. This gorgeous track is a tribute to the Leahy patriarch from two generations prior – singing out from the passing of time – blessing his descendants as they live their authentic musical traditions, creating fearlessly into the future.

Lesley Mitchell-Clarke

Speaking Hands

Curtis Andrews

Independent (curtisandrews.ca)

Among the first reviews I wrote for The WholeNote was The Offering of Curtis Andrews (December 2009). “I've been ... bopping around the apartment to this joie de vivre-filled CD by Curtis Andrews, Newfoundland's globe-trotting percussionist and composer,” I enthused. “The music [draws] from Andrews' studies in South Asian, West African and North American music ... [merging] all those influences in an energy-rich field, couched in mainstream jazz forms and improv-rich solo...”

Relocated to Canada's West Coast, Andrews has continued his musical journeys inspired by those same global elements. And he’s joined on his sparkling new album, Speaking Hands, by 20 talented musical colleagues from across Canada, USA and Africa. Manifesting a mature musical voice, this sophomore release features nine Andrews' compositions and one by Carnatic percussion master Trichy Sankaran, their tricky metric landscapes negotiated with aplomb by the Vancouver-based ensemble, The Offering of Curtis Andrews. Though recorded last year, Speaking Hands reflects two decades of travel, study and collaboration with master musicians on three continents.

Andrews' compositions intertwine “rhythms and polyphonies of vudu-derived traditional music of West Africa, the micro and macrocosmic play of time and pitch found in Carnatic traditions of South India,” and jazz harmony and improvisation. It’s the novel intersection of all these seemingly disparate elements into a cohesive and high-spirited musical statement that marks the album as something special.

The album title? Andrews explains it was inspired by the practice of the Carnatic recited rhythmic language known as solkattu. “It is the voice that gives rise to rhythm before the instrument does... the hands ‘speak’ what the voice (mind) creates.” This album certainly speaks to me.

Andrew Timar

Roots of Strings – The oud at the crossroad of Arabic, flamenco and Indian music

Nazih Borish

Analekta AN 2 9173 (analekta.com/en)

Syrian-born Nazih Borish is a respected oudist and composer. While establishing and running his Syrian oud school, this already-renowned artist began to expand and embrace a wide variety of musics, including Arabic, flamenco, blues and jazz. In 2016, Borish arrived in Canada, where he seamlessly continued his international work as a composer and performer. On this energized program of original compositions, Borish has collaborated with two equally accomplished and gifted artists: bassist Roberto Occhipinti and acclaimed world-music percussionist (darbuka, req, ketim and dahola) Joseph Khoury.

Every well-produced track underscores the oneness of mankind. From the most elemental bass notes of Mother Earth’s heart to the intensity of shared human emotional experience – this recording is a journey of profound meaning. The opening track, Nazihauwand (Nahawand taksim), is a resonant, mystical composition... with sonic elements that are steeped in human experience – sounds from a timeless place, in a place-less time – eventually segueing into a wider, more languid sequence, punctuated in an inspired way by Occhipinti and Khoury.

The title track is heady with exotic spices, exploring the deep and ancient relationship between the indigenous music of Spain, Iberia, Portugal, the sub-Continent and the Arabian peninsula, followed by Ataba (Bayat taksim) – deep moving, with rich, lustrous tones; the facile skill of Borish is breathtaking. I can hear this universal music echoing off the walls of the Blue Mosque, the Taj Mahal or Carnegie Hall! Ali Baba Dance is a stunning – and Damasrose (Rast samali) is a sensuous, Masala-flavoured trip, displaying complex string technique by Borish, all while expressing the subtleties of several different instruments of antiquity – even hints of the Japanese koto.

Lesley Mitchell-Clarke

Roots

Ventus Machina

Leaf Music LM239 (leaf-music.ca)

Ventus Machina is a classical wind quintet based in New Brunswick which makes “excursions” into other genres. Roots is an inventive album containing arrangements of folk songs, fiddle tunes, Celtic music and a few iconic Canadian singer-songwriter staples. The majority of arrangements are by James Kalyn who plays clarinet and saxophone in the group. The album begins with Our Roots Medley which has five movements including an arrangement of some of Bach’s Goldberg Variations (The Goldberg “Variations”), a Swedish folk song (Koppången) and Gordon Lightfoot’s The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald. Kalyn’s arrangements are complex and use the full acoustic and technical resources of the quintet to present a unique perspective on these diverse selections. The Goldberg “Variations” are quite contrapuntal, while Edmund Fitzgerald uses a majestic French horn to announce the theme amongst the other swirling instruments.

Bird on the Wire has Kalyn playing bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, singing and using slap tongue techniques for rhythmic purposes. On Joni Mitchell’s The Circle Game the quintet is augmented by the Atlantic String Machine and a small children’s choir. For the three fiddle tunes, Traveller’s Breakdown, Doin’ Repairs and Calm Before the Storm, they are joined by the composer Ray Legere, playing fiddle and mandolin, with Christian Goguen on guitar; the music gets lively.

The underlying delight present throughout Roots is having familiar music reinvented in an unusual and intriguing context. This is Ventus Machina’s second album and I look forward to more musical adventures with them in the future.

Ted Parkinson

In D

Brooklyn Raga Massive

Independent (brooklyngragamassive.org)

Terry Riley’s iconic minimalist composition In C (1964) is scored for an indeterminate number and kind of instrument or voice. A drone-like pulse on the note C synchronizing the ensemble guides its performance, while superimposed repeated phrases give the work a phasing effect. (Riley had been deeply influenced by his studies with Hindustani classical vocalist Pandit Pran Nath.)

Hailed as “Leaders of the Raga Renaissance” (The New York Times), Brooklyn Raga Massive was founded in 2015 by sitar player and composer Neel Murgai. Given the diversity of instruments and musical backgrounds of the group, BRM chose Terry Riley’s adaptable In C to record in 2017. Then at Riley’s suggestion in 2020, BRM members took inspiration from In C’s form and composed a new work. It is interpreted by 25 musicians on the album In D, each of the
three sections set to a different Hindustani raga (Indian classical melodic mode). Within that framework improvisational instrumental and vocal solos are balanced by effectively composed tutt passages and drum features. Musicians and instruments from numerous traditions playing together can prove a challenge; this album manages to avoid many of the pitfalls. Adding to the cultural diversity here, while there’s certainly an emphasis on the classical Indian soundworld, other traditions unexpectedly and delightfully come to the fore before receding back into the sonic prevalent texture.

In recognition of the pandemic context the recording was made in, the three ragas were selected to “match the pandemic situation we now face. We plunged from our normal happy lives into darkness and [now] finally … we have hope.” The joyful communal spirit of In D gives me hope too.

Andrew Timar

#IV: Unfinished World
Intersystems
Waveshaper Media WSM-04CD
(waveshapermedia.com)

Toronto multi-disciplinary art collective dedicated themselves to replicating hallucinogenic experiences. Architect Dik Zander, light sculptor Michael Hayden, poet Blake Parker and electronic musician John Mills-Cockell (known for his work with the bands Syrinx, Kensington Market and decades of soundtrack composition) constructed immersive installations aiming to overload each of the five senses.

Intersystems’ trilogy of late 60s albums (Number One, Peachy and Free Psychedelic Poster Inside) have become canonized experimental classics, reissued as a lavash box set by Italian label Alga Marghen in 2015. The archival efforts of compiling this collection – alongside accompanying reissues of Syrinx and Mills-Cockell’s solo work – lit a spark of inspiration as Intersystems’ surviving members reunited for a new studio project. With the new album #IV, and its accompanying CD-only EP Unfinished World, they expand their legacy as luminaries of the Canadian avant-garde.

In a series of sessions at Hamilton’s famed Grant Avenue Studio, Hayden and Mills-Cockell conducted an electronic séance. Though Parker sadly passed away in 2007, they rendered the words of his poems with computerized vocalizations, drawing listeners into an uncanny valley. At times, these spookily lifelike voices take a cue from Parker’s deadpan delivery on Intersystems’ original albums. Elsewhere, their warped robotic gurgles sound like a sinister Max Headroom clone.

Mills-Cockell runs wild across a playground of vintage Moogs and Mellotrons, conjuring a vast expanse of effects. The sparse ambience of Revelation of the Birds casts an otherworldly glow over Parker’s surrealistic poetry about avian conversation topics. In the two parts of Sonny Abilene, the narrator’s

Something in the Air
Sophistically Curated Box Sets
Collate and Disseminate Important Music

KEN WAXMAN

Assembled since the first significant 78s were collected in one package, the boxed set has traditionally been used to celebrate important anniversaries or extensive projects. CD collections are the same, with these improvised music sets aurally illuminating various programs.

The most meaningful collection is the seven CDs that make up Julius Hemphill The Boyé Mutli-National Crusade for Harmony – Archive Recordings 1977-2007 (New World Records 80825-2 newworldrecords.org). Consisting of 53 previously unreleased tracks, the box presents a full picture of composer and saxophonist Hemphill (1938-1995), who was a member of the St. Louis Black Artists Group and founder of the World Saxophone Quartet. Hemphill is represented not only by numerous combo sessions with fellow sound innovators, but also by a disc of his chamber music compositions as well as multimedia creations involving solo saxophone forays and spoken word. While other tunes of his are interpreted by pianist Ursula Oppens and the Daedalus String Quartet, a more memorable compositional program on Disc 4 is of two pieces Hemphill conducted played by improvisors using traditional orchestral instruments and without solos. Slotted among Baroque, blues and bop, the tracks include achingly melodic motifs plus timbral extensions into multiphonics and swing that are unique. Roî Boyé Solo and Text is an entire disc dedicated to the vernacular trickster character the saxophonist developed in theatrical presentations where his horns comment on verbalized themes extended with Malinké Elliott’s recitation of the poetry of K.Curtis Lyle. With the rhymes personifying a variety of inner city St. Louis characters from shouting preacher to mumbling hustler, Hemphill’s flute or soprano alto saxophone lines offer either measured cadences as affirmation or use screech mould, triple tonguing plus the addition of miscellaneous percussion to rhythmically solidify the urban imagery and underline the barbed explosiveness of the situation.

However, it was as an improviser, composer and arranger that Hemphill’s identity was solidified, and these skills are expressed in cultivated and unique fashion involving numerous ensembles on the other five CDs. Hemphill’s best-known associates, bassist Dave Holland and drummer Jack DeJohnette, joined the saxophonist and longtime musical partner, trumpeter Balkida Carroll, in 1979 for one concert. Known for affiliations with Keith Jarrett and Miles Davis, the bassist and drummer easily respond to Hemphill’s music, as percussion rolls and ruffs and stentorian string plucks smack and swipe alongside light-toned grainy brass smears and an unbroken line of reed shrills. Mirrors’ squirming exposition opens up for a jumping tempo-shattering snare- and-cymbal solo without upsetting the piece’s ambulating balance. Meanwhile, the concluding Would Boogie is defined by the title as a drum backbeat; walking bass lines match lockstep horn animation which splinters the theme into atom-sized reed bites and spayed brass flutters and then reconstructs it. This down-home quality is further emphasized with two groups on CD 6 which include electric bassists and guitarists. Pops and splatters from Jerome Harris’ electric bass evolve in tandem with Hemphill’s sax squeaks or flute trills as six duo selections become harsher and more pressurized. A similar intensity is expressed when bop meets blues on Pigskin, as Jack Wilkins’ echoing guitar licks and drummer Michael Carvin’s power backbeat add mainstream swing to the saxophonist’s astringent exploration. One/Two/Time projects the group’s multiple identities as guitarists Allan Affie’s and Nels Cline’s blues-rock twangs and frails connect with Hemphill’s shifting split tones,
agitated delivery of nightmarish imagery combined with looping minor-key melodies is reminiscent of minimal wave outsider John Bender.

The album concludes on an ominous note of acceptance with The End of the World, as swirling arpeggios drift across 12 minutes of dystopian poetry. In Parker’s vision of the apocalypse, human skins peel off like snakes, while bodies ascend into heaven on electric light. As Mills-Cockell once said, “If it wasn’t disturbing and profoundly weird, it wouldn’t be Interstems.”

**Jesse Locke**

String of Pearls
Annabelle Chvostek
Independent (annabellemusic.com)

> It has been six years since JUNO-nominated, versatile singer/songwriter Annabelle Chvostek released a recording. The reason being is that Chvostek suffered significant hearing loss, the result of a massive feedback blast during a soundcheck. This would be a challenging experience for anyone – let alone a musician. This new CD is a direct result of Chvostek’s desire to create a project that would be enjoyable and accessible to those with hearing loss – and in keeping with this directive, she decided to produce an alternate monaural version of the recording specifically for people with hearing issues, available digitally at annabellechvostek.bandcamp.com.

There are three co-producers on String of Pearls: Chvostek, David Travers-Smith and Fernando Rosa, two of whom are hearing impaired. Rosa was born deaf in one ear, and by 2015 Chvostek was also. Through his brilliant engineering (and excellent hearing), Travers-Smith has created crisp, bright, satisfying digital tracks in stereo, and also in monophonic sound, a modality long gone but lovingly repurposed to allow people to experience the music in a new, authentic way. Joining Chvostek on this journey is a large cast of uber-talented characters, including violinist Drew Jurecka, guitarists Debi Botos and Tåk Arikushi, vibraphonist Mark Duggan, bassist Rachel Melas and drummer Tony Spina.

The majority of the material here was written by Chvostek, with the exception of a tasty Tom Waits tune, Just the Right Bullets, rendered with a highly creative “High Noon” horn-bandoneon-percussion-laden interpretation. The title track boasts a clever lyric that eloquently explains Chvostek’s journey, with a bit of a nod to the Boswell Sisters. Huge standouts include ke T’ai Vue Hier Soir (I Saw You Last Night) – an unabashed love song, performed in gorgeous, sibilant French and perfectly presented in a “Hot Club de France” style. Violinist Jurecka shines here, out-Grappelli-ing Grappelli! Also the sumptuous Firefly (You Just Love), replete with a delicious arrangement and equally delicious performances from Chvostek and the ensemble. Easily, this recording is one of the most enchanting and innovative of the year. Brava!

**Lesley Mitchell-Clarke**

| **moving the piece from the hotel ballroom to the honky tonk.**

Country blues energy coupled with urban experimentation also enlivens the multiple bands that Hemphill led under different names featured on Discs 1 and 3. Usually including Carroll, Dimples: The Fat enlivens the multiple bands that Hemphill led under different names moving the piece from the hotel ballroom to the honky tonk.

- **String of Pearls**
  - **Annabelle Chvostek**
  - **Independent (annabellemusic.com)**

  - It has been six years since JUNO-nominated, versatile singer/songwriter Annabelle Chvostek released a recording. The reason being is that Chvostek suffered significant hearing loss, the result of a massive feedback blast during a soundcheck. This would be a challenging experience for anyone – let alone a musician. This new CD is a direct result of Chvostek’s desire to create a project that would be enjoyable and accessible to those with hearing loss – and in keeping with this directive, she decided to produce an alternate monaural version of the recording specifically for people with hearing issues, available digitally at annabellechvostek.bandcamp.com.

  - There are three co-producers on String of Pearls: Chvostek, David Travers-Smith and Fernando Rosa, two of whom are hearing impaired. Rosa was born deaf in one ear, and by 2015 Chvostek was also. Through his brilliant engineering (and excellent hearing), Travers-Smith has created crisp, bright, satisfying digital tracks in stereo, and also in monophonic sound, a modality long gone but lovingly repurposed to allow people to experience the music in a new, authentic way. Joining Chvostek on this journey is a large cast of uber-talented characters, including violinist Drew Jurecka, guitarists Debi Botos and Tåk Arikushi, vibraphonist Mark Duggan, bassist Rachel Melas and drummer Tony Spina.

  - The majority of the material here was written by Chvostek, with the exception of a tasty Tom Waits tune, Just the Right Bullets, rendered with a highly creative “High Noon” horn-bandoneon-percussion-laden interpretation. The title track boasts a clever lyric that eloquently explains Chvostek’s journey, with a bit of a nod to the Boswell Sisters. Huge standouts include ke T’ai Vue Hier Soir (I Saw You Last Night) – an unabashed love song, performed in gorgeous, sibilant French and perfectly presented in a “Hot Club de France” style. Violinist Jurecka shines here, out-Grappelli-ing Grappelli! Also the sumptuous Firefly (You Just Love), replete with a delicious arrangement and equally delicious performances from Chvostek and the ensemble. Easily, this recording is one of the most enchanting and innovative of the year. Brava!

  - **Lesley Mitchell-Clarke**

  - **... but Twenty Festival (NotTwo MW 1000-2 nottwo.com)** is a five-CD box that preserves those performances. They consist of different combinations featuring saxophonists Mikolaj Trzaska of Poland, Peter Brötzmann from Germany, Ken Vandermark from the US and Sweeds Mats Gustafsson; bassists Barry Guy of the UK, Joëlle Léandre from France and Pole Ralaf Mazur; drummers Paal Nilssen-Love from Norway and Zlatko Kaučič from Slovenia; plus Swiss violinist Maya Homburger, American trombonist Steve Swell, Swedish tubist Per-Åke Holmlander and Catalan pianist Agustí Fernández.

  - Ranging in length from four minutes to over 20, none of the 28 tracks disappoint, with a few more outstanding than others. Demonstrating inventive flair for instance, Léandre is in her element whether it’s in a trio with Swell and Fernandez, a quartet with Guy, Kaučič and Swell or going one-on-one with Guy or Trzaska. The quartet set demonstrates that resonating pumps from two sophisticated bass players can stretch enough horizontal and splayed patterns to either provoke or accompany as many crashing percussion or slurring tailgate brassy smears as the others can produce. Swell’s almost ceaseless scooping tones and Fernández’s metronomic keyboard vibrations set up a trio challenge at even greater length, but Léandre’s concentrated string stuttering with tandem vocalizing is so powerful and percussive that her string buzzing consolidates the exposition from allegro interaction to andante solidarity. Solo, her string traction is such that she can create speed-of-light spiccatto jolts from the bass’ highest-pitched strings with the same textural innovation with which she pushes the narrative with bottom-aimed sul tasto stops, all the while spanning the instrument’s wood and verbally gulping and crowing additional onomatopoetic colour. Her duet with Guy shows both in top form(s) as they harmonize or test one another, constantly switching arco and pizzicato roles, splintering shrill notes or modulating deeper pitched ones, so intermittent melodies share space with pressurized movement.

  - Baritone saxophonist Gustafsson constantly challenges clarinetist Vandermark or alto saxophonist Trzaska in their meetings, but in each instance the reeds are part of an additional kaleidoscopic brass or percussion-affiliated canvas. With the clarinetist, contrapuntal reed trills and bites become shrilier and more dissonant as Swell and Holmlander spread cascading bumbles below them until...
all four reach screeching concordance. With Trzaska, Mazur and the tubist creating a continuum, double saxophone flutters can turn into barely there tongue slaps and whistles as flatulent brass quakes and sliding bass string crackles intersect to propel the narrative. Meanwhile, the Brötzmann, Guy and Kaučič meeting can be contrasted with the Gustafsson, Mazur and Nilssen-Love trio. The German saxist’s distinctive nephritic cry is met by the drummer’s calculated splashes and shatters as the bassist keeps the program chromatic. Each time the saxophonist speaks unexpected split tones from his horn, Guy produces connective stops while adding further grainy character along with Kaučič’s cymbal rubs. But when Guy’s subsequently powerful bass strings pull teeth to unbalance the exposition and push it to dissonance, it’s Brötzmann’s unexpected elaboration of a snatch of Sentimental Journey that launches the three into a near-swinging finale.

There’s no comparable respite with the other trio whose combination of reed glossolalia, sluicing string runs from Mazur and thumping drumming suggest heavy metal as much as free jazz. When Nilssen-Love repeatedly pummels his kit and the bassist strums rhythmic ambulation, Gustafsson’s timbral screeches and basso honks rest comfortably among the vibrations below. The set is appropriately concluded with a brief finale with all the musicians expressing group excitement from, and appreciation of, the proceedings as they spill out an organized free-for-all that humbly and abruptly ends. However the standout performance is a four-part dialogue among Fernández, Guy, Mazur and Kaučič. Creating a kinetic yet horizontal pulse, the bassist moors the exposition as the drummer decorates it with cymbal colours and drum pops while the pianist tinkles out a floating canter with sharper theme variations. The storytelling is further enshrined as kinetic piano lines join wide bass string pulses to slow down the allegro narrative to a cumulative responsive finale.

Some innovating musicians need and deserve more than a single disc with which to express their far-ranging talents. These box sets show this can be effectively done.

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**Old Wine, New Bottles**

**Fine Old Recordings Re-Released**

**BRUCE SURTEES**

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**Louis Kentner Plays**

**Louis Kentner**

**Profil/Hänssler PH20085 10 CDs**

(naxosdirect.com/search/ph20085)

Pianist Louis Kentner was born on July 19, 1905 in Karwin, then a part of Austrian Silesia, now Karvina in the Czech Republic. His parents were of Hungarian origin and named their son Lajos. Having later settled in London, in most modern biographies he appears as a British pianist and composer.

Kentner was highly gifted musically and from 1911/12 he studied at the Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest where he first came to attention with a concert performance of Chopin. At the Academy he studied piano with Arnold Székely, chamber music with Leo Weiner and composition with Hans Koessler and Zoltán Kodály.

He made his official debut in 1915 and began concert tours in European cities attracting attention with his interpretations of Chopin and Liszt. He won the Chopin Prize in Warsaw and the Liszt Prize in Budapest. In 1933 he gave the first Hungarian performance of the Bartók Second Piano Concerto (with Otto Klemperer) and in 1946 the first performance in Europe of the Third Concerto under Sir Adrian Boult.

Kentner had settled in London in 1935 and was given British citizenship in 1946. Audiences were unimpressed in their appreciation of his Mozart and he also gave radio performances of complete cycles of Beethoven and Schubert sonatas. He had a keen interest in Baroque music, especially Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier.

Looking through Kentner’s repertoire on these ten discs poses the usual question, what to play first? Here are the composers: Brahms, Bartók, Walton, Balákyére, Dvořák, Liszt, Bach, Mozart, Ravel, Beethoven, Hubay and Chausson. Assisting artists are Yehudi Menuhin, Gaspar Cassidy, the Pascal Quartet, the Philharmonia and BBC Symphony Orchestrass, Adrian Boult and Harry Blech. As Kentner enjoyed a reputation for his Liszt, there is of course the B Minor Sonata recorded in 1937. Wagner found this work to be “beautiful beyond all conception,” and Kentner takes this to heart in the last two pensive and reflective sections of this one-movement masterpiece.

There is also a disc of 15 short Liszt delights including Un Sospiro, La Campanella and Gnomerneigen. Yehudi Menuhin is heard in Bach’s Six Violin Sonatas BWV1001–1006. Also with Menuhin is the Walton Violin Sonata recorded in 1950. The Bartók Third Concerto is here with Boult and the BBC Symphony. The rest are not all the usual suspects found in such collections and this one is certainly worth investigating.

Kentner had a recognizable sound that identifies his playing throughout this unique collection.

**Ivan Moravec Edition**

**Ivan Moravec: Academy of Saint Martin in the Fields**

**Hänssler CLASSIC HC 20084 4 CDs**

(naxosdirect.com/search/hc20084)

It was only recently that we raved about an 11CD Ivan Moravec set, Portrait, published by Supraphon, of incomparable performances from their and others’ archives of solos and concertos. Every performance on those discs remains a treasure. This new 4CD set from Hänssler is headlined by four Mozart concertos in collaboration with Neville Marriner and the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. It begins with No.20 in D Minor K466 which is meltingly beautiful in every respect, both performance and recording. This is followed by No.23 in A Major K488, and on disc two Nos.24 in C Minor K491 and 25 in C Major K503. The recordings were made in the Henry Wood Hall in 1997 and 1995. CD three contains sonatas by Haydn and Janáček, Chopin’s Preludes 17 to 24 and a couple of (presumably) encores by Debussy and Chopin, all recorded at the 2000 Prague Festival. The fourth CD finds Moravec in the Academy of Arts and Letters in NYC playing the Chopin Finali March Sonata and half a dozen Chopin favourites rising to a triumphant Polonaise No.7 Op.61. Another stellar collection from the Moravec vaults.
OTHER FINE VINTAGES

Three Quintets by Peter Müller
Richards Wind Quintet
Crystal Records CD252 (crystalrecords.com)

► This recording of Johann Peter Müller’s Wind Quintets has just been digitally remastered after its initial release back in 1976. Although a pastor by profession, Müller (Germany, 1791-1877) was also an avid composer, writing a substantial number of works including two operas, some organ preludes, string quintets and these three wind quintets.

All three are beautiful and charming, showcasing the best of the classical style. Müller had a deep understanding of the strengths of each wind instrument as well as how they blend together, creating works that are both virtuosic and perfectly balanced.

These works are performed expertly by the Richards Wind Quintet: Israel Borouchoff, flute; Daniel Stolper, oboe; Elsa Ludewig-Verdehr, clarinet; Edgar Kirk, bassoon; and Douglas Campbell, horn. One of the first resident wind quintets in the United States, they toured around North America from 1948 to the late 1980s, proudly representing Michigan State University and the wind quintet form as a whole.

Melissa Scott

Sonatas for Horn and Piano
Christopher Leuba; Kevin Aanerud
Crystal Records CD372 (crystalrecords.com)

► Why resurrect a recording of horn and piano duets almost 50 years after it was first released? It is factual that the horn – the French horn as we know it today – is a mainstay in orchestral performance, wind quintets and chamber jazz settings, but true virtuosos are few and far between. The late Gunther Schuller comes to mind, as does John Clark, Vincent Chancey, Canada’s Jeff Nelsen, Sarah Willis who’s celebrated as being the first female brass player in the revered Berlin Philharmonic and of course Toronto’s own late, great Joan Watson, principal of the COC Orchestra and founder of True North Brass.

But what bearing should any of this have on Sonatas for Horn and Piano, a 1977 recording by the late Christopher Leuba? Biographically speaking, Leuba was first horn in Fritz Reiner’s Chicago Symphony and appeared with the Philharmonica Hungarica under Antal Doráti. Leuba was also a noted pedagogue and his Study of Musical Intonation is considered Bach-like in its importance: “the definitive work mathematically describing true, or just, intonation, in comparison to the tempered scale.” Which brings us to this recording.

Leuba truly practices what he once proverbially preached on these Sonatas for Horn and Piano by American composers John Verrall, Halsey Stevens and Paul Tufts. None of this music is considered – in our frame of reference – famous. But each is singularly eloquent; perhaps even a perfect example of how a French horn ought to sound when the spotlight is turned on it. Pianist Kevin Aanerud gently eggs Leuba on throughout, making for an utterly memorable performance.

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HANDEL
THE RESURRECTION
AN OPERATIC TOUR DE FORCE

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S
o here we are a year later, and we’re still waiting for our lives back. But for me, all of a sudden, the pandemic hasn’t all been bad – because I’ve fallen in love again. In musical love, that is.

For most musicians or repertoire that have penetrated my heart the actual circumstances in which I first heard them are lost to my memory. They’ve just been there as long as I can remember. But not for all. My most vivid repertoire love affair came when I was about 14, maybe, visiting New York, and walking with my parents by the construction site of what would become the Columbia Broadcasting System’s headquarters, the famous Black Rock building on 52nd Street in midtown Manhattan.

To make things more interesting for passersby, CBS had installed little listening posts with headphones so you could sample CBS recordings as you walked by the site. And one of them contained the explosive Finale of Stravinsky’s Firebird Suite, in a Bernstein/NY Philharmonic performance – a piece I had never heard before. In fact I’m pretty sure I’d never heard a note of Stravinsky before. There I stood, on 52nd Street, utterly and completely transfixed, playing the excerpt over and over again, many, many times, to either the delight or horror or amusement of my parents. (I think I returned to the site to listen again the next day.) I still have the Bernstein album I bought immediately on my return home.

Is there anything more wonderful in music than discovering a performer who absolutely thrills you, who opens up the world to you in a way you never thought possible, who strikes you at a level you can’t really explain or understand, but who you know instantly will be a lifelong companion, a never-ending part of your life? I’m guessing we’ve all had these experiences; they are really the essence of our enjoyment of music. Music is highly erotic, let’s face it. It is a form of all-encompassing eros, really quite pagan in its dimensions, that allows us to open our hearts to an extraordinary degree in the safe privacy of our own emotional imaginations. That sensuousness, and the pleasure it gives us, is certainly one of the great achievements of music, one of its great mysteries.

Also mysterious, as with all love affairs, is exactly who and what creates this immense feeling of satisfaction within us. Who wants to analyze it? We just want to enjoy it. Also part of the pleasure of the experience is its unexpectedness, the way it bursts upon you when you are least anticipating it.

So it was for me about a month ago when I got a yen, which I do every so often, don’t ask me why, to listen to Frank Foster’s Shiny Stockings a tune which Foster, a saxophonist with the Count Basie band, wrote as an instrumental for the band in the 50s, and to which lyrics were eventually added (by Ella Fitzgerald). I googled Shiny Stockings and noticed that one of the video results that popped up was a thumbnail of what seemed to be a young kid with a microphone. I clicked on it. My life hasn’t been the same since.

What I clicked on was a bit weird – a bunch of teenage musicians, really, arrayed as a big band but in what looked like someone’s living room. But, from the moment I heard the solo piano vamping the opening figure, along with a great rhythm guitar, I was intrigued. After all, there was Scott Hamilton, the great American sax player, in the background, so this couldn’t be too amateur an outfit. And then, the girl who I had seen on the YouTube thumbnail started singing – and I was lost. I’ve listened to this video, honestly, probably 150 times since that day. I’m listening to it as I write this, and there are tears in my eyes.

I’m in musical love again – with Alba Armengou. Armengou, I have since learned, is a Spanish musician, now just 20 – she was only 17 or 18 when she recorded that video. She is, it turns out, a great trumpet player as well, part of an astonishing jazz educational program, sort of an El Sistema for jazz, run for the past 13 years in Barcelona by an extraordinary musician,
Joan Chamorro. (He’s leading the band in *Shiny Stockings*, sometimes you see him on bass, occasionally on sax.) Armengou started playing with the band – there are videos of her – at seven or eight. None of the musicians in the group is over 20. But as amazing as the Sant Andreu Jazz Band is, it was the voice and demeanour and being of Alba Armengou that struck me to the core.

She may not be to everyone’s taste. Her voice is completely vibrato-less, and she sings English with a slight accent (which I find charming), mainly because, as far as I can tell, she doesn’t speak English. But her sense of pitch is the most extraordinary I’ve ever heard, her lower register is intensely beautiful, her phrasing impeccable (maybe because she’s a player, not just a singer); she just combines everything I find attractive in a musician.

Listening to her just pierces me – it’s a very physical sensation, this total release into a performer, leaves me a bit short of breath, puts a permanent smile on my heart. And thanks to YouTube and Instagram I’ve been listening to a lot of Alba Armengou for the past month, with a greater and greater sense of appreciation and affection. She sings Bossa Nova with impeccable taste and restraint as on Jobim’s *Triste*, can really let loose with a big band, with *Nobody Else But Me* and has created the most beautiful performance I’ve ever heard of anything with Billy Strayhorn’s immensely difficult *A Flower Is a Loveless Thing*, ethereal and haunting and soul-elevating. The only comparable performance is that of Ella Fitzgerald, but Ella was a mature performer when she recorded the tune. Armengou was 18. Eighteen!

Imagine Ella singing her version of *A Flower* in her *A-Tisket, A-Tasket* years. That’s how amazing Armengou is.

OK, I know I’m going overboard, because there’s also a pleasure in confessing your loves, but as I think of my reaction to Armengou’s musicality, it reminds me of how I’ve been shaped over a lifetime by the other performers and pieces of repertoire to which I’ve reacted similarly. I can vividly remember the first time I heard Anne Sofie von Otter singing Grieg songs on her first CD – I can still feel the shock of pleasure at that perfection. I had the same feeling when I heard the Murray Perahia/English Chamber Orchestra Mozart piano concertos back in the 80s. And then there’s Gould.

I actually came to Gould late, in my 30s, not sure why, and the first album of his that turned my world around was, crazily, his version of the Two–and Three–Part Inventions of Bach, on that crazy wonky piano on which he recorded them. Why them? Who knows? Maybe because I had played some of them as a student. But even with these ultra–simple pieces, the basic piercing intelligence and spirit of Gould was apparent – he changed what I thought music could do (as he did for many). That illumination he provided has been part of me,

Sometimes, something special happens, something out of the ordinary, which reminds us, oddly, in its uniqueness, of what music actually is.

honestly, ever since. And, as I started out saying, for me, often the pleasure of discovery has not been of performers, but of repertoire.

But that’s how it is, isn’t it. We all listen to a lot of music, enjoy a great deal of it – but sometimes, something special happens, something out of the ordinary, which reminds us, oddly, in its uniqueness, of what music actually is. It’s as though these extraordinary moments, even if they are infrequent, are the truest evidence of what is happening in music all the time – its constant potential for these illuminating epiphanies of bliss. So even in these darkened, cloudy days, when the prospect of life as it was seems to constantly recede just out of reach, it’s important to be reminded what lies underneath. Music, and our reactions to it, is one of the best reminders of that enduring power in the world. As I discovered with one click of a computer mouse on one YouTube video just a few weeks ago. And for which I will be thankful forever.

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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