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An Interview with Judah Adashi

TOM MOORE

Judah Adashi (b. 1975) is the child of Israeli parents, but was born and raised in the United States. He teaches composition at the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he is also founder and director of the Evolution Contemporary Music Series. He studied with Nicholas Maw and John Harbison. We spoke via Skype on March 12, 2010.

MOORE: Please talk about your childhood, and how you got involved in music. Were your parents musical?

ADASHI: My parents are both musical – that’s definitely a formative part of why I am doing what I do. My mother is originally from Romania, and my father was born and raised in Israel. They met in Israel; my mother immigrated there when she was sixteen. She was an actress at the National Theater in Israel. My father was a musician who was also active in the theater. They initially met at a kibbutz, and re-encountered each other years later when he had to teach her a song for a play. My mother has a passion for classical music, chamber music in particular, but she is tone deaf – she can’t sing, really. The image of my father teaching her to sing is an enjoyable one.... he has since gone on to become a physician, but he has a great ear, and is a great pianist in a variety of styles. My mom always had the local classical station on and took me to concerts, so I grew up hearing a lot of classical and romantic music. My dad would play anything from the Beatles to Chopin on the piano. I grew up around a lot of music.

MOORE: Where had your mother grown up in Romania?

ADASHI: In Bucharest.

MOORE: Romania is a place which is amazingly diverse in terms of language and culture. Your mother is Jewish?

ADASHI: Both my parents are Jewish.

MOORE: Did she grow up speaking Romanian?

ADASHI: Yes. I didn’t learn any Romanian. My parents spoke Hebrew and English in our household. I was born here in the States, and those two languages were freely mixed.

MOORE: Did the Jewish community there also speak Yiddish?

ADASHI: My mother’s parents spoke Yiddish. My father’s parents spoke German; his mother was from Austria and his father from Czechoslovakia.

MOORE: When did your mother leave Romania for Israel?

ADASHI: In 1961. She was born at the end of World War II. Romania was going from a Nazi regime to a Communist regime, and it was a complicated time to be an Eastern European. Coming to Israel was a very liberating experience. Something that she often mentions is how struck she was when she started her schooling in Israel, and the students would raise their hands and begin their comments with “I think that...” instead of just passing along received wisdom. It’s a very outspoken culture, and to that extent my parents are not very characteristic of it – they are both quiet, studious people, and don’t have that natural brashness that comes with growing up in Israel.

MOORE: You mentioned a connection to Czechoslovakia. When did your father’s family get to Israel?

ADASHI: In 1935. My father was born in 1945, three years before Israel was founded.

MOORE: How did you get started with music as a child?

ADASHI: The way in for me was piano lessons, the conventional path. When I was about seven years old, I started private lessons, at my mother’s suggestion. We had a musical household, so it seemed like a natural thing to do. After a few years, I started to take lessons at the Preparatory division of the Peabody Institute, where I now teach. I took piano lessons and music theory. Another important musical thread was choral singing. In high school I directed my school’s a cappella group, which became a serious pursuit all the way through college. A cappella singing is one of those things that is pervasive at universities but is not necessarily looked upon as a serious musical activity. I look back on it as something significant in terms of how I became a musician. I went to an all-boys school growing up, so the a cappella group was a TTBB ensemble singing pop and jazz, and the larger choirs and glee clubs sang everything from arrangements of traditional folk songs and ballads to more serious choral works, though we didn’t go much further than the Messiah. A related thing that I did in high school was music directing – playing the piano and working with singers in musical theater productions at my school and at some other local high schools. When you take piano lessons, it can be a very isolated activity, unless you do chamber music, which I didn’t – so the singing groups and the musical theater created a sense of music as a communal enterprise, as a social project, as something fun.

MOORE: For piano there’s so much technique and the repertoire is so huge, there is so much music you can play without anyone else, that if you are the introverted sort, there’s nothing to stop you from going down that path.

ADASHI: It's extraordinarily rewarding, and I am grateful to have studied the instrument – I think it serves you quite well as a composer – but it can be narrowing. You can end up living in a world where you have one-on-one lessons, and your musical life is focused on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It can get a little narrow, which is something that as a composer, as a teacher, as an advocate for contemporary music I am always trying to shake up a little bit. I try to reach students as young as possible so that they realize there is a lot more out there.

MOORE: What music theater productions did you do?

ADASHI: When I was a junior I was the vocal director and pianist for a production of *West Side Story*. It wasn't that easy to take on *West Side Story*...

MOORE: No, it's a big deal.

ADASHI: People question if you can do it, if you can find the singers...we did a respectable job. I still go back to listen to the CD. That was my introduction to Bernstein as well, who is a very important figure for any American composer.

MOORE: Were there other musics that were important to you as a high school student? Jazz? Rock and roll?

ADASHI: I was a stalwart rock and roll listener, but jazz was not on my radar yet. I was a big Beatles fan, listened to classic rock, not all that much that was really current. I liked and still like U2.

MOORE: At what point did you start in on composition?

ADASHI: As I got older I was feeling that I wanted to do something in music. I didn't know exactly what that was. It was becoming clearer that I wasn't looking to be a pianist, at least not in the professional, performing sense of the word. As you said, there is so much technically to perfect, and I felt that I was an expressive pianist, but I didn't think that the idea of spending hours refining trills, and pedaling, and evenness was for me – I would fix one of those things, and then another one would become a problem! I pursued piano through the beginning of college, and then let that go, more or less. Then it was a process of exploration. I got to Yale and did a BA in music – it was not a performance major, but a general academic major, with theory and history courses. I thought perhaps that I would want to go into musicology, or into theory – I considered those things in turn – but neither seemed quite like what I wanted to do. And having done some musical direction with a cappella groups, this started to be the thing that I enjoyed the most. It wasn't about performing, it was about the behind-the-scenes creative work: rehearsing, arranging. It occurred to me that maybe composing was what I would be interested in. It was only towards the end of my college career that I took a composition course at Yale, and I found it very daunting at the time. I had no point of reference for contemporary music at that point. I felt like the things that the students were doing – working with computers, various atonal systems – were foreign to me, and that I was out of my depth.

But I was interested, and through gradual exposure to what people were writing I began to think that this was something that I could do.

MOORE: Were you involved with one or more of the a cappella groups at Yale?

ADASHI: I was in, and was the music director of the Spizzwinks(?), and I was also in the senior group, the Whiffenpoofs, which is the oldest such group in the country. I directed that group as well, and we traveled a lot, and performed. In both groups I conducted, and arranged quite a bit of music. I was starting to experience what it meant to write music and have it performed, and the rewards of that.

MOORE: On the other hand, the idiom for the Whiffenpoofs would not have much in common with Sessions, or Xenakis, or Stockhausen.

ADASHI: Not at all. It couldn't be further removed! That's where I got more of an introduction to jazz, since the Whiffenpoofs and other groups were doing a lot of jazz standards. Cole Porter was in fact an early Whiffenpoof. I wouldn't say that any of those three composers you mentioned were remotely on my radar at the time. The first arguably classical piece that I notated and had performed was a set of three art songs on poems by Langston Hughes. I played the piano, and a baritone I knew sang them. That was my first venture into having a piece on a composition recital. It was totally new and enjoyable. The teacher I had at the time, Kathryn Alexander, was very supportive. She could sense that this was new to me and that I was coming from a more tonal place. I remember her pointing me in the direction of Ned Rorem's music. I can see in hindsight that by the 90's, there was no one way to write contemporary classical music. You didn't need to sound like Schoenberg, you didn't need to sound like Stravinsky, or Xenakis, Stockhausen or anyone else -- you could write what you wanted. That was, on the one hand, a daunting freedom, but on the other hand, a liberating one. It has been a pluralistic and undogmatic time to grow up as a composer.

MOORE: Certainly. In that regard, this is an extremely recent development, because this would not have been the case at a similar institution, even only in the early eighties, there would have been a strict canon, with some composers in and some out. Shostakovich, for example, was out, since he was contaminated by socialist realism.

ADASHI: I am not a fan of dogma on any side. I am suspicious of people who are completely sequestered in the world of new music, and also suspicious of people who won't have anything to do with it. Music is part of a continuum, and there is a lot to be drawn from everything, whether it's Barber or Boulez. I think taste is important. It's important to know what you like and don't like, what speaks to you and what doesn't, what may or may not have a place in your own music. I make a point, in the concert series I direct and as a teacher, of being inclusive. I hope that I sometimes surprise people. I listen to a lot of music, and consume contemporary music omnivorously.

I try to put a lot of things out there for people's consideration, especially for students. So many baby-boomer composers had to go through this experience of writing 12-tone music in college, and ten years later they finish their doctorate and scrap it all and start over...it's unfortunate that they had to experience many things of value – serial music, avant-garde music – in the light of dogma and ideology, rather than just seeing what could be gained from them. The chance to draw on these things in an ecumenical way is nice.

MOORE: ...what you might call the post-modern condition.

ADASHI: Yes. One of the composers who helped this along was György Ligeti, because he was a composer who was suspicious of dogma. He had come from Eastern Europe where he had seen the worst of totalitarianism, and then he went to Darmstadt where, as he put it, no one was being killed, but there was character assassination. Ligeti was part of the postwar avant-garde, but voraciously consumed all kinds of music, and wasn't discriminating based on some sort of categorical imperative passed down from on high. That's been an inspiration to a lot of students. If you think about a place like Yale, Martin Bresnick studied with Ligeti, and has that open-mindedness. When I started my undergraduate class in composition at Yale, a lot of people were writing music with a certain degree of complexity that I found intimidating. That being said, Yale, then and now, qualifies as a place with a healthy musical environment, with a lot going on, from a cappella, to musical theater, to composers who run the gamut in terms of style.

MOORE: Where did you head after your course in composition?

ADASHI: I ended up moving back to Baltimore. I took a year off, because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, and started taking composition lessons privately. That seemed promising enough that I decided to apply for the master's program in composition at Peabody. I was on the fence about whether I would go in a classical direction or not -- I was intrigued by the Berklee School of Music, and was thinking about going in a more commercial direction. As a footnote, I spent that year and the following one working at a classical record store in town, which was an education in itself. I can think of few things better than that – perhaps working in a library? – in terms of building your sense of the repertoire. I was listening to a lot of music and that was invaluable.

MOORE: Record stores are fabled for being places with extremely knowledgeable employees who are willing to impart that knowledge...

ADASHI: ...whether you want to hear it or not!

MOORE: ...the literary examination of that being High Fidelity by Nick Hornby, which has a lot to do with the academic approach to music, actually.

ADASHI: Absolutely.

MOORE: And unfortunately it is something that we don't have at this point.

ADASHI: It was definitely a chance for me to immerse myself in things that I didn't know so well.

MOORE: I would be willing to bet that that store has gone out of business by this point.

ADASHI: To its credit, it has not gone out of business. It has transformed. There is still a CD store, but they make their money through affiliations with local organizations like the Baltimore Symphony, selling CD's at concerts. They have also opened up a performance space, which filled a huge vacuum in Baltimore – it has become an ideal place for jazz, for contemporary music, for all kinds of chamber music. It's three blocks up the street from Peabody – an intimate, seventy-five seat space, which is where the concert series that I have directed for the last five years is based, so that relationship has continued for me long after I stopped shelving CDs.

MOORE: Who were you studying with at Peabody?

ADASHI: My whole time at Peabody – my master's degree and the beginning of my doctorate – I studied with Nicholas Maw, who passed away this past summer. I had no idea who he was – I got a letter saying that I had been accepted into the studio of Nicholas Maw, and went home to find out who he was, opened up my Grove Dictionary, and there he was, which seemed like a good sign. He was in the hard copy of the 1980 Grove. Nicholas was a composer who went his own way, even before people started defecting from the avant-garde. He had found his own inventive, imaginative way of dealing with tonality in the fifties and sixties in the UK, when no one was interested in that, but he stuck to what he was doing. He showed that you could still work with those materials in fresh ways. I worked with him for three years in the master's degree program, and later for two more years in the doctoral program. I took another couple of years off from school after finishing my master's in 2002, and began teaching composition and theory at the Peabody Preparatory. During those years I commuted intermittently up to Cambridge to study with John Harbison, someone who is well-schooled not only in the music of the twentieth century, but of past centuries as well. I see my two mentors as people who have a sense of music as something that has gone on for a very long time. It's not as though the slate was wiped clean during and after the world wars. They both write music that maintains a connection to all that has come before. That is something that I try to do as well. I don't put a premium on starting fresh – I think that is unrealistic, and I value being part of what I think is an extraordinary tradition.

MOORE: What was Maw's approach to teaching composition?

ADASHI: Teaching composition is such a strange and individual phenomenon. More than anything, as I said in remarks that I gave at his memorial service, he modeled what it was to be a composer.

We had our weekly lessons, and sometimes he would have great insights about the form of a piece, and sometimes he would get into the nitty-gritty of individual notes. I felt that there was something holistic about the experience. He never told me what to write. He let me do my thing, but he had opinions and watched over me. I learned a lot simply by gauging his reactions to my work. I knew it when I had written something that he thought was personal, that he thought spoke distinctively. His manner was fairly reserved – he never ripped anything apart, and he praised me, but wasn't lavish or over the top. In some ways, it was a more hands-off style, but in that way you start to absorb a teacher's sensibilities. With regard to the musical process, he didn't teach me how to compose, didn't tell me what to do, but I think he imparted that in a very organic way. His writing itself was very organic. He was not a composer of systems. He had a language, and very strong ideas about how things should naturally unfold. The only thing that dictated what you did with the music was the material itself. If I brought in an initial idea, he gently told me to give the ideas a life of their own, to let them bear themselves out, and I think that is some of the best advice you can get – learning to trust your ideas, to trust your music. That's not to say that craft – writing fugues and so forth – is not valuable, but in this day and age having that kind of guide, a Virgil for this difficult journey, is invaluable.

MOORE: It sounds very much like what you describe is a more organic, or let's say narrative, approach to composition, in which the material suggests the structure, as opposed to a more architectural approach, in which you conceive a structure for the piece and then fill in the details.

ADASHI: I think that's exactly right. I don't ever recall Nicholas talking about pre-compositional plans or anything like that. The irony is that he is someone who is known for very large-scale works, and I think that is something that was important for him, but he had the ability to think in these narratives that were very elaborate and multi-dimensional and rich, and I don't think that came out of systematic planning ahead of time, or even during the process. I think it took shape in a way that was driven by whatever the initial material was, whether melodic material, as was often the case for him, or something else.

MOORE: How would you describe your own approach? Is it in this narrative vein?

ADASHI: Yes, it is very much in the narrative vein. I have largely adopted that conception of spending a good deal of time arriving at my principal idea or ideas, and then developing them in a way that seems appropriate for that piece. John Harbison helped me in that he put a great premium on clarity. He often pointed out that I had introduced an idea at the beginning of a piece and not brought it back, or introduced an idea which was not the main idea, and he really got me to think about how to present the narrative in a way that gets across to the listener. I think it's easy to take a narrative mode too far and wind up with sprawling fantasia-like forms, which is not what I am looking for. John got me thinking about economy of means, getting your initial ideas out there up front.

MOORE: What you are saying about Harbison has to do with rhetoric. Harbison has spent many years working with Bach cantatas, so I am sure he is not unfamiliar with baroque rhetoric, where you have the *inventio* and *dispositio*. As you say, these things go back a long way. Were there composers that appealed to you as compositional models?

ADASHI: Nicholas's music was something I admired very much. And through Nicholas, not directly, not that he talked about it very much, but simply because he was English, I started to take an interest in the music of Benjamin Britten, and have never really let go of it. So many of the things that I value in music go on in Benjamin Britten's work -- I think it's very expressive, it is music that is intricately made, but it communicates to a lot of people within and beyond the *cognoscenti*. In terms of idiomatic writing for instruments, I come back to Britten again and again as a teacher. If a student needs to write a piece for solo guitar, there's a piece I can show them. If someone needs to write a piece for strings, there's a piece I can show them. If they need to write a solo harp piece, there's a work for harp – Britten is someone who worked in a lot of idioms, but I don't feel like he's one of those composers who churned out a lot of music that he wrote at the piano, and forced it onto whatever ensemble – he wrote idiomatically for these instruments, which is something that Nicholas put a fine point on. That's something that is very important to me. Being a pianist gives you a polyphonic tool with which to experiment, but there are also dangers, which is that you can end up writing piano music and simply transcribing it. If you're in a string quartet, and a composer essentially gives you a piano piece which they have arranged, you can tell. I started to get interested in mid-century American composers -- Samuel Barber, Ned Rorem, the lyrical vein. I had been writing vocal music early on, and felt a real connection to that style. The influences game is a funny one to play -- everyone hears something different in my music. When I am asked who my favorite composers are, the ones I have come to comfortably list are Britten, Schumann, and Leoš Janáček. There is a lot of music by Janáček that is stunningly expressive. It seems like one wouldn't even have to say this, but emotion is a big part of music for me. I think I get those three composers -- when I listen to their music it speaks to me in a very particular way, emotionally. I teach a course on contemporary music, and I run a contemporary music series, and I haven't listed any contemporary composers...but that's not to say that they aren't a huge part of my musical life. I don't think of them as influences – I just think of them as music that I really like. I admire Martin Bresnick's music. Derek Bermel is someone who is a friend and who I think is an absolutely fantastic composer. I like a lot of Steve Reich, I like a lot of Ligeti...I could go on and on.

MOORE: I thought that was a very interesting answer. Britten is writing music in genres that are not easily adaptable for an American environment -- you have operas, service music for the Church of England, the vocal music, which is a hard sell in the United States, and very little in the way of traditional chamber music -- you almost never hear his string quartets, for example.

ADASHI: I hadn't thought about it in those terms. Through Nicholas I became a musical Anglophile. They prize things there -- all those song cycles for voice and chamber orchestra, string orchestra music -- that we don't in the United States, where the musical culture lends itself to a certain kind of chamber music and to orchestral music. I love some of Britten's orchestral music, but that's not what is important about him for me, and the same goes for Janáček. What I like about those composers is that they communicate with a personal intensity and integrity. There's nothing typical about what they are doing. Britten had these personal relationships with Peter Pears, Julian Bream, and Rostropovich, artists for whom he wrote -- I think that comes through in the music. There's an intimacy to it that is deeply felt and very genuine. There's something very personal about it. I got that word, "personal," from Nicholas. That was his highest praise. Not that you had written a really difficult piece, or an original piece, but a personal one. That's what I prize, today, still.

MOORE: What piece would you consider your Opus 1, and why?

ADASHI: It's a solo guitar piece which I wrote in 2000. That was the first piece I wrote with Nicholas where I could tell something had happened, something different. A lot of my music has some literary impetus or connection. That piece is titled Meditation with the subtitle Three Episodes from William Styron's *Darkness Visible*. *Darkness Visible* is a ninety-page memoir, by the author of *Sophie's Choice*, on his experiences with depression. I was so taken by this book -- the writing is so elegant. It is restrained in style, and for that reason manages to be all the more expressive. This is something I am drawn to musically as well. Music doesn't have to be big or loud to be profound and expressive. The text inspired my musical ideas, and those ideas clicked with the guitar, which can be an instrument of quiet depth. Everything came together there, and it is still a piece that I look back on as the beginning of something meaningful for me as a composer.

MOORE: To follow up on the literary connections, you have a piece referencing Macondo, and *Songs of Kabir* has a literary reference as well.

ADASHI: I would say that eighty percent of my pieces have some kind of literary connection, but the piece has to stand on its own as a piece of music. I make a distinction between program music and program-note music. Program-note music is the kind where you need to read the program note to understand the piece! The pieces you mention are instrumental pieces, and there is no text being set. I don't think you need to have any text in the program to connect with the music. I usually share that *Songs and Dances of Macondo* is inspired by *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, and that *Songs of Kabir* is inspired by translations of the Hindu poet, Kabir, but I hope you don't need that to enjoy the music -- it's just another way in. In addition to growing up around music, I grew up around a lot of books. Both the teachers I mentioned, Nicholas Maw and John Harbison, are very literary types -- they engage a lot of literature in their work.

I have been setting poetry to music less and less of late, but I hold on to literary underpinnings, even if they are only there for me, as an inspiration or a springboard.

MOORE: To my ears in many of your works I hear an ecstatic mode of expression, something that recalls Messiaen, for example. In contrast to contemporary music that is difficult to get into, your idiom seems more welcoming.

ADASHI: Technical challenge is never the goal for me, although I want to write something that is interesting to play. I haven't listened to a lot of Messiaen, but he is a figure that I feel some resonance with. I like to have a soulfulness, a space in my music -- I would say that for me there is something sacred or ecstatic in the music-making itself, not through the sheer number of notes, or the language, but in the way that the music breathes. I have a bulletin board above my desk, with a note from David Del Tredici, which says: "Judah -- impressive all. But so sad. Why? - -David." I don't think of my music as sad, and it was pleasantly surprising to hear you refer to it as ecstatic. I think that there is a quietness, a seriousness and sincerity -- but I hope there is something joyous about that. For some composers, you hear the music and you meet the person, and they are identical. For me, the music represents different facets of my personality. For people who know me well, it is a very accurate reflection of me. If I have just interacted with someone socially, they might be surprised to find that my music is quiet and introspective, but it's another more personal side of me that I am grateful to have music to express. It's not necessarily how I talk or act in my daily life, but it doesn't contradict it. It's the foundation on which my personality is built.

MOORE: In Jungian terms, your anima.

ADASHI: Yes, your soul, an essence that you are trying to express. For Lutoslawski, writing music is "soul-fishing" -- you hope that you catch someone for whom the music resonates in their soul, even if only one person.

MOORE: Is there an aspect in which your Jewish heritage has shaped what you write as a composer?

ADASHI: The quick answer to that is "no," but with a huge caveat, which is that I am, as is readily apparent from the surface of much of my music, enormously drawn to the sounds of the music of Spain and the Middle East. That was never something that I set out to do, where I said to myself "I love this, and I am going to incorporate it into my music." But it just started to appear, for example, in the piece for violin and string orchestra, *Grace*, which has a lot of Hebraic, cantillation-like elements. People commented on it, and I was surprised, since I had not thought about it. In a way, that's the best way for these things to enter in. I was glad that it was not something that I had consciously planted in the piece. My family is Jewish, but not religious in terms of practicing. I can count on one hand the number of times that I went to a synagogue growing up. I did have a Bar Mitzvah, but organized religion was never a big part of my life.

You do start to wonder, though, if certain sounds don't come through your blood -- I mean not just Jewish, but Jewish and Eastern European. I mentioned Romania and Czechoslovakia, and that may be part of why a composer like Janáček speaks to me. It connects to what I was saying about joy versus sadness in music. In Eastern European music and in Jewish culture, there is the idea of being able to find the joy in sadness and the sadness in joy. That is something that I have noticed in my music.

MOORE: Please talk about your current projects.

ADASHI: The current piece I am writing is for voice and guitar. I am excited about that, because I haven't written for the voice in a while.

I am setting a text by Louise Glück, an American poet. I just finished a solo harp piece, Aria. More and more I find myself trying to write songs, even in my instrumental music: substantive melodies that can be borne out in a compelling way. I am writing a substantial work for my doctorate at Peabody, which is looking like it may be an orchestral piece. I tend to think in terms of smaller, more intimate groupings, but I have some ideas that I think could translate to a chamber orchestra. Something else I am hoping to do soon is write a piece for piano. A lot of composers I know who are pianists seem to turn out a lot of music for piano, which is something I have never done. I haven't found my piano voice. If for some people playing the piano makes that seem easier, for me it makes it seem harder. I don't know how my music speaks on the piano yet.



Experimental Opera Alive and Well

ADAM BRONER

Artistic director Harriet March Page and composer Mark Alburger have long poured their energy and ingenuity into Goat Hall Productions and San Francisco Cabaret Opera. On June 17-20 at Berkeley's Live Oak Park they held Fresh Voices X, their tenth annual festival of new operatic works. An accomplished mezzo, Page has kept one foot on the stage - I once heard her sing the moving role of Maurya in Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Riders to the Sea* -- while turning more towards directing and producing in recent seasons. Mate Mark Alburger handles musical direction and promotes experimental opera, coincidentally finding a vehicle for his own quirky works.

In recent years *Dionysus* by Steven Clark, *Leonardo's Notebooks* by Lisa Scola Prosek, *The Quantum Mechanic* by John Bilotta, *Inferno* by Peter Josheff, and *Mice and Men* and *Antigone* by Alburger were among many of the jewels that this courageous couple premiered.

This summer's festival consisted of two programs, X at the Heart of America, and X in the Soul of Europe and Beyond, ten one-act operas that balanced charm with the macabre. Each was fully realized, with accomplished singers and quick changing sets, and each offered a glimpse into a rarefied world, one that we are fortunate to have in our own backyard.

Offering a touch of much needed levity, *George Bush: The Last 100 Days*, written in 2008 by Chris Whittaker, was full of surprises, with Nathaniel Marken supplying a humorous portrayal of a Bush epiphany: "I changed my mind!" he sang, to the delight of the press and chagrin of his press secretary.

Composer/librettist duo John G. Bilotta and John F. McGrew premiered *Trifles* June 17, a cold tale of murder and injustice in the Midwest. Based on Susan Glaspell's play of 1916, an abusive relationship is explored after a farmer is found hung. Two neighbors, played by soprano Maria Mikheyenko and mezzo Alexandra Jerinic, explored the subtleties of the crime while packing for the farmer's wife, who had been arrested for murder. Their chemistry and fine voices added punch to the slow paced tension, peppered with clarinet trills and cello glissandi.

"I tell you it's queer, Mrs. Peters," sang Jerinic. "We live close together. And far apart." Mikheyenko sang back of stillness and the death of her baby, capturing the isolation of that age.

Daniel Felsenfeld's *The Bloody Chamber* reworked the Bluebeard myth, giving the ingénue more voice. But rolling a strawberry around on full, pursed lips, Jo Vincent Parks, voice thickened with lust, obviously relished his portrayal of the Marquis's sensual evil. Indre Viskontas played his victim straight, performing a lovely aria as he undressed her. The

creep factor was heightened by simple piano motifs that blurred as they overlaid each other.

Alburger, who describes his music as "post-minimal and post-popular," wrote *Job: A Masque* as part of his continuing project on the Bible. Once described as a Pop/Stravinsky fusion, Alburger sampled melodies from Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* (in "Man is Born to Suffer"), and Ralph Vaughan Williams, but set those elegant motifs against popular rhythms for music that was provocative and surprisingly accessible.

Marilyn Pratt defined *Job's* despairing faith and *Crystal Philippi* played a leather-clad Satan, the poles of a timeless Biblical tension.

The next night, and more sinister.

Medea Alone, by David Garner, was a virtuoso vehicle for soprano Kristen Brown, who alternately massaged her bloodied arms with a knife, and sent high notes peeling against cement block walls. Lovely glissandos and small carefully realized intervals balanced the ancient Greek plot of love turned to hatred and madness.

Mark Narins's *Theresa Kren* was based on an unusual premise, a little girl whose death inspired the mother to resurrect her as a golem. The Jewish setting vied with Christian themes for an unsettling mix, but was saved by the arias, alternating folk and chazzanut motifs sung compellingly by Katherine Howell and Tristan Robben, with piano accompaniment by Keisuke Nakagoshi.

Based on a Kafka story, *The Hunger Art*, by Jeff Myers with libretto by Royce Vavrek, made *Medea* seem almost fetching. A narcissist "artist" and his co-dependant wife, jailed by three butchers in bloody aprons and fright wigs, re-enacted the Eve and apple tale -- but well after a bite of the Tree of Cynical Euro-Trash.

"We are but the vessels that Hunger weaves," sang tenor Justin Marsh to soprano Eliza O'Malley, Alfonso to her Ivona. Stylish piano, played by Hadley McCarroll, and effective staging made this piece resonate.

Staged on a shoestring with the help of top musicians and singers, *Fresh Voices* is an astonishing display of artistic intention in an age of tightened belts, and a testament to the energy of Page and Alburger. Their future programs can be found at www.goathall.org.

Chronicle

June 3

Kirke Mechem's Suite for Chorus, in its New York premiere by the New Amsterdam Singers. Church of the Holy Trinity, New York, NY. "[C]onductor Clara Longstreth pointed out that in the realm of vocal music most composers select the text, then write the score. For Mr. Mechem, on the other hand, words were secondary in this work, which treats the choir like a symphonic or chamber ensemble and uses consonants and vowels as strings might incorporate pizzicato and varied bowing strokes. What resulted was a colorful, complex work. Words and sounds overlapped in a texturally rich tapestry in the cycle's four songs, Kum Ba Ya, Too Young to Marry, They That Mourn, and Papageno and the Prince. Ms Longstreth, who founded this amateur choir in 1968 and remains its music director, led a chamber ensemble in a handsome performance. The first half of the program, titled Morning, Evening, Earth and Sky, opened with Morning Greeting, a short, cheery work by Robert Baksa. Next came a lovely performance of Joseph Rheinberger's Abendlied (Evening Song), a six-voice motet. Robert Dennis, in the three appealing songs of his Morning Group I, focused on the contrasting moods of what he calls his 'favorite time of day in its various aspects,' setting texts by Jonathan Swift, Íñigo López de Mendoza and William Blake. Carlos Chávez . . . set poems by Keats (Sonnet to Sleep), Shelley and Byron in his evocative Three Nocturnes. . . . The program ended with the New York premiere of Ronald Perera's earthsongs, melodic, lighthearted settings of texts by E. E. Cummings. There was witty interplay between words and music" [Vivien Schweitzer, The New York Time 6/710].

June 4

Flux Quartet performs Morton Feldman's String Quartet No. 1. Bargemusic, New York, NY. 'Feldman's . . . [is] a 90-minute piece composed in 1979. In one sense, you could hardly imagine a better match of composer and location. During the later years of his career Feldman, who died in 1987, wrote pieces that emphasized whisper-soft dynamics, clarity and transparency, with time-loosed sensations of dislocation and drift extended over extreme durations. Bargemusic offers close quarters and strikingly clear acoustics; it also provides a mostly gentle liquid quiver that soothes some audience members and discomforts others. The setting had its drawbacks A circling helicopter and the enthusiastic squeals of riverfront revelers interfered with pale slivers of sound played on muted instruments at dynamics sometimes marked at quintuple piano: an improbable notion of near-silence. Even the most focused audience members might have had trouble concentrating; another sound punctuating the performance was the creak of the exit door. The mission undertaken by the Flux players -- Tom Chiu and Conrad Harris, violinists; Max Mandel, violist; Felix Fan, cellist -- was something like tilting at windmills while mounted on tortoises and armed with feather dusters.

Mr. Chiu, the quartet's leader, seemed to confirm as much in his introductory remarks, which he intentionally delivered at a near-whisper. 'Just to clarify, we're not playing for six hours,' he said, alluding to Feldman's six-hour String Quartet No. 2, which the Flux has performed on several occasions; it has lately turned up more often than its predecessor. Before Friday, Mr. Chiu said, the String Quartet No. 1 had been played just once in the last 10 years. Novelty and wit aside, the Flux members approached their work with utmost seriousness, performing with painstaking care and utter conviction. Cued by Mr. Chiu's subtle nods and sharp inhalations, the musicians worked through Webernesque squiggles, grainy chords, fidgety arpeggios and the odd fortissimo outburst with an unflappable poise, seemingly oblivious to the outside world's intrusions. Undoubtedly this was hard work for the performers, and nearly as difficult for listeners who went the distance. But as usually happens during performances of Feldman's more expansive conceptions, an initial period of ennui ultimately gave way to something approaching a hypnotic bliss: a disembodied sensation heightened here by Bargemusic's amniotic wobble. Of the respectable-size audience that turned up for the performance, a majority remained to offer a hearty ovation at the end: proof that Feldman's legacy is in good hands with the Flux Quartet, and that Mr. Peskanov's new ventures at Bargemusic are finding the audience they deserve" [Steve Smith The New York Times, 6/7/10].

June 5

Flux Quartet performs two concise quartet works of Morton Feldman from the 1950's, along with the lengthy Clarinet and String Quartet (1983) and Piano and String Quartet (1985).

June 24

Farewell performance of the conductor Maurice Kaplow at the New York City Ballet. David H. Koch Theater, New York, NY. "The program had begun with Andrews Sill conducting Jay Greenberg's often admirable score for Call Me Ben, the wretchedly feckless 'ballet dramedy' by Melissa Barak. But Mr. Kaplow conducted the rest of the musical fare, which, other than the [Carl Maria von Weber's] Euryanthe overture, was all American: Samuel Barber's irresistible Violin Concerto (with Arturo Delmoni delivering a performance of concert-level sensuousness in the solo) and Hershy Kay's Western Symphony. The Kay score for George Balanchine's 1954 ballet of the same title works so hard to be cheerfully corny that it's easy to overlook how well it features each section of the orchestra during its course. I love the harp before the curtain rises, the saloon piano during the first-movement pas de deux, the various passages that highlight brass, percussion, woodwind and oh, those swooning string portamenti (How I wish that Kay's arrangement of the Gershwin numbers for Balanchine's Who Cares? were remotely this good.

Onstage Who Cares? is the better ballet, but I know many Gershwin lovers who, with good reason, find it insufferable to the ear)" [Alastair Macaulay, *The New York Times*, 6/26/10].

June 25

Third screening of Mark Alburger's *Sex and the Bible: Part I*. David Garner residence, San Francisco, CA.

Clarinetist Paul Green, violinist Joel Pitchon, cellist Ronald Feldman, and pianist Doris Stevenson. Bargemusic, New York, NY. "David Schiff's *Divertimento* from 'Gimpel the Fool,' a playful suite derived from Mr. Schiff's opera based on Isaac Bashevis Singer's short story, squared the brash sounds of Jewish klezmer with the piquant harmonies and wiry elegance of neoclassical Stravinsky. Playing both E-flat and B-flat clarinets, Mr. Green showed a firm grasp of a klezmer clarinetist's voicelike phrasing and expressive slurs and bends. Shulamit Ran's eloquent, soulful *Soliloquy*, a piano trio distilled from her opera, *Between Two Worlds* (The Dybbuk), drew as clearly on Jewish stylistic sources, here turned to darker, more abstract ends. With Paul Schoenfield's *Trio for Clarinet, Violin, and Piano* came a return to brightness, levity and klezmer appropriations. Here again Mr. Green was a convincing stylist; Ms. Stevenson stole the show with flamboyant hand-over-hand cascades in the second movement, *March*" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 6/27/10].

June 27

Bang on a Can Marathon. Winter Garden, World Financial Center, New York, NY. "Several times . . . I deemed this particular edition the best-sequenced marathon of the handful I've attended from start to finish. (That tally includes 2007's installment, all 27-and-a-half hours of it: a feat I'm still prone to bragging about.) The concert, presented free in a co-production with the River to River Festival and World Financial Center, started at noon and concluded at 1 a.m., an hour behind schedule. On reflection, I can't categorically confirm my initial impulse; *Bang on a Can*, the collaborative venture run by the composers Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe, has mounted these prodigious events in one form or another since 1987. I'm certain, though, that this latest marathon was the first to make me notice how artful the sequencing actually was. The programmatic rationale was referred to by the composer and clarinetist Evan Ziporyn just before a midafternoon performance by his Gamelan Galak Tika: 'things that I love, taking place at the same time.' Mr. Ziporyn was referring specifically to his own contribution, *Tire Fire*, a flamboyant fusion of Balinese gamelan and rock guitars into something new, personal and exhilarating. But his observation applied equally to the whole affair. Just before Mr. Ziporyn's piece, the Jack Quartet played Xenakis's jagged, bracing *Tetras* from a position atop a staircase behind the audience. 'There's something about doing Xenakis next to gamelan and guitars that kind of sums up *Bang on a Can*,' Mr. Ziporyn said. He was right: somehow the transition from Xenakis's elemental howl and shred to Mr. Ziporyn's shimmering culture clash worked.

Likewise, the almost medieval purity of Mary Ellen Childs's *Black Box*, performed by Quartet New Generation, a German recorder consort, served as airy refreshment after the density, clangor and volume of Mr. Ziporyn's offering. Similar feats of contrast and balance popped up throughout the marathon, as disparate strands from the contemporary classical, jazz, electronica, world music and indie rock spheres were neatly woven together into a crazy-quilt representation of adventuresome notions. You could liken the program to a quirky mixtape or iPod playlist, except that its reach was broader, more like a Last.fm Internet radio channel, idiosyncratically sequenced, then made available for public consumption. Using an Internet metaphor seems especially appropriate, given an increased emphasis on social media this year. Elsewhere, using Twitter during a performance might be viewed as bad manners; here, crew members and volunteers wore T-shirts emblazoned with Twitter-friendly slogans: 'follow @bangonacan' and 'tweet #boac.' Stage announcements called attention to a social-media lounge upstairs, where Twitter users and old-school bloggers could recharge their equipment. If, for some reason, you grew weary of sitting and listening, you could manically strum or beat along with *Bang on a Can* pieces in the video game *Rock Band 2* in the social-media lounge. Audience die-hards were invited to have their hands stamped at the end of each hour; collect all 12, and you were a 'Marathon Warrior,' with a certificate and other enticements to show for it. The gimmicks could have been overbearing, were it not for the striking impression made by the performers and music. Moritz Eggert, a German pianist and composer, showed a comedic flair in solo works that called for shouting, pounding the piano's casing and mashing its keys with feet, chin and rear. Slagwerk Den Haag, a dazzling Dutch percussion group, similarly combined virtuosity and theatricality. Kambur Kalendarov and Kutman Sultanbekov, traditional musicians from Kyrgyzstan, made beguiling, complex music with simple jaw harps, flutes and lutes. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the bassist Florent Ghys and the electric guitarist Tim Brady used extensive technology to become exuberant one-man ensembles, each accompanied by video projections. Buke and Gass, a quirky indie-rock duo, planted a foot in each of those extremes, merging homespun tools and technological savvy. Vernon Reid, a prominent rock guitarist, mixed funky beats and electronic textures with the recorded voices of former slaves in *Ghost Narratives*, an intriguing concept rendered muddy and indistinct by the room's acoustics. An opening performance by the John Hollenbeck Large Ensemble, a contemporary big band, was similarly affected by overly resonant sound. Yet the room could also be an advantage, as during a mesmerizing solo set by the English electronic musician Mira Calix, and a gorgeous collaboration between Ms. Calix and the *Bang on a Can All-Stars*. Amid the parade of cameos, two extended works stood out. At the marathon's midpoint, the Talea Ensemble gave a fierce performance of Fausto Romitelli's *Professor Bad Trip*, a phantasmagorical sprawl of oozing timbres and howling psychedelic guitar. And at the evening's end, Brad Lubman conducted *Signal* in an assured, absorbing account of *Shelter*, a potent collaborative work by Mr. Gordon, Mr. Lang and Ms. Wolfe that has only become more poignant since its premiere in 2005" [Steve Smith, *The New York Times*, 6/28/10].

June 28

Frank Oteri's 21st Century Schizoid Music concerts presents Du Yun. Cornelia Street Café, New York, NY. "His series, which draws its name from a 1969 song . . . by the progressive rock band King Crimson, is focused on musicians whose work straddles several pop and classical styles and who take on different musical personalities, depending on the setting where their work is to be heard. This past season, Ms. Du's calling cards in New York concert halls have included the New Juilliard Ensemble's reading of *Vicissitudes No. 3*, an energetic but traditional orchestral score; several scores for silent films by Alice Guy Blaché, in which Ms. Du played synthesizer with a jazz-rock ensemble; *Air Glow*, a complex work for the International Contemporary Ensemble and electronics; and a freewheeling collaboration with the cellist Matt Haimovitz. Each inhabited its own musical world. For [this] evening performance, Ms. Du played the piano, a metallic percussion instrument and some electronic instruments (including a computer), and she both sang and recited texts. She was joined by Gareth Flowers, a trumpeter, and Phil Moffa, who presided over a laptop and contributed abstract electronic sound and hip-hop beats. The trio offered two short sets, each essentially a suite of five pieces, played without pause. Given the breadth of Ms. Du's imagination, it made compelling, even mesmerizing listening. But for the most part, the performance seemed to put a spotlight on only one version of Ms. Du: the inventive, outgoing, quirky indie pop diva with an avant-garde edge. If Ms. Du embraced the Schizoid series' mandate, she did so subtly. Part of her program was given to experimental iconoclasm, by way of improvisations on other composers' works. Each set included a movement from Satie's *Sonneries de la Rose + Croix* (1891), and though she preserved the essential elements of these simple piano pieces, Ms. Du's reconfigurations were considerable. In the *Air of the Grand Master*, she shared the work's graceful melody with Mr. Flowers (who played it with a muted sound and alluring vibrato) and in *Air of the Head Prior*, she handed him the theme at the start, focusing instead on an expansion of Satie's harmonies. The second set included an even flightier improvisation on *O Crux Benedicta*, by the 16th-century composer Francisco Guerrero. Perhaps the Satie and Guerrero glosses were meant to show Ms. Du's more restrained side. Her own works were assertive and colorful. In *choanoflagellates* and *Angel's Bone*, Mr. Moffa's beats and sound washes and Mr. Flowers's wide-ranging trumpet lines supported Ms. Du's idiosyncratic vocal performances. Her style takes in throaty whispers, groans and shouts; at times she seems to be evoking Leonard Cohen or Yoko Ono. But mostly, Ms. Du is in a world of her own, and the confident, high-energy theatricality that she brings to her vocal music is woven through her instrumental works just as vividly" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 6/30/10].

June 29

New York Philharmonic in an all-Russian program. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY.

"[Conductor Bramwell] Tovey began with the March and Scherzo from Prokofiev's *Love for Three Oranges*, a pair of energetically brassy movements that sizzled here. . . . [Violinist] Mikhail Simonyan was . . . at his best . . . in . . . Rodion Shchedrin's *Gypsy Melody*" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 6/30/10].

June 30

Sting and his wife in *Twin Spirits*, re Robert and Clara Schumann. Allen Room, New York, NY. "Crossover projects in classical music have traditionally been matters of opera singers or big-ticket instrumentalists performing jazz, pop or folk music . . . But since the late 1980's, crossover has moved in the other direction too. Stewart Copeland and Roger Waters have written operas; Paul McCartney has written a stream of orchestral, choral and piano works; Elvis Costello has composed a ballet; and Sting -- Mr. Copeland's onetime colleague in the Police -- has undertaken several performance projects, most notably *Songs From the Labyrinth*, a 2006 CD of John Dowland songs and lute pieces, performed with a pop singer's freedom and unpolished vocal tone. . . . *Twin Spirits*, a hybrid music and theater piece about the Schumanns. You could easily fault him for those qualities, but in interviews Sting has made it clear that he is aware of his shortcomings. And he has discussed Dowland's songs, and other classical works, with a passion that shows that his heart is in the right place: he loves this music and wants people to hear it. That was presumably part of the thinking behind *Twin Spirits*, a 100-minute hybrid theater piece and concert in which Sting and his wife, the actress Trudie Styler, appeared . . . The work, written and directed by John Caird and first performed at Covent Garden in 2005, is meant to bring to life the romance between Robert and Clara Schumann. A 2007 performance, also at Covent Garden, has been released as an Opus Arte DVD. Sting makes no attempt to sing Schumann's lieder in this production; the vocal music is the province of a baritone and a soprano. Instead Sting portrays the composer, reading from his letters to Clara Wieck during their long courtship and from the joint diary they started when they married in 1840. Ms. Styler plays Clara and reads her end of the correspondence. Not much acting is called for. Sting and Ms. Styler remained seated through most of the production, but to their credit, they endowed the Schumanns' letters with a sense of the emotion behind them: amusingly in the case of Schumann's playful, mildly eccentric early missives; poignantly when Clara reports on Schumann's madness, institutionalization, and death. A narrator, David Strathairn, filled in the details, chronology and context from a throne-like seat on a platform behind Sting. Ms. Styler and the six musicians who performed music by both Schumanns, with a sprinkling of Chopin and Mozart, between groups of letters. Mr. Caird's script is efficient and fast paced, though toward the end, when Schumann's correspondence dries up as his mental afflictions take over, the text necessarily shifts toward narrative, and the musical sections grow longer" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 7/1/10].

Recording

Laurie Anderson. *Homeland*. Nonesuch. "[The] TriBeCa loft - her base of operations since 1975 -- was a hive of activity, including a conference about a coming museum installation in Brazil and various promotional tasks surrounding the release of *Homeland*, her first album of new material in nearly 10 years. Thirty-some years into a career that began on the fringes of the downtown avant-garde scene, Ms. Anderson, 63, is more prolific than ever and, together with [Lou] Reed, has ascended to New York art-world royalty. The two were even queen and king of this year's Mermaid Parade at Coney Island. At the moment Ms. Anderson . . . was still thinking about [her recent trip to] Poland. Before her show there she visited Majdanek, a former Nazi concentration camp, with [John] Zorn. 'It was a devastating trip,' she said in her home studio, which overlooks the ruins of a Hudson River pier. 'Zorn and I spent two hours crying after walking through this thing, and just couldn't stop crying.' It's an understandable response, yet slightly surprising to hear coming from Ms. Anderson, whose work often considers the horrors and follies of humanity from a cool, more detached perspective. Her signature song, the left-field 1981 new-wave hit "O Superman," conflated maternal succor with the psychology of the modern corporate state using electronically processed verse. 'So hold me, Mom, in your long arms,' Ms. Anderson sang, "Your petrochemical arms/Your military arms.' *Homeland* similarly twists together ideas of the personal and political, beginning with the title, a word that has acquired ominous overtones in the shadow of Sept. 11. 'It's a very cold, bureaucratic word,' Ms. Anderson said. 'No one I know would say 'my homeland.'" She notes its recent pairing with the word 'security,' which she contends 'is not about security, really, but more about control. The phrase doesn't make anyone feel particularly safe, does it?' Sociology of language notwithstanding, *Homeland* may be the most frankly emotional record Ms. Anderson has ever made. The work is dedicated to her parents, and the mood veers between degrees of darkness. The lead track, *Transitory Life*, begins with a yarn spinner's sly indictment -- 'It's a good time for bankers, and winners, and sailors' -- then segues into a more intimate voice, describing the funeral of a grandmother who "lies there

in her shiny black coffin looks just like a piano.' The music is shaped by a stark, mournful viola line played by Eyvind Kang, and a pair of igils -- horse-head fiddles -- played by members of Chirgilchin, a Tuvan traditional group. Ms. Anderson has performed with *The Lake* and *The Beginning of Memory* are slowly unfolding songs that each refer to the death of a father. But the sense of loss on *Homeland* goes beyond family. *Dark Time in the Revolution* tries to square modern-day America with the nation Tom Paine was defining when he wrote *Common Sense*. 'You thought there were things that had disappeared forever/Things from the Middle Ages/Beheadings and hangings and people in cages,' Ms. Anderson intones over Joey Baron's inexorable tom-tom rolls. 'And suddenly they're all right welcome to the American night.' For the record's 11-minute centerpiece, *Another Day in America*, Ms. Anderson uses a vocal processor to assume a male persona, a trick she first used in 1978 as M.C. of a tribute to the writer William S. Burroughs. She referred to the character as 'the Voice of Authority' back then. Now he's aged and acquired a name -- Fenway Bergamot -- coined by Mr. Reed. 'He got melancholic and got a personality somehow,' Ms. Anderson said. His semi-robotic voice is strangely emotive. As modern pop singers regularly alter their voice with AutoTune and other effects, *Another Day in America* suggests creative roads not taken. In the song *Bergamot* (who has his own Facebook page) ponders the future in a discursive monologue adding a direct address to God. 'Ah, America,' he says through Ms. Anderson and her electronics. 'We saw it, we tipped it over, and then we sold it.' In a nice conceptual touch the gender-bending vocalist Antony (Antony Hegarty of Antony and the Johnsons) adds ghostly vocals in the background. If sadness and loss is the primary tone of *Homeland*; there's also anger. Only an *Expert* features beats by the British electronic musician Kieran Hebden (who also records as Four Tet) and eviscerating electric guitar by Mr. Reed. Speaking rapidly and with unusual specificity Ms. Anderson riffs on climate change, the banking crisis, the war in Iraq and civil rights post-9/11" [Will Hermes, *The New York Times*, 6/22/10].

Laurie Anderson Homeland



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