

The Ph.D./D.M.A. Programs in Music

April 28, 2022 1:00 p.m.

Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall



Charlotte Mundy, voice

Breadmaking (2016)

Forrest Pierce
(b. 1972)

Kitchen (2017)

Bahar Royace
(b. 1989)

The Divided Self (2021)

David Bird
(b. 1990)

Brooklyn Narcissus (2016)

Chris Castro
(b. 1994)

The Understanding of All Things (2015)

Kate Soper
(b. 1981)

Notes on the Program

At some point in my CUNY admission process, Professor John Musto described the Graduate Center Music Department as a place for musician-philosophers. That concept of a musician-philosopher stuck with me, and eventually led me to make ‘philosophical music’ for voice and electronics the focus of my this recital. Two of these pieces explicitly feature a ‘learned scholars’ or ‘philosophers’ in their text, while the other three explore themes of truth, existence, meaning, and identity through less explicit means. The oldest piece on this program was written in 2015; the newest in 2021. I find that the thrill of linking philosophical discourse with live music is especially potent when the composers and audiences are commenting on and existing within concurrent circumstances. Four of these works are for voice and electronics, and the fifth is for solo voice. I made this choice both for the practical reason of reducing rehearsal time with other people in the continuing pandemic, and also because these two mediums - voice and electronics - may lend themselves the most easily to philosophical projects because of their exceptional powers of representation and narrative.

A parable by the medieval mystic, Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, set to music by **Forrest Pierce** in 2016, opens the program. Like many of Pierce’s vocal works, the vocal line is florid and demanding. However, while his vocal writing often calls for impressive vocal pyrotechnics, *Breadmaking* is a little more down-to-earth in character, demanding clarity of text and earthiness from the vocalist. Originally set for high voice and improvising drone, the drone part was adapted into a simple fixed media accompaniment by the performer. The composer asks in the score that no program notes or text should be provided to the audience, necessitating a different quality of communication and listening between performers and audience.

Pierce’s interweaving of florid passages with more simple text setting, and his creation of a scenario that is conversational and approachable while also being divinely beautiful, is a musical illustration of the point Rumi is making with his story: just as a baker kneads bread, just as lovers embrace, the human and the divine are in a constantly shifting embrace. The piece as a whole is by far the ‘clearest’ on this program; telling a straightforward story in a linear fashion, using distinctive but familiar harmonic progressions. The narrator even concludes by entreating us to meditate on steadfastness and clarity. But as we will see, when composers grapple with philosophical concepts, the results are rarely clear, at least on their sonic surface.

Bahar Royae’s *Kitchen* also uses the preparation of food as a locus for truth. In this case, Bahar is interested in the kitchen as a meeting place for family. In her detailed and multilayered fixed media part, she has incorporated many field recordings, including sounds from her own kitchen and different electronic processing techniques. These sounds are ‘kneaded’ seamlessly with the voice part, which is constantly shifting from different forms of white noise, pitched sounds, and eventually texts. The voice is electronically processed in numerous ways to further multiply and assimilate it into the fixed media component. The voice is also ‘processed’ via instructions in the score, which use unique graphics to instruct the vocalist to filter her sound with different tongue positions, amounts of air and consonant shapes.

Over the course of this work, fragments of a Kurdish lullaby emerge in the live voice part and dissolve again, as if someone is struggling to remember it. Lines of a poem written by Royae’s uncle gradually take shape, first as isolated consonants, and finally as a chromatically ascending scale that rises to a boiling point. At the piece’s conclusion, recordings of the Kurdish lullaby echo from the speakers, evaporating before they ever reach a conclusion. Rather than making a philosophical assertion,

'Kitchen' raises questions about identity and meaning; about the boundaries between memory and reality. The piece's performance in darkness, with a mask at times covering the face of the visitor, adds a sense of mystery and alienation to its overall effect. It was composed in 2017 in close collaboration with vocalist Felicia Chen.

The Divided Self by **David Bird** examines many of the same philosophical themes as 'Kitchen' - identity, meaning, family- but with a very different aesthetic sense. In this work, language is clear and mostly coherent. Words are generally left whole, not broken down into scattered phonemes as they are in 'Kitchen'. The voice does not blend with the electronics but engages in quick, almost rhythmic dialogue with the pulsating sound cues. This work is also performed in darkness, with a light being repeatedly turned on and off in sync with the tape.

'The Divided Self' draws influence from the work of psychologist R. D. Laing, who valued psychotic behavior as a valid expression of distress, in contrast with many psychologists who view such behaviors as symptoms of illness. It is related thematically to an earlier work by David Bird for voice, flute, clarinet and percussion, 'Series Imposture' (2013), which similarly questions the distinction between sanity and insanity.

In 'The Divided Self,' the vocalist embodies several personas: a cold, clinical narrator, a person in distress, a mother singing to her child, and an aggressive narrator. The vocal part calls for a clear, expressive, well-timed vocal performance with occasional extended techniques and more two more traditionally melodic sections. The intense electronic component lures the audience into an aroused and potentially trancelike state, making this work a dramatic and immersive exploration of emotion and psychosis.

The only work without electronics on this program, **Chris Castro's** delicate, propulsive, emotionally complex work *Brooklyn Narcissus*, proceeds logically from Bird's brush with psychosis. It sets a poem by Paul Blackburn, impressionistically describing a long subway ride home on a rainy Tuesday night and the reflections that arise on such a journey. References in the poem to the subway and to waves lapping on the pier are mirrored in the breath noises and fast, repetitive rhythms of the vocal part. Just as the poetry slips between descriptions of the train ride and inward reflections on identity and relationships, the music flits between whispered rhythms, gasps, humms, short repeated pitched motives, extended lyrical lines, and shouted fragments of text. All of these sounds are woven into a rhythmic grid that stays constant throughout the piece, although it is subdivided in various ways. While not explicitly philosophical or psychological, 'Brooklyn Narcissus' depicts and honors the inherently fragmented nature of human experience.

The final work on this program, *The Understanding of All Things* by **Kate Soper**, tells a story about a philosopher, mirroring the first piece on the program. But while 'Breadmaking' is entirely lucid, 'The Understand of All Things' begins in a fragmented form similar to the works by Royae and Bird. Like many of Soper's vocal works, this piece features more speaking than singing, but the speaking is intricately intertwined with more obviously musical content, and requires deft timing and clarity of expression. It tells Soper's adaptation of a story by Franz Kafka about a philosopher who would pounce on children's spinning tops, expecting that his true knowledge of this one small thing will provide him with true knowledge of all things. Just as the text evolves from fragmented and barely intelligible sentence fragments to fully intelligible paragraphs, the sonic landscape of the piece also progresses from complex "unpitched" sounds to clear pitches. The riotous, sparkling electronic part at the opening of the piece seems to communicate the emotional register of playing children, while

the non-vibrato sung notes, echoed by the electronics, could be interpreted as gleams of some kind of absolute truth. When Kafka's philosopher finally catches a top, he feels disgust rather than enlightenment, suggesting that it may be a mistake to assume that true knowledge can ever be separate from play.

About the Artist

Soprano **Charlotte Mundy** has been called a “daredevil with an unbreakable spine” (*SF Classical Voice*). Recent performances include George Benjamin's one-act opera *Into the Little Hill* at the 92nd Street Y, George Crumb's *Night of the Four Moons* with Emerald City Music, the world premiere recording of *Unisono II* by Agata Zubel with cellist Inbal Segev, and a set of music for voice and electronics presented by New York Festival of Song, described as “an oasis of radiant beauty” by the *New York Times*. She is a member of TAK ensemble and Ekmeles vocal ensemble, and a passionate educator, having worked with composition and students as a visiting artist at institutions including Columbia University, Harvard, Stanford, Cornell, NYU, and Princeton. Learn more at charlottemundy.com.

Texts

Breadmaking

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207–1273)

trans. Coleman Barks

There was a feast. The King was heartily in his cups. He saw a learned scholar walking by. “Bring him in and give him some of this fine wine.” Servants rushed out and brought the man to the king’s table, but he was not receptive. “I had rather drink poison! I never tasted wine and never will! take it away from me!” He kept on with these loud refusals, disturbing the atmosphere of the feast. This is how it sometimes is at God’s table. Someone who has heard about ecstatic love, but never tasted it, disrupts the banquet. If there were a secret passage from his ear to his throat, everything in him would change. Initiation would occur. As it is, he’s all fire and no light, all husk and no kernel.

The king gave orders. “Cupbearer, do what you must!” This is how your invisible guide acts, the chess champion across from you that always wins. He cuffed the scholar’s head and said, “Taste!” And, “Again!” The cup was drained and the intellectual started singing and telling ridiculous jokes. He joined the garden, snapping his fingers and swaying. Soon, of course, he had to pee. He went out, and there, near the latrine, was a beautiful woman, one of the king’s harem. His mouth hung open. He wanted her! right then, he wanted her! and she was not unwilling.

They fell to, on the ground. You’ve seen a baker rolling dough. he kneads it gently at first, then more roughly. He pounds it on the board. it softly groans under his palms. Now he spreads it out and rolls it flat. Then he bunches it, and rolls it all the way out again, thin. Now he adds water and mixes it well. Now salt, and a little more salt. Now he shapes it delicately to its final shape and slides it into the oven, which is already hot.

You remember breadmaking! this is how your desire tangles with a desired one. And it’s not just a metaphor for a man and woman making love. Warriors in battle do this too. a great mutual embrace is always happening between the eternal and what dies, between essence and accident. The sport has different rules in every case, but it’s basically the same, and remember: the way you make love is the way God will be with you.

So these two were lost in their sexual trance. They did not care anymore about feasting or wine. Their eyes were closed like perfectly matching calligraphy lines. The king went looking for the scholar, and when he saw them there coupled, commented “Well, as it is said, ‘A good king must serve his subjects from his own table!’”

There is joy, a wine-like freedom that dissolves the mind, and there is manly fortitude like the king, a reasonableness that accepts the bewildered lostness. But meditate now on steadfastness and clarity, and let those be the wings that lift and soar through the celestial spheres.

Brooklyn Narcissus

Paul Blackburn

Straight rye whiskey, 100 proof
you need a better friend? Yes. Myself.
The lights
the lights
the lonely lovely fucking lights and the bridge on a rainy Tuesday night Blue/green double-stars the
line
that is the drive and on the dark alive gleaming river
Xmas trees of tugs scream and struggle
Midnite
Drops on the train window wobble . stream My trouble
is it is her fate to never learn to make
anything grow be born or stay
Harbor beginnings and that other gleam . The train is full of long/way/home and holding lovers
whose
flesh I would exchange for mine The rain, R.F.,
sweeps the river as the bridges sweep Nemesis is thumping down the line But I have premises to
keep
& local stops before I sleep
& local stops before I sleep
The cree- ping train joggles rocks across I hear
the waves below lap against the piles, a pier
from which ships go
a sign which reads PACE O MIO DIO
oil
Manhattan Bridge
a bridge between
we state, one life and the next, we state is better so
is no
to Mexico
"The flowers died when you went away"
backwater, flows
between us is
our span our bridge our naked eyes
open here
see
bridging whatever impossibility. . . PACE! PACE O MIO DIO
oil
"The flowers died. . ." Of course they did
Not that I was a green thing in the house
I was once. No matter.
The clatter of cars over the span, the track the spur
the rusty dead/pan ends of space of grease
We enter the tunnel.
The dirty window gives me back my face

The Understanding of all Things

Franz Kafka, adapted from *Der Kreschel* ("The Top")

Once there was a philosopher who hung about where children played. And wherever he saw a child with a spinning top, he would lie in wait. As soon as the top began to spin, the philosopher would pounce. Though the children shrieked and tried to shield their toy, he paid no attention. As long as he managed to catch the top while it still spun, he was happy, but only for that moment, and then he would fling it down and walk away.

For it was his belief that the understanding of any small thing, such as a spinning top, was sufficient for the understanding of all things. It seemed, therefore, inefficient to him to study complex problems. Once the smallest detail is truly known, are all things known, and so he focused only on the top. And whenever a top was readied to be spun, he hoped that this time he would succeed, and while he was breathlessly chasing after it, his hope would turn to certainty. But as soon as he held the dumb wooden thing in his hand, he felt disgusted, and all at once the howling of the children burst into his ears, battering him away, and he staggered like a top under a clumsy spin.