

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

May 23rd, 2022 1:00 p.m.

Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall



Martine Thomas, viola with Joseph Vaz and Jiarong Li, piano

Impromptu (1931)

Dmitri Shostakovich
(1906–75)

Joseph Vaz, piano

Viola Sonata (1975)

Moderato

Allegretto

Adagio

Dmitri Shostakovich

Joseph Vaz, piano

INTERMISSION

Song for Flint (2019)

Vijay Iyer
(b. 1971)

You did this to me (2021)

Joy Guidry
(b. 1995)

Cello Sonata No. 2 (1843)

Allegro assai vivace

Allegretto scherzando

Adagio

Molto allegro e vivace

Felix Mendelssohn
(1809–47)

Jiarong Li, piano

This recital is given in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the D.M.A. degree.

Notes on the Program

Hello, thank you so much for coming to my recital! It fills me with joy to play for all the friends and family in the audience today. My favorite part of a recital is usually the reception afterwards, where I get the chance to talk with each person about what they loved, share some food, and of course give lots of hugs. With so many people tuning in on the livestream, I will really miss that post-recital time to talk! It's not a perfect substitute, but I've created a document where I hope you'll leave messages for me to read. You can access it via the QR code below, or at this link:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1OnKoPUZG0Kr1n6DN5oNEOfMh9Dz3gOxq-orl0X4jm7M/edit?usp=sharing>



Dmitri Shostakovich was born in 1906 in St. Petersburg and was only eleven when the Bolshevik Revolution took place. His whole adult life took place within the lifespan of the Soviet Union, and his creative work is almost always discussed in conjunction with his political circumstances. Shostakovich had to deal with a tremendous amount of censorship, and his work continually put his life at risk within the context of the Soviet state, especially under Stalin. It's hard for me to imagine the degree of stress he was under, almost without respite. In a letter to a friend, he writes: "You ask if I would have been different without 'Party guidance'? Yes, almost certainly. ...I would have displayed more brilliance, used more sarcasm, I could have revealed my ideas openly instead of having to resort to camouflage...".

Today's program features Shostakovich's only two works for solo viola and piano, the **Viola Sonata** and the **Impromptu**. These two pieces are opposites in many ways. The Sonata was written at the end of Shostakovich's life—he completed the sonata on July 6th and died just over a month later, on August 9th, 1975—while the Impromptu was written at the beginning of his career, when he was only 25. Musically too, the Sonata is substantial and complex while the Impromptu is brief and quite simple. The Sonata has been a staple of the viola repertoire since it was written, while the Impromptu was only discovered in 2017 on a scrap of paper among other documents in the Moscow Central State Archive. Scholars think that Shostakovich wrote the Impromptu in one sitting, likely while socializing with friends. Someone in the room must have been a violist, because the score is scribbled on the blank back of a Beethoven viola part. Most other details about the piece are unknown because even Shostakovich forgot about this piece after writing it (he accidentally reassigned its opus number to a film score!).

The history of the Sonata is well-documented though, since its composition coincided with Shostakovich's final period of illness. Fyodor Druzhinin (a violist, Shostakovich's longtime collaborator, and the dedicatee of the Sonata) writes that Shostakovich knew he was dying, not

abstractly but in a very real way, putting in an immense amount of effort to finish this sonata while he was struggling to just hold a pen. Even a month before his death, he told Druzhinin, “Notating is very difficult for me. My hand trembles and doesn’t obey me. I waste a lot of time.” Immediately before he left for the hospital, he called Druzhinin to tell him “I exerted all my strength and finished the finale”. He proofed the sheet music from his hospital bed and approved a final version three days before he died on August 9th, without ever hearing the sonata. It was premiered on October 1st at the Leningrad Philharmonic for an audience that overflowed the hall’s capacity and filled up the foyer too. This seems to have been a memorial concert, with Shostakovich’s empty seat filled with flowers and audience members crying openly.

In characterizing the Sonata, Shostakovich described, “the first movement is a novella, the second is a scherzo, the finale is an adagio in memory of Beethoven. But don’t let that confuse you: this music is bright, bright and clear” (I’ve also seen this translated as “radiant music”!). The first movement is certainly substantial enough to be a whole novella. It has a distinctive pizzicato motive, a couple cadenzas (which never appear in sonatas, but occur in every movement of this one!), and dramatic passages that almost sound orchestral. This movement also uses twelve tone techniques, one of few times that Shostakovich experiments with this. The second movement is a scherzo that quotes Shostakovich’s unfinished opera from 1942, “The Gamblers”, based on the Gogol play. He reorchestrated the overture, deconstructing fragments of various wind lines and recombining them into a viola melody. He was aware of the significance of returning to an earlier period of his life, noting a line of Pushkin in the margins of the manuscript: “The work of long-ago days”. Unlike the first and last movements of the sonata, which are strikingly sparse, this second movement is very active and has a lot of Shostakovich’s classic sardonic humor. The third movement is almost the length of the first two movements combined. It quotes the motifs of each of Shostakovich’s symphonies, in order from 1-12, as well as quoting Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata. The manuscript shows that this movement is inscribed, “To the Great Beethoven”. Reading this, I wonder when you’re writing something in memory of someone else (Beethoven, in this case), are you inevitably thinking about your own memory? Beethoven clearly guided Shostakovich’s artistry, and it seems he wanted to place himself within his line of his legacy. In this final work, I think Shostakovich was expressing how he wanted to be remembered.

“A dystopian thinker [is] interested in how you manage dystopia, and how you manage the inequalities that actually produce dystopia. ...He believes that there is an infinite capacity for the rich to maintain their access to clean water... [They] will always be able to get a clear, cool glass of water to drink. Now, if no one else can, that’s not their problem, because what they have a commitment to, an allegiance to, is the conditions which a) produced dirty water, and b) produced unequal access to clean water.” As Fred Moten describes it, the managers of dystopia access water not just permanently, but easily. They drink that water and drink it peacefully because they can avoid, with ease, proximity to unsafe water sources or anyone who experiences them.

I bring up this discussion of water access because unequal access to clean water, specifically in Flint, Michigan, is the issue at the heart of this piece. **Vijay Iyer** opens his score to “**Song for Flint**” with the following note: “Judith Butler defines ‘precarity’ as the unequal distribution of precariousness. These are precarious times, in which access to safe clean water is an endangered human right, increasingly under siege by the damage to the planet brought about by humankind’s excesses. But this is also an epoch of systemic inequality, in which corporations, municipalities, and nation-states can and do inflict incremental or drastic harm on entire vulnerable populations, through war, deregulated pollution, and the differential withholding of basic life needs. Jasbir Puar has called out this cruel, largely unchecked capacity of the powerful, which she critically labels ‘the right to maim.’ The people

of Flint, Michigan became a historic example of a living population subjected to this kind of violence, in the form of environmental racism. ...I offer this piece, and my commission, to the children of Flint.” This piece is dedicated to the children of Flint but was also written to address the managers of dystopia, in particular the largely white and wealthy audience at the piece’s premiere.

Since 2014, water contamination enabled by a negligent city government has exposed thousands of Flint’s residents to dangerous levels of lead and other toxins. For children, this situation is particularly severe because of the correlation between lead exposure and learning/behavioral challenges, which have already emerged in classrooms and homes across the city. Many people in the United States probably know of the water crisis in Flint, but as a memory, not something ongoing. They are used to not having to think or feel anything particular about it, except to remember reading articles in the news cycle six or seven years ago. They have always had easy access to clean water and have little or no proximity to Flint’s crisis. Proximity is crucial—in the words of Clint Smith, the “ostensible limits of our empathy” are defined by our closeness to someone or something. Whether a failure of imagination or emotional capacity, we can often only truly extend our empathy, active caring, and solidarity within our proximity.

With “Song for Flint”, Iyer approaches his audience’s lack of proximity to Flint’s crisis with “...the idea of ally as a verb, which means it doesn’t become an identity. Instead it’s a purpose, or a task.” The tasks for the performer of this piece include: researching the water crisis in Flint and water insecurity in general, creating a relationship to the music based on reflecting on their own relationship to the crisis, and figuring out how to communicate the purpose of the piece to the audience. The tasks for the audience include: reading the information provided by the composer and performer, using the time and space of the music to internally engage with the issues related to the piece, and considering how to respond.

I would suggest joining me in donating to the Flint Kids Fund at flintkids.org, an organization that focuses on the long-term health and development needs of Flint’s children. You can also find a reading guide at the link/QR code below to learn more about the water crisis in Flint and water insecurity elsewhere.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MKzqFgH1-T2UQK7ahLNBKYuIt3ye31m6rdhhDTo6rmY/edit>



In their own words, “Radical self-love, compassion, laughter, and the drive to amplify Black artmakers and noisemakers comprise the core of NYC-based bassoonist and composer **Joy Guidry’s** work. ...A versatile improviser and a composer of experimental, daring new works that embody a deep love of storytelling, Joy’s own music channels their inner child, in honor of their ancestors and predecessors.” I knew Joy first as a kind, funny, and sensitive bassoonist when we met at the Banff

Centre in 2018. Since then, it has been astounding to watch them grow into their own as a fearless composer.

I first collaborated with Joy as a composer in November 2020, when I contacted them to ask if they had an open-instrumentation solo piece I could play on an impromptu concert. Even though the performance was only a week away, Joy suggested writing a brand-new piece for the occasion. We spent an afternoon in workshop, where I tried different sounds at their prompting and they guided what and how I played while scribbling down notes. Later that evening, they sent me an elegant graphic score titled “Yellow Dragonfruit”, with clouds of stippled rainbow colors and a fish-like cluster of red and black strokes. They surprised me with a score again in December, when I received a viola piece just before New Year’s as a holiday gift. I tell both these stories to illustrate how generosity and creative exploration are truly at the core of Joy’s identity as an artist and as a friend.

Like “Yellow Dragonfruit”, **“You did this to me”** is a graphic score, although a very different one. It is completely in grayscale colors and features a densely patterned circle on the left of the page, which Joy describes as “the orb of anger”. The instructions for the piece read, “It is valid to be pissed off. Start from a place of calm and let the graphic guide you to an explosion of valid expression. I want you to really let loose on your instrument, but make sure what you are saying is with intention”. The exact notes are all improvised, but the events are synced to a stopwatch that runs while the piece is being played. Timestamps and black strokes lead across the page, building into the orb, then abruptly float away into a smoky cloud in the lower right corner.



You can learn more about Joy and check out their new, spectacular album “Radical Acceptance” at their website, guidrybassoon.com!

Felix Mendelssohn's cello sonatas are not usually played by violists! My teacher, Paul Neubauer, was undaunted by this fact and made a transcription of the **Cello Sonata No. 2** for the viola. His transcription fills a gap in the viola repertoire—there are not many works for solo viola from the Classical era. However, calling this piece Classical is not completely accurate. Mendelssohn was composing in a period when the late Classical era and the early Romantic era overlapped. Some of his music falls clearly into one style or the other and other music is a hybrid of both. This second cello sonata is the latter—a hybrid of styles that uses Classical forms alongside Romantic textures and characters.

Mendelssohn wrote this piece during a time of his life that was transitional too. After moving to Berlin for two years for a prestigious job that didn't work out, he returned home to Leipzig disappointed. The following year in Leipzig was an important and productive time for him though. He wrote his famous *A Midsummer Night's Dream* incidental music, started the Conservatory of Music, and wrote this second cello sonata.

Although the first and last movements of this sonata are joyous, sweeping, and thrilling to play, my favorite movements are the second and third. The second movement, *Allegretto scherzando*, is often described as an *intermezzo* (light or dramatic music that occurs between the acts of a play). If this movement were played between acts, I can imagine it accompanying a playful skit. While rehearsing, Jiarong and I watched a video of two dogs leaping into the air to bounce a balloon with their noses as they ran circles around each other, hoping to capture some of this playfulness in the music. To continue with the theatrical metaphors, the third movement is reminiscent of a soliloquy. It starts with chorale-like piano chords outlining a melody in the style of Bach, a composer that Mendelssohn admired and promoted throughout his lifetime. Once the viola comes in though, the passionate melody takes center stage like an actor would in their soliloquy. There are moments of tenderness, frustration, regret, and acceptance all contained in these few minutes of music.

About the Artists

Martine Thomas, violist and poet, has a Masters in Viola Performance and a Bachelor of Arts in English from the Harvard-New England Conservatory dual degree program. Martine is based in New York City, where she began her Doctorate of Musical Arts at CUNY Graduate Center in Fall 2021. She performs traditional classical music as a soloist and chamber musician, working with Paul Neubauer, Mark Steinberg, and Martha Katz. Martine enjoys collaborating closely with composers of her generation, like Camila Agosto and Joy Guidry, as well as established composers, including Tyshawn Sorey, Vijay Iyer, and George Lewis. Summers spent at the Lucerne Festival and with the International Contemporary Ensemble at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity have honed her interest in contemporary music, creative, and improvised music. Martine is also a poetry editor for *Peripheries Journal* and you can find her recent poetry in *Lana Turner Journal* and the *Colorado Review*.

Joseph Vaz was born in Faro, Portugal, and has been studying piano since he was eight years old. He recently was a semifinalist in the 2020 West Virginia International Piano Competition, and has placed in several national and international competitions.

Joseph has performed at Weill Recital Hall in Carnegie Hall and numerous other venues in the United States, Italy, and Austria. His orchestral debut came with the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra in February

2015, and he has also performed as soloist with the Seven Hills Sinfonietta and other orchestral ensembles. He regularly presents solo and chamber recitals for his degrees and for his community. Joseph's recent appearances at summer festivals include the Bowdoin Music Festival and Chautauqua Piano Institute on scholarship.

Having completed his B.M. at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music with Emile Naoumoff and his M.M. at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music with Ran Dank, he now is pursuing his D.M.A. at the CUNY Graduate Center with Julian Martin.

An active collaborative pianist, he has worked with all types of musicians in chamber music and with multiple orchestras for operas and concert programs. Interested in many genres of music-making, Joseph enjoys working in musical theatre, and recently appeared in the role of Oscar the rehearsal pianist in CCM's production of 42nd Street.

Outside of music, Joseph has a Bachelor's degree in mathematics and a minor in French from Indiana University.

Chinese Pianist **Jiarong Li** enjoys sharing music with the community and believes music is a powerful language we all understand. Jiarong was a collaborative piano fellow at Bowdoin Music Festival and has been invited as a collaborative piano fellow at Music Academy of the West this summer. She featured as pianist for the 2019 production of the contemporary opera Oedipus in the District at the Tank in NYC, Modern Art Meet Chamber Music series at Stride Arts Gallery, Si-Yo Musical Phone Pal and Distant But Connected projects.

She is currently pursuing her doctorate in collaborative piano with fellowship at Manhattan School of Music, where she studies with John Forconi. Jiarong holds a Master of Music from New England Conservatory, where she studied with Bruce Brubaker and Pei-Shan Lee, and a Bachelor of Music from Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, where she was admitted with first place, and studied with Xiang Zou. Her former teachers include Heasook Rhee from Manhattan School of Music and Xianyu Ke from her hometown, Zhuzhou, China. She has won prizes at competitions including first prize in the Oxford Philomusica Piano Festival and Summer Academy Competition, the New England Conservatory Honors Competition, the International Music Competition-Best Schubert Performance, the Distinction Award of the Hong Kong-Asia Piano Open Competition, and was a finalist at New England Conservatory Piano Concerto Competition and semi-finalist at Foundation for Chinese Performing Arts International Concerto Competition.

Jiarong is a Si-Yo Artist and Artist in Residence at Grace Note Farm.