

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

March 4, 2024 6:00 p.m.

Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall



Marina Kifferstein, violin with Laura Cocks, flute and Meaghan Burke, cello

How quiet – at the bottom of the lake, peaks of clouds (2023)* Ashkan Behzadi
** world premiere* (b. 1983)

Don't Cry Bird (2024)* Jingjing Luo
** world premiere* (b. 1953)
with Laura Cocks, flute

Vocalise (2009) Taylor Brook
(b. 1985)
with Meaghan Burke, cello

The Su Song Star Map (2017) Liza Lim
(b. 1966)

This recital is given in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the D.M.A. degree.
Please switch off your cell phones and refrain from taking flash pictures.

Notes on the Program

How quiet – at the bottom of the lake, peaks of clouds (2023)*, by Ashkan Behzadi

My relationship with Ashkan Behzadi has spanned over a decade, and in that time I have performed quite a large volume of his chamber music, but this is the first solo work he's written for me. I am honored that he trusted me to premiere this stunning, deeply intimate piece, which explores the feeling of deep loss and processing grief. We had a workshop in the spring of last year, and he completed the piece over the summer while in residence at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire.

The title is the full text in translation of a haiku by late 18th/early 19th century poet Kobayashi Issa, whose chosen name "Issa" translates to something like "one tea," or according to poet Robert Hass, "a single bubble in steeping tea." The words of the poem evoke a bizarre, almost uncanny kind of stillness. One imagines the author looking up from the bottom of the lake, seeing the clouds through the water's surface. He is still, reflecting on the quietude. Is he dead? There is no sense that he's conscious of holding his breath, no urgency or anticipation. Time seems to have slowed nearly to a stop.

Much like the poem, the piece seems to exist outside of time. It is almost entirely extremely quiet, emphasized by timbral indications such as "flautando" (flute-like/airy) and "sul tasto" (played over the fingerboard for a more muted tone color). The harmonic palette is microtonal, in a scale that was developed intuitively to avoid perfect octaves. All of the intervallic relationships are nudged slightly wider or narrower than in standard tuning, creating an unmoored sense of floating in harmonic space. The performance notes encourage the performer to sing along quietly with themselves, as Glenn Gould famously does in his Bach recordings. The piece is in many ways influenced by Bach; it is concerned with the intimacy of the performer's relationship to their instrument, both musically and as a physical extension of the body. Many of the gestures are choreographically complex, requiring the violinist to make large movements that produce very little sound. It is meant to be played to oneself, for oneself. The audience is invited to be in the same space and to listen in as voyeurs, as the violinist sings and struggles through a soft and complicated melody.

The piece is constructed in two long sections and a coda. The first section is characterized by an ascending melodic motif that weaves and wanders around, only to trail off and begin again, over and over. There is no real sense of development; it exists in a space of rumination and circularity, returning again and again to similar phrases that never seem to fully resolve. Each iteration is unique, and yet it feels as if we've heard it before. The second section is characterized by a counterpoint between extremely high pitched descending lines, broken up against a hesitant and delicate pizzicato bass line. The coda seems to be finally focusing, the lines centered around a close range, absent of the extreme contours and leaps in the earlier sections. In retrospect, we can see that the stillness and quietude we thought we felt in the rest of the piece was almost chaotic, erratic in comparison. We leave the piece with at least a sense of clarity and focus, if not resolution.

Don't Cry Bird (2024)*, by Jingjing Luo

From the composer:

“Three years of pandemic was chaotic to both humans and animals. My mom died in China two years ago. I could not be there next to her. The inexorable emotional currents wove the music into my consciousness. Every night I hear her moaning and crying in silence that she would not see her daughter the last time. The words and the tone of voice are inscrutable and subtle. The improvised sections in the piece are inspired by birds, narrating the domino-like wave of covid infections at the time of my mother's death. The yearning and longing continues.

The work is dedicated to my dear friends Marina Kifferstein and Laura Cocks with affection.”

I have known Jingjing Luo since my time at Oberlin Conservatory, and worked with her a number of years ago on an opera project. Since then, we have been conceiving of another piece, which eventually developed into tonight's premiere. Her dynamic and at times theatrical music accesses a deeply emotional space. Her writing accesses senses of pain, sweetness, and nostalgia, often all at once. She uses vocalizations, overblowing on the flute, overpressure techniques on the violin, and various other compositional techniques to communicate these highly charged and dramatic feelings.

This piece has been in process for a long time, in various stages of dreaming and planning together. I'm pleased to present it with one of my closest and most cherished collaborators, flutist Laura Cocks.

Vocalise (2009), by Taylor Brook

From the composer:

“Written for Mira Benjamin, this piece explores formal ideas from Hindustani music. The lowest string of the violin is retuned to a slightly flat F-sharp, corresponding to the just major third of a D. This note is heard throughout the piece as a drone, grounding a microtonal mode and gradually expanding register of the solo instrument. The drone can be produced electronically or by using any number of offstage instruments.”

I have wanted to play this work of Taylor Brook's for many years, and am thrilled to present it on this program. I have worked with Taylor for over a decade, primarily through our group TAK Ensemble (in which Taylor serves as Technical Director), and in that time I've performed a large handful of his gorgeous, substantial works. After a very emotionally challenging first half of the program, this piece offers both a meditation and catharsis. It is arranged in sections, each exploring the overtone series of the different strings and building off of their relationship to the drone. The lowest string is tuned down to match the just-intoned F-sharp drone, which operates as a sonic carpet for the entire duration of the piece.

The use of microtonality in this piece is functionally the opposite of Behzadi's approach in the first work on tonight's program. Whereas Behzadi uses microtonality to destabilize pitch relationships, Brook's microtonal inflections serve to align the pitch material in simple harmonic ratios with the drone, giving it a sense of groundedness and stability. Of all of the works on tonight's program, this piece relates most closely to my dissertation work, which centers around performance practice of music for strings in rational (or “just”) intonation. This tuning practice produces a sound world

enriched by psychoacoustic effects, filling the acoustic space and giving the impression that the ensemble is much larger than a soloist with accompanying drone.

I'm happy to be joined by Meaghan Burke, another one of my most long term and cherished collaborators, who will be performing the drone on cello.

The Su Song Star Map (2017), by Liza Lim

From the composer:

“[The] star map for the celestial globe of Su Song (1020-1101), a Chinese scientist and mechanical engineer of the Song Dynasty (960-1279)... was first published in the year 1092, in Su's book known as the *Xin Yi Xiang Fa Yao* (Wade-Giles: *Hsin Yi Hsiang Fa Yao*). On this star map there are 14 xiu (lunar mansions) on Mercator's projection. The equator is represented by the horizontal straight line running through the star chart, while the ecliptic curves above it. Su Song's star maps had the hour circles between the xiu (lunar mansions) forming the astronomical meridians, with stars marked in quasi-orthomorphic cylindrical projection on each side of the equator, and thus was in accordance to their north polar distances. Not until the work of Gerard Mercator in 1569 was a celestial map of this projection created in the Western world (Needham, Volume 4, Part 3, 569).”

Liza Lim is a composer who I have had the pleasure of working with closely several times over the last few years. In 2022, I performed the highly soloistic violin part to her large ensemble work “Extinction Events and Dawn Chorus,” which shares certain motifs with “The Su Song Star Map.” This past fall, I had the pleasure of working with her again on the premiere of “Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time,” a large-scale ensemble work in which I was again featured as a soloist alongside violinist Johnna Wu and performative artist Winnie Huang.

I find Liza’s music to be highly visceral and evocative, with a distinct approach to violin writing that is at once highly unusual and idiomatic. This piece utilizes scordatura (detuning) of the lowest string down to an E, which creates both an expanded pitch palette as well as a growling timbral quality in the low register that comes from the looser strings. This tuning also creates octave resonance between the highest and lowest open strings, which are now exactly two octaves apart. Her expressive instructions include words like “throaty” and “husky,” which come through in the varied technical approaches to the instrument that she calls for in her writing.

On her website, Liza says of her music that it “centres collaboration and transcultural ideas. The roots of beauty, time effects in the Anthropocene and the sensoria of ecological connection are ongoing concerns in her art practice.” These themes are all deeply present in “The Su Song Star Map,” as if she is exploring the idea of an alien or astronomical ecology. In keeping with the inspiration of the piece, the wandering lines of the solo violin seem to be tracing points on a map, entering different timbres and registers like connecting the points of stars. Her use of repetition also lends a sense of exploration, retracing steps, or scanning the eye backwards and forwards over the points of a map. This piece is not about the vastness of space – rather a single violinist voicing an explorer, mapping what they can see above from the vantage point of earth.

About the Artists

Marina Kifferstein (she/they) is a violinist and generative artist based in New York City. Equally comfortable in major international venues and DIY spaces, they enjoy a diverse career that encompasses contemporary chamber music, improvisation, composition, classical performance, and experimental practices. She is a founding member of TAK ensemble and The Rhythm Method string quartet, a member of the Lucerne Festival Contemporary Orchestra, and a regular guest with the International Contemporary Ensemble, Wet Ink, and the Talea Ensemble. As an active touring artist, recent performances have taken them to Asia, Europe, South America, Canada, and across the continental US. In addition to regularly conducting residencies at universities including Harvard, Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Huddersfield, and Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, they are on the faculty of the United Nations International School, Point Counterpoint, The Composer's Institute at Lake George Music Festival, the Composers Conference, and the Lucerne Festival Academy. Marina is currently a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center, with a focus on just intonation in 20th century chamber music for strings.

Ashkan Behzadi (b. 1983) is an Iranian-Canadian composer residing in New York City. He completed his Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA) in composition at Columbia University. Prior to this, he earned his bachelor's degree in composition and music theory from McGill University, and he holds a bachelor's degree in architecture from Tehran University.

The dialectical relationship between modernist lyric poetry and contemporary music forms the cornerstone of Ashkan's aesthetic exploration in recent composition projects. His works showcase a meticulous attention to detail, often incorporating musical allusions to craft a miniaturist and gently lyrical landscape. Ashkan's musical pursuits aim to evoke the essence of collective memory associated with folklore lyrical singing or group dancing, while carefully steering clear of folklorist aesthetics.

Ashkan has collaborated with various ensembles, including TAK Ensemble, Ensemble Recherche, Oerknal Ensemble, JACK Quartet, Divertimento Ensemble, Ensemble Alternance, Ensemble UnitedBerlin, Ekmeles Ensemble, Yarn/Wire, Ekmeles, and Wet Ink Ensemble. His contributions to the field have garnered recognition through awards, artist residencies, and participation in prestigious festivals. Notable accolades include the Koussevitzky Composition Award, Fromm Foundation Award, MacDowell Fellowship, Civitella Ranieri Residency, DialogeFestival at Stiftung Mozarteum Salzburg, Rondo 2017 in Milan, and Manifeste Festival at IRCAM.

Ashkan Behzadi holds a position as a composition faculty at the Manhattan School of Music and also currently teaches as a Lecturer at Columbia University.

Jing Jing Luo is an award-winning Chinese-American composer and a visual artist whose music has been performed by acclaimed artists and orchestras at major venues worldwide. She has received a Ford Foundation individual artist award, 3 Rockefeller Foundation's individual artist fellowship awards, an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a commissioning award from the Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation, an recipient of Discovery Grant for Female Composers and a 2023 Commissioning Award for the new operatic works by women composers supported by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation, a 2023 featured artist for the EarShot from American Composers Orchestra, 2022 Harvard University Barwick Lecture Series guest speaker for the music department, a Commissioning Award from Jerome Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, Meet the Composer, Honorary Prize Winner for the Fourth Fanny Mendelssohn

International Composition Competition in Germany, five artist residencies at MacDowell Colony and amount dozens of Composer in residencies. A formal visiting professor in music composition at Oberlin Conservatory of Music. She is currently working on an opera for the White Snake Project for a full production in 2026.

Taylor Brook writes music for the concert stage, electronic music, music for robotic instruments, generative music software, and music for video, theatre, and dance. His music is often concerned with finely tuned microtonal sonorities as well as unique approaches to the integration of electronic sound and digital media.

Brook enjoys collaborating with performers and ensembles on the development of new works, including Mira Benjamin, Jeffrey Gavett, Corey Hamm, Dana Jessen, Andy Kozar, Vicki Ray, Quatuor Bozzini, Del Sol Quartet, JACK quartet, PARTCH ensemble, and many others.

In 2018 Brook completed a Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA) in music composition at Columbia University with Fred Lerdahl and was a 2020 Guggenheim Fellow in music composition. Currently Brook is the technical director of TAK ensemble.

Liza Lim is an Australian composer whose music focuses on collaborative and transcultural practices. Ideas of beauty, ecological connection and ritual transformation are ongoing concerns in her compositional work. Her four operas: *The Oresteia* (1993), *Moon Spirit Feasting* (2000), *The Navigator* (2007) and *Tree of Codes* (2016), and the major ensemble work *Extinction Events and Dawn Chorus* (2018) explore themes of desire, memory, and the uncanny. Her genre-crossing percussion ritual/opera *Atlas of the Sky* (2018), is a work involving community participants that celebrates the emotional power and energy dynamics of crowds.

Liza Lim has received commissions from some of the world's pre-eminent orchestras and ensembles including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Bavarian Radio Orchestra, Ensemble Musikfabrik, ELISION, Ensemble Intercontemporain, Ensemble Modern, Klangforum Wien, International Contemporary Ensemble and Arditti String Quartet. She was Resident Composer with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in 2005 & 2006. Her orchestral cycle *Annunciation Triptych* (2019-21) is jointly commissioned by the BBC SSO, Bavarian Radio Orchestra, Westdeutscher Rundfunk orchestra and Orchestre de la Philharmonie de Luxemburg. Other projects include *Sex Magic* (2020), for flautist Claire Chase, and quartets for Sigma Projects and JACK Quartet. Her music has been featured at the Spoleto Festival, Miller Theatre New York, Festival d'Automne à Paris, Venice Biennale and at all the major Australian festivals. Lim is Professor of Composition and inaugural Sculthorpe Chair of Australian Music at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Her music is published by Casa Ricordi Berlin and on CD labels Kairos, Hat Art, HCR and Winter & Winter.

Laura Cocks (they/she) is a flutist with “febrile instrumental prowess” (The New York Times), who works in a wide array of environments as a performer of experimental music and “creates intricate, spellbinding works that have a visceral physicality to them” (Foxy Digitalis).

Laura is the executive director and flutist of TAK ensemble, “one of the most prominent ensembles in the United States practicing truly experimental music” (I Care If You Listen), with whom Laura makes musics “that combine crystalline clarity with the disorienting turbulence of a sonic vortex” (WIRE Magazine). They are also a member of Talea Ensemble, noted for their “astonishing fluidity,” “compelling lucidity,” and “precise control” (the New York Times). As a soloist, improviser, and chamber musician, they have performed with musicians such as DoYeon Kim, Shara Lunon, Timothy

Angulo, Luke Stewart, Wendy Eisenberg, Lester St. Louis, Brandon Lopez, and Madison Greenstone, the International Contemporary Ensemble, Sun Ra Arkestra, Wet Ink Ensemble, and many others in NYC and abroad.

Their recent solo album, *field anatomies* (Carrier Records), noted as one of Stereogum's top-ten experimental releases of the year, charted in the Billboard top ten "Classical Crossover" releases and was praised for its "superhuman physicality" and "disciplined patience" (Bandcamp Best Contemporary Release and Experimental Release). Laura can be heard on labels such as ECM, Denovali Records, Catalytic Sound, TAK editions, Tripticks Tapes, Carrier Records, Chambray Records, Double Whammy Whammy, New Focus Records, Sound American, Orange Mountain Music, Supertrain, Gold Bolus, Hideous Replica, Sideband Records, and many others.

Hailed as "outstanding," with a "street-smart, feline voice" (The New York Times), **Meaghan Burke** is a cellist, vocalist, and composer working in the space between contemporary music, improvised music, and songwriting. Her compositions and songs explore relationships between sound, storytelling, and the body, seeking new possibilities for care in performance and listening.

Meaghan is a founding member of The Rhythm Method, a contemporary, feminist, "trailblazing" quartet of "skillful composer performers" (The New Yorker) praised for its "stunning displays of fearsome extended technique and fearless programming." (New York Music Daily) She's also the lead singer and cellist of avant-grunge band Forever House, a member of Viennese songwriting collective Loose Lips Sink Ships, and an actively performing singer/songwriter solo artist.

Meaghan is a current artist-in-residence at The Foundry in West Stockbridge, MA, where she is developing her large-scale music-theatrical work, "The Wandering Womb." This piece uses the primitive gynecological/psychological concept of hysteria to explore stories surrounding pregnancy, miscarriage, and the many other weights carried by anyone who's ever had a uterus. Her soundwalk/binaural sound piece Fenster is part of MATA Presents 2021-22 season; this work extends her series of "Care Pieces," conceptual scores written as gifts for friends during the early months of the pandemic. She has been commissioned by Austrian Cultural Forum NYC, Chartreuse String Trio, and the Byrne:Kozar Duo, as well as writing regularly for The Rhythm Method.