

December 2, 2024 6:00 p.m.

*Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall*

## Johnna Wu, violin

*instancing* (2024)\* Tobias Fandel  
for violin solo with body-mounted speakers and electronics

*Weaving* (2018)\*\* Chikage Imai  
for violin solo

*bitloss* (2024)\* Itzá García  
for violin solo with body-mounted speakers and electronics

*A Hair on the Skin of the Water on the Lake* (2020) Bahar Royace

*Stereo* (2024)\* Simon Kanzler  
for solo violin and virtual instruments

*the rest rubble and nettles* (2024)\* Scott Miller  
for solo violin

*One and the Other* (2021-2022)\*\* Liza Lim  
for solo violin (with low octave strings)

\* World premiere

\*\* US premiere

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

**Tobias Fandel** is a composer and visual artist working with acoustic instruments, video, and digital media. His interests include the reversibility of loss in the virtual, the physicality of computed materials, and various printing methods and technologies. In his recent projects he engages the friction between current and obsolete media technologies, investigating elusive qualities and sensory artifacts across different cultural sensitivities. He lives and works in Harlem, New York and is a doctorate student at the Graduate Center.

Tobias writes about his work:

The piece *instancing* draws inspiration from rendering techniques in computer graphics, where vast quantities of similar objects—such as trees, grass, or buildings—are replicated to populate generative landscapes. These objects share vertex data yet achieve the illusion of uniqueness through intentional and distinct variations in each instance. Philosophically, this concept resonates with my artistic vision: while the artist initiates and evokes nuanced variations, the act of instancing attains true significance only when the audience actively engages with the creative space.

I came across **Chikage Imai's** piece *Weaving* after choosing to perform it for a contemporary music festival in Japan. Weaving begins with a forceful opening gesture that insistently returns after it quickly dissipates. The fingers, like the contours of the piece, twirl around each other and become entangled as they try to escape from the grasp of the opening idea. As Chikage encouraged me, “if you feel some threads turning and entwining each other continuously to push going [in] one direction in this piece, I think you can enjoy the piece!”

*Bitloss* (or bit loss) refers to the loss of information during its transmission. These corruptions, occurring at the smallest unit of digital communication, can have significant impacts on data exchange and accessibility. I chose this title as a creative metaphor for a series of works for solo instrument and electronics that incorporate various forms of interactivity and sonic translation between human performers and digital environments.

For the pieces, *instancing* and *bitloss*, **Tobias** and **Itzá** designed four body speakers using 3D printers tailored for me to play while being immersed in the four-channel speaker system that they acquired for the Graduate Center.

*Bitloss* for solo violin and electronics explores two forms of interactivity. The violin's sound is processed live through an AI timbre transfer effect, and both the acoustic sound of the violin and its timbre overlay are played through small body speakers worn by the performer.

The timbre transfer model is derived from a collection of musical instruments housed at the Mary S. Harrell Black Heritage Museum in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. These instruments (flutes, percussion, and strings) were heavily

weathered by the Florida climate, and their aged and distorted sound qualities provided an ideal data set for training a machine learning model. Every tone and noise produced by the violin on stage is analyzed by the model, which then outputs the sound that most closely resembles the incoming signal.

Yet, there is a gap in the attempt to summon the instruments' collective sound through the violin. A loss of information that is inherent in its transmission. The wearable speakers attempt to find a connection (or perhaps longing) between the violin and the timbre transfer model, embodying the sound of the instrument collection. It is not yet clear to me if this embodiment draws the acoustic and electronic sounds closer together or pulls them further apart.

Itzá García

I first worked with **Bahar Royae** on *A Hair on the Skin of the Water on the Lake* at an artist residency at Avaloch Farms in New Hampshire in late August of this summer. The lake on the campus was ripe with imagery and inspiration for playing the piece, not to mention that it provided ample opportunities to be distracted from working. The sounds created by the bow are like water strider bugs with legs that skim the surface of the water without breaking its surface tension. In creating the exquisitely hypnotic textures of the piece, she uses techniques found in Persian music such as the *Dorrâb* and *Eshâreb* that refer to types of ornamentation. The other techniques such as the *jette* are ones that she invented along with Adam Woodward, for whom this piece was written. It involves turning the stick of the bow so slightly so that it jumps on the string while the overall sound remains undisturbed, like how an insect can jump across the lake without leaving a ripple on its surface. The sounds are so delicate as to be almost imperceptible, and its effect is magnified through amplification.

Bahar writes:

*A Hair on the Skin of the Water on the Lake*, is about the repetitions of a still image (or sound) that moves in the mind's memories.

There are sounds in the horizon; and in the horizon of sound is silenced noise. There is a memory of an image-sound in the horizon of memory that every time that it is recalled, it shatters and morphs into something else of itself. There is a sound that moves on the skin of my memories, like a hair that dances on the skin of the water. That tune is Asghar Bahari's\* *Pish Darâmad e Isfahan*, and "A Hair on the Skin of the Water on the Lake", tries to reconstruct it with repetition, embracement of the body, and deployment of errors. This piece was the turning point in my realization that I wanted to focus on a style, the spark of which was my piece "Tombstone": working with rhythm as a physical phenomenon and dealing with multiple axes of time simultaneously.

\* Asghar Bahari was a 20th-century Iranian Kamancheh player and composer.

**Simon Kanzler** is from a small village in southern Germany called Ottersweier. He is the son of an artist and a schoolteacher.

The piece ***Stereo*** for solo violin and virtual instruments is the latest in a series of electroacoustic works that uses his personal collection of instrument samples. The material in the work is derived from mapping the finger positions of two different chords and then developing them as arpeggio materials that are desynchronized temporally from the electronic sounds. The feeling of desynchronization is crafted through Simon's use of looping rhythmic fragments to create what he likes to call a "groove", referring to his former background as a jazz musician with a penchant for heavy metal and other music with a fervent sense of pulse.

**Scott Miller** writes about his piece:

"**the rest rubble and nettles**" is—at least in part—a piece about reflection. The violinist and listener constantly retrace their steps, but nothing is ever the same as before. I decided on a title only after finishing the score, as is usually my practice. It is taken from Samuel Beckett's one-act play *That Time* (1974), in which three disembodied voices swirl around a floating head, each recounting different memories. One voice ("A") describes an attempt to find an old folly where they would hide as a child, discovering only a "bit of a tower still standing all the rest rubble and nettles." Beckett's flowing, punctuation-free language spoke to my music's shifting tempos and fluid pitch language, while the abstract formalist structure was echoed (very differently) in my music's stark contrasts. The "A" voice's shift towards uncertainty is particularly resonant, with the play's opening line, "that time you went back...", returning in increasingly unsure variations: "or was that another time all that another time was there ever any other time but that time..." I hope the music can offer listeners a space to reflect on change, continuity, and uncertainty.

The work is composed for a violin strung with an octave G string, meaning the fourth string of the instrument sounds a full octave lower, while the rest of the strings remain in the original octave. This peculiar setup inspired my music in two ways. First, I was free to develop harmonies that rely on super wide voicings that stretch well beyond the range of a standard violin. Second, a spectral analysis of the open octave IV string revealed many stretched overtones (similar to the struck strings of a piano), with an especially prominent third partial. From this insight, I developed a scale based on a 710-cent fifth (8 cents larger than Just Intonation) as the harmonic basis for the piece.

When I met **Liza Lim** for the first time to discuss a new piece that she was writing for us, she needed to know me - "why do you play the violin?" she asked. My mind then swirled to face that looming existential crisis upon having pondered this question for the ten-thousandth time. I think I mumbled something along the lines of "because I like it" and - lying through my teeth - "it's fun".

The truth is the reason why I play is beyond my own comprehension. It's something connected with my history and the pre-history of a time before me that compels me to do so. Liza instinctively knows this and wants to create music that asks the performer to embody and bring forth their personal histories.

*The One and the Other* is also titled by Liza to be *Speculative Polskas* for the Swedish Karen Hellqvist. Polskas are Swedish folk dances that are an intrinsic part of Karen's connection to her Swedish heritage. Liza writes that she was inspired by "observations of Karin's physical and emotional relationship to her violin as a container of stories and memories".

While the first movement intends to replicate the raucous joy of the polska, the second movement is dreamy and contemplative, meant to summon one's past and the present. The second movement of the piece serves as the opening to Liza's work *Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time*, which is played to summon the spirit of a river.

There are moments when Liza asks for the performer to decouple and to desynchronize the right and left hands while playing, indicating a slippage in memory and time. Liza creates loops for the violinist to create a sort of knot where the performer can travel between the past and the present.

In the final movement, Liza asks the violinist to recall the Näktergal polska. When I had no idea how to recall the polska and asked Liza for help, she assured me that "it's really about your own embodied knowledge, so you could still take those pitch cues and develop in a different direction - how might your own cultural embodiment come through with its own voices, bodies, ghosts?"

As Liza explains in her program notes:

The various forms of ornamentation: finger trills, lateral bow glides and brushing movements, are amplifications of notions of desire: of the human desire to create "lures" through demonstration of skill, aesthetic beauty, and an artisan's personalization of given materials. Sliding back and forth, weaving threads of time, story, dance and song, the musician arrives at a trembling knot of presence.

## About the Artist

**Johnna Wu** is a violinist, performer and improviser active in North America, Europe, and Asia. She grew up in Indianapolis and moved to Paoli, Pennsylvania (a town close enough to be considered Philadelphia) during high school, and has lived mostly in New York since college.

She is the founder, artistic and executive director of the New York-based electroacoustic ensemble PinkNoise. Her most recent appearances include performances at the Lucerne Festival, Toyama International Contemporary Music Festival in Japan, University Museum of Contemporary Art in Mexico City, the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, Donaueschingen Musiktage, the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, Carnegie Hall, the Berlin Philharmonie, Paris Philharmonie, Guangzhou Opera House, and the Banff Centre in Canada.

In 2015, she was awarded the Fulbright scholarship to pursue research in Germany. She graduated from Columbia University with a Bachelor of Arts degrees in biology and music, with a concentration in pre-medical studies and later obtained a Master of Music degree in violin performance at The Juilliard School. She is a doctorate student at the Graduate Center where she studied with Mark Steinberg. She serves on the violin faculty at CUNY-Staten Island and has been a co-curator and faculty member for the Lucerne Festival in Switzerland.