

May 2024

by Derek Katz

Paola Prestini (b. 1975) *Listen, Quiet* (2012)

Paola Prestini is a major figure in the new music world, with closely intertwined careers as a composer and as an artistic leader. Born in Italy and raised in the American Southwest, her broad sense of her mission as a creator and advocate was already highly visible during her student years at Juilliard, where she founded the interdisciplinary arts company VisionIntoArt. More recently, she became the artistic director of the innovative Brooklyn performance space and music producer National Sawdust, which she co-founded in 2015. Prestini's compositions are also interdisciplinary, often combining multiple media and involving collaborations with other disciplines. Her 2016 *The Hubble Cantata*, for instance, is an opera based on the work of the astrophysicist Mario Livio that incorporates Livio's voice, live musicians and a virtual reality experience using images from the Hubble Space Telescope.

Listen, Quiet, from 2012, is another multi-media work that combines live performance, electronics, voice, and also one that reflects Prestini's deep involvement with the institutions and spaces that support new music. Commissioned by Juilliard for its then-new multimedia venue the Rosemary and Meredith Willson Theater, *Listen, Quiet* is for cello, percussion, and pre-recorded sounds (the cellist for the first performance, and most subsequent performances, was Jeffrey Zeigler, Prestini's husband, and formerly cellist of the Kronos Quartet). The piece also includes a film, by S. Katy Tucker.

Prestini's starting point was a series of recorded conversations between an artist and a friend that reflected the pain in the artist's life. The work is intended both to situate that pain in the cycles of everyday life, and to ease it through nature and water's power to nurture and heal. The two words of the title each refer to one half of the piece, the first led by the percussionist and the second centering on the cellist.

Listen begins with the percussionist playing woodblocks with one hand and glockenspiel with the other, soon joined by a pre-recorded marimba and augmented with other live drums (mostly tom-toms, and including a surdo, a low bass drum created for Brazilian samba music).

We also hear fragments of the recorded conversation, but electronically manipulated such that we feel the agonized emotions that are being expressed, but do not take in the individual words. The cellist, whom Prestini conceives of a narrator speaking for the artist, enters later, initially with long, low tones, and eventually become more active and agitated, somewhat in opposition to the percussionist, whom Prestini describes as a "perpetrator," representing the indifference of life. The visual images combine a woman, a body of water and handwritten texts, barely legible, just as the recorded words resist being parsed. The scene is dark and what movement there is very slow. The sounds of water eventually replace the women's voices, washing away the pain.

Prestini calls *Quiet*, "a hymn to voices from my childhood, of my mother. They tell a story about magic, and of the memories that shaped us both." *Quiet* is led by the cellist, whose lines are recorded and looped, creating a layered cello ensemble, over which the live player can declaim. The percussionist provides an improvised background, with most of the sounds drawn from bells, antique cymbals and water vessels. The film moves from the surface of the water to beneath it, from dark to light, and from near-stasis to free motion, suggesting visual analogues for multiple forms of liberation. The piece ends with the pre-recorded voice leaving the pain of *Listen* behind, and breaking into song.

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Martin Butler (b. 1960) ***Remember This Fire* (2022)**

Martin Butler's *Remember This Fire*, for oboe and percussion, is very closely tied to today's performers. The piece makes some references to *Chaconne*, a solo oboe work that Butler composed for Nicholas Daniel in 1991, and *Remember This Fire* was written for Daniel and Ji Hye Jung, who gave the world premiere at the Leicester International Music Festival in 2022.

The title is a line from an early poem by Ezra Pound, "The Alchemist," written in 1912. This was just at the time when Pound was developing the principles of Imagism that would establish him as major figure in modernist poetry. "The Alchemist," however, displays none of the pithy economy and musical rhythms typical of Imagism, but is a lengthy poem that creates the effect of a chant through a predictable meter. The poem is typical of Pound in its evocation of an imaginary and culturally rich world in which alchemists express themselves through medieval troubadour songs, and in which alchemical formulas are represented by names of women from Classical and Romance literature.

"The Alchemist" describes a process in which chants assist the alchemist to transmute base metals, which pass through stages, each associated with a different color. *Remember This Fire* consists of six distinct sections, each representing a different incantation and a different stage of the alchemical transformation. Here, the literal colors of the changing metal are suggested by changing tone colors. The oboist alternates English horn and oboe, and the percussionist moves between tom toms to marimba, ending with the glockenspiel. Each section has a different combination of instruments, with the exception of the second and third sections. These are both for oboe and marimba, but the third section has a slower and freer tempo, and shimmering tremolos from the marimba create a distinctly different texture. All of the sections use repeated short melodic and rhythmic figures that reinforce the idea of a ritual incantation. As Butler puts it, "the music is mostly energetic and fizzing." The final section, with the bell-like sounds of the glockenspiel, suggests that the transformation into gold is complete, and the piece "explodes towards the end in a flash of metallic light."

John Psathas (b. 1966) ***One Study* (2005)**

John Psathas, a New Zealand composer born of Greek immigrant parents, is known for works that move through a dazzling array of musical styles, spanning classical, popular and world traditions. He is especially associated with works that feature percussion, many arising from collaborations with the Scottish percussion superstar Evelyn Glennie. If you watched the Athens Olympics in 2004, you may have already his music, which was used for the opening and closing ceremonies.

One Study was composed for the Portuguese percussion virtuoso Pedro Carneiro, and scored for solo marimba, "junk percussion" and digital audio. The junk percussion part is for a collection of instruments and objects ranging from cymbals to salad bowls, frying pans and a laundry-powder lid. The junk percussion may either be played live by the solo percussionist, or can be part of the pre-recorded audio component.

One Study is a brilliant perpetual motion, with the marimba player spinning out a near-constant stream of rapid notes, following a jagged path and jogged with syncopated accents until the energy finally dissipates near the end of the movement. The digital audio is unabashedly funky, featuring bass beats more typical of Electronic Dance Music than of classical chamber music, and held chords and tubular bells that provide a whiff of progressive rock. The marimba part, meanwhile, adds some jazz flavor, and hints at the composer's early gigs as a jazz pianist.

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Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)
Sonata in D Minor, K. 1 (L. 366)
From *Essercizi per Gravicembalo* (pub. 1738)

Domenico Scarlatti, born 1685 (the same year as Bach and Handel), is very much the odd man out on this otherwise all-21st century program. Apparently one of the great keyboard players of his time (although he did lose an organ duel to Handel), he composed over 550 keyboard sonatas, most of which were written in Madrid, where he was in service to Maria Barbara, Infanta and later Queen of Spain. These are the not substantial, multi-movement works that the designation “sonata” might lead us to anticipate, but short, single movement pieces, usually in two repeated halves.

Many of them may have been intended more as technical studies, and the D Minor Sonata on this program was the first in a collection published in London around 1738 as *Exercises for the Harpsichord*. In this Sonata, each half begins with a brief passage in which the left hand imitates the right before moving into a series of trills and descending scales over a repeated note accompaniment. The Scarlatti Sonatas have long been a part of the piano and harpsichord concert repertoires, and, in recent years, have also become standard works for the accordion.

Julien Labro (b. 1980)
“Dowland’s Lament” (2018)

Note by Julien Labro:

Dowland’s Lament is a fantasia inspired by “Come Again, Sweet Love Doth Now Invite”, song No.17 in the *First Book of Songs and Ayres of Four Parts* by John Dowland, published in 1597. While some of the fragments of the original melody are preserved, harmonically and rhythmically, it reflects and reinforces the tensions within the text, which are marked by the emotional roller coaster of love, pining, frustration, bitter-sweet melancholy. In the midst of this push and pull motion, the famous striking repetition of the rising fourths found in the original melody are unveiled.

Clarice Assad (b. 1978)
Petite Suite (2024)

Commissioned for Camerata Pacifica by Olin & Ann Barrett, Titus Brenninkmeijer, Albert & Lisa Cosand, Miguel & Paula Levy, Arnold & Gretl Mulder, Rick & Regina Roney.

Note by Clarice Assad:

“Petite Suite,” blends Parisian chanson, Brazilian music, and jazz elements to create a work that uplifts the spirit and offers a moment of respite and joy during troubling times. The suite consists of five short movements, each evoking a distinct emotion and atmosphere. “Etroitement lié” (Tightly Bound) opens with infectious energy and intricate rhythms. “Chanson D’un Amour perdu” (Song of a Lost Love) shifts to a mood of tender nostalgia and longing. “Arc-en-Ciel” (Rainbow) bursts with quirky freedom and joy. “La valse de Juju” (Juju’s Waltz), a melody crafted by Assad’s younger sister Julia when they lived together in France, exudes innocence and sweetness. The final movement, “Chanson brésilienne” (Brazilian Song), celebrates the composer’s Brazilian heritage with vibrant rhythms and joyous melodies. The musicians’ versatility shines throughout the piece, with the accordion adding a unique and enchanting sound to this unique combination of instruments.