November 2026

by Derek Katz

Michael Daugherty (b. 1954)
***Firecracker*, for Oboe and Chamber Ensemble (1991)**

The most famous virtuosi of the 19th century were pianists and violinists, but alongside Franz Liszt, Clara Schumann and Niccolò Paganini were brilliant players on other instruments, like the oboist Antonio Pasculli (1842-1924). Known in the 20th century (but apparently not his own) as the "Paganini of the oboe," Pasculli toured as a soloist as a teenager, before becoming a professor at the conservatory in his hometown of Palermo at sixteen. Like Liszt and Paganini, Pasculli specialized in fantasies on popular opera melodies, combining instrumental versions of arias with brilliant variations. When Michael Daugherty was commissioned by the Brazilian oboe virtuoso Alex Klein (Klein would become principal of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra a few years after the commission) for a solo work, Daugherty decided to base his work on a motive "inspired by the diabolically difficult etudes of Pasculli." It's not clear exactly where Daugherty found his inspiration. The two-note figures that saturates the beginning of the piece are the same pitches as the first ones in the piano part for Pasculli's "Characteristic Study" The Bee, but that's only two notes. Some of the passage work resembles figures from Pasculli's 15 Caprices for solo oboe, but not that closely, and, in any case, those are transcriptions of violin studies by Pierre Rode.

In any case, the Pasculli's bravura spirit clearly infuses *Firecracker*, which is also diabolically difficult for the oboe. The most obvious hurdles are the many lightning-fast runs and figures, but the solo part also lies cruelly high for much of the piece (including a trill near the end that is far enough outside conventional oboe technique to require a special fingering written into the score) and calls for special techniques like circular breathing, where the soloist must bring in new air while sustaining a note. There are also coloristic effects, like using "false" fingerings to allow for rapid changes of tone quality on the same pitch, something common in the jazz saxophone world, but not found in orchestral woodwind circles. While the oboe is the center of attention, the chamber ensemble is far from a modest accompanying body. Many of the most fearsome licks are shared between the oboe and the other instruments. Daugherty also specifies a seating arrangement that spreads the instruments across the stage, with winds on one side, and string on the other, allowing the music to pan from side to side.

Daugherty came late to concert music after an early career based more in jazz, funk and rock, and most of his works lean into grooves from other genres. Daugherty also has a strong interest in popular culture, with concert works inspired by Superman and Elvis, amongst others. Firecracker falls into three large sections. The first starts with fragments tossed between oboe and bass clarinet over a steady tambourine pulse. The piece gathers energy and momentum as the other instruments join in, and the fireworks begin with etude-like rapid perpetual motion figures running through the ensemble. The section settles into a funky groove over a repeated cello riff before eventually calming, and leaving the oboist playing a very, very long note (this is the circular breathing part). The next section is a tango, with the dance rhythms first in the castanets, and then in the cello, under a sultry oboe melody. This leads to a cadenza for the oboe alone, and then the music gathers speed again, and returns to the tempo and figures from the first section, with the pulse goaded by the big drums; tom toms and bass drum. The fireworks end not with a bang, but with a spectacular ascent, fading into the ether.

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Sarah Gibson (1986-2024)
***I prefer living in color*, for Bass Clarinet, String Trio, Piano and Percussion (2017)**

Sarah Gibson had already established herself as a major compositional voice nationally and internationally by the time of her tragically early and still recent death (she was working on a commission from the BBC during her final illness), but she was especially prominent and beloved in Southern California, where she studied at USC, taught at California State University, Long Beach and UCSB, frequently performed as a pianist, often as part of the piano duo HOCKET, and had works performed by ensembles including the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestras. Her time at UCSB was a small part of her career, but she made an enormous impression, not just as a creative figure and performer but as a compassionate and inspirational teacher who immediately formed a vibrant and supportive student community around her and as a collaborative and supportive colleague. She is sorely missed.

I prefer living in color is typical of Gibson's work both in the general sense of demonstrating her keen ear for timbre and knack for lively rhythms, and also more specifically in being inspired by the visual arts. Gibson was very interested in connections between the arts, and many of her works were inspired by particular art works, usually (although not in this case) by women. The artist behind *I prefer living in color* is another long-time Los Angeles resident, David Hockney. Gibson was taken with Hockney's *Snail Space* (1995), a series of works including an enormous painted installation that incorporates shifting lights, and his *Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio* (1980), a similarly immense, but more representational work depicting the artist's commute from his home to his studio. Gibson's music is connected both to the shifting colors of *Snail Space* and to the views from Mulholland Drive. She was also interested in the ways in which different lights shining on *Snail Space* caused colors to move from foreground to background and back again, an effect that is reproduced here with instrumental groups and timbres.

In the first section of the musical work, the pianist plays a portion of the keyboard that strikes strings that have been dampened with putty, turning the piano into a percussion instrument that blends with the percussionist playing temple blocks. The string trio operates as unit, playing rhythmic chords, eventually joined by the bass clarinet with dramatic flourishes leading to more lyrical lines. When the piano part shifts to chords lower on the keyboard, sounding with a conventional piano timbre, the texture begins changing, with longer lines in the strings, who begin to express themselves as more independent voices. The last section of the piece is marked as "rocking" by Gibson, with piano chords and the percussion using the instruments of a rock trap set. The violist plays a solo in imitation of a distorted electric guitar, eventually joined by the full ensemble, with the percussionist dropping disruptive bass drum bombs. A "howling" bass clarinet solo leads to a calm (and presumably safe) arrival at our destination.

November 2026

by Derek Katz

Missy Mazzoli (b. 1980)
Vespers, for Violin and Electronics (2014)

Missy Mazzoli's *Vespers*, for violin and electronics has its roots in an extended work for voices, violin, clarinet, bass, electronic keyboards and percussion, *Vespers for a New Dark Age* (2014). That work, in the composer's words, "is a distorted, wild, blasphemous take on the traditional Vespers prayer service," using fragments of poems by Matthew Zapruder for the sung texts. The new work for violin, created the same year, draws from the fifth movement of the earlier work, "New Dark Age." Mazzoli both sampled music for keyboards and mallet percussion and reworked a section from the middle of the movement including voices. The violin part combines new material with repeated rising figures from the source work. The sampled chords move very slowly through harmonic changes, but shimmer and glow with tremolos from the percussion mallets.

The violin part is made up of slides, quick repeated figures and tremolos, with an electronic delay causing a constant echo, or duet with itself. The piece falls into two sections, with the first for just instruments, rising in intensity and falling back before a new section with sampled voices. The words are very difficult to make out (presumably intentionally) and Mazzoli seems to be using the voices for sonic qualities, not for relaying ideas. Near the end, the voices break into harmony and the violin rises higher than before, but the music returns to the opening sounds for a quiet ending.

Niloufar Nourbakhsh (b. 1992)
The Innocence of Life (Camerata Pacifica Commission, World Premiere)

NOTE FROM THE COMPOSER

When I began working on this commission from Camerata Pacifica, I had recently lost my mother. Her absence had left a profound hole in my life, and for a long time I seemed to see everything through the lens of that loss. It shifted my perspective on life, on time, and on the inevitability of death.

The first movement takes the form of a procession. Its musical material grows around an ostinato that bears a distant resemblance to Chopin's Funeral March. In the second movement, I imagined the act of dying itself; the gradual decay, the slipping away of life, and finally, the moment of farewell.

The final movement turns toward the other end of this cycle: the miracle of life and of giving birth. When I first conceived this work, I was grieving the death of my mother. By the time I finished it, I had become a mother myself.

Motherhood has not erased my awareness of death; if anything, it has made its presence more palpable. There is now a continuous awareness of how temporary everything is, but within that awareness I have also come to cherish more deeply the passing moments themselves, and the strange, singular beauty of simply being alive. The Innocence of Life lives somewhere within that contradiction: between birth and death, grief and wonder. It is my attempt to hold on to these fleeting moments and float in the present.

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by Derek Katz

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
Quintet for Piano and Winds in E-flat major, K. 452 (1784)

Presenting public concerts was a complex proposition in Mozart's Vienna. The most suitable halls – the courts theaters – were only available during Lent, when operas could not be staged, and, even then, putting on a performance required overcoming many practical hurdles, from outfitting the hall and printing tickets to engaging an orchestra and transporting a piano. Despite this, Mozart did manage to put on substantial number of lucrative public concerts in the mid-1780s. These "academy" concerts were programs that mixed symphonies, opera arias, improvisation and concertos, with the main attraction the opportunity to hear Mozart himself at the keyboard, both as an improvisor and as soloist in piano concertos that he had composed specially for these occasions.

The Quintet for Piano and Winds, K. 452, first performed at one of the court theaters a week and a half before Easter in 1784, is almost unique as a Mozart chamber work composed for public performance. The Quintet shared the program with two new concertos (K. 450 & 451), and has some concerto-like features, both affording many opportunities for Mozart to display his keyboard wizardry and also making use of many of the possibilities of combining solo keyboard with wind instruments that Mozart used in his concertos. The relationship between piano and winds is always shifting in the Quintet. Sometimes, all instruments play together as a small orchestra, against which both piano and individual winds can appear as soloists, sometimes the piano accompanies individual wind solos, sometimes the four winds join to provide a backdrop for the piano, and sometimes the two hands of the pianist are like fifth and sixth individual voices, engaging in dialogue with the four winds.

Another concerto-like feature is a written-out cadenza in the third movement, in which the musical argument stops on the harmony that would have signaled an improvised cadenza in a concerto, and then a long, winding conversation amongst all players leads to a final trill and a return of the main theme. A subtle, but distinctive feature of the Quintet is that there are no tempo extremes. Neither of the "fast" movements are allegro, but rather allegro moderato and allegretto (that is, lively but moderate, and somewhat less than lively) and middle, "slow" movement is a larghetto rather than a largo (something less than broad). Everything is graceful, there is room for elegant melodies, as well as space to fill with brilliant keyboard figuration.

The premiere performance was apparently a great success. Mozart wrote his father "I played two grand concertos and then a quintet, which was applauded extraordinarily; I myself consider it the best work I have composed in my life…I only wish that you could have heard it." Even accounting for Mozart's desire to please and impress his father, and that there were more than a fewer great pieces yet to come, this is high praise indeed. The Quintet truly is a special piece, even by Mozart's exalted standards, long treasured and cherished by wind players, and worthy of much broader audiences.