



A E Q U O R A

MYSTERY SONATA

Aequora for grand piano and electronics by María Huld Markan Sigfúsdóttir was originally commissioned for the Iceland Arts Festival in 2015 by the pianist Árni Heiðar Karlsson. The work is inspired by a text of Anne Carson from her book *Nox*, (including the segment above). In meeting María, she expressed to Mina and me that she had been thinking about adding a texture, an element, a new voice to the composition. She and I connected in sharing stories of our violin studies and we even found that many years ago we both studied with the same great violinist at a summer festival. Not only did María successfully and beautifully create and integrate the violin into this work, she also composed a coda of new material, a melody that seems to exist without pulse and beyond time; it is extraordinarily effective and magical. María writes, “The manuscript is hand-written without time signature. The electronic part creates a certain atmosphere and a frame over which the instruments play. The piano part is more fixed and the violin is written as a counterpoint to the other layers, creating tension and release. The piece evolves from uncertainty towards a clearer structure and demands from the performers a close listening and attention to delicate nuances.”

First Escape for solo violin by Daníel Bjarnason was commissioned and first performed by violinist Jennifer Koh in 2018. The composer informed me of his plan to write a series of “Escapes,” this having been the first. In learning this work I found myself repeatedly returning, in my mind, to an Escape Room. If you don’t know what that is, it’s an endeavor enjoyed by many young and older people: essentially, they pay money to be locked in a room where they must find clues and eventually escape. I went to one of these with my niece and nephew and while I enjoyed seeing their intelligence in action, my own internal experience was probably more like incarceration. Daníel’s piece is brilliantly composed for the violin, utilizing the natural harmonics of the string in the most virtuosic ways. It’s a wonderful contrast to Páll Ragnar Pálsson’s *Notre Dame*, which explores the expressivity of intonation across the harmonic series in a slow context. In contrast, Daníel uses the harmonics more in the way Paganini is rumored to have used them in the early 19th Century in his performances, achieving large leaps of pitch within a fast sequence. There is a manic quality to the work and yet a clear and intelligible form. The score calls for speeding up and halting, reminding me again of the excitement of finding clues to leave the Escape Room, and then realizing the clue led to nothing.

Notre Dame was originally written in 2021 for an Icelandic duo, Elísabet Waage on harp and Laufey Jónsdóttir on violin. The work explores the many distinct timbres and intonations of a unison pitch as played in various places on the strings, and on various lengths of string. The composer, Páll Ragnar Pálsson writes, “When Mina and Zachary approached me with a proposal for collaboration, it felt like a natural thing to do, to take this piece and rewrite the harp part for piano. A majority of my works are based on overtone scales of the instruments I am using. Combined, they create a set of notes that has been my home area in everything I have composed over the past few years. To me there is something divine, like some connection to omnipotence, through the overtones.”

When Mina and I began studying the piece, I initially slightly altered the violin’s tuning so that the natural harmonics would match the intonation of those on the piano. We had our first Zoom video session with Páll and he expressed his intention that the intonation differences in the “unisons” are in fact the natural harmonic series and very much part of the expressivity of the composition. By the next online video meeting, I had fully embraced the musical language, including the intentional subtle differences in unison pitches from string to string and instrument to instrument, and found that working directly with the composer had shaped the way we, as a duo, understood the gestures, the rhetorical statements, and the phrasing within the larger structure. Páll wrote, “I was thinking a lot about *Notre Dame* after the fire. There is a feminine connotation in the name of the church and I perceive the religiousness of it from a motherly aspect. It was a deep shock for the Occident when *Notre Dame* of Paris burned in 2019. As a joint effort of foresters, carpenters, engineers and benefactors, the roof is now being restored to its original state using materials and methods from the 13th century. The urgency and devotion of this act indicates the significance a building can have for a vast group of people.”

Reminiscence by Anna Thorvaldsdóttir was composed in 2017 in recognition of Democracy 25. This pan-European political movement explores alter-globalization, social ecology, ecofeminism, post-growth, post-capitalism, and universal basic income. In this work for solo piano, Anna uses specific notation to achieve the most captivating and moving resonances from the instrument, often conjuring mental images and memories of witnessing and experiencing natural phenomena, such as a volcanic eruption, an earthquake, or a storm over the ocean. However, although Anna finds inspiration in the musical qualities of nature, it's more about the "energy and the flow and structure, the nuances and perspectives you can take to zoom into the tiniest detail and zoom out. It's much more about the flow and the energy rather than specific landscapes. It's also not about romanticizing it at all, because nature is also brutal."

Reminiscence is composed in seven short sections, delineated by textural changes requiring different extended techniques on the piano. The challenge is to continue the natural flow of the musical material while getting inside the piano, holding down a pedal, reaching for the halfway mark on a string, all while holding down a key for sustained resonance. The effect is pure magic and creates a visceral experience for both the performer and listener.

Re/refractions, composed in 2023/24 by María Huld Markan Sigfúsdóttir, was commissioned by Boulder Bach Festival and *Mystery Sonata*. It received its world premiere by Mina and me at Boulder Bach Festival in Colorado, in February of 2024. Sigfúsdóttir writes, "The piece is inspired by a few different things - space (in the register of the instruments and the actual space between sounds), time (actual tempo and sense of time), and textures. The textures in the piece are often felt by changes of light or color in the tonal quality and chords. The terminology of the word refraction is: the bending of light as it passes from one transparent substance into another. This bending of light by refraction makes it possible for us to have lenses, magnifying glasses, prisms and rainbows. The piece is loosely divided into two parts, fraction 1 and 2, but is at the same time one whole arc of music. The second half of the piece gravitates around the note D and d-minor, which is also referred to as Re."

Mina Gajić has garnered an international reputation for insightful and dynamic performances of a vast and ever-evolving repertoire including many new works by living composers, concertos and recitals performed on historic Romantic Era pianos, and collaborations on harpsichord and fortepiano. She started her education and music career in Yugoslavia and subsequently performed as concerto soloist and recitalist in Italy, France, the Czech Republic, Serbia, Montenegro, China, Bolivia, and across the United States. As duo partner with violinist Zachary Carrettin, she has appeared on four continents, focusing on a diverse repertoire spanning the centuries and various styles—on historic period pianos in addition to modern concert instruments, and including new works composed for the duo.

Notable performances have included critically acclaimed period instrument renditions of works by Chopin, Brahms, Britten, Ives, Berg, Antheil, and Bartók. Her doctoral dissertation and subsequent research on the work of Yugoslav composer Josip Slavenski connect Balkan folkloric traditions and approaches to twentieth century music between the two World Wars.

Her performances of Brahms and Schumann (Érard piano, 1895) can be heard on the audio book *Escapement*, by award-winning author Kristen Wolf. Additionally, Gajić and Carrettin's recording of Schubert sonatas on historical instruments (Érard piano, 1835), *Boundless*, was released in 2020 and became a Top 10 on Billboard Charts "Traditional Classical" the following month. Her recording of Balkan Dances & Tango Nuevo with Carrettin, *Confluence* was released in 2022 on the Sono Luminus label. She performs as harpsichord concerto soloist on the 2023 *Boulder Bach Festival* album, also on Sono Luminus, and her album titled *Sonic Alchemy* was released in 2023. In 2024, her prepared piano album *Bach UnCaged*, with Carrettin on electric violin, was released (Sono Luminus).

Gajić holds degrees from the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Shepherd School of Music at Rice University, and holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Colorado-Boulder.

Gajić is the founder and Artistic Director of Boulder International Chamber Music Competition—*Art of Duo*. Former faculty at Sam Houston State University, in 2019 she became Artistic and Executive Director of Boulder Bach Festival, and subsequently co-founded the ensemble COrmpass REsonance.

Zachary Carrettin has performed as violinist, violist, cellist da spalla, and conductor in more than twenty-five countries on four continents and has established a reputation for presenting diverse programs which feature repertory from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries—on period, modern, and electric instruments. He has conducted orchestras across the United States, Europe, and South America. As soloist and music director with Project Bandaloop, he appeared at Wolf Trap Center for the Performing Arts *Face of America* Series, the Stavanger Festival (Norway), and in a private concert for the Sultan and Royal Family of Oman, in Muscat, performing on electric violin.

In the field of historically inspired period instrument performance, Carrettin appeared as soloist with American Bach Soloists and as guest concertmaster with numerous baroque orchestras including the GRAMMY-nominated Sono Luminus recording of Hasse's *Marc' Antonio e Cleopatra* with Ars Lyrica, and the U.S. premiere of Vivaldi's rediscovered opera *Moteczuma* with Musica Angelica and Long Beach Opera. He toured internationally performing Mexican baroque music with El Mundo and toured the California mission churches performing with Chanticleer. His recording of Schubert sonatinas on original instruments with pianist Mina Gajić was released in 2020 (Sono Luminus), and the following month hit No. 9 on Billboard Charts traditional classical. During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown he recorded Bach Cello Suites on baroque viola (Sono Luminus), inspiring the following: "...everything is infused with poetry" (Gramophone Magazine), and "This performance counsels that we can see the world anew." (Early Music America)

In chamber music Carrettin has collaborated with the Tokyo Quartet, the Assad Brothers, and with many of the world's early music luminaries. An advocate of diversity in music, Carrettin toured one-hundred cities with Yanni and shared the stage with Ray Charles, the Black Crowes, Cake, Joan Jett and many others at festivals internationally, as soloist with Project Bandaloop. His original music and recordings have been heard on Late Night with David Letterman, at the Kennedy Center, on CBS Sunday Morning, 60 Minutes, PBS, and on NPR's Sunday Baroque. His tango nuevo and Balkan dances recording in collaboration with pianist Mina Gajić, *Confluence* was released in 2022 (Sono Luminus). Gajić and Carrettin also appear as soloists on Boulder Bach Festival's 2023 album (Sono Luminus). In 2024, the duo released *Bach UnCaged*, an album juxtaposing electric baroque violin with effects, and prepared piano (Sono Luminus).

Carrettin holds degrees from Rice University Shepherd School of Music and University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and pursued doctoral studies at Rice University, leaving to serve on the faculty at Sam Houston State University as Director of Orchestral Studies, and later at University of Colorado Boulder as interim Director of Early Music Ensembles as well as guest Music Director at Eklund Opera.

Carrettin is currently in his twelfth year as Music Director of Boulder Bach Festival, and in that capacity is the co-founder of the BBF's ensemble-in-residence, COmpass REsonance (CORE).



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