

Three-Part Invention: Palisades Virtuosi Tells All

Written by Robert Schulslaper
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Call it synergy, call it telepathy, in any established chamber group there's a symbiotic resonance, an empathic sensitivity that binds the players together and shapes their performance. Palisades Virtuosi, originally a casual association among three friends, has, after 11 years together, had sufficient time to "gel" so that the interpretive give and take, flow, and intuition are automatic. Previously featured in 2010 (*Fanfare* 34:2), the trio members have returned to tell us more about their shared history as exemplary executants and adventurous commissioners of new music.

Ron Levy:

We three met a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away and made rather an immediate decision to form a group, precipitated by Don's leaving the *Phantom of the Opera* national tour, with which he was playing principal clarinet. The idea of starting a commissioning program was born of desperation, after we virtually exhausted the repertoire for flute/clarinet/piano after our first season. We all had had extensive experience playing new music. I, for one, had two early teachers, Diana Arlyck and Leland Thompson, who were enthusiastic about contemporary music [Lee was a gifted composer], and who subsequently inculcated this interest in me. In addition, I was a member of *Dogs of Desire*, a chamber-sized offshoot of the Albany Symphony, which commissioned, performed, and recorded new music. (The name derives from [conductor] David Alan Miller's desire to have had a rock group when he was growing up: That's the name he would have christened it with.)

We started by playing four concerts on our subscription series; now we do two plus a special Christmas concert. Run-outs total about another half dozen or so. This year, we are starting a newish relationship with Bergen Community College. We are scheduled for a full-length recital, and there will be other concerts that we will participate in. In addition, we normally play once or twice at Montclair University, and will probably be going back to the University of Hawaii (on Oahu), where we have an informal residency-of-sorts. The types of venues range from Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center to schools and assisted-living facilities. We do it all. Although we travel to many of our concerts, it's not really "life on the road" except for Hawaii. Margaret and Don still have children and family considerations, but I think we would all like to have more touring in Palisades Virtuosi's future. Personally, I'd like to see our commissioning program divided into three categories: young artists (to age 22), domestic, and international. We will continue to draw on our commissions for repertoire for our upcoming albums, which would include several CDs devoted to our "corruptions" (adaptations of existing works).

Why did we call ourselves Palisades Virtuosi? All of us reside in northeastern New Jersey, which has as a major geographical landmark the Hudson River and the [Western] Palisades, which run along its shores. As for "Virtuosi," the term derives from the Italian word for "virtuous." The true meaning of "virtuoso" is not a technical "show-off," but one who has cultivated an appreciation of artistic excellence (which includes superior craftsmanship). Our latest album cover is a riff on the name of the Moravec piece, which alludes to the famous Palisades Amusement Park, formerly situated in Cliffside Park [now the site of a couple of high-rise apartment buildings]. Don and I enjoyed the park when we were youngsters; Margaret, who grew up in Vermont, didn't. The park was gone by the time she moved to this area.

As to our having any favorites from the current program, you really want us to get in trouble with our composers, don't you? [laughs] I will say, though, that the Moravec, although one of the most difficult and virtuosic of our commissions, is a romp, and is becoming one of our "trademark" pieces. The Chwalyk is so poignant; remember that Margaret's lovingly recorded poem is "signed" [presented in sign language] when we do it live. The Sampson is important and somewhat "crunchy"—an interesting revisit of a pre-existing flute piece. The Womack is incredibly evocative of what it's supposed to portray—OK, ya got me!

It's one of my favorites. The Wojcik is huge in scope (symphonic, even), and an eloquent and very personal existential statement. And the Garcia-Marruz and the Perillo, rather comfortable "bedfellows," are simply fun and delicious.

Speaking about composers in general, these are the musicians who get the rawest deal, often working without much compensation, in solitude, and often without a lot of recognition. Our hearts go out to them; certainly we feel considerable responsibility to serve them as well as possible. In the early days, working closely with the composer was very helpful, at least to me. Now, because we have honed our rehearsal skills and craftsmanship and become more discerning, our final renditions diverge less from the composers' intentions. Sometimes the well-meaning suggestions of the composers can have the opposite effect of making us more rigid and "careful." Ultimately, I think the composer has to trust his notation; after all, he or she won't be around forever to coach future practitioners.

Margaret Swinchoski:

Ron and Don have performed together since Don was in high school, and I met Don over 25 years ago at a reading orchestra in New York. I still recall the magical reading of a Beethoven Sixth one summer evening that convinced me that Don and I were on the same page musically. It was then, and still is, a joy to play with him! I met Ron over 20 years ago when I was hired by a colleague to perform a concert with him in Vermont. I asked him if he was willing to do a recital with me shortly thereafter and he agreed. His passion for performing and his entrepreneurial sense have led us to many ventures in the performing world and I treasure our musical association. Ron then brought the three of us together 20 years ago for another Vermont concert. We had a great time, and over the next few years whenever Don returned home to New Jersey from his tour we would get together to read some trios. About 12 years ago Don came "off the road" and Ron suggested we form an official trio because we had enjoyed playing together so much.

We chose the name "Palisades Virtuosi" not because we live near the old amusement park site but because we live near the Hudson Palisades, across from Manhattan; and Virtuosi because, well—we have a lot of really virtuosic pieces in our repertoire!

There are other flute/clarinet/piano trios around who have chosen to arrange and orchestrate well-known works for their instrumentation to enlarge their repertoire. While we appreciate their work and have done some of that type of arranging ourselves, we really felt that our mission should be to create a body of new repertoire for our trio that could remain as a legacy for future generations. Here are some answers to FAQ's about the success of our commissioning project:

- **Palisades Virtuosi has commissioned 38 works for flute, clarinet, and piano since 2003.**
- **Seven composers have made transcriptions of their existing works for Palisades Virtuosi.**
- **Twelve composers have written non-commissioned "gifts" for Palisades Virtuosi.**
- **Eleven works have been commissioned by other benefactors for Palisades Virtuosi.**

In all, Palisades Virtuosi has been responsible for nearly 70 new works for flute, clarinet, and piano in just 11 years!!

From the beginning of our commissioning program we have striven to give voice to the dozens of unsung heroes of new music. Many composers struggle in anonymity for years, and not because of lack of talent. As with all musicians, it is often being in the right place at the right time that makes the difference in one's success. We hope that we have made that difference for the composers whose names are not as familiar as others. And many of them come from our state of New Jersey. In all, of the works we have commissioned, more than two-thirds have been written by New Jersey composers!

We have had a subscription series in Ridgewood, New Jersey for over 10 years. In addition to that we perform many run-outs of those programs throughout the Tri-State area (NY/NJ/CT). We feel it is important for these new works to be heard as much as possible—our commissions have multiple performances that allow us to reach a full appreciation of the works before we record them. We perform roughly 15 to 20 times a year in concert halls, universities, churches, all types of standard venues, and yes, if we were hired to perform in alternative venues we would be happy to. Just as long as they have a

good piano and good lighting! We've occasionally journeyed farther afield to Hawaii and Canada, and we are open to more travel in the future!

At nearly every performance I ask the audience members to raise their hands if they've never heard these three instruments together in concert, and at nearly every concert 30 to 40 percent of them raise their hands. There are a number of trios of this instrumentation around now, but when we started in 2003 there were only two or three. The audience members that we hear from are usually delightedly surprised and wonder why there aren't more trios like us around!

I am exceedingly proud of all our recordings. We have been releasing a new album of commissioned works every other year since 2006. The majority of the works we commission are on the more accessible side, although there is a broad range of tonal language. To name just a few would be difficult, as each work has been rehearsed and honed to such a point that they have all become very near and dear to my heart.

There are a lot of contrasts on our newest album. Paul Moravec's *Palisades Amusement* inspired the whimsical cover showing all of the CD's composers on The Cyclone roller coaster with Palisades Virtuosi at the helm. Our trio often chooses our commissioned composers from those we have met, worked with, or just plain admired all along. I met Paul when he was an up-and-coming talent at Mario Davidovsky's Composers' Conference, way back when it was held in northern Vermont. While a student at Johnson State College (VT) I worked several summers for the conference and so met a lot of composers. (The conference subsequently moved south to Wellesley College in Massachusetts). Paul was memorable among the composers I met there, and I encountered him from time to time throughout my years in New York. When Palisades Virtuosi's "Mission to Commission" was born, Paul was a natural for the composer wish list to which we're continually adding. Thankfully he agreed to write for us and *Palisades Amusement* was born! When Paul began writing the piece, he told us that our name kept making him think of the amusement park that he went to many times as a boy and that he kept hearing the tune from the park's TV ads, *Come On Over*. (An amusing side note: We subsequently spent some time trying to *find* that tune within the work without any success. We later mentioned to him that we had been searching unsuccessfully for it and he then told us that even though it was going through his head, it didn't actually make it into the piece. No wonder we couldn't find it!!) In the piece he depicts the giant roller coaster at the center of the park, The Cyclone, which terrified him as a child. The piece has a dark, eerie section that mirrors the apprehension he had when getting on the ride, we hear the building tension as the coaster reaches the top and then it finally lets loose for a "wild ride!"

Time Unheard, by James Chwalyk, is a warm and lyrical tribute to his parents' support of his musical career. It is a very accessible work that we love to perform and audiences love to hear. On this disc the poem written by James's grandmother is narrated; in performance it is presented in sign language during the middle section of the piece.

David Sampson's *Undercurrents Redux* is a picture in motion, playing on his memories of a childhood spent on the banks of the Camden River in South Carolina. Opening with a calm and reflective flute solo, it moves into a soundscape of water creatures stirring and water swirling, ending with rippling cascades in the finale. It is a challenging and exciting work to perform.

By far the work with the greatest scope (and length!) on the CD is Raymond Wojcik's *Between Worlds*. Written at a time when the composer was grappling with the life and death issues of discovering he had cancer, the work spans the gamut of human emotion from bewilderment, anguish, grief, poignancy, and ultimately acceptance that is gained through the final minutes of the piece. (I have to say that emotionally this work is cathartic and exhausting to perform, yet so satisfying and uplifting!)

Pictures of Hawaii abound in each movement of Donald Reid Womack's *'Aina*. From "Lo'ihī," the new island forming off the coast of the big island, through the twisting threads and strands of "Pele's Hair" (the volcanic glass that forms when lava is spewed into the air) to "Makai" with its swirling schools of fish and sea life, and finally to the vast wastelands of the fields of lava depicted in "Echoes of a Long Frozen Fire," the composer paints his beloved home in evocative colors and sounds! We love performing this piece!!

Sergio Garcia-Marruz's *Palisades Rush* portrays a gentle and relaxing saunter on a sultry day, paired with a crazy drive into Manhattan! Beautiful harmonies with unexpected twists are contrasted with pointed rhythms and humor to boot!

Tour de Force by Steve Perillo is a gas to play and our audiences always enjoy it! The first movement is an *hommage* to sunny Italy and the second is a joyous romp! What fun! My favorites? All of them!

In the beginning we worked with each composer religiously, as Ron says, and over the years we have developed a method for approaching each work that enables us to grasp the piece without extensive input from the composer. Now we generally perform the work for the composer sometime during the week of the premiere and get his or her general feedback, which we use for a final polishing of the piece. We have had two or three works over the years where we were unable to meet with the composer prior to the performance. With detailed communication to answer questions we might have, these have seemed to come off equally as well as ones that had more “hands on” time from the composer. Most recently, our premiere in March 2014 of Kerry Turner’s *Vathek* was handled entirely by email, as Kerry is currently residing in Europe. And when the composer received the concert recording he was delighted with the result!

What next? We are very much looking forward to our new association with Bergen Community College as visiting artists and will be staging our initial concert there this coming November with a wonderful new piece by California composer Adrienne Albert. We also have a list of pieces to fill at least three more volumes of commissioned works ... all we need is time and money!!

Don Mokrynski:

One of the most memorable and fortuitous moments of my life came when I was auditioning for Juilliard and enlisted Ron as my accompanist. After rehearsing my material we played through the Brahms sonatas “for fun,” which was such an exciting experience—so easy and natural. Brahms turned out to be the favorite composer for both of us! I realized a bond was instantly formed. Thirty years later we are still trying to find the opportunity for when we can commit ourselves to adding yet another reading (of the sonatas) to the already saturated catalog—but we feel compelled that it must be done! I think this an integral part of the formation of Palisades Virtuosi, which has been the most timely and worthwhile of all of our personal projects.

The group’s dedication to new works came as a reaction to not having enough repertoire for our instrumentation. I wasn’t initially interested in the idea, but since I did a lot of “new” music at the Eastman School I was open to it, and the idea of promoting American composers (and particularly local ones, i.e., from New Jersey) was extremely appealing.

I’ve accrued a long list of wonderful memories and experiences while being “on the road,” as I travelled through much of the U.S. with various touring groups for a decade. Margaret traveled briefly as a “sub” on *Phantom* with me. The limited traveling that Palisades Virtuosi has done together, such as to Hawaii, has also been unforgettable, especially as we are good friends who are dedicated to serving what we have created. It really does feel like a “calling,” and I wish we could bring Palisades Virtuosi to anybody who would enjoy having us.

The most common critique we get is that the flute and clarinet sound too much the same and are in predominantly the treble range. The blending of the instruments, however, is what I enjoy the most—just listen to the wonderful examples by Richard Lane [Trio No.2; ALBANY TROY 826] or Joseph Turrin [*Statements* ; ALBANY TROY 1339] to name a few. Interestingly, Richard died suddenly, and this manuscript was found on his piano (possibly unfinished) with the dedication to the Palisades Virtuosi. The second movement therefore seems an eerily fitting elegy to this wonderful man. Joseph Turrin is a close friend and so (and most cleverly) composed solo movements two, three, and four based specifically on his impressions of each of our personalities.

Also, some composers are extremely clever about taking two instruments that can sound so alike and juxtaposing them in inventive ways—Paul Somers’s *An Arch of Miniatures* [ALBANY 826] or Amanda Harberg’s *Birding in the Palisades* [ALBANY TROY 1339] spring to mind. This includes brief, descriptive narrative recited by the great Marni Nixon. In the second movement I am a blissful fish that is pursued to an unfortunate end by a bird (flute). In the last movement I am not having trouble with my instrument—I am simply doing my best to be a crow!

And finally we also have many pieces that employ the other instruments in the flute/clarinet families—the bass clarinet vs. piccolo or E \flat clarinet/bass flute, etc. Brilliant examples are the “911” piece by Brian Schober [*Windspace* ; ALBANY TROY 1195]—in concert (as well as the recording) the alto flute and the bass clarinet are situated as far at the left and right wings of the (sound) stage as possible, in order to create the ominous effect of “windspace” that depicts the horrifying moments of the 911 attacks on the World Trade Center—or our 50th commission, *Aina* , by Hawaiian composer Donald Reid Womak [ALBANY TROY 1481], in which the bass flute/bass clarinet really help to define the contours and spirituality of the Hawaiian volcanic landscape.

As for favorites, I, like my colleagues, hate to make that kind of choice. Actually some of my favorite pieces are some of the transcriptions (or “corruptions”) that we have created—Beethoven’s “Spring” Sonata, Saint Saens’s *Carnival of the Animals* (“The Swan” on bass clarinet), and a bunch of Joplin *Rags*. But I have to honestly say that I’m amazed at how much I’ve come to like just about every composition written for us. The talent has been amazing and seemingly inspired, which makes playing them so exciting.