Cris Derksen
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CRIS DERKSEN IS HOME

The award-winning cellist on the urgency of Indigenous activism in the arts, the importance of hustle, and why life under lockdown is busier than ever

Cris Derksen (BMus’07) is home. The COVID pandemic has brought the Juno-nominated cellist’s life on the road — more than a decade of near-constant travel, with frequent stops on the folk, classical, art and fashion circuits in Canada and abroad — to a sudden halt. Yet she finds herself busier than ever.

Since the lockdown began last March, Derksen has composed music for the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, collaborated on an “art-dance-fashion” film for Indigenous Fashion Week Toronto, scored a documentary series for the Knowledge Network, and performed many virtual concerts, including a Wednesday Noon Hours event for the School of Music.

“It’s been kind of a lovely treat to be at home for ten months,” she says.

Derksen credits her success during this difficult time to a determined, pan-genre approach to music that dates back to her days as a UBC music student, and to her experiences as a Two-Spirit person of Cree and Mennonite descent in Canada’s white, settler-dominated music industry. It’s an approach that has ultimately served her well as an artist and as someone immersed, out of necessity, in the business of music.

In November, Derksen spoke with the School of Music’s Prof. T. Patrick Carrabré about the urgency of Indigenous activism in the arts, the importance of hustle, and the future of live music in a post-pandemic world.

The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How have you been managing during all this lockdown? I see you active on social media and doing lots of concerts, but tell us what life is like.

Derksen: You know, I hadn’t been home since I graduated from UBC, really. For 13 years, I’ve been on the road. And it’s been kind of a lovely treat to be home. I’m even busier than I imagined. I’m doing performances. I’ve done some classical commissions, a choral commission. I just finished Indigenous Fashion Week Toronto — 40 minutes of straight art, dance, fashion, and film, all combined. I was the lead composer for that. Now I’m going straight into a four-part docuseries that is due at the end of January for Knowledge Network. It’s called BC: A History, and it covers first contact between Indigenous peoples and European settlers, and explores how white settler governments passed laws to make it easier for white people to get ahead and definitely made it hard for any folks of colour to maintain any sort of liveable situation. So that’s what I’m diving deep into. As well as these online concerts that I record at night [laughs].

I think that’s interesting, because you really do balance the performing and the creative side of things, which I’m sure keeps you very flexible. You were a performance major at UBC, and from that you’ve developed this really varied career. Can you give us an idea of how that evolved?

Derksen: I arrived at UBC as a string player with a little bit of a different perception at the beginning. I knew I didn’t want to play at a desk in an orchestra. I wanted to be a really good player so I could play my own music. So I went to UBC with the idea that I was there to learn the skills and discipline you need to maintain a rigorous working life. Skills I could take from UBC into the real world. But I also wanted to do things my own way.

I was super-fortunate that I was already touring with Tanya Tagaq before I graduated, in 2007. So I did my grad recital, and the next day I went to perform at the Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto, and the day after that we went to Spain to perform for WOMEX. It was just like the path was already set out. And again it goes back to me wanting to do something different — I was creating that path while I was at UBC. I had a clear vision of what I wanted to do.

Another thing that really helped was Dr. Sal Ferreras’s music business course. I took a lot arts business courses that taught me how to get grants.

There are still Indigenous projects for symphony getting funded that don’t include Indigenous composers. This is something that we have to take back.

— Cris Derksen

Read the full interview on the High Notes blog
Conjuring the Future

A new collaboration between Prof. Bob Pritchard and Turning Point Ensemble imagines one possible future for humanity — and another for classical music performance

An oboist wanders barefoot in near-darkness. He plays a string of searching notes, trails off, and begins again, elaborating the melody. He stops, peers. Ahead, curled up on the ground, lies a body. The oboist removes the mouthpiece from his instrument and blows into the barrel. A light flickers, and there is movement. The figure of a cyborg staggers to its feet, vertebral loops pulsing a deep blue. Who are these two strangers? Creator and creation? Master and servant? Adversaries?

So begins Synapses, a new multimedia collaboration spearheaded by Professor of Composition Bob Pritchard and oboist David Owen of Vancouver’s Turning Point Ensemble.

The project, which premiered in January as part of the Chan Centre’s winter programming, takes up one of the challenges musicians face right now: How do you bridge the gap between performer and audience that has opened up during the COVID-19 pandemic?

“When [COVID] hit, live performances just stopped. It was adapt or die,” recalls Owen.

Synapses originated with an unusual commission and a wildly inventive piece of technology. Turning Point, one of Vancouver’s pre-eminent classical music collectives, launched a new initiative that would allow member musicians like Owen to commission new music from Canadian composers and work with filmmakers to realize them visually. They would be performed, recorded, and packaged together as 1 + 1 + 1..., an ambitious streaming video series.

“The idea was to be as creative as possible, to offer something beyond the experience our audiences would get at a live show. I immediately thought of Bob Pritchard,” Owen says.

For Prof. Pritchard, the timing was perfect: “I happened to be working on a new piece of wearable tech, and I was beginning to think about how I might compose music for it,” he says.

Kálmán, Rediscovered

Prof. Jonathan Girard and the UBC Symphony Orchestra shine a light on century-old symphonic treasures

By Tze Liew

Emmerich Kálmán couldn’t sing, and wouldn’t dance — but his music has moved hundreds of thousands of operetta-goers to fits of tears and waltzes of joy. Capturing many a heart with gems like Die Csárdásfürstin (The Gypsy Princess) and Gräfin Mariza (Countess Maritza), Kálmán is a glittering beacon among names like Johann Strauss and Franz Lehár, and currently the most performed operetta composer in the world.

What most of his fans probably don’t know is that, early in his career, Kálmán (1882–1953) wrote orchestral works in the vein of Liszt and Bartók. These include two rarely-performed manuscripts, one of which was stowed away in a drawer for almost a century, never to see the light of day — until now.

The UBC Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Dr. Jonathan Girard, recently released Emmerich Kálmán — Symphonic Poems on the Operetta Archives label, featuring world première recordings of Kálmán’s two early symphonic poems, Saturnalia (1904) and Endre és Johanna (1906). Written before Kálmán embarked on his journey as an operetta composer, they are fascinating pieces: Saturnalia brings to life the traditional wild revelries in honour of the Roman god Saturn. Endre és Johanna is inspired by the 1885 novel by Hungarian writer and politician Jenő Rákosi, depicting the tragic 14th-century marriage between Johanna, granddaughter of King Robert the Wise of Naples, and her cousin Andrew, son of King Charles I of Hungary — when she was five and he six.

To discover symphonic poems by a major composer like this is like finding shipwrecked treasure — and Girard is passionate about bringing light to obscure works. He had always known of Kálmán, but was further piqued while conducting with the Ohio Light Opera, where at least one Kálmán operetta was put on every other summer. There Girard met Michael Miller, a long-time Kálmán crusader, friend of the Kálmán family, and head of the Operetta Foundation, who told him about the tone poems that had never been recorded commercially.
Dr. Stephen Chatman, Professor of Composition, is one of Canada’s most prominent, versatile and frequently performed composers. From grand orchestral works, to classic piano gems for learners, to imaginative choral songs that sell 20,000 copies of sheet music a year, his music is beloved by ensembles, choirs and fledgling pianists across North America — praised as “bright, expressive, eminently accessible fare that’s easy on the ear and good for the soul” by the American Record Guide.

Prof. Chatman has been teaching at UBC since 1976. He was the youngest faculty member then, and probably the oldest now. After a whopping 45-year teaching career, during which he has mentored scores of students who have gone on to great careers, Prof. Chatman will retire this year at the age of 71.

High Notes took the opportunity to talk to Prof. Chatman about his adventures as a composer and professor, and hear his perspective on how the music landscape has changed over the years. Prof. Chatman has always been a pillar of inspiration and encouragement to his students — his wellspring of lived experience, musical knowledge and quirky stories will be missed.

You’re a very prolific composer. What is your process? How do ideas come to you, and how do you so easily turn the germ of an idea into something fully realized?

Chatman: There is a mystery to composing and, as I get older, I understand less and less about composition. Like many composers, I find that beginning a work is the most difficult. Some parts, like transitions, are more difficult to write than others. But once I have a start, I can usually finish a piece without too many problems. The one piece of advice I give my students is, “Try not to worry about whether your music is good or bad - just write it.” Easier said than done, especially for young composers.

Read the whole story on the High Notes blog.