

Concord of Sounds: New Compositions for Accordion

Matti Pulkki, accordion

Program

- Matt Simon *Rotating Bokeh* (2020, WP), for amplified accordion
- Yu-Chun Chien *RE: ColOReD* (2022, WP)
- Jeewon Kim *Karenin* (2022, WP)

Intermission

- Reiko Fütting *ineo* (2019)
- George Katchis *become/desiccated* (2018)

Originally planned for the Fall of 2020, this concert continues my collaboration with composers George Katehis and Reiko Fütting. Meeting George in 2016 in Darmstadt led to a process of him writing a highly demanding and detailed piece, *become/desiccated*, which I have since performed in recitals around the world. It is through George that I had the great pleasure of meeting Reiko, and his exceptional work *ineo* was premiered on my last visit to New York in 2019, and I have since been looking forward to performing it after the hiatus in all live performances.

From these previous trips to New York through Reiko and George, I have been able to connect with wonderful composers and premiere multiple new works. Tonight's program features three such premieres: with Matt Simon, we have been exploring noise through contact microphones and amplification since 2020, leading to the piece *Rotating Bokeh*. My collaborations with Yu-Chun Chien and Jee Won Kim began last year and will culminate in two highly imaginative and effective new pieces.

If this program featuring five distinct compositions should have a single theme, it would be *extension*. In each their own way, these pieces seem to strive to extend the existing limits and conventions of the instrument and instrumentalist in terms of technical, timbral, and performative qualities. Tools of extension vary from innovative extended techniques and overlaid sound textures to the use of electronics and spoken text. This concert of exclusively solo accordion music, written exclusively in North America, is also representation of extension in one geographical area -- as the accordion in the context of American art music still remains a novelty. – Matti Pulkki

Accordionist **Matti Pulkki** is an active and enthusiastic performer of contemporary and experimental repertoire. Often performing with different chamber groups and ensembles, Pulkki seeks to explore and extend the technical and acoustic possibilities of his instrument through the music written in our time.

Since his debut recital at the Helsinki Music Center in 2018, Pulkki has made appearances on international festivals, such as the Reedblocks Festival in Thessaloniki, Greece, and performed recitals throughout Europe and North America. He has also been featured as a soloist by ensembles and orchestras such as NYKY Ensemble and Ensemble Contemporain de Montréal.

Recently, Pulkki's focus has been collaboration with composers and he has actively commissioned new works featuring accordion. He frequently holds lecture-recitals about his instrument and its possibilities for composers at international festivals and universities around Europe and North America. Although Pulkki performs mostly original music written for accordion, he also arranges and transcribes music from a wide range of global styles and enjoys working as a creative artist and musician on diverse projects from interdisciplinary productions to music theatre and opera.

Matti Pulkki holds a Master's degree from the Sibelius Academy of the University of the Arts Helsinki and is currently pursuing his doctorate at the University of Toronto under the guidance of professor Joseph Macerollo, and is based in Toronto. His doctoral research focuses on the collaborative processes between composers and instrumentalists.

mattipulkki.com

Matt Simon is a Jewish American composer from New York. His music focuses on the exploration of compositional ideas, numbers, and sonic textures. Trained as a jazz guitarist, Simon received a Bachelor of Music from New York University where he studied with Bruce Arnold, Tony Moreno, and Ralph Alessi. Upon being exposed to the ideas of the Second Viennese and New York Schools, Simon became interested in the classical music of the twentieth century and the breadth of possibilities it offered. After studying with Nathan Davis for several years, Simon attended the Manhattan School of Music where he received a Master of Music in composition, studying with Reiko Fueting. Simon's music has been performed by ensembles including S.E.M. Ensemble, Longleash, Quartet121, Ostravská Banda, and Ensemble Signal.

bo·keh

/'bʊkə/ or BOH-kə

noun

1. The visual quality of the out-of-focus areas of a photographic image, especially as rendered by a particular lens.

Origin

1990s: from Japanese *boke*, apparently shortened from *pinboke* 'state of being out of focus'.

Jee Won Kim is a composer based in the United States and South Korea. She received her BM in Composition at Chung-Ang University in South Korea and received her MM in Composition at Manhattan School of Music where she studied with Reiko Fütting. She is currently pursuing her doctoral degree at Indiana University Jacobs School of Music under the tutelage of David Dzubay and Aaron Travers while teaching composition and music theory as an Associate Instructor.

She has received prizes, awards, and scholarships in South Korea and the United States, and her works were performed in the United States, Czech Republic, and South Korea by Unheard-of//Ensemble (New York), Studio Dan (Vienna), MSM Composers' Orchestra, and various musicians. Her electronic music work was played at SEAMUS National Conference 2021.

https://soundcloud.com/jen_nnnnny

"Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing."

"Anyone whose goal is 'something higher' must expect someday to suffer vertigo. What is vertigo? Fear of falling? No, Vertigo is something other than fear of falling. It is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves."

- Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Yu-Chun Chien, a Taiwanese composer based in the United States and Taiwan. Her compositions and arrangements have been published and performed in Taiwan, the United States, Germany, France, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, and Canada. She has appeared at various festivals, conferences, and residencies around the world, and has collaborated with some of the world's prestigious orchestras, ensembles, and musicians, including the Radio-Sinfonieorchester Stuttgart des SWR, Arditti Quartet, loadbang, among others.

Yu-Chun Chien received her Doctor of Musical Arts and Master of Music degrees from Manhattan School of Music in New York, and her Bachelor of Music degree from Taipei National University of the Arts in Taiwan. Some of her most influential teachers have been Reiko Fütting, Susan Botti, and Chung-Kun Hung.

Yu-Chun Chien is currently a Teaching Assistant Professor at West Virginia University. Previously, she was appointed coordinator of aural skills and coordinator of the theory tutoring program at Manhattan School of Music, where she served as a teaching fellow in the college theory department and a faculty member in the pre-college division.

As a composer, Yu-Chun Chien constantly searches for new means of expression, which can be transformed in personal and intimate ways.

- RE: ColOReD** “RE” has the meaning of “to response,” “to repeat,” “to reuse,” “to re-compose,” and so forth.
“RE” also suggests the pitch of “D” in the fixed Do solfège system.
- RE: ColOReD** “COLORED” may reflect passive tenses which can be “was colored,” “is (being) colored,” and “will be colored.”
- RE: ColOReD** “COLOR” suggests “timbre” that the piece explores not only the instrumental timbre but also its interaction with the voice.
“COLOR” is also related to the third movement “Farben” in Arnold Schönberg’s Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 16.
- RE: ColOReD** The piece is a compositional documentary, serving as a “RECORD” of the compositional process.
- RE: ColOReD** The piece throws out a question: which note is the center – “C or D”?
- RE: ColOReD** The piece is dedicated to the “fantastic” accordionist, Matti Pulkki.
The collaborative experience has been “OLE!”

Reiko Fueting was born in 1970 in Königs Wusterhausen of the German Democratic Republic. He studied composition and piano at the Hochschule für Musik “Carl Maria von Webern” in Dresden, at Rice University in Houston, at Manhattan School of Music in New York, and at Seoul National University. Some of his most influential teachers have been the composers Jörg Herchet and Nils Vigeland, and the pianist Winfried Apel.

Reiko joined the theory faculty at the Manhattan School of Music in 2000. Five years later, he became a member of the composition faculty and was appointed chair of the theory department. In 2020, he was also appointed chair of the composition department. He has taught vocal accompanying at the Conservatory of Music and Theater in Rostock, Germany, and appeared as guest faculty and lecturer at universities and conservatories in China, Colombia, Germany, Italy, Russia, South Korea, and the United States.

As a composer, Reiko has received numerous prizes, awards, scholarships, grants, and commissions. His music has been performed in several countries in Europe, the Americas, and Asia. It is published by Edition Gravis in Berlin, Germany; most of his recordings have been released on the New Focus label in New York. He has collaborated with a wide range of musicians, ensembles, and orchestras, with a particular interest in vocal ensembles and ensembles performing on period instruments. He is currently working on an opera on the life of the mystic nun Mechthild von Magdeburg, which will be premiered at the reopening of the concert hall in Magdeburg, Germany in 2022.

“With my music, I aim to explore the psychological nature of memory, as it is projected onto the compositional device of musical quotation. By realizing this device in the entire musical spectrum of assimilation, integration, dissimilation, disintegration, and segregation, while moving freely between clear borders and gradual transitions, quotation and memory may function as a means to reflect upon contemporary artistic, cultural, social, and political phenomena.”

Initium ut esset, creatus est homo.
Damit ein Anfang sei, wurde der Mensch geschaffen.
That there was a beginning, man was created.

“The composition *ineo*, for accordion (2019), was commissioned by Ralph Crispino's I-Park Foundation and is dedicated to Finnish accordionist Matti Pulkki. The sentence by St. Augustin, used in the original Latin as well as in its English and German translation, was included as a reference to German/American philosopher Hannah Arendt, whose interpretation reaches beyond its Christian context and focuses on the potential for political change represented by the birth of each human being. I think that this shift of focus from the mortality of humans to the nativity of humans is as relevant in our times as it was in the times Hannah Arendt reflected. Musically, the composition references contemporary composers (Sofia Gubaidulina, Arvo Pärt) as well as the music of Josquin Desprez (the chanson *Nymphes des bois*, also known as *La Déploration de Johannes Ockeghem*, and one excerpt of the Missa *Pange lingua* (“...et incarnatus est...”/“...and was made man...”).

George Katehis (www.georgekatehismusic.com) is a Greek-American composer based in NYC. His compositional interests lie at the exploration and convergence of “polywork,” polyphony and complexity, music semiotics, various “early music” techniques, and more recently -- toy and mechanical instruments, theatre, and mixed media compositions through archival work. Currently, he is an instructor for undergraduate and graduate courses at New Jersey City University’s (NJCU) Department of Music, Dance, and Theatre and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. at the CUNY Graduate Center, having studied with Jason Eckardt and Jeff Nichols. At the Graduate Center, he is the director of the GC Composers, the presenting organization for new music.

Katehis’ music has been performed in North America and Europe and exhibited in numerous festivals, lectures, workshops, and masterclasses. He has received grants, residencies, and prizes from the Goethe Institut, American Guild of Organists (AGO), the American Accordionists’ Association (AAA), Fulbright Foundation, the Canada Arts Council, and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts Emergency Grant (FCA). In 2017, he received a Fulbright Research Grant for ethnomusicological and ethnographic research in Greece. In the Fall of 2018, Katehis founded *meta.ξ* (www.meta-ksi.com), a collective of Greek composers and artists acting as curators of experimental art, music, and design centered around the ideas of “crisis” and “post-crisis,” representation and identity, and alternative artistic spaces.

Upcoming projects include works for harpsichordist Wesley Shen (2022) and *fit trio* (pianists Jana Luksts, Magdalena Falçes, and Yu-ting Huang, 2022), among others.

become/desiccated (2018) was commissioned in 2016 by Matti Pulkki and was supported by a grant from the American Accordionists’ Association. The first draft of the work was premiered by Pulkki at the DiMenna Center for Classical Music in 2017. Matti gave subsequent performances in Canada, Finland, Switzerland, and Greece, and the piece is published by Edition Avantus.

This note is updated from my original statement in 2017, as tonight’s performance has offered a unique opportunity to reflect on this work after more than four (long) years and reevaluate both my original propositions and question how a work such as this, unique in my own practice and embroiled in its own controversies, is perhaps still relevant. *become desiccated* was a departure from

dealing exclusively with instrumental works with an abstract conveyance of meaning and without distinct program, and it was my first (serious) attempt at responding to current events in a musical work around what was (and is still) a growing ubiquity of politicized works, “radical” composer collectives, and “impactful” presenting organizations and institutions. Thus, in this work, I was genuinely probing the issue of addressing the “real” in the world of total abstraction and questioning the futility of music-making amidst the various disruptions of “modern life.” And though this piece and my general rhetoric, on the surface, seem to mock the preposterousness of this very act – I actually saw (and still see) the piece as hopeful and productively generative rather than overtly pessimistic, as I explore a turn “inward” towards various unspeakable languages rather than the language of aggrandized advertisement. Considering that this work was already about “crisis,” a subject that has remained central to my subsequent music and academic research, it can be said that in 2022, I am once again thinking about modes of response in overlapping and saturated epidemiological-ecological-social-political-economic crises, methodological and bodily ruptures, catastrophes, and seismic cultural shifts.

The work was conceived during and as an explicit response to the tragic events of 2015-16: the increasingly international trends of renewed xenophobia and neofascism as demonstrated in response to the European Union and IMF-imposed austerity measures on the Greek state, the continued ideological battles of modern Greek autonomy and identity, the largely-western politicization and manipulation of refugees in Greece and Turkey, and the increasing concern towards the potentially negative future implications of ever-pervasive technological advancement. These topics form the fabric of material with which the piece’s musical and textual structure is concerned. Lastly, I explore a personal topic -- my own deteriorating health as an aging Type 1 Diabetic, and the explicitly-American subject of the politicization of the cost and availability of insulin and other life-saving medical technologies. Today this latter point remains painfully relevant, as do the others, though they no longer occupy headlines.

Several unrelated texts, mostly newspaper clippings, propel the work’s narrative: *Doctors Shouldn’t Be Gods* – an interview with Siddhartha Mukherjee (Jo Ellison for Financial Times, 2017), *Ending Greece’s Bleeding* (Paul Krugman for New York Times, 2015), and *The Sweet Relief of Splenda in My Purse* (Maris Kreizman for New York Times, 2016). These texts are fragmented, fractured, atomized, themselves desiccated to the point where they become devoid of semantic, and sometimes presented in full comprehensibility by the same quasi-fractal relationships that organize the metrical and large-scale formal aspect of the work, albeit with a disintegration of conventional language. Through this constructed narrative, I reflected on these writings and asked, as Siddhartha Mukherjee does in *The Gene*: what generates the undistorted variants of our normal selves? How do we continue to realize ourselves through illness, disability, and austerity measures? On this latter question, Krugman asks: how do societies realize themselves amidst mutilation by “medieval doctors who insist on bleeding their patients”?

The form of the work is a set of variations based on a 17-note series, which forms 17 sections of proportional relationship, and a coda. Interspersed throughout the piece are lengthy silences, which themselves, in their totality, form a “variation”. Within each variation, the same 17 pitches are cycled through at various speeds that rotate at different lengths. As if bound to a sort of medieval breaking wheel, these cycles regurgitate identical or varied material ad infinitum.

Lastly, the coda of *b/d* pays tribute to partisans during the Greek Civil War of 1946-49 – an event which today still forms a bitter memory in Greek history. These partisans (which included Serbs,

Albanians, Macedonians, Roma, Montenegrins, Romaniote and Sephardic Jews, and many others) resisted Nazi occupation during the Second World War faced violent persecution, exile, and often execution by British and American militaries following the war. The letters cited in this piece, several of which were written by teenagers, were sent to their families in advance of their executions. These same letters are cited in Luigi Nono's *Il Canto Sospeso*, and I include them, silently, as a representation of the continued polarization of "European" centers and an increasingly decolonial Balkans in what is a final, frustratedly-overt political statement in a work that problematizes that exact type of sentiment in art.

The title of the work is derived from two sources: an excerpt from the composer Roger Sessions concerning compositional pedagogy and the various "extraneous" elements that supposedly clutter the composer's practice, and from St. John of Kronstadt, in a call for simple prayer.

"The question of education – or, as I would prefer to put it, training – of the composer is, in my opinion, today much cluttered up with the quantity of extraneous matter which tends to confuse or even to obliterate the central issue. A good part of this confusion may certainly be traced back to a traditional system of teaching which had not only become frozen in its essentially cut-and-dried treatment of materials, but had also and with still graver consequences, taken its basic assumptions so much for granted that they had finally *become desiccated* to the point of sheer abstraction, devoid of relevant content." – Roger Sessions, *Questions About Music*

"Whatever else, we must convince our heart to pray, otherwise it will *become desiccated*."
Words of St. John of Kronstadt