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VOLUME 20  
ISSUE 52

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JULY 8 - JULY 14, 2020



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## Art & COVID-19

Two in-person art exhibits open in Saranac Lake. Learn more on [page 8](#)



# The Sounds of Things Unforeseen

By Benjamin Pomerance

Photo Left: Marilyn Reynolds. Photo provided

SOMETIMES, the unforeseen happens backstage, when a zealous saxophonist encounters an unsuspecting violinist for the first time.

Marilyn Reynolds had barely finished the final note of her recital at SUNY Plattsburgh when she spotted a tall man rushing in her direction. “He said, ‘I’m the chair of the music department. I play the saxophone. And I’ve been wanting to form a violin-saxophone-piano trio for years,’” recalls the longtime orchestra of St. Luke’s performer. She laughs. “And then he said, ‘I’ve decided that you’re going to be the violinist.’”

Sometimes, the unforeseen happens on Craigslist, when a pianist seeks an adventurous collaborator, and a percussionist answers the typewritten call. “I’ve found

a lot of good things on Craigslist — my dog, a drumkit from the 1920s, houses I’ve lived in on both sides of Lake Champlain,” states Jane Boxall, the artist whose mastery of percussive instruments spans from marimba to vibraphone to a park bench. “Rose’s post was something like ‘Classical Musician Seeks Collaborators,’ and I was intrigued.”

Sometimes, the unforeseen lightning strikes twice for the same person. Boxall’s reply to pianist Rose Chancler, artistic director of the Piano By Nature concert series in Elizabethtown, sparked the formation of the Ricochet Duo, an unlikely but successful pairing of piano and marimba. Six years later, Daniel Gordon, the saxophonist who tracked down Reynolds at that recital, managed to persuade the

violinist to give his idea a try, with Chancler as the pianist for the unconventional trio that now performs under the banner of “Metamusic.”

And sometimes, the unforeseen just works. The Curbside at Harborside drive-in performance in Plattsburgh on July 11 brings both the Ricochet Duo and Metamusic together on the same outdoor stage, with Chancler serving as the hub of this harmonious wheel. “It’s like playing a concert with all of my good buddies,” the pianist declares. “It’s a connection like nothing else. We have a shared intuition, a real common feel for the music that we play. And we’ve just had such wonderful times together.”

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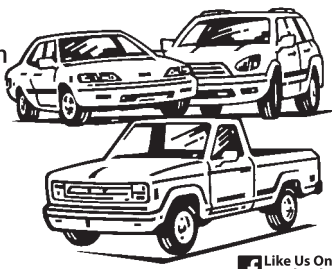
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Her co-conspirators agree. “I said to myself, ‘Really? I’m not playing with a saxophone,’” Reynolds remembers of her initial reaction to Gordon’s entreaties. “But I made a fake smile and said, ‘Okay, whatever you say.’ But then we got together with Rose to read through some music that Dan had collected. And honestly, our feeling playing together, and being together was so well-matched. The three of us clicked. We feel a real respect for each other. And we didn’t have to work at it. It was there from the moment we started.”

“I’m lucky to work with people who are willing to explore,” Gordon says. “I thought that we would be together for only one concert because it had taken me so long just to get to that point. But after that concert, Rose and Marilyn both said, ‘We can’t stop here. It’s too much fun doing this.’ And I thought, ‘Wow. This is too good to be true.’”

The formation of Metamusic marked the culmination of another unforeseen set of events: the chance encounter with a saxophone-violin-piano trio at a gathering that Gordon came within a whisker of leaving early. “It happened at the World Saxophone Congress in Montreal in 2000,” he remembers. “Ninety percent of the pieces on the programs for the World Saxophone Congress are pieces written just for that event and many of them never get played again — for good reason. By the third consecutive day of hearing such pieces, I was ready to vomit saxophone.”

He was about to bolt for his car when one notation in his program caught his attention: saxophonist James Umble from Youngstown State University joining with two musicians from The Cleveland Orchestra, violinist Stephen Warner and pianist Carolyn Gadiel Warner. “They played a piece by Evan Chambers called *Come Down Heavy*, and I was utterly spellbound by it,” Gordon recalls. “And I remember driving home after the concert that night saying over and over again to myself, ‘I’ve got to form myself an ensemble like that.’”

Now, that ensemble is 6 years old. They have performed everywhere from Finland to Texas, bringing forth music known by few audience members but enjoyed by many. “It’s about exploration and discovery and creation,” Gordon says. “We dig up this stuff that nobody else is doing because our combination of instruments is so unusual, and we bring life to it. And it is a heck of a lot of fun.”

That repertoire includes Srul Irving Glick’s spirited *The Klezmer’s Wedding*, an offering by the prolific Canadian composer that will leave audience members dancing in their car seats when performed on the July 11 program. It includes Brian Dykstra’s *Two Rags and an Interlude*, laced with a ragtime verve and offering a finale that Reynolds describes as “a jazzy romp.” It includes a suite of dances by Walter Hartley, esteemed professor at SUNY Fredonia and author of abundant saxophone compositions, which will keep audience members’ toes tapping.

And the bill of fare for July 11 doesn’t end there. In a tribute to the Black Lives Matter movement, Reynolds and Chancler will play William Grant Still’s *Summerland*, a shimmering vision of beauty in the afterlife from the man frequently dubbed “the Dean of African-American composers.” Raised in Arkansas, Still became infatuated with the operettas and concerts that his stepfather took him to see. At the age of 15, Still took his first violin lesson. By adulthood, he had taught himself to play the clarinet, saxophone, oboe, cello, double-bass and viola.

Yet Still somehow recognized that his strongest voice came not from the notes that he could play, but from the notes that he could write. After serving in the Navy during World War I, he moved to Harlem, where he began arranging popular music for performances and radio broadcasts. In 1931, he broke the classical color barrier when the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra gave a concert featuring Still’s first symphony — the first time that a major orchestra performed the complete score of a symphony authored by an African-American.

Another wall-shattering moment occurred five years later,

when Still conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl. The concert marked the inaugural appearance of an African-American conducting a major American orchestra in a program featuring his own musical creations. He would go on to write nearly 200 works, including nine operas, five symphonies, four ballets and the film score for the movie *Pennies from Heaven*.

Juxtaposed on the program with *Summerland* is Chancler’s solo presentation of George Gershwin’s *Prelude in B-flat Major*, a virtuosic work by a man whose complex legacy Chancler has explored in the lead-up to this concert. The author of celebrated compositions from the opera *Porgy and Bess* to the beloved *Rhapsody in Blue* has faced posthumous scrutiny in recent years. Entire symposia and lectures have focused on whether Gershwin’s success was built on cultural appropriation of the musical heritages from which he drew substantial inspiration.

Chancler, too, studied Gershwin carefully before adding the *Prelude* to this upcoming program. “I wanted to look at the issue of cultural appropriation,” she says. “I wanted to make certain that he was okay.” Ultimately, she came away largely satisfied with her findings about the composer’s attitudes. “He delved deeply into such a wide range of influences and opened himself to them,” she explains. “He celebrated the influences that he came into contact with. I think that he saw great beauty and depth in the world around him, and he just had to celebrate it.”

And there is no doubt, Chancler continues, of Gershwin’s genius in concocting something novel out of that mélange of foundational influences. She wrote recently of this brilliance in a letter to Boxall’s sister, who is learning the *Prelude in B-flat Major*. “You have to think about what you want a piece to sound like from the beginning,” she explains of this syncopated fantasia, laced with blues and jazz attributes and rhythms from Brazilian baião music. “You can’t just play it at half-tempo for a month. You have to learn it with a fluidity.”

Fluidity likewise fits the description of Boxall’s percussion mastery, showcased in works that often demand a gymnast’s flexibility and a surgeon’s precision. Charles Joseph’s Smith’s *Indigo Spanish Fantasy* is one such composition, requiring Boxall to play using five mallets at once. Smith wrote the work with Boxall’s talents in mind, one of several creations showcased on her album of music performed using as few as zero mallets and as many as eight mallets, a feast of technical prowess and a proving ground for the marimba’s versatile voice.

“I think composers have a general tendency to approach the marimba as if it were a big wooden piano,” Boxall notes of working with Smith on crafting this piece. “However, the way mallets work on the marimba is different to the way fingers work on the piano. Knowing Charles composed at the piano, I think I suggested he write intervals, chords and figurations that he could play on the piano with five pencils, rather than with 10 fingers. I remember him mentioning spending quite a lot of time with pencils writing this piece. I imagine him juggling multiple writing implements, manuscript paper, maybe a beverage and a snack.”

Juggling rhythms rather than objects is the theme of Marc Mellits’ *Tight Sweater* suite, two movements of which Boxall and Chancler will play together on this program. Using what Boxall describes as “driving, repetitious rhythms that interlock and interact,” the percussionist and the pianist will offer a sense of the synergy that has grown between them in the 12 years since Boxall responded to Chancler’s Craigslist ad. Boxall refers to Chancler as one of her closest friends. In a separate interview, unprompted, Chancler says the same about Boxall.

Now, the friends are back together again, Ricochet Duo and Metamusic gathering on the same stage after an oddly long time apart because sometimes, the unforeseen happens when a virus rampages the planet and leaves concert halls without concerts. Sometimes, the unforeseen happens when social distancing results in sonic isolation. Sometimes, the unforeseen happens when an apparent inevitability — the steady presence of in-person performances — turns into a rare species overnight.



Rose Chancler. Photo provided

“It’s got to come back, don’t you think?” Reynolds asks about live concerts. The question is not entirely rhetorical. “I feel like I’ve been breathing music my whole life. It’s sort of like air for me. The aliveness of it all. There’s something special about throwing caution to the wind and laying it out there and seeing what we think of each other and what the audience thinks of us.”

“Music is at the very center of my life,” Boxall says, “and while touring and gigging isn’t possible, I’ve gone back to work farming, freelance writing and doing sundry day labor or seasonal work. As my music income collapsed to zero in March, I’ve been very appreciative to receive several emergency grants from Musician Aid, Vermont Arts Council, Artist Relief and the New Music Solidarity Fund. These have been extremely helpful.”

Amid the forced silence, there were times when music managed to grow through the cracks in the sidewalk. Gordon engaged in intense research on Jacques Ibert’s *Concertino da camera*. Reynolds taught lessons — first on Zoom, more recently on the back porch of her Rouses Point home. Boxall worked with composer Jimmy Bunch on recording the writer’s new work for percussion and robot voices. Chancler worked with a friend on creating an online music-and-theatre camp for kids.

Sometimes, though, the sonic blossoming was more intimate, filling a void left by tragedy and unrest. “When times were rough, I could sit at the piano and play,” Chancler explains. “It was a comfort for me. That super focus of making music — it takes you out of the present and puts you in a place where you are building something.” She pauses. “The world would be okay if I stopped playing,” she states, “but I wouldn’t be okay. It is such a force in my life: an identity, in a way.”

Now, through this drive-in concert, the four artists agree that a component that has been missing from that identity is returning. The impetus to prepare a program and the inspiration — and yes, sometimes the chaos-infused fear — that comes from playing for someone other than themselves offers a focus that the performers agree

has been difficult to muster at times during these days of abnormality. “It makes me tear up, honestly, to think about missing it,” Reynolds says, “and how nice it will be when it comes back again.”

It is a feeling of return that Chancler knows well. “There have been times in my life when I’ve gone off and tried to live a ‘normal’ life without music,” she recalls. “But in the end, I come back because I’m so destitute without it. And like a parent, music always welcomes you home, no matter how far away from it you’ve gone.”

Perhaps this is because music, like a parent, is rooted in the unforeseen. A live performance can hold more twists and turns than an unmarked road in the Alps. A performing artist’s career can be transformed by answering an ad on Craigslist or by reticently agreeing to an out-of-nowhere offer backstage at a recital. A world that feels ripped apart can find a release of boundless emotions through little dots on a page brought to life by players who know how to imbue them with feeling and listeners who are ready and willing to receive the transmission.

And a time of silence can be filled with sound again when friends find a way to come back together in a safe manner — a gathering that, while still unconventional, nonetheless restores some of the communion that has been lacking in these recent months. “I feel like we have been at the bottom of a deep hole,” Gordon states. “And that’s when music helps. Music helps us climb out of that deep hole.” He stops. “People are finding out what we’ve known all along,” he concludes. “Life is just a whole lot better with music in it.”

*Piano By Nature will present Rose Chancler, Marilyn Reynolds, Daniel Gordon and Jane Boxall in concert on July 11 at 7:30 p.m. on stage in a drive-in concert the “Harborside” lot near the City of Plattsburgh Marina. All attendees must bring a face mask to wear whenever they are outside of their vehicles, and all social distancing requirements must be followed. For more information, email pomerance.benjamin58@gmail.com or visit pianobynature.org.*

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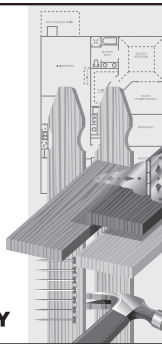


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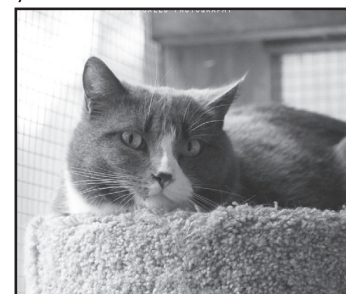
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