

Beyond Perception

BY BENJAMIN POMERANCE

ONE PURCHASER LIVED ALONE, ordering enough food for a banquet and listening incessantly to the number's stations from Eastern Europe, writing down each number that the cryptic broadcasters uttered and then hanging those pages of numerals on clotheslines throughout her living space. Another customer adored classical music, always recruiting their delivery driver to sing arias by George Frideric Handel. A third buyer was the governor of New Jersey. A fourth demanded separate trips to keep meat and dairy items separate, obeying kosher laws to the letter.

There are more stories where these came from, a pickle barrel's worth of households with exacting predilections to which Dennis Báthory-Kitsz had to cater. On each voyage for that Trenton delicatessen, he would stuff his truck with the same cargo: plenty of brisket, heaps of potato salad, mountains of stuffed cabbage and all of the other customary trimmings. At each stop with these items, he would be received differently. In his mind, he tracked each response, from the home where he would be urged to sing to the residence where security could frisk him.

He had secured the position to support his fascination with writing music. As an unknown composer in his early 20s, he understood that a day job was vital. Already, his agony as a student had dissuaded him from wanting to teach, the customary path that burgeoning musical creators tread to put bread on their tables. Delivering food for the deli, with its catalog of characters who cried out for a place in somebody's novel, felt like a far better occupation.

Yet he never imagined that the work would teach him something about music. Then came the Sunday when four vocalists stood in a Trenton church and sang barbershop harmonies. The music was a candy-striped Americana arrangement of the hymn *Rock of Ages*, authored by Báthory-Kitsz to put some new clothes on an old body. The effort had been a somewhat whimsical one, designed to raise a few eyebrows and potentially germinate a few smiles.

But as the singers delivered their rendition, an unexpected wave rippled throughout the church. One person's eyes grew moist, then another, and still another until the entire affair had turned into a six-handkerchief special. "By the time we finished it, the entire congregation was openly weeping," Báthory-Kitsz remembers. "For reasons that I could not explain, this music ended up touching people in ways that were not at all part of my intentions."

He contemplates this memory. "This was the first time in my life that this happened," recalls the man whose music will take center stage for multiple concerts on the Piano By Nature series. "This was the first time I had written something that I perceived to create a certain effect and the listeners perceived it in a manner that I never imagined." He stops again. "But it certainly would not be the last."

More than 1,100 times now, he has repeated the process: cast some sliver of his soul into music, release the ship from its moorings and watch as the recipients react. In the decades that have passed, he has received seemingly every response in the spectrum of human emotion, from awe to shock and sometimes both at once. Much of the time, the responses have in some way differed from his expectations. All of it, he has realized, is part of this dance.

There have been moments when he wondered why he was still taking these leaps. Yet the wondering never translated into stopping. From the earliest moments, the hook lodged deeply in his psyche, a kid pushing the never-pressed "FM" button on his parents' radio set and then practically collapsing under the aching sound that exploded from the speakers. The station that he had unintentionally reached was WQXR. The music that he had unintentionally found was Siegfried's funeral march from the final opera in Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle.

He was in his junior year of high school. "I had never heard a note of classical music before," he remembers. "We had no classical music in our house." Yet Wagner's majestic processional had stolen his breath away, and he was ready to move planets if necessary to feel that sensation again. He began haunting the nearest library, pulling musical scores off the shelves and examining them until his eyeballs sang.



Photo by Charlie Freiberg



Photo by Josephine Russo

Still, he knew nothing about translating those black dots on the page into sound. He marched into the high school band director's office, asking to be taught an instrument. The band director glared suspiciously. *Another kid who wants one more line on his resume*, his stare seemed to say. "Here," he grudgingly responded, handing Báthory-Kitsz a bass clarinet.

It was perhaps the most cumbersome instrument imaginable for a beginner. Báthory-Kitsz didn't care. "I practiced like crazy until I learned the notation," he says. "And then it was like a lightbulb in my head went off." Suddenly, the mystery was coded no longer. Playing this instrument was fine, but there were other instruments to explore, too. *Perhaps*, he thought to himself, *I could write something for all of them*.

"I was a musical naïf," he states today. "I had been learning the bass clarinet for only a couple months. What did I know about things that were supposed to be impossible?" On his own, with no compositional training, he wrote a tone poem for 17 instruments. Pleased with his handiwork, he returned to that same suspicious high school band leader, composition in hand.

"I showed it to the band teacher," Báthory-Kitsz chuckles. "He gave me this steely eye. Finally, he said, 'Did you write this?' I said, 'Yes.' He stared at me again for a while, saying nothing. Then he said, 'May I take it home?' I said, 'Sure.' I still had no idea if he liked it or not." The next week, he brought it back. He had corrected technical errors. And he didn't say anything else to me other than, "Bring me your next piece."



Photo by Ken Kaplowitz

He takes a breath. "From then on," he proclaims, "I wrote music."

When he enrolled at Rutgers University, though, he entered as a double-major in physics and mathematics, not music. Since his youngest days, he had delighted in taking things apart and observing what happened when he reconstructed them differently. In adolescence, he began building little circuits that made sounds, forming makeshift synthesizers. "I came from a poor family, so I couldn't afford to buy anything," he says. "I basically raided the dump for my parts."

At Rutgers, he found himself surrounded by people who never had to raid the dump. Too many of them were studying physics and math, so he switched to majoring in French. Before long, he kicked aside that course of study, too, shifting to music. "They didn't have a composition faculty that taught undergraduates," he says. "So, I did music theory." At some point, he did manage to get one of the graduate school composition professors to look at his work. "Too tonal," the professor concluded dismissively.

The encounter epitomized his scholastic experiences. "The classroom usually was hideous," he says. A few exceptions to that trend existed, chief among them F. Austin Waller, his conducting professor, and Scott Whitener, the director of the college's wind ensemble. Beyond them, he carved his curriculum outside the academic gates, organizing friends into chamber ensembles and staging concerts with them.

He freed himself from Rutgers, diploma in hand, in 1970. Three years later, he compiled his first major arts collective, calling it Trans/Media. A year after that, he appointed himself as the project director of the first Delaware Valley Festival of the Avant-Garde. Three more festivals followed, a period during which he wrapped up his day job driving for the deli and shifted into working as a laborer. In the night hours, he split time between writing new compositions and organizing opportunities for open-eared members of the public to hear them.

Then the woman to whom he was married at the time got mugged. "The scene in Trenton was going downhill," he declares. "Our Trans/Media group was getting more diffuse. Things were changing." He and his wife made a change of their own, moving to a new home in Vermont. "It's not that far from New York City," he recalls thinking. "How bad can it be?"



Photo by Stevie Balch

SAVE 20¢

PER GALLON ON FUEL OIL OR KEROSENE OFF OUR CASH PRICE!

PREPAY SAVINGS! PREPAY NOW BEFORE OCTOBER 6TH!
Call 518-481-6800
 MINIMUM PREPAY \$1,500

COLLINS Oil Inc.
 ORDER ONLINE AT COLLINSOILINC.COM

Automatic delivery - exclusive 'no run out' \$100 guarantee!
 Service contracts • 24 hour burner service • Budget plans
 HEAP dealer • Competitive pricing



American Legion
Post 1619

Queen of Hearts \$11,300

*Come in & See Jen all week
 and enjoy a drink!*

219 Rand Hill Rd | Morrisonville, NY | 518-561-8706

MOUNTAIN TOP HOUSING



PCH

PLATTSBURGH HOUSING AUTHORITY

4817 South Catherine Street,
 Suite 101, Plattsburgh, New York



EQUAL HOUSING OPPORTUNITY

Monthly Rent \$600

Included in Rent: Lawn Care, Snow Removal,
 Garbage, Water, Heat

On-Site Laundry - All Units 1 Bedroom, 1 Bathroom
 Quiet and Peaceful, 30 mins. Outside of Plattsburgh

Application Located at:

<https://www.phaplattsburgh.com/mountain-top-housing/>

For More Information Contact Tiffany at 518-561-0720 ext. 240

Triple M Truss, LLC
 125 Stuart Road
 Burke, NY 12917

Custom Designed By
 Certified Engineer



"Quality Built Trusses At A Fair Price"

Phone 518-497-3339

Fax 518-497-6220

COME SEE WHAT WE CAN GROW

NORTHERN ORCHARD
 FARM  STAND

APPLE HARVEST BEGINS!


OPEN DAILY 10AM-5PM | 470 Union Road • Peru
 518-643-9806 | northernorchard.com |  Find us on Facebook



Photo by Stevie Balch

He soon found out. “It was freaking oblivion,” he shouts. “Four-digit phone numbers. Party lines. A town of three hundred people.” He found work repairing television sets, then became a wastewater engineering company’s typist. Dissatisfied with both gigs, he built his own computer company; wrote a book on hardware and software advances; and penned articles for trade publications. One of his interview subjects in 1980 was a young programmer named Bill Gates. “There’s nobody getting rich writing software that I know of,” Gates insisted at the time.

Musically, however, Báthory-Kitsz felt that he was wandering in the wilderness for the first time in his life. Finally, he decided to turn back to his roots. A chance encounter with music on the radio had lit his fire as a child. Perhaps a radio would save him from banality once again. Picking up the phone one day and finding none of the villagers listening in, he called the public radio station. “Do you play new music?” he asked the man who answered. “No,” the radio host replied. “But I’m willing to start.”

“And then he did a brilliant thing,” the composer recalls. “He started leaving five minutes of silence, dead air, on his program. And he would say, ‘Imagine if this space were filled by music that has just been written.’”

Meanwhile, Báthory-Kitsz was writing plenty of content to fill that space. “I wrote a half-hour piece,” he says, “and I gathered all of the musicians to play it. We performed it live on the air.” Immediately thereafter, he grimaces, the courageous radio host was fired. “He’s now working in Canada,” Báthory-Kitsz states, “and I think that he is quite happy there.”

But the door in Vermont had opened at last to music that had just been written. The Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble took flight in 1984, giving Báthory-Kitsz an outlet for the music that the Green Mountain State’s more traditional groups had bypassed. A fortuitous connection with Clarence Barlow, a pioneer of joining electronic and acoustic musical forces together, led to a six-month sojourn for Báthory-Kitsz on the other side of the Atlantic, escorted by Barlow into the orbit of some of Europe’s most innovative writers.

And back on this side of the pond, the radio station at Goddard College called with a lightning-strikes-only-once type of offer: a 90-minute show on which he could play whatever music he desired. With his friend David Gunn, another urban transplant to Vermont, he spawned a program that they titled “Kalvos & Damian New Music Bazaar.” For 10-and-a-half years, they featured ink-still-wet-on-the-page music, often interviewing the composers on the air.

“We never used our own names on this program,” Báthory-Kitsz says. “The people who I interviewed on the radio never knew I was a composer.” Finding the use of a pseudonym liberating, he continued to intermittently adopt new names whenever he wanted to work in unanticipated ways. He wrote a cabaret show using the identity of Brady Kynans. His films, photography, and other forays into visual arts often bear the name of D.B. Cowell. When he felt that some of his compositions merited a female persona, he credited them to Orra Maussade.

Yet after all of these years spent doggedly cutting through the fog, his true name has gradually become well-known. To date, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers have bestowed 28 awards upon him. Such honors, though, require an archaeologist’s patience uncover on his website, buried on his resume far beneath other aspects of his career in which he appears to find greater interest.

Among the achievements that he features more prominently on his resume are his opera, *Erzsébet*, the story of a Hungarian countess who allegedly murdered more than 600 women and bathed in their blood — a story that he researched for decades before the opera’s premiere in 2011 — and his “We Are All Mozart” project, for which he authored one hundred pieces on commission in a single year. “Mozart had to work like that,” he explains in a matter-of-fact tone. “So, I wanted to see if I could do it, too.”

Then there is the list of concert works for less-traditional instruments, from the ukulele to the bouzouki, and another set of compositions for instruments that he developed himself. One of his inventions, the Monofilament, stretches fishing line across an organ pipe, and calls for the performer to play using a cello bow. More technologically complex is the Headbuzzer, with supersonic oscillators and control surfaces, and the Nighthawk, built with computers and light sensors with independent algorithms.

It may seem gimmicky at first — the homemade instruments with names worthy of Willy Wonka, the quest to match Mozart, the pseudonyms, the vast array of music spanning from one piece that lasts for seventeen seconds to another that is described as “27 years long and turned off after



Photo by Peter Fokas

6 weeks,” and all of the rest of the mind-spinning aspects of this collection. To an extent, the whole scene can be attributed to one man’s efforts to quench his fear. “If there is anything that I want to avoid,” he intones somberly, “it’s boredom.”

Yet to stop here would miss the bullseye. A central theme flows through all of these tributaries. “Music is linear,” he explains. “It flows forward. Centuries ago, Gregorian chant was all based on the fluidity of speech.” In the *ars nova* movement of the Late Middle Ages, he continues, more complex music formed that was still grounded in this same principle. “There were no bar lines, no beats to count,” he says. “They didn’t need a conductor.”

All of which leaves Báthory-Kitsz yearning to party as if it were the fourteenth century all over again. “Rhythm then was much freer than it is today,” he points out. “It was more organic, more natural. It wasn’t constricted by this more recent concept that all music has to have a steady beat. For some pieces, a steady beat is important, but for others, it isn’t.” Most of his work falls into the latter category, using whatever devices he can muster to sustain the same essence of freedom in his music that he has managed to guard in nearly 75 years of life.

But he knows, too, that all of these intentions may shift their shape as soon as the sounds hit the airspace. Across the decades, he has seen performers unveil aspects of his compositions that he never intended and encountered listeners reacting to his works in ways he never expected. Just as he urges recipients of his works to focus on the forest more than the trees, he has found that performances of his music can surprise even himself. To an artist dodging boredom, there is nothing better.

“I want to strip away the priesthood of composers,” he declares. “Music is not some conjuring act available to only certain people. If you want to write a piece of music, you can do it. If you want to play a piece of music, you can learn it. And if a piece of music makes you feel a certain way, you should be free to express it.” The horizons of where this can lead, he knows, are boundless. From deli deliveries to computer programming, radio broadcasts to musical creativity, it has defined his existence. In the space beyond perception, all possibilities still thrive.

Piano By Nature will feature music by Dennis Báthory-Kitsz, with the composer present, on Oct. 6 at 3:30 p.m. in a pop-up performance at Champlain Centre Mall in Plattsburgh and Oct. 6 and 7 at 7 p.m. and Oct. 8 at 3 p.m. at the historic Hand House in Elizabethtown. Reservations are required for the three Elizabethtown programs. Multi-concert package deals are available. For tickets and more information, call 518-962-8899, email pianobynature@gmail.com or visit pianobynature.org.



Photo by Peter Fokas