

So Much to Play With

BY BENJAMIN POMERANCE

PERHAPS you think that you have outgrown toys. Maybe you believe that a diminutive instrument with one-quarter the range of a grown-up piano should come with a yellow warning label: *Do not give to anybody over the age of 7*. Conceivably, you last spent time with a so-called child's instrument at some juncture between kindergarten and 2nd grade, right around the era when others started to tell you such pursuits were decidedly uncool. Possibly you have shelved memories about what those moments were like in every year that has followed until now.

Yet there are those who would disagree. There were 31 pages of listings in the Toy Piano Chamber Music Database as of 2003, compositions developed by everyone from Frank Abbinanti to Ruben Zahra. There are works for the toy piano alone, selections for mixed instrumentation and concertos that place the toy piano into the soloist's role with orchestras of varying sizes. John Cage created some of these pieces. George Crumb and Andy Akiho crafted others. Many more come from writers who still are carving their niche in the modern landscape.

And on the night of Feb. 15 and the afternoon of Feb. 16, some of these creations will take center stage at the Hand House in Elizabethtown. Pianist Rose Chancler and percussionist Jane Boxall — billed as “Ricochet Duo” when they play together — have formed a recent penchant for the capacities of these little instruments. To them, and to the composers whom they feature, these works are considerably more than novelty pieces. “I love the sound,” Boxall says. “It feels very percussive. Musically, it is far more than just a simple ‘toy.’”



Jane Boxall

Or, potentially, it is a reinvention of what listeners should consider a toy to be. A child's plaything can indeed produce a sound that is uniquely percussive, a range of bell-like tones emitting from hammers striking metal rods. From this foundation comes infinite possibilities. It could be coupled with the glockenspiel, as Chancler and Boxall will do with Eve Beglarian's *Play Like a Girl*. It can be paired with another toy piano, as Olivia Kieffer — one of the planet's leading proponents of the instrument — did in casting her *Nobility of Homophones!*

But this is only the start. From these crystalline, nostalgic sonorities, a mechanical remnant from innocent youth can open doors to complex conversations traditionally associated with adults. Sometimes, the themes can bring humor. Kieffer's toy piano duet arises from wordplay, a clever grown-up flurry of quips after an Easter Sunday service about whether a particular poem used a rhyme for the word “rows” or “rose.” “Ah!” the older gentleman with whom Kieffer was conversing responded with spurious grandeur. “The nobility of homophones!”

Other discussions drill deeper into society. *Play Like a Girl* opens the vein of gender-based expectations. The music spins through eight variations on *Kaval Sviri*, a work of joy and power that earned popularity in the late-1980s when performed by the Bulgarian Women's Chorus. From there, the performers have options. They can play on the toy piano, or the celeste, or any other instrument that they feel is historically viewed as “girly.” What comes after that is artistry that demands tough dialogues about exactly what “playing like a girl” means.

The contentions, though, do not end there. Some of the questions that *Play Like a Girl* poses come from voices that are not human. Beglarian's composition can come with a package of pre-recorded tracks for the performers to use or the musicians, if they wish, can simply take Beglarian's score and record the additional variations themselves. From this process, regardless of which road the artists take, a different strain of chamber music evolves, one in which people make music in the collaborative company of machines.

And here, too, a social dilemma returns. It has been 75 years since the pioneering computer scientist Alan Turing published *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*, opening his article with a provocative question: “Can machines think?” The query, he later concluded, was unanswerable, for no one could agree on what the term “think” meant. Yet a different, more nuanced question unlocked further debate: whether an artificial entity could demonstrate convincingly intelligent behavior — convincing enough to fool other humans.

“Instead of trying to produce a program that simulates the adult mind, why not rather try to produce one that simulates the child's?” Turing asked. “If this were then subjected to an appropriate course of adult education, one would obtain the adult brain.” The decisive test, he wrote, would come in a conversation between two entities. The human would not know whether they were speaking with another human or with a machine. The machine's mission would be to persuade the human that their discourse was with a person of flesh and blood, not electronics.

Outwardly, there is no such convincing in *Play Like a Girl*, or in any of the other music combining electronic and

acoustic instruments that Chancler and Boxall will perform in these concerts. No true doubts exist concerning which tonalities are human-made and which are computer-born. “They are definitely electronic sounds,” Chancler states, “very pleasant ones, very rhythmic, very cool. But you can tell that they are coming from a computer.”

Yet when an observer considers such scenes, new factors weave into the equation. “It is interesting as a listener when you hear these sounds when you do not know where they are coming from,” Boxall points out. “It is interesting to experience sounds when you have no visual reference for the source, and you can just imagine what weird type of hybrid instrument might be producing such a sound. And then it is really interesting to combine these effects of sounds from an unseen source with us making other sounds in real time, where there is no visual mystery.”

All of which means that Turing's hypothetical gets to enter the arena after all. In Joshua Clausen's *She Quietly Enters and Leaves the Fray*, for instance, a combination of piano and electronics form a “pidgin language” of the composer's making. “In linguistic studies, ‘pidgin’ refers to improvised systems that evolve in border communities when two cultures with different language systems attempt to communicate,” Clausen explains in his notes. “[T]hey discover and use those overlapping zones of expression that allow for some kind of meaningful exchange.”



In this age, such a concept represents a broader reality. Not so long ago, the notion of humans and machines sharing a stage as musical partners would have sounded like the fantasies of science fiction. Today, we stand in the experimental phase, a time of the pidgin language of people and computers trying to occupy the same space and attempting to communicate. From these entities that externally seem drastically different, an overlapping zone of expression can develop. How greatly they ultimately overlap will lead to the answer to Turing's question.

There are other compositions on Boxall and Chancler's bill of fare that likewise appear to

illustrate beliefs in a capacity that could be limitless. *C*, a duet for vibraphone and piano by Naumburg Prize winner Hannah Lash, provides five minutes of perpetual motion, starting simply enough but then spinning into restless, relentless, forward-driving cycles. Celebrated writer and performer Molly Joyce offers *Less Is More*, engaging in interactions that are both auditory and visual, with a lighting component that almost becomes a part of the musical pulse.

Yet there is a possible caution signal on the program, too. John Psathas was inspired in the early 1990s to create *Matre's Dance* for percussion and piano — a work that launched his international career when it became a favorite of esteemed percussionist Evelyn Glennie — by a scene from Frank Herbert's *Dune* series. In the presence of priests, a child begins to dance. With increasing abandon, she hurls her body into every step. The sun rises above her. Close to noon, though, fatigue from all of this unchecked motion sets in. She collapses, exhausted, on the sand.

And amid all of these sensations, the journey travels full circle to a different array of queries, the concerns illuminated by Ivan Trevino in a work commissioned by a consortium led by pianist Annie Jung and vibraphonist Colin McCall, a twosome that performs under the label of Back Pocket Duo. Separate motifs appear and, as the work unfolds, weave together into a statement of shared understanding. The name on the piece's title page is direct: *Empathy*. The date of completion is 2017. Eight years later, the relevance of its thematic material still burns.

It is a relevance borne out in the musicians who will play it. Ostensibly, Chancler and Boxall are dissimilar from one another, playing instruments that on the surface appear to be unlike and traveling different roads on their individual highly accomplished careers. Their paths did not intersect until Chancler posted an open-ended advertisement online: "Seeking classical musicians for collaboration." Boxall had moved from the United Kingdom to Illinois at the time when this ad popped up on Craigslist. Chancler, a Texas native, was living in the North Country.

Yet Boxall was in the middle of planning a relocation to Vermont, only a short trip away from Chancler's studio in Westport. Her favorable response led to the birth of Ricochet Duo in 2008, opening the door for the pianist and the percussionist to play a program of piano-and-marimba duets in that same year for the inaugural season of Chancler's Piano By Nature (PBN) concert series. Seventeen years later, after multiple curves and switchbacks on each of their individual trails, they still find themselves walking the same artistic path together.

A sincere friendship has formed from all of their shared steps. "In the early days of Ricochet Duo, people would often mistake us for sisters," Boxall says. "Rose and I have a bond that goes beyond just rehearsing and playing music together. In part, that is why Ricochet Duo still exists. I moved away from the North Country. I went to medic school



Rose Chancler

for eighteen months, which was really intense. I was not concertizing as much as I had been. And, of course, there was the pandemic, which shut down touring life entirely and which still has its effects on us all."

She pauses. "But when it came to having a chance to play together as Ricochet [Duo] again," she concludes, "there was really no doubt about it. Both of us were completely enthusiastic about getting together and putting together another program that was spicy and delicious and interesting."

The flavoring of that program — titled *Greatest Hits*, a tongue-in-cheek name given that Boxall and Chancler have not played most of these pieces together before — demanded mutual trust. Boxall began by suggesting that she not play the marimba in this performance, forcing them to craft something entirely different from their first PBN show. From there, Chancler embarked on a lengthy scavenger hunt of various combinations for piano and percussion instruments, coming up with piles of manuscripts for the artists to test drive.

"One of the great things about Jane is that she has a really open mind about what is out there," Chancler says. "At the same time, she has great taste. I can rely upon her judgment. And mostly, we agree upon a lot of stuff." She laughs. "And in this case, one of the things that we agreed upon was wanting to expose people to a lot of things — different combinations of rhythms, sounds, colors, textures, expressions of emotions — that they probably had never experienced in a concert before."

To do so requires a bilateral affirmation of faith. In one direction, the performers must be confident that listeners will take a chance on something new. Simultaneously, the attendees must believe that the musicians will take good care of them, even though the sounds and concepts on the program might be distinct from the music to which they are accustomed. "I like a mixture of moods and flavors and styles," Boxall states. "Hopefully, the audience will, as well."

And for those who are on the fence, one more item merits attention. Aspects of these pieces are fun, works of art that reject pomposity. Yet those who mistake fun for fluff do so at their own peril. Pint-sized pianos can show absurdities of gender-based expectations. Chamber music linking computers with humans can probe questions about relations between people and machines. On and on it goes from there, the options proving limitless. Perhaps there are things on this stage that may look like mere toys. In actuality, though, there is so much to play with.

As part of the Piano By Nature concert series, Ricochet Duo — percussionist Jane Boxall and pianist Rose Chancler — will perform on Feb. 15 at 7 p.m. and Feb. 16 at 3 p.m. in the historic Hand House in Elizabethtown. Reservations are encouraged. For tickets and more information, call 518-962-8899, email pianobynature@gmail.com or visit pianobynature.org/ricochet-duo/.



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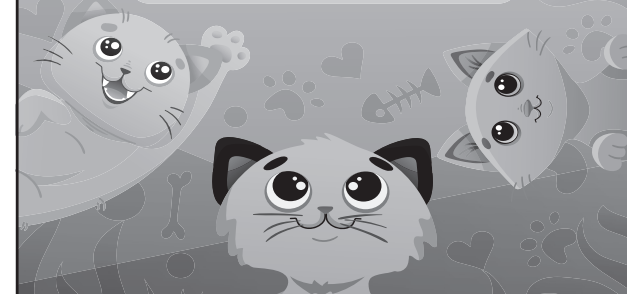
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