

Venturing outside the box with American Modern Opera Company's flutist

By Zoë Madonna Globe Staff, December 13, 2018, 5:59 p.m.



Emi Ferguson's arrangements of Bach will be performed at the Run AMOC! Festival. (REBECCA FAY)

Listening to her 2017 album, “Amour Cruel,” which sounds like what would happen if Lana del Rey ended up at Louis XIV’s court, it’s easy to hear why flutist Emi Ferguson, 31, is so enthused about her involvement with the daring, deliberate arts collective American Modern Opera Company.

“There’s this infusion of energy that goes across discipline, between the dancers and the musicians. Everyone’s teaching each other,” she says via phone from New York, where she’s

based. “It’s a really amazing group of people, who are very curious about finding new pathways to share their art forms.”

Born in Japan and raised in England and Brookline, the flutist has been a member of the Matthew Aucoin and Zack Winokur-directed company since its relatively recent formation. This year’s Run AMOC! Festival, presented by American Repertory Theater starting Friday, includes performances of several arrangements of Bach preludes and sonatas that Ferguson created with the baroque band Ruckus, which will be released on the album “Fly the Coop” this spring. She describes them as “inspired by all of our historical performance experience, but also by our modern sensibilities,” including bluegrass and jazz.

Q. Do you think that once you get to a certain stage in your career as a musician, there are fewer opportunities for learning new things, especially things that don’t concretely relate to what you’re already doing?

A. Yeah! I think it’s something a lot of people struggle with. As professional musicians we are so often pigeonholed into a certain niche, and also everyone’s just doing their best to continue to market themselves, stay afloat, and do what they love, which is perform. Being able to seek out new opportunities is quite difficult from a scheduling standpoint, even more difficult from a financial standpoint.

AMOC is an amazing think tank for all of us in that way. We can come together, share all sorts of ideas, and let it be a little bit nebulous, and then over time have them solidify. And that’s what Zack and Matt believe in. We believe in these people, and we believe in what they’re going to produce over a long period of time. They don’t need to produce an epic piece of work, tomorrow or in a week, or in a year.

Q. Tell me more about what makes your Bach arrangements unique.

A. We used the essence of Bach’s character. So, his humor. Bach the man, rather than Bach the

figure that so often we associate him with. And we ran with that. We have some of them where Clay [Zeller-Townson] is playing the bassoon like the most gorgeous tenor saxophone ever.

[Bach] was only introduced to the flute around 1717, which was right at that point when he was writing lots of instrumental music. What's crazy is he continued to write for the flute for the rest of his life, really up until he died, and these sonatas span his adult composition career. You get to see three different sides of his personality, and we try to bring them out even more to create this beautiful color palette.

Q. You brought up bluegrass. What do you think makes bluegrass and Bach go so well together? Chris Thile does it, Sierra Hull does it . . .

A. People have borrowed Bach in so many genres. I'm definitely not an expert in the bluegrass world, but I think so much of bluegrass is using instruments that Bach was similarly writing for. You've got plucked guitar-family instruments, you've got string instruments, it's almost natural for people to want to explore that. And so much of Bach's instrumental music is fun, it's dance music, it's meant for gatherings of friends.

Q. If you could change something about the music world, what would it be?

A. The first thing that comes to mind are these boxes! Classical music is one thing, pop music is another thing. Things should be fluid to encourage listeners to continue to explore. There's so much out there, especially in the classical world. Such an incredibly diverse array of music is lumped into one title — that it's classical — which is just crazy. To try and break down some of those imaginary marketing walls that we've built, to have a lot more fluidity.

It becomes such a nightmare now with all this metadata that's attached to recorded music. Spotify, I think, has a heart attack when it's like "You play the flute and you sing, but the singing is pop and the flute is classical and what genre do we put you in!?" I don't know what a better way is. How to better address the minutiae of the metadata, to encompass a human being who is not

one thing ever, but many things all the time?

RUN AMOC! FESTIVAL

Presented by American Repertory Theater. Various locations, Harvard Square, Cambridge, Dec. 14-16. 617-547-8300, www.americanrepertorytheater.org

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