

# The Boston Musical Intelligencer

*a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston*

Lee Eiseman, publisher; Robert Levin, advisor; David Moran, assisting editor; Bettina A. Norton, emerita editor

NEWS & FEATURES

REVIEWS

UPCOMING EVENTS

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

IN: REVIEWS

DECEMBER 22, 2018

## Eclectic Adventures with AMOC

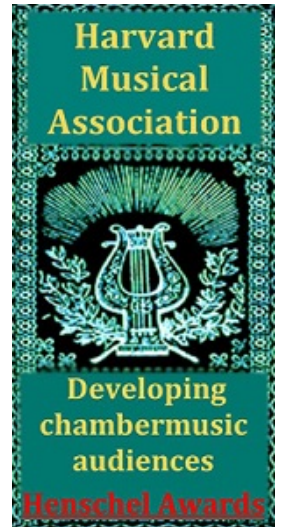
by [CJ RU](#)

What better antidote to December doldrums or holiday hustle than to let one's spirit run amok with AMOC — the American Modern Opera Company — through an afternoon of ambitiously eclectic adventures? Last weekend the interdisciplinary collective helmed by artistic directors Matthew Aucoin and Zack Winokur presented a quartet of hour-long programs with modern dance, theatrical lighting, and music ranging from Bach to present day, alternating between two Harvard venues — the Agassiz House's neoclassical Horner Room and the Loeb Ex black box, each configured to accommodate an intimate audience of 30-60.

### Bach Sonatas and Preludes

Although the Run AMOC! Festival commenced with a sold-out performance of *With Care* the previous night, Saturday afternoon began with Bach flute sonatas and keyboard preludes repurposed for chamber ensemble. Emi Ferguson led on Baroque flute, imbuing the instrument that often wispily embodies both “wood” and “wind” more thoroughly than any other with a Romantic, even operatic, emotiveness. Every bit as expressive, the five-piece “Baroque band” Ruckus, with special guest Stephen Stubbs on guitar, brought continuo playing to not simply a new level, but a revelatory new dimension of dynamism altogether. If you enjoyed the purr of professional engines rounding a familiar track before, buckle in as Ruckus revs up and spirits you off to the Formula One races.

BWV 884 became a zesty Bruegelian village dance. BWV 1034 unfurled with the pathos of a doomed bel canto heroine's midnight soliloquy, then spiced up to fandango flair. BWV 855 wafted as mist over delicately frost-brocaded



RECENT  
COMMENTS

Bertrand47 on  
[Longtime Voice of  
WHRB Honored](#)

Nathan Redshield on  
[CLT Will Reveal  
Carmen's Motivations](#)

Nathan Redshield on  
[Longtime Voice of  
WHRB Honored](#)

toni norton on



Ruckus (ART photo)

water until thawed by the jazzy throb of double bass. BWV 1035 breathed of wisteria and lilac on a warm breeze before returning to Bruegel with banjo in tow for an eruption of pure, pulsing hoedown joy.

Wit, panache, and the jubilant, virtuosic verve of a bebop-Baroque jam session electrified and illuminated previously candle-lit edifices as Ruckus and friends raised the roof, and my mind's eye will never see those structures in quite the same light again.

## Cage

Equally epiphanous, albeit in a more mystical milieu, pianist Conor Hanick presented a winning case for John Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* to rank among Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and Schumann's *Dauidsbündlertänze* as one of the most miraculously intricate and ruminative cycles to grace the keyboard.

Inspired by Indian art, music, and philosophy, Cage composed the pilgrimage of a piece for prepared piano, with a constellation of screws, nuts and bolts, and rubber and plastic strips deployed across the strings in various inventive configurations to create a soundscape that ranges from plain piano to drums, cymbals, chimes, xylophone, a titinnabulous music box, European and Asian bells, and the wooden fish that furnish the bass beat to many a Buddhist's childhood memories. Hanick's contemplative pacing allowed each texture, shading, and thought to flow and flourish organically, ultimately weaving a tapestry evocative of the cosmos: light and dark, space and time, infinite distance, and the invisible forces that bind.

[Longtime Voice of WHRB Honored](#)

Toni Norton on [Longtime Voice of WHRB Honored](#)

virginia eskin on [Longtime Voice of WHRB Honored](#)

toni norton on [Longtime Voice of WHRB Honored](#)

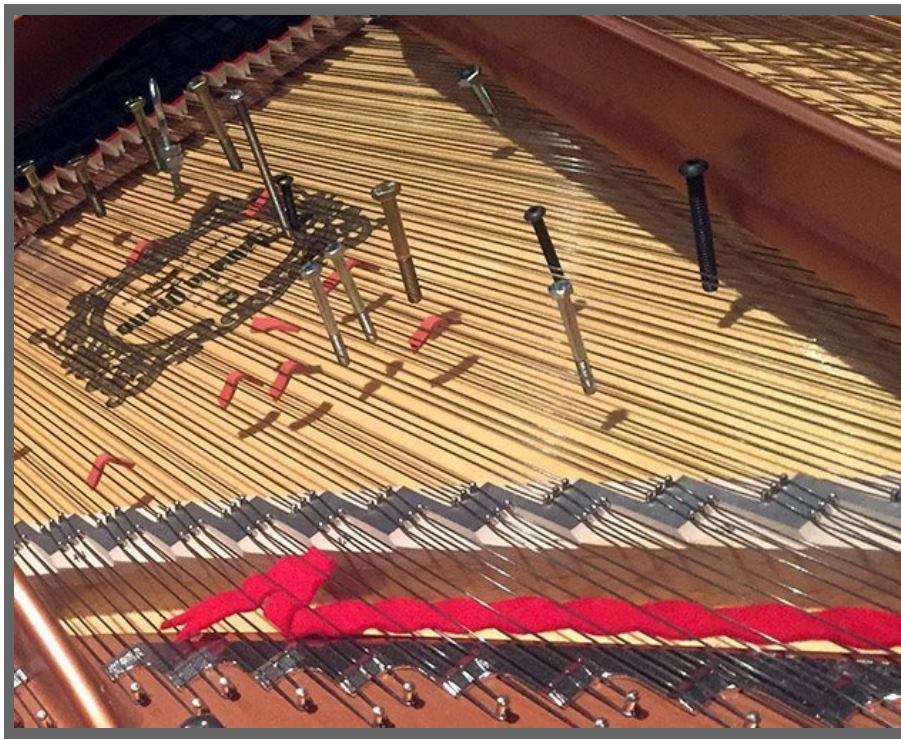
Joel Cohen on [Longtime Voice of WHRB Honored](#)

davidrmoran on [Longtime Voice of WHRB Honored](#)

Bertrand46 on [Longtime Voice of WHRB Honored](#)



Christopher Gilmore's spare lighting design served the meditative mood. Some later flourishes veered into distraction, but mostly subtle shifts of smoke-thickened spotlights in the otherwise blacked-out Loeb Ex enhanced the ambience, and the almost constant illumination of the keyboard focused audience gaze on the reflection of Hanick's hands gliding across the lid.



Prepared piano (CJ Ru photo)

A choreographic component by Or Schraiber sinuously hinted at Hindu sculpture by way of capoeira and popping. Brevity certainly beats bloat, but the one-off abruptness of a single sonata-length dance coming midway through a sequence of 19 other sections seemed more of an afterthought appendage than an essential element to the experience. Or was it something of a first step towards more sustained engagement through the cycle?

With or without any external lighting, staging, or movement, Hanick's *Cage* shone and moved by its own merits. It would be a privilege to hear it again, in whatever form it next reincarnates.

### **AMOC in Concert**

The third movement of the afternoon was appropriately more on the short and scherzo side, consisting of five compact compositions from within the past three decades.

Doug Balliett, the double bassist who had earlier infused Ruckus with such a jazzy beat that one half expected him to start spinning his instrument, joined Coleman Itzkoff on cello for a taut, pulsing *Dual* by Aucoin. Rustling shades of dusky cobalt and umber reminiscent of his opera *Crossing* underlay a line of lyric urgency, a query akin to Lenski's existential "Kuda, kuda" in the dim dawn before his fatal duel.

Iannis Xenakis's *Rebonds* followed, with Jonny Allen as the solo percussionist who exuberantly piles all those pebbles perfectly to form a monument of

classical scale and structure, while Julia Eichten provided a dance response unfortunately redolent of the flinging and flailing common among collegiate troupes trying to be artistic.

Itzkoff and Allen joined forces with an electronic looper for Andy Akiho's cinematic-time-lapse-ready *21*, which, for all its incessant four-note-theme-driven pulse, and by no fault of the musicians, seemed oddly anemic.

Cellist Jay Campbell and pianist Conor Hanick (fresh out of his sublime *Cage*) thrashed through a fast and furious *Gretchen am Spinnrade* by Eric Wubbels, whose *Sturm und Drang* vision — but for a few all-too-brief bars of stillness containing more tension than all the thundering rest combined — appears to derive less from Goethe than from Philip Glass on crack in a Twilight Zone of arctic shrillness.

To bring the concert full circle and presage the next show, Keir GoGwilt and Miranda Cuckson, the violinists of the full-length *With Care*, shared a concertized extract from Aucoin's original composition for that production. Their utter conviction in delivery boded bounties more to come.

## **With Care**



Or Meir Schraiber and Miranda Cuckson. (Nathanillia Perez photo)

Back in the Loeb Ex black box, under Christopher Gilmore's ember-warmly melancholic lighting, two violinists (GoGwilt and Cuckson) and two dancers (Or Schraiber, also briefly in *Cage*, and Bobbi Jene Smith, who shares credit with GoGwilt for creation of *With Care*) face off and feed off one another, alternately engaging and estranging. The music, an eclectic array including works by Reiko Fueting, John Cage, and Charles Wesley, a Bach violin partita, the violinists' own improvisations, and, in culmination, Aucoin's *With Care* —

which shared both a searing searchingness and D-fixation with Shostakovich — sounded of a piece with each other, equally integrated into the show's propulsive flow of abstract dance-theater.

Those who still mourn the late, great Pina Bausch may take heart. *With Care* poses similar questions of what womanhood constitutes, internally and externally; how we relate with and care for each other in an injurious world; how we love and accommodate and seek slivers of solace when true understanding remains impossible. Extended passages with passing quotes of classical sculpture could easily be subtitled “The Agony of Galatea” (as in Pygmalion's statue, not Acis's nymph), so eloquently did they probe the struggle between presentation of an ideal form and the fallibilities of flesh. “What is this bizarre thing, my body?” we ask in bewilderment with Smith. The Sisyphean task of mounting a bundle of sticks on the floor, one leaning against another, this pair rising while that falters, poignantly pointed to the precariousness of codependency and echoed the contrapuntal shuffling of chairs in Bausch's *Café Müller* (popularized in Pedro Almodóvar's 2002 film, *Hable con ella*).

Yet Smith cuts a loamier and less lacerating feminine figure than Bausch, emanating a fluid warmth even when stone-still. As alumni of the Israeli Batsheva Dance Company, both Smith and Schraiber are fluent in Ohad Naharin's gaga language, which can choreograph for every single muscle and joint independently. Together and apart, they brought a supple, searching corporeality to the sonic celebrations.

The violinists were also integral to the action. In one of the most affecting segments, GoGwilt played the *Chaconne* from Bach's Violin Partita No. 2 in D Minor — impeccably — with his back turned to the audience, while Smith swayed beside him, as if timidly trying to adhere to his very breath without ever touching. Another *coup de théâtre* saw Cuckson and GoGwilt merge into one, each providing an arm as they played on a single violin together, an apt image to embody the aspirations of not just this production but the Run AMOC! Festival as a whole.

## **The Sum of Festival Parts**

Compliments to AMOC and its American Repertory Theater host for a festival which thoughtfully joined disparate components into a single expansive arc. In addition to enjoying adventurous and excellent execution of off-the-beaten-path programs, seeing the same performers pop up in divergent contexts — as well as familiar audience faces migrating among venues — amplified the spirit of communal celebration of the arts, in whatever forms they materialize. We few, we happy few, who luxuriated in the radical intimacy of these performances may be loath to cede our privileged position, but I hope future Run AMOC! Festivals will draw the exponentially enlarged audience they so dearly deserve.

**CJ Ru, Yale Ph.D. candidate in history, previously served tours of duty in the administrative offices of San Francisco Opera and Philharmonia Baroque**

## Orchestra & Chorale.

*Share this:*



Tweet

Comments Off

---

© B. M. Int.

*If you would like to contribute to the Intelligencer, please familiarize yourself with our [submission guidelines](#).*