

When a trio means more than three

March 13, 2012 | By Jeremy Eichler

On the rare chamber music occasions on which a flute, a viola, and a harp share the stage, you can usually guess the agenda: Debussy's bewitching late Sonata (L. 137) for this precise combination of instruments. As three emissaries from distant countries of timbre, they create an ephemeral blend of colors that feels completely *sui generis*, and almost inseparable from the Debussy work itself.

So it was a lovely conceit for the violist Kim Kashkashian to dream up a Jordan Hall recital [Sunday night](#) that used the Debussy as both destination and point of departure. The program began with one of Rameau's "Pièces de clavecin en concert" rendered here by harp, flute, and viola; its central panel was a probing, mystically inclined work for all three instruments by Sofia Gubaidulina titled "Garten von Freuden und Traurigkeiten" ("The Garden of Joy and Sorrow"); and it concluded with Debussy's iconic sonata. It added up to a transfixing recital.

Kashkashian is of course a violist with a singularly generative approach to the instrument; she lives in Boston and teaches at New England Conservatory but she maintains a wider artistic purview and rich connections to composers and musicians around the world. Her latest project is a trio with flutist Marina Piccinini and harpist Sivan Magen, two accomplished solo artists who seem to share a kindred sense of musical wanderlust, at least judging by the solo works tucked between the trios [on Sunday night](#).

Kashkashian's solo turn came first, and consisted of selections from Gyorgy Kurtag's "Signs, Games, and Messages," an ongoing series of aphoristic pieces by this towering Hungarian composer. Begun in the 1980s and still in progress, they amount to a composer's running diary, with selections memorializing lost friends or taking on more playfully abstract ideas, as depicted in "Chromatic Dispute" for instance, the last of the six works offered in Sunday's set. As always with Kurtag, this is highly compressed music in which every note seems to carry an enlarged psychic and spiritual investment. Kashkashian has worked extensively with the composer himself, and on Sunday she generated the music's power and distinctive accent like a native speaker.

"Sublimation" for solo harp, by the Japanese-born French composer Yoshihisa Taira, also makes high demands on its player, spiking a disjointed monologue with open-handed slaps on the instrument, knuckle raps, and the use of a metal rod on the strings. Magen made it all rhetorically cohere and gave us an arresting ending in which the sound seemed to evaporate before the ears.

Piccinini's remarkable solo turn came via Michael Colgrass's "Wild Riot of the Shaman's Dream," a long flood of expressionistic gestures calling for the flute (as Colgrass puts it) to "pant, growl, cry, and mutter." I might add gasp, purr, and scream. Piccinini's account was a tour de force of modern flute playing.

By that point, we had indeed drifted a long way from the land of Debussy, but the program ultimately came home to the sound world in which it at least implicitly began. These three players gave the Sonata a rhapsodic freewheeling account, sensitive to nuance, artfully blended. The night as a whole had the charm and resonance of one of those Kurtag miniatures: a small vessel with a secret cargo.

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Storytelling Treats from Kashkashian *et al*

by [Zoe Kemmerling](#)

NEC faculty member Kim Kashkashian is proof that the words “violinist” and “famous” are not contradictory, and any recital of hers is an event not to be missed. On Sunday night in Jordan Hall she impressed with not only technical and artistic mastery, but with collaborative and communicative skills — just what one would expect from a luminary of the viola world. She was joined by equally skilled colleagues Marina Piccinini, flute, and Sivan Magen, harp, and together the three of them achieved the difficult task of creating a cohesive program from an ensemble for which the only well-known composition is Debussy’s *Sonate pour flûte, alto et harpe* (the program closer).

Often chamber music with an all-star cast runs awry, the artists unable to overcome their individual personas to achieve the necessary blend. Not so with Kashkashian and friends, who consistently demonstrated mutual dedication and attention while at the same time maintaining their individual charms. I was unsure what to expect from the opening piece, an instrumentally far-flung adaptation of one of Rameau’s *Pièces de clavecin en concert*, thinking it odd for the players to introduce themselves with a composition originally written for none of their instruments. However, the imitative nature of the writing highlighted their ability to converse, banter, and combine sounds, and the piece as a whole came off with a nice balance of zippy virtuosity and naturalness. The swift tempo of the opening movement sometimes threatened to overwhelm the ear, as cascades of notes in the harp met with crisp, metrically inexact ornamentation in the melodic lines. On the other hand, the effect was never staid or boring — each instrument used the playful, leaping and falling opening figure of the theme to pop out of the texture with mischievous, unsettled flair. Kashkashian and Piccinini allowed their sound to flower operatically in the slow second movement (“La Cupis” — each movement named for a friend or acquaintance of note): a warm and sensitive love duet, perhaps as tribute to Rameau’s niche as opera composer. The level of connection between the two sustaining instruments in regards to color and phrasing was masterful, including a few elegantly precise *subito piano* moments.

Kashkashian returned alone for selections from Kurtág’s *Signs, Games and Messages*, announcing that she was going to “play and tell stories” by way of explaining the six miniatures’ quirky titles. Her short interjections, from honoree Tamás Blum’s melancholy promise “I will wait for you on the other side,” to an assurance that there was “absolutely no hanky-panky involved” in Kurtág’s relationship with another dedicatee, to the interpretation of the one called “Flapping-Slapping” as “an unresolvable dispute” were managed gracefully without breaking the spell of performance and provided a welcome chance to digest the incredibly creative and pithy substance of Kurtág’s work. The pieces themselves were a perfect showcase for both Kashkashian’s impeccable technique and her intelligence in opening up for display these tiny windows into another world. From the gypsy-tinged romanticism of “Hungarian song of the green forest” to the superhuman *nth*-position microtonal double stops of “Chromatic dispute,” she jumped from haunting to rambunctious to crazy to celebratory with élan.

It was the Kurtág that made me begin to see a pattern in the program: the theme of storytelling, or at least of pieces that offered glimpses into other places and other lives. Sofia Gubaidulina’s trio *Garten von Freuden und Traurigkeiten* (The Garden of Joy and Sorrow) is inspired by two poets, the Russian Iv Oganov and the German Francisco Tanzer, and the performance was bookended by a reading in German of one of the latter’s poems by an uncredited girl from the corner of the stage, which in contrast to Kashkashian’s previous narration came off as somewhat affected (and made more awkward by the fact that she had to remain perched on the edge of her chair during the entire performance).

The trio itself was lovely, largely composed of overlapping ostinato figures which ebbed and flowed with an ease befitting the cycles of nature they illustrated. Magen set the tone effectively with an undulating figure that involved bending pitches with a metal implement; later he also used a long strip of paper to create more unique sounds that contributed to the “vivid Eastern color” with which Gubaidulina mirrored Oganov. One of Kashkashian’s roles was

an ethereal pattern of natural harmonics, and though Piccinini was the one most often carrying a melody, she blended seamlessly into the landscape of shifting colors. Contrasted with this landscape were several cadenzas for each instrument that emerged in swathes of aggression and passion (Magen wielding his metal thing like a mad scientist) before subsiding into the previous blend of cyclical mantras.

Magen and Piccinini both had solo turns in the second half of the program, with (I was pleased to discover) pieces meant to dispel the stereotypical characters of their respective instruments. Magen performed Japanese-French composer Yoshihisa Taira's *Sublimation*, which perhaps doesn't have a story beyond the physical process it describes but definitely has a statement to make. Magen energetically demonstrated further extended techniques with thumps, knocks, squeaks, rattles, and slaps which sounded at times eerily like UFO communiqués, alternating effortlessly with the classic beauty of *glissandi* and harmonics. He also displayed a great talent for rendering two voices and two characters simultaneously in different registers of the instruments.

Piccinini's selection was Michael Colgrass's *Wild Riot of the Shaman's Dreams*, a profile of a legendary crazed Inuit shaman, written and dedicated to Piccinini. According to Colgrass they worked together to achieve "the right balance of madness and poignancy that we both felt expressed the lost soul of Kakumee," and the result was dramatic, suspenseful, and moving. The piece started out guttural and blustery and moved through a tapestry of effects and characters, from stark long notes that evoked the icy, windswept tundra to piercing trills and runs channeling a human psyche stretched to the breaking point. Piccinini augmented the deeply evocative music with body language and facial expressions, building tension as she careened between ever more wild juxtapositions, interrupting snatches of folk songlike melody with bursts of insanity. Alternately crouching over, cradling, and flinging her sounds right and left, she was a truly entertaining and potent storyteller.

The Debussy trio concluded the program, and after becoming acquainted with each performer over the course of the evening it was a pleasure to hear them come together again in Debussy's intricate and lush chamber gem. It's a very meandering type of piece, but the three performers maintained as tight an ensemble and as clear a sense of phrasing in the dreamy, wispy passages as they did in sections of rhythmic drive. In fact, the head-in-the-clouds sonorities they achieved belied the intense concentration and group focus that, underneath, never flagged. The Interlude brought many instances of lovely unisons, long and perfectly balanced pentatonic phrases and notey runs during that gave Magen the chance finally to be angelic. Kashkashian, on the other hand, did not shy away from scratchiness in the Finale, adding another texture to the detailed mix — overall, a performance of beauty and guts.

More scampering, imitative Rameau was offered as an encore: merry, if not quite as successful an adaptation as the earlier selection. Great musicians and great music, both familiar and new — a thorough treat.

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An Unlikely Threesome

The harp, flute and viola make beautiful, strange music in the latest Soundings at the Nasher Sculpture Center.

by Gregory Sullivan Isaacs

published Saturday, March 10, 2012

Flutist Marina Piccinini, harpist Sivan Magen and Kim Kashkashian

Soundings, the innovative and eclectic concert series at the Nasher Sculpture Center, presented another intriguing performance on Friday. This time, it was the infrequently heard combination of harp, flute and viola. They started out with some lovely Rameau, his *Pieces de clavecin en concert* No. 5 from 1741, and ended with the best known composition for the combination, Debussy's 1915 *Sonate pour flute, alto et harpe*, L.137. In between, they played three works that are representative of modernism's most obtuse and dissonant school of composition.

Actually, it would have been better if the program had been played in reverse. Hearing the Debussy first, we would have had a perfect picture of the source and musical roots for the other musical language of the other four pieces.

Then, the Rameau would have been soothing desert after we dutifully ate our modernist Brussels spouts.

The young and awesomely talented players made an excellent case for the difficult music that separated the Rameau and the Debussy. Flutist Marina Piccinini, violist Kim Kashkashian and harpist Sivan Magen each had a solo turn as well

Together, they played *Garten von Freuden und Traurigkeiten* (Garden of Joys and Sorrows) (1980, rev.1993) by Sofia Gubaidulina. This was a confusing composition and difficult to follow. The obtuse program notes ("concrete aural perception of this garden") didn't help. The harp was prepared with a strip of paper, which created a buzzing sound. More interesting was the bending the strings after they were plucked, which sounded like a theremin. The viola was stuck playing screechy harmonics most of the time. A brilliant flute cadenza was a highlight. In any event, it was a terrific performance and they made as good case for the piece as is conceivable.

Kashkashian, a superb violist, tackled "Signs, Games and Messages" by György Kurtág. These are six short programmatic pieces for solo viola; some are portraits, some landscapes, while the Chromatic dispute that ends the collection describes an argument. Kashkashian offered a brief description of each movement before she played it. Usually, talking during a performance is unwelcome, but in this case, it was very helpful.

Flutist Piccinini astounded all evening, but she really impressed in "Wild Riot of the Shaman's Dreams" (1992) by Michael Colgrass. She entered from the back of the hall playing the opening low flutter-tongued notes of the piece and she was riveting right through to the final moment. Much of this piece is dramatic and filled with sudden mood changes. For example, a scale went from angry to pleading as it progressed upwards. Based on a literary reference to a demented shaman, Piccinini had a lot of input into the piece. As the composer said in the program notes, "together Ms. Piccinini and I poured over the various effects in this work until it seemed to have the right balance of madness and poignancy that we both felt expressed the lost soul of Kakumee." In other hands, it is questionable that this piece would have the same impact, but that is beside the point. In Piccinini care, it was much better than the sum of its parts.

Magen, also obviously a virtuoso, took his turn with another aggressively modern composition, *Sublimation* (1971) by Yoshihisa Taira. The harp was certainly put through it paces. Magen hit his hapless instrument, slapped it, used metal implements on the strings, and plucked them hard enough to create a vicious twang. The program notes called this "extended techniques" and they were certainly effective in creating new sounds. However, they also overshadowed the musical content so that the "strange" was all that you remembered. He had to re-tune before the Debussy, which ended the program. "The harp suffered quite a lot of abuse," he explained.

We noticed.

With Latest ‘Soundings,’ Classical Series Turns To More Subtle Agenda

By [Wayne Lee Gay](#)

March 12th, 2012 8:55am

The Soundings “New Music at the Nasher” series, presented at the Nasher Sculpture Center under the direction of Seth Knopp, has, since fall of 2010, brought a breath of fresh air to the Dallas classical music scene with an emotionally intoxicating blend of rule-breaking and innovation, including considerable theatricality and literary content. For Friday night’s “Classical Tradition/Musical Innovation” concert, the series made a strong turn toward a more subtle agenda, focused on an ensemble of flute, viola, and harp in a largely traditional recital-type setting.

The repertoire for the evening wove engagingly across the centuries, beginning in the French baroque with three movements from Jean-Phillipe Rameau’s *Pieces de clavecin en concert* of 1741, with the harp subbing in, quite reasonably, for the harpsichord—producing a slightly more liquid, resonant sound suitable for interplay with the modern flute and viola.

With this foundation from the past in place, the evening progressed directly into a neat exhibition of dissonant but greatly varied works from the late twentieth century. Violist Kim Kashkashian delivered Gyorgy Kurtag’s *Signs, Games, and Messages*, a set of fiery miniatures, with impressive intensity.

Anyone who associates the harp only with glittery, ethereal glissandos would have been taken aback—in a good way—by the range of expression and world of sound revealed by Sivan Magen in his performance of Yoshihisa Taira’s *Sublimation*.

In the evening’s one bit of theatricality (of which there is usually a good deal more in a Soundings concert), flutist Marina Piccinini entered from the back of the room, walking toward the stage while playing the opening section of Michael Colgrass’ *Wild Riot of the Shaman’s Dream*, a work that dashed any preconceived notions of the function of the flute as surely as Tiara’s work had displayed new possibilities for the harp.

In the midst of these solo works, contemporary Russian-Tatar composer Sofia Gubaidulina’s *Garten von Freuden und Traurigkeiten* (*Garden of Joys and Sorrows*) provided the keystone for the evening. An extended piece for the entire ensemble, its most obvious element was a continuous building of tension followed by retreat, a device repeated several times. A Nietzschean fragment from the diary of the Austrian author Francisco Tanzer was recited in German before and in English after the performance, in the evening’s one bow to the series’ frequent literary component in past concerts.

The journey then wound back again to somewhat more familiar territory to close with Debussy’s *Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp* of 1915—a work which, though related to the composer’s earlier lavish explorations of impression, presents Debussy’s beauty of tone and harmony in a lean, abstract framework. For encore, the ensemble presented a fourth and final movement from Rameau, providing a satisfying return to the “home base” of the French baroque.

While not as obviously striking in content as earlier concerts in the series, the concert was equally profound and significant. And this excellent series continues to exert a huge positive influence of style and approach during what is clearly a period of crisis and transition for the local classical music community.


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This month I am simply listing concerts I expect will be great. My pick of the month is the Boston debut of a new Flute, Viola, and Harp trio, starring instrumental superstars Marina Piccinini, Kim Kashkashian, and Sivan Magen.

By Susan Miron.