

Electric violinist Tracy Silverman to appear at Beachland Ballroom July 21

by Mike Telin



“It’s all about staying in touch with contemporary culture,” the multifaceted electric violinist Tracy Silverman said during a recent telephone conversation from his Nashville studio. On Monday, July 21 at 8:00 pm at the Beachland Ballroom, Silverman will perform a solo concert on his six-string electric violin featuring music by Santana, George Gershwin, Stevie Wonder, John Adams, J.S. Bach, Jimi Hendrix, Terry Riley, Nico Muhly and Kenji Bunch as well as his own compositions.

Musically speaking, [Tracy Silverman](#) defies musical boundaries. A graduate of the Juilliard School and former first violinist of the Turtle Island String Quartet, Silverman has been a champion the 6-string electric violin since 1980.

“One of the things I’m focused on is the advancement of the instrument and part of my mission is to develop new repertoire for the instrument.” Silverman’s mission seems to be paying off. He premiered Pulitzer Prize-winning composer John Adams’s *The Dharma at Big Sur* with the LA Philharmonic for the opening of Disney Hall in 2003. And in May of 2012 he premiered Terry Riley’s *The Palmian Chord Ryddle* with the Nashville Symphony in Carnegie Hall during the Spring for Music Festival. His recently released CD, *Between the Kiss and the Chaos*, features the celebrated Calder Quartet.

But what can audiences expect at Silverman’s Beachland Ballroom performance? “I’ve been doing a program called Concerto for One. It includes the new Terry Riley concerto and a piece by Nico Muhly, called *Seeing is Believing* that I will be playing with orchestras next season. It also includes the new concerto that Kenji Bunch wrote for me called *Embrace*. And of course there will be some John Adams, *Dharma at Big Sur*, too.” Silverman’s playlist will also include music from his own two concertos for electric

violin and orchestra. “This sounds like a lot of concertos, but don’t worry worry, I’ll also include some Hendrix and Stevie Wonder just for fun.”

Silverman points out that in many ways his six-string electric violin is closer to an electric guitar than a four-string acoustic violin because of its range and its ability to be a chordal instrument. “I also like to demonstrate with a Stevie Wonder tune that it can be funky too. By using a loop pedal I can stack different functions on top of each other — for example a bass then a rhythm guitar, a drum beat or a trumpet solo on top of all of it.”

He explained that unlike the acoustic violin strings which go from E, A, D and G highest to lowest, the six string instrument has a C, a fifth below like a viola, and an F, a fifth below that. “It’s almost down to a cello range and it’s the first fret on a guitar, so it is the same range as a guitar. This is significant because that lower octave adds bass tones.”

If you’ve been following Tracy Silverman’s career you know that he was a musical omnivore long before it was fashionable. Is the classical music world just catching up to a trailblazer like Silverman? “It kind of feels that way to me,” he said laughing, “but I try not to say it because it never comes off sounding very good.”

But what led him down his chosen musical path? “When I started doing this I was about 30 years ahead of my time. But back then I was not all that interested in new music because in the 70s and early 80s, for the most part I felt that new music was a little academic. And I always thought it was crazy because Mozart and Beethoven were writing in a contemporary style that everybody understood. They weren’t writing something that was obtuse, they were writing accessible music for the most part. It was in the style of the day and that made perfect sense to me. And since new music was not interesting to me I went into the direction of rock and roll.”

Today Silverman does feel that things have come full circle. “I’m back in the classical world first of all because I think the instrument is worthy of attention of great composers — it has all the expression of a violin plus the potential of an electric guitar, so it is a very rich instrument to write for. I also think that new music is coming around to partnering with all kinds of contemporary musical sounds that are.”

Silverman, who holds teaching positions in jazz violin and composition at Belmont University and Vanderbilt University’s Blair School of Music also feels that things are changing because the teaching has changed as well. “One of things I think is true is that you cannot interpret music if you don’t also write music, so it’s not just a matter of learning how to improvise, it’s learning how to be creative on your instrument. I don’t care if you can’t improvise spontaneously with people all around you — that’s fine. But start thinking in that way and start learning how music is created because you’ll never understand what Mozart or Bach are doing unless you try to do it yourself.”

He also believes that it is important for students to learn to play with a contemporary sound, which has led him to create a bowing technique called Strum Bowing. “This isn’t just about the electric violin, because the acoustic violin has to stay in touch with contemporary culture too. It’s important for players to learn how to play the instrument in a way that is going to satisfy a contemporary audience. It needs to be part of the larger musical culture.”

Check out Tracy Silverman’s recent NPR Tiny Desk Concert [here](#).

Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 15, 2014.

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