

## Preview: Cleveland Chamber Music Society — eighth blackbird on April 29 (second of three)

by Daniel Hathaway & Mike Telin



“Expect the unexpected,” eighth blackbird’s spokesman/flutist Tim Munro told our readers in the first of these previews, but he didn’t mean that patrons should go in uninformed. Today, Tim delves into the background of two of the pieces on the ensemble’s program next Tuesday, April 29 at 7:30 in Waetjen Auditorium at Cleveland State University.

The concert will begin with Bryce Dessner’s *Murder Ballades*, inspired by violent stories preserved in American folk music. The piece was written for and premiered by eighth blackbird in 2013 in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, where Dessner is a composer-in-residence at the Muziekgebouw.

Tim Munro: “We met Bryce six or seven years ago when he came to some of our concerts and we were quite taken with his music. He’s kind of a wildly famous rock star (he’s a member of the band The Nationals) as well as a classically trained musician (he has a master’s degree from Yale, where he studied classical guitar, flute and composition).



He has an incredibly unique compositional voice that we were excited to take advantage of. And he was quite taken with this dark, dingy, strange world of the murder ballads.

“We wanted something kind of down and dirty out of him, but he wanted to write a very classical piece, something that would take advantage of our skills as classical players. We sort of met in the middle.

“The piece itself is quite rambunctious and exploits a lot of interesting techniques to get the different sounds of folk instruments. We end with a wild furious drunken dance. It’s a really fun piece.

“The tunes are high spirited, beautiful sometimes, and you very easily forget that they’re about the darkest subject matter — grisly murders.

“We’re going to be doing the piece with the [LA Dance Project](#) in the fall. They’re bringing their production they choreographed to this music to the Brooklyn Academy of Music.”

Listen to an excerpt [here](#).

Tom Johnson, an American minimalist composer who studied with Morton Feldman, wrote *Counting Duets for two performers* in 1982. He is intrigued by the “countless” ways that human beings count things. eighth blackbird combines his *Counting Duets* with arrangements of György Ligeti *Études* arranged by Tim Munro and Lisa Kaplan.



Tim Munro: “We like to make music with unusual tools and nothing is more unusual than shouting numbers at each other. We are actually interspersing Johnson’s counting duets with our Ligeti arrangements for two reasons. One is that both composers are obsessed with numbers. And the counting duets are quite funny, surprising and light hearted. While the Ligeti can come across as quiet serious, both have characteristics of the other, so by playing them side by side they can feed one off one another.

“Lisa and I decided to arrange the Ligeti — we each did two — because very sadly, he never wrote anything for our combination of instruments before he died. And these just seemed absolutely right for the picking. Each etude is made up of at least six different tunes that are going on simultaneously, so there’s always something to listen to. The idea of delineating those lines and giving them to different instruments was too tempting.



“We tried to be very faithful to the original. We didn’t add any notes and we tried not to subtract any. What’s funny is that they turn out to almost be harder for six people than for one person. Why? They’re just really hard to play together. It’s like trying to imagine synchronized sky diving as an Olympic event. You’re all jumping off and flying through the air and simultaneously trying to do tumbles and turns while also trying to stay at the same speed. They’re amazing feats of technical wizardry and emotional maturity.

“*Counting Duets* will be split up between the ‘birds’. There is some theatrical hijinx in the counting duets too but I just can’t do it justice over the phone.

Listen to an excerpt from the Ligeti arrangements [here](#).

*On Friday, April 25 Munro will discuss Richard Parry's Duo for Heart and Breath, Brett Dean's Old Kings in Exile and Steven Mackey's Suite Slide.*

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