

Yellow Barn and The Sarajevo Haggadah: a conversation with Seth Knopp

by Mike Telin



“When we leave conservatory, our available time to do things that are out of the routine of everyday life dwindles considerably,” pianist and Yellow Barn artistic director Seth Knopp pointed out during a telephone conversation. “Whether you’re a touring musician or piecing together a living, it’s hard to find time to dedicate yourself to one project. Our residencies are a chance for musicians to immerse themselves in their work.”

One example of a project created during a Yellow Barn residency is Merima Ključo’s “The Sarajevo Haggadah: Music of the Book,” which will be presented on Wednesday,

October 28 at 7:30 as part of the Cleveland Museum of Art’s Performing Arts Series. This multimedia work for accordion, piano, and video traces the story of a precious Jewish prayer book’s journey from medieval Spain to 20th-century Bosnia. The performance will feature Merima Ključo on the accordion and pianist Seth Knopp. Video for the presentation is the creation of Bart Woodstrup. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Geraldine Brooks, who wrote about the Haggadah in her historical novel *People of the Book*, will introduce the program.

Located in Putney, Vermont, [Yellow Barn](#) is an international center for chamber music that encourages discovery in the studio, the classroom, and the concert hall through its annual summer educational programs and ongoing artist residencies.

Mike Telin: How did you first meet Merima Ključo?

Seth Knopp: I first met her when she was part of a residency with clarinetist David Krakauer and violinist and singer Iva Bittová.

MT: When did she first introduce the topic of the Sarajevo Haggadah project?

SK: I remember it well. I was in Berlin for Yellow Barn auditions. It was the dead of winter and I was jet-lagged, so at three in the morning I checked my email and there was a message from Merima that said, ‘A little gift for you.’ It was a beautiful video interpretation of a piece by Couperin that she had done with a video artist.

Later I told her that if she ever had a project she was interested in pursuing, she should just let me know. Right away she told me that she had been thinking about something ever since she had read this book by Geraldine Brooks. She told me more about her ideas and I thought it sounded fantastic, and it all happened from there.

MT: Jumping forward, how long was the residency during which “The Sarajevo Haggadah” was created?

SK: It happened in two parts, one in October and one in March. Those were the periods when her ideas were crystallized, and at the end the first performance of the piece happened.

MT: Residencies play an important role at Yellow Barn. How do you look for potential artists?

SK: People can apply, and we do have a list of examples of residency projects that we’ve done in the past. There are a few criteria. The artists need to be able to communicate what it is that they want to do, and certainly the quality of their playing counts a lot. There’s also a very general rule that I go by when I’m looking at potential projects — is it something that can really benefit by being at Yellow Barn, or is it something that could happen anywhere?

MT: Why do you think the residency program has been so successful?

SK: The work that gets done during a residency is very concentrated. We’re very lucky to have a beautiful campus as our summer home, and we have some beautiful studios, so a lot of things come together in an amount of time that wouldn’t be possible if the artists were living their everyday lives parallel to developing their project.

MT: Do all the residencies result in a performance?

SK: Most of them do, but not all. Some residencies have truly consisted of people playing around with and exploring ideas.

MT: You just finished your first-ever [Music Haul](#) tour, which Merima was a part of. The idea is fantastic. How did it go?

SK: It was very good. I think something like this has a lot of potential and can do a lot of good, so we're very excited about it. It was quite an experience to go into places where people have probably not been exposed to a lot of music of this kind. Seeing their faces transformed was incredible.



The following is an excerpt from Yellow Barn's website explaining the origins of the truck developed for the Music Haul tour:

Beginning with the purchase of a used 17-foot U-Haul, Yellow Barn first invited architect John Rossi of VisibleGood to join the project. Together with designer John Kramer, Bill Lincoln at Response Marine, and Viking Welding, Yellow Barn's team devised a self-contained, traveling concert venue for as many as six musicians, fully-equipped with interior and exterior performance spaces, a high quality internal/external sound system, video capabilities, and climate-controlled passenger and storage areas, including storage for percussion, string instruments, and a piano.

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