

Steuart & Michelle Pincombe bring their “Music in Familiar Spaces” tour to Nighttown

by Mike Telin



Living in a camper for a year while traveling around the United States giving concerts in breweries, cafés, churches, and private homes — you can imagine musicians of many genres doing that, though we don’t often associate that lifestyle with classical musicians. But that’s exactly what cellist Steuart Pincombe and his vocalist wife Michelle have been doing for the past six months.

On Thursday, March 24 beginning at 7:00 pm, the yearlong *Music in Familiar Spaces* tour will make a stop at [Nighttown](#) for a concert titled “The Art of the Fugue.” The program, one of ten being offered on the tour, will feature Steuart Pincombe and Netherlands-based pianist Shuann Chai performing works by Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms.

“Shuann and I will be playing some staples of the repertoire,” Pincombe said during a telephone interview from the camper. “The idea for the program literally came to me in the car. I was thinking about Brahms’s *Cello Sonata No. 1 in e*. It’s a piece I’ve played as long as I can remember, and it’s one of the first sonatas most cellists learn because it’s approachable. But what I had never really thought about is that the Sonata’s outer movements, the first and third, are directly related to *Contrapuncti No. 4* and *No. 13* from Bach’s *Art of Fugue*. It’s an obvious connection when you hear it.”

The program will also include Beethoven's *Cello Sonata No. 5 in D*. "We'll probably pair this with some of Bach's Two- and Three-Part Inventions, and we'll include some musical examples so people can latch on to the connections."

Although [Shuann Chai](#) and Pincombe are both graduates of the Oberlin Conservatory, their time there did not overlap. They met after Pincombe moved to the Netherlands, where Chai had been living for several years, and the two quickly became frequent collaborators. Chai now makes her home in The Hague. Pincombe recently returned to the U.S. to start [Music in Familiar Spaces](#).



"Living in the Netherlands was great," Pincombe said. "My career as a soloist and chamber musician was going well but I didn't feel like I was having a life. So Michelle and I decided to do this tour where we can work together doing something we care about: making beautiful music accessible to everyone."

Pincombe said it was while figuring out the logistics of the tour that they got the "crazy idea" of turning an old trailer into their home for a year. "It's a 19-foot, shiny aluminum camper from 1959. It might have been easier to get a more modern one, but this allowed us to convert it into a peaceful, beautiful space with an all-wood interior. I had about a month to make it functional for full-time living, then we literally jumped on the bandwagon."

Giving credit to Michelle for pulling the tour together, Pincombe noted that they began by crowdsourcing in order to find out who might be interested in the tour and where they were located. "Michelle gathered all of that information and sent out descriptions about some of the different programs we were offering. The response was quite good."

All of the programs being offered have been developed with specific venue types in mind. Presenters can choose from concerts of solo cello as well as collaborative offerings. “I’ve tried to create themes that relate to the spaces,” Pincombe explained. “*Bach and Beer* is specifically designed for breweries, while *Adaptation* is more suited for house concerts or cafés.”

An adventurous program, *Silence/noise*, features solo cello repertoire by Berio, Lachenmann, and Xenakis interlaced with pre-recorded audio of John Cage, Morton Feldman, and others talking about how to listen. “This one is a little harder sell than *Bach and Beer*,” Pincombe joked.

A popular collaborative program has been *Wondrous Love* (violin, cello, voice, and reader). “We just performed this in Bloomington and Goshen, Indiana. It features spirituals and music from the Shape Note tradition and is relatively simple for Michelle and I to pull together. We’ll try to bring in a violinist from the area and have a full day of rehearsals and the concert. This is a perfect program for churches.”

All of Pincombe’s programs have been created not only for specific spaces but also with a mind toward connecting with the people who use those spaces. “Every concert is performed without intermission, and the entire tour is name-your-own-ticket-price, which has been working out really well. We just want people to be comfortable, and choose what it’s worth to them. But no one has to worry, we’re not going to shake anybody down.”

With so many details to take care of every day, how does the cellist find time to practice? “Good question,” he said with a laugh. “Michelle and I try to figure out our schedules so that we don’t stretch ourselves too thin. It’s a lot of work just parking the camper: finding the location, backing in, and stabilizing it — all the stuff that’s behind the scenes. But in terms of practice, I’ve been working on efficiency, so I focus on the parts that need to be worked on, and I know that when I’m onstage I’ll be able to make it musical.”

Currently the *Music in Familiar Spaces* tour is in its sixth month with six more to go. After Cleveland it heads to the East Coast with performances in Boston, New Haven, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Delaware, and Vermont. The Pincombes will wrap things up on the West Coast with stops throughout California, Oregon, and Washington.

“We figured that one year would be about as much as we could handle, and I think we were right,” Pincombe said. “It’s great, it’s awesome, and it’s encouraging to see the audiences respond so well. It’s a lot of running around, but that’s being on tour. There are ten different programs, and maybe that’s a bit ambitious, but so far it’s going well.”

As far as living in a camper, Pincombe said it's working out nicely. "When I was growing up, my family had a 1985 Volkswagen camper bus. I wanted to take it to Oberlin so badly, but my dad said that he knew if he allowed me to take it, I would live in it, so maybe this is some sort of payback."

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