

## CIM New Music Symposium: fifteen minutes with George Tsontakis

by Jeremy Reynolds



On Sunday, April 2 at 4:00 pm in Mixon Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music, CIM New Music Ensemble will present a concert including George Tsontakis' *Gravity Plus*, selections from *Midnight Rain*, and *Portraits by El Greco*, as well as music by Morton Feldman and Stephen Stucky. Tsontakis will be featured in a New Music Symposium on Saturday, April 1 at 1:30 pm, in Studio 113 at CIM. Both events are free and open to the public.

Keith Fitch, head of composition and director of the New Music Ensemble at CIM, said that the school generally hosts three composers each year for guest residencies of a few days. The composers spend time working with the CIM Orchestra and New Music Ensemble, as well as holding masterclasses with the composition students.

"I've known George for a very long time," Fitch said. "I brought him in as a guest in 2009 for the CIM Orchestra, and I've really wanted to have him back for a chamber music concert of some of his works. I think he's one of our best composers, and not enough people know his music."

Fitch described the composer's music as personal and very well-crafted. Born in Queens, NY, Tsontakis graduated from the Juilliard School before studying at Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome. A longtime composer-in-residence at the Aspen Music School, he has had his work performed and recorded worldwide and is currently working on a recording project with the Albany Symphony.

"There's an expressive element to his music, and he's a wonderful colorist," Fitch said. "His music is very compelling, with beautiful lines, exciting rhythms, and virtuosity. For people who think of contemporary music as 'plink-plonk,' as my mother used to call it, George's works are approachable, passionate, and incredibly sophisticated. They live in

between tonality and chromaticism.”

Regarding the program, Tsontakis said via email that he considers *Gravity Plus* a more colorful, “engineered” work and *El Greco* “more spiritual, seeking to reflect the depth and mystical colors of the master’s paintings. He and I share heritage from Crete, Greece, albeit 400 years apart.”

The composer explained that he writes from intuition, with the goal of creating an honest communication for all, not just composers or to impress audiences. Asked what he hopes attendees take away from Saturday’s Symposium, Tsontakis responded, “Without new music being created and performed, ‘classical music’ will become a relic and the ‘orchestra’ a history museum in itself. I have faith that what the performers initially embrace in my music will eventually spread to a wider audience,” he said.

Looking ahead, CIM’s New Music Ensemble will perform a program of Morton Feldman and Christian Wolff at the Cleveland Museum of Art on Wednesday, April 5 at 6:00 pm. The free performance will be held in the contemporary galleries and will include a lecture about the relationships between the paintings and the music.

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