

## Jeffrey Zeigler at Transformer Station April 26

by Mike Telin



To make it in the music business, you need to be able to capitalize on any opportunity that comes your way. Someone who has always been prepared to do exactly that is the versatile cellist [Jeffrey Zeigler](#). A former member of the Kronos Quartet, Zeigler has premiered works by John Adams, Henryk Gorecki, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and John Zorn. He has collaborated with a diverse roster of artists including Laurie Anderson, Vijay Iyer, Glenn Kotche, David Krakauer, Kimmo Pohjonen, and Tom Waits. On Wednesday, April 26 at 7:30 pm at Transformer Station, Zeigler will present a solo recital as part of the Cleveland Museum of Art’s Performing Arts Series.

Given Zeigler’s diverse career, what does he have in store for his Transformer Station concert? “I’m excited about the program that I’m bringing to Cleveland,” the cellist said during a recent telephone conversation. “It’s a bit eclectic and will include some technology and some good, old-fashioned solo cello pieces. I think the musical language has a really nice breadth to it, so I hope to take the audience on a sonic and emotional journey.”

In addition to the world premiere of New York City-based composer Randall Woolf’s *The Feeling of What Happens*, the evening will also feature John Zorn’s *Babel: The Confusion of Tongues*, Philip Glass’s *Orbit*, Paola Prestini’s *Room 35*, and Andy Akiho’s *Three Shades, Foreshadows*. “Topping it off will be a work by JG Thirlwell. Jim is known for juxtaposing musical styles, and *Rubato* is a wonderful piece.”

Zeigler noted that Randall Woolf’s new work is rooted in Appalachian music. “A lot of the inflections that I’m trying to create are very much connected to that style. Randy was just here and we were joking about the fact I’m from San Francisco — I have a west coast / east coast accent, and now I’m working on acquiring an Appalachian accent for this piece.”

The program is also a snapshot into who Jeffrey Zeigler is. “Growing up multicultural — my mother is Japanese and my father is black — and in a multicultural environment like San Francisco, there’s always that question of who you are as a human being,” he said. “But that is the question that binds us all. In Yo-Yo Ma’s film *The Music of Strangers*, he talks about how the Silk Road Project has been an exploration of who he is and how he fits in the universe. And he said that’s the same question that the other seven billion people on the planet also have.”

During an interview for [\*Alive and Composing\*](#), Zeigler said that he is still trying to figure out the cello. I asked him if that is still true. “Every day,” he said laughing. “The cello is my chosen instrument. Every day when I pick it up, there is that familiarity, but there’s also this thing where I’m looking at it, and it’s looking at me, and we’re like, ‘Oh, hi, nice to meet you.’ We’ve been on a journey for a long time, but there’s still so much to discover.”

Zeigler first began to realize all that his journey into classical music would entail just before he entered his freshman year at Eastman. “I don’t come from a musical family, immediate or extended, so to them what I was doing was very unfamiliar, although my parents were always supportive,” he said. “But it was only a few weeks before I went to Eastman that my high school cello teacher sat me down and told me that I was going to have to take theory classes. And she literally taught me what a tonic and dominant chord were. I was that ignorant as to what classical music was all about.”

After graduating from Eastman, Zeigler went on to pursue a master’s degree at Rice. It was there that he received some wise career advice from his teacher Paul Katz. “By then I was already thinking that I wanted to play in a string quartet, but Paul told me that I should prepare myself for any possibility because you just don’t know what will click.”

After Rice, Zeigler did take a number of orchestra auditions with varying degrees of success, but what clicked for him was the world of contemporary chamber music. He spent six seasons as a member of the Corigliano Quartet and eight with the Kronos Quartet. Then he made the difficult decision to, as he put it, enter string quartet retirement. “Since I left Kronos, I haven’t played any string quartets — except once when Philip Glass asked me to play a benefit concert for his Days and Nights Festival. I said that for him, I’d come out of retirement just once.”

Today, a different kind of quartet is a focal point of Zeigler's career. "I'm in a group with slam poetry champion Roger Bonair-Agard, steel pan player Andy Akiho, and drummer Sean Dixon. Roger is a black Trinidadian, and Andy's background is kind of like mine. We call ourselves Miyamoto."

Zeigler explained that they chose the group's name after reading about Ariana Miyamoto, the 2015 Miss Universe Japan. "She's like me, half black and half Japanese. Even though she was born and raised in Japan, many people didn't like having her as Miss Japan. Around that same time, we were discussing Barack Obama, and one thing that infuriated us was when people questioned whether or not he's black enough. Since ethnic identity is a big part of what the quartet is, we thought it would be interesting to tie that into our name."

In addition to his role in Miyamoto, Zeigler serves as a curator at National Sawdust, a venue with which he has had a long relationship. "I've been connected to it from the beginning, when it was still called the Original Music Workshop because my wife is the director. Before I became an official curator, I used to joke that I was Paola's cheapest cellist, because I think I played on every single fundraising event. One of the missions of the space is to target artists who are in the early or middle parts of their careers but deserve to be heard. A lot of venues won't take that risk."

*Photo by Axel Dupeux*

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