

Clive Driskill-Smith & Joseph Gramley bring Organized Rhythm to Akron

by Daniel Hathaway



The idea of forming an organ/percussion duo arose in 2003 after British organist Clive Driskill-Smith gave an “Organ Plus” concert at London’s Westminster Abbey, pairing organ with various solo instrumentalists including percussionist Colin Currie.

“Clive said he’d love to do that kind of program again,” his now duo partner Joseph Gramley recalled in a telephone conversation. “We happened to have the same concert management, so Clive went on the Phillip Truckenbrod website, saw my name, and cold-called me. He was living in Oxford at the time so we got together in Hartford during his next visit. We hit it off and decided to tour together.”

Driskill-Smith and Gramley will bring their Organized Rhythm duo to Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Akron on Sunday, April 7 at 4:00 pm for a free concert of works by Aaron Copland and Gustav Holst they have arranged themselves, as well as original and commissioned pieces by Paul Creston, Jacob Rogers, and William Susman.

I caught up with Joe Gramley in Georgia, where he was on an eight-city tour with one of his other groups, the Silk Road Ensemble. I began by asking him about Organized Rhythm’s Copland and Holst arrangements.

“I’ve always loved Copland’s ‘Hoe-Down’ from *Rodeo* since I was a 15-year-old in the Eugene, Oregon Junior Orchestra. It was actually the first piece I played with them. Clive thought its big, wide open chords would work great on the organ. And

the middle movement is kind of a theater organ interlude that's not included in the orchestral suite."

Driskill-Smith distilled the orchestra parts down to a version for two hands and two feet, but Gramley is playing all of Copland's percussion parts "including the famous xylophone solo, marimba, wood block, timpani, bass drum, and of course, the triangle."

The duo have extracted three movements from Holst's *The Planets* — Mars, Jupiter, and Venus — and added a fourth movement they commissioned from University of Michigan faculty composer Stephen Eddins. "The ninth planet wasn't discovered during Holst's lifetime, and we thought we needed to give Pluto some love, even though it was demoted a few years ago."

Gramley will play a whole *batterie* of percussion during the Holst, including the all-important vibraphone for Venus, and will turn to some non-Western instruments for Pluto. "I'll be using hand drums from around the world, something I do a lot of with Silk Road, plus crotales and bells that make a bridge between Pluto and Jupiter." Watch a 7-minute video of excerpts from their *Planets* suite [here](#).

Paul Creston's *Concertino for Marimba* was the first-ever concerto written for that instrument, Gramley said, adding that Creston highlighted several neglected solo instruments in his works. "We'll be playing the second movement, 'Meditation,' which features a Hollywood string sound with rolled notes from the marimba almost the entire time.

"Clive and I commission one new duo piece every year, and Jacob Rogers' *How to Find Your Way Back* is warm and welcoming, both ambient and immersive," Gramley said. Rogers is a 22-year-old composition major at the University of Michigan, where Gramley has been on the faculty since 2007. "I met him during a Juilliard summer program and commissioned him to write a piece for the University percussion ensemble when he was only a sophomore."

The third original work is William Susman's *Haskalah*, whose title refers to a 19th-century Jewish Enlightenment movement. "We met after a concert at Stanford," Gramley said. "Bill is a classical and jazz pianist who really understands the marimba. He's also intrigued by the contrast between the sustaining qualities of the organ and the rapid decay of notes on the marimba. My part is all single notes, and the pairing of instruments really works together."

Clive Driskill-Smith began his career as organ scholar at Eton College, Winchester Cathedral, and Christ Church, Oxford, in addition to playing bassoon in the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain. Last year, he moved across the pond to become music director at All Saints Episcopal Church in Fort Worth, Texas, a situation that makes it much easier for Organized Rhythm to take on single engagements like next Sunday's concert in Akron. Driskill-Smith and Gramley now play six to eight domestic engagements each season, and their calendar includes international dates in Budapest in May and Taipei in August.

Gramley's position at the University of Michigan takes him full-circle back to the school where he studied as an undergraduate, and allows him the freedom to take on projects like Silk Road and Organized Rhythm. It wasn't what he set out to do — his original dream was to be an orchestral musician. "I was a freelancer in New York playing with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, Orpheus, and the Met Opera Orchestra in addition to Broadway shows and pops. But then when I got older, I went down a different path and started to play chamber music and global music."

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