

**Cleveland Chamber Choir
& Cleveland Composers Guild:
a conversation with Natsumi Osborn**

by Jarrett Hoffman



Composer Natsumi Osborn remembers the first time she read *October Danger*, a poem by her friend Anabelle Clark.

“It’s very descriptive and kind of mystical,” Osborn said during a telephone conversation. “It evoked in my head the kinds of images and feelings that I always want to evoke in my music.”

Osborn went on to set that text to music with her choral work *Autumn Reflections*, for which she won the Cleveland Composers Guild’s 2019 Collegiate Composition Contest. She’s currently finishing up her second year at

Oberlin College and Conservatory, where she studies composition with Stephen Hartke, Jesse Jones, and Elizabeth Ogonek.

In two concerts this weekend, the Cleveland Chamber Choir, under the direction of Scott MacPherson, will perform works by members of the Cleveland Composers Guild, including Osborn’s *Autumn Reflections*, and pieces by American and British women composers — details below.

Osborn’s interest in composition began very early when she was growing up in Tokyo. “I started piano lessons when I was five, and I would often just make stuff up as I was practicing,” she told me. “My parents would hear that and encourage me to turn those ideas into little songs. They always videotaped what I was writing,” she added with a laugh.

Over the next ten years, her compositional interests shifted many times. “I tried playing the piano and writing songs, and at one point I was interested in film scores.” At age 12, she moved to Houston, and in high school began studying with Daniel Knaggs, then a doctoral student in composition at Rice University. “That’s when I was introduced to the world of classical and contemporary music,” Osborn said. “That’s when the gears really shifted, and I am where I am today because of that.”

Knaggs suggested that Osborn try her hand at choral writing. “He helped me find different types of music to listen to and scores to study so I could get a feel for the many ways that text could be set,” she said. When it came time to choose a text, he encouraged her to pick something that felt personal to her in order to create a strong foundation for the piece.

That’s where Anabelle Clark comes into the story. She and Osborn went to high school together for two years — they were close friends and still are. “She’s a writer in her free time,” Osborn said. They got to talking about the different processes of writing poetry and music, and Clark brought up her poem *October Danger*.

The composer found it fascinating. As she writes in her program notes:

Through imagery of beautiful autumn scenery, the poem brings about several underlying concepts that are uncomfortable to face: realizing the ease with which we are distracted by desire, being conflicted between what we love and what is ultimately right and losing ourselves while pursuing a romanticized reality. These hidden sentiments spoke to me strongly, and my personal understanding of the poem’s context drew me to set it to music.

It’s been a happy story, and not just because Osborn won the Composition Contest. The Oberlin College Choir gave a reading of the piece last year, and the composer sent a recording to Clark. “She was really excited about it.”

We also spent a few minutes chatting about her experience so far as a double-degree student at Oberlin, majoring in composition and economics. That program normally takes five years to complete, but Osborn is hoping to finish in four.

“My schedule has definitely been packed every semester, but I really enjoy it that way,” she said. “When I’m feeling stuck or burnt out, I’m able to completely shift gears. Taking that time away from music momentarily and focusing completely on something else sometimes re-energizes me, and gives me the mental space I need to go back to music, ready to complete whatever I started.”

The Choir's performances take place Saturday, May 18 at 7:30 pm at Fairmount Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights and Sunday, May 19 at 3:00 pm at First Congregational Church in Akron. Oberlin faculty musicologist Charles Edward McGuire will discuss the music 45 minutes before each concert. Tickets are available [here](#).

In addition to Osborn, the Guild will be represented by Jennifer Conner, Scott Michal, Jeffrey Quick, William Rayer, Dawn Sonntag, and Frank Wiley. Works by Abbie Betinis, Rosephanye Powell, Cecilia McDowall, Judith Bingham, and Charles Stanford, plus an arrangement by Undine Smith Moore, make up the rest of the program.

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