

**Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival —  
chatting with lutenist Elizabeth Kenny  
and composer Nico Muhly**

by Mike Telin



“With plucked instruments you have the freedom of a classical musician on the one hand, and on the other, you can also have a great relationship with folk, rock, and jazz,” English lutenist [Elizabeth Kenny](#) said via Skype from Cremona, Italy. “And sometimes you can escape those boundaries, which is very true of composers like Kapsberger and Piccinini — they had their intellectual side and a strong sense of what could be done with three or four chords.”

On Saturday, June 8 at 4:00 pm in CIM’s Mixon Hall, Kenny will present a program titled “Theorbo Fantasy: old and new music for the long-necked lute,” featuring the music of Kapsberger and Piccinini, as well as works by James MacMillan and Benjamin Oliver. The program will also include the world premiere of Nico Muhly’s *Berceuse with seven variations*,

written for Kenny. The concert is part of the [Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival](#). Tickets are available [online](#).

Although Kenny has been a big fan of Muhly’s music for a long time, the two weren’t introduced until she performed in New York City with the English viol consort [FRETWORK](#). “They were playing a piece by Nico that didn’t have a lute part, so I was in the audience listening. I knew he had written a piece for Iestyn

Davies that stuck in my mind, so I thought, this guy can write for lute. Eventually I sent him a fan mail and said, ‘Please, would you write something for the theorbo?’ and he very kindly accepted.”

At their only face-to-face meeting — the rest were done over Skype — she brought along some of her favorite pieces by 17th- and 18th-century composers to play as a starting point for the process. “I was tuned at A=415 and I was surprised that Nico immediately started playing the same things on the piano — transposing by a semitone.”

Kenny said that the most difficult part of writing for theorbo is understanding the instrument’s illogical tuning system. She pointed out that many times, music that looks simple on the page doesn’t work so well in reality. To illustrate, she picked up her instrument and demonstrated how one side uses the same intervals as a guitar, and the other side is tuned down to produce the lower notes in the scale. “It’s almost like you have two instruments in one,” she said. “That’s the part that is not intuitive for a composer who doesn’t play the instrument. But Nico learned incredibly fast.”

After their initial meeting Muhly went away and got down to work. “One day some music arrived, but I am a slow learner, so it took me a while before I was ready to say, ‘This works, but maybe you should try something different here.’ But sometimes when I say that something doesn’t work, it’s because I haven’t practiced it enough, so I need to push myself to find new solutions. It was interesting that when I did get stuck, he always said the same thing — think Bach — and that always helped. I’m not sure why, but it did.”

Kenny described the piece as harmonically rich with an interesting balance between melody and harmony. And like any cradle song, it begins gently and rhapsodic. “It does have its nightmare moments, and it gets quite exciting but always returns to that gentle mood.”

Turning to the topic of James MacMillan, Kenny said what’s wonderful about him is that in addition to being a great composer, he’s also a pragmatist.

His *Motet I (Since It Was the Day of Preparation)* comes from a larger work written for five voices, five instruments, and a bass soloist as Jesus. “He wrote an extended motet for each of the instruments and said they can be played as freestanding pieces. This motet has kind of an old loneliness feel.”

Kenny got to know the music of Benjamin Oliver while they were colleagues at the University of Southampton. “He writes a lot of funky experimental stuff, but like

Nico, he's grounded in the older styles and likes to mix them together. In *Extending from the Inside* he uses a ground bass structure under material that is more fragmented, so you can hear the layering of the old and new."

Saturday's program will also include Alessandro Piccinini's *Toccata Cromatica*, *Partite variate sopra la Folia*, and *Ciaconna*, and Giovanni Girolamo Kapsberger's *Toccata*, *Passacaglia*, *Capona*, *Canario*, and *Colascione*.

"It's important for me to pair the old music with the new," Kenny said. "And hopefully people will hear echoes of older music that is in the new. I think that makes it more accessible to the listener who doesn't think of themselves as a new music aficionado."

She pointed out that there are other members of the lute world who regularly program the old with the new. "But for me it's been a nice way of expanding my own understanding of my instrument, and it's made me play the old stuff a little differently as well."

In his composer notes [Nico Muhly](#) writes:

*Berceuse with seven variations is constructed around a cycle of twenty-four chords, spaced with a maximum distance between the lowest and highest notes. Each variation explores various paths through this cycle, but always keeping the idea of a cradle-song, a berceuse, in the background. Some of the variations treat this music subtly and calmly, and other times, exploding the chords into fast-moving notes found at the extremes of the instruments. The piece ends with the chords dispersed, inverted, and made gentle again.*

I caught up with Nico Muhly by phone at his home in New York, and began by asking him what he found interesting about this commission.

Nico Muhly: I've written a fair amount for "historical instruments" — I hate to even use that word so let's put it in quotes — because of course if it's being played now, it's not historical. I've written before for lute and viola da gamba. For me, there's something poetic in those sounds being tempered by modern harmonies, and the other way around. There's a bit of time travel which happens in most of my work anyway — it always looks back a little bit to the Renaissance, Elizabethan, and Jacobean periods.

*Mike Telin: How did the commission come about?*

NM: Very easily. Liz emailed asking if I wanted to write it and I said yes. I wish there were a more complicated origin story to this, but that's literally what happened.

*MT: Is the cradle song based on one that already exists?*

NM: No, I invented it. A berceuse is just a triple-meter song and there are hundreds of them. Berceuse just means to "rock a baby." Weirdly, I was interested in creating a music that felt like it was already a variation on something else.

One of the great things about people who commission a lot of music is that you can ask them what they already have in their fingers. I was listening to the other contemporary works that Liz has had written for her — she commissions a fair amount of music — and I wanted to make sure that what I wrote was not the same and was something that could fit well into her programs, not just of Renaissance music, but also of contemporary music.

*MT: How is writing for the theorbo different from writing for the lute?*

NM: It's very similar, and the fundamental difficulties remain the same. I wish I could say that it's somehow easier, but in fact, it's hard.

One of the things that's a challenge is that my sense of idiom for stringed instruments is pretty specific to bowed instruments — I totally get that. Whereas when you look at the way that the theorbo is tuned, it changes your sense of what is idiomatic and what isn't.

The top two strings sound lower than the second top two, so there's this weird thing where you have to go up to go down. It's more similar to writing for the viola da gamba than any other thing I've found.

Liz and I worked together a lot over Skype, which was great because there is a spectrum of what is idiomatic for the instrument and what isn't. What is a natural thing to do versus what is completely unnatural. What's a stretch versus what's a challenge, and you really have to calibrate all of that just to figure out what you've written versus what you're actually asking for.

But she's a wonderful and patient collaborator. I am the kind of composer who wants to know how to do it better each time. I'm interested in asking why this spacing is easier for you than this one if it's not immediately obvious to me.

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