

Local 4 “Tuning In,” a conversation with composer & pianist Eric Charnofsky

by Nicolette Cheauré



A concert program comprised entirely of piano quintets is fairly uncommon, but on Thursday, December 17th at 7:00 pm at the Steinway Gallery you can hear three such pieces on the same program, as part of the Local 4 Music Fund’s “Tuning In” virtual concert series. You can hear piano quintets by Shostakovich and Amy Beach, performed by violinists Jennifer Walvoord and Diana Pepelea-Vardi, violist Esther Nahm, cellist Derek Snyder, and pianist Eric Charnofsky. The concert will also feature Charnofsky’s own composition, 5 by 5.

The piece was commissioned for and premiered by the Los Angeles-based group Pacific Serenades, and partly modeled off of *Meditations on a Suicide*, a film score Charnofsky composed in 1989. The work hasn’t been performed since 2011, “So this is bringing it back nine years later,” Charnofsky said during a recent Zoom interview. Specializing in premiering new works, Pacific Serenades highlighted a composer from the area at every concert, and their only requirement was to “compose something that is of lasting beauty.” In 5 by 5, commission number 101, Charnofsky utilized the compositional freedom he was granted. The title refers to the instrumentation and number of movements. Each — Intrada, Chaconne, Tarantella, Meditation and Postscript — features a different instrument and a specifically chosen interval, bouncing between celebration, resonance, quirkiness, and thoughtfulness.

Charnofsky was interested in exploring the music of underrepresented composers alongside more identifiable works. “I found Amy Beach’s Quintet op. 67. She was a turn of the 20th century American composer, and really the first American female composer of note. I thought that if people don’t know it already that they

should. I loved it: it's hard, it's very Romantic, and it's very fun. Then I thought we should balance it out with a composer that people do know, and that Shostakovich's Quintet op. 57 would be distinct."

He is optimistic about revisiting his quintet, noting the flexibility that comes when performing one of his own pieces. "I may decide in the rehearsal that I don't like things as much anymore and we should change it, and I'm present, so why not?"

The group plans to rehearse in a large space while socially distancing, with everyone remaining masked throughout. "As a precaution, I'm assuming we are all going to bring our own music stands so that we can be safe in that way." He and his colleagues are no strangers to playing in small ensembles, but he does worry about replicating that intimate experience while staying far apart. "We've all played chamber music in traditional settings, so this is a big adjustment. I'm a little concerned as to how we're going to set it up, since I rely on tiny aural cues and am not facing the other players. There are still times you have to have the visual contact for coordination."

Charnofsky, who has been involved in making music since childhood, is an individual who wears many different hats. He's a Juilliard trained pianist and composer, and teaches at Case Western Reserve University. How does he balance all of these activities? "I've always thought that all the musical things I do are connected and inform each other. Obviously not all people who teach in a university also are active music makers. My connection to music is staying active. That connects me more effectively to the students I teach, and being engaged in those activities helps me better relate to them, and them to me. I want to be a part of the process, not just knowledgeable."

The pianist's upcoming concerts are also his first swing back into performing after months of concert opportunities were cancelled by the pandemic. Although he hasn't had the chance to work with Walvoord, Pepelea-Vardi, Nahm, and Snyder before, he's looking forward to it. "All musicians are starved for performance opportunities.

Knowing that there could be hundreds or even thousands of people listening that aren't in the room with us — that is always a strange experience. It's going to be new, but I think by December we're going to be really ramped up and excited about it."

The concert on December 17th is sure to be an enjoyable evening of spontaneity with a certain degree of novelty. All the musicians will come together for one

common purpose: to make the world feel slightly less heavy and shine a little brighter, at least for one hour.

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