

No Exit Presents: Pianist Geoffrey Burleson

by Mike Telin



Presents **PIANIST**

noexit
new music ensemble

GEORGEY BURLESON

MUSIC BY
GEORGE ANTHEIL
ROB PATERSON
GERALD STRANG
VINCENT PERSICETTI
MARY KOUTOULDJIAN
HERBIE NICHOLS
MEL ROBINICK
AND
FRANK ZAPPA

free and open to the public

May 2nd at 7:00 pm
the Bop Stop
2920 Detroit Ave
Cleveland, OH 44113
216.771.6551

May 3rd at 7:00 pm
Heights Arts
2175 Lee Rd
Cle Hts, OH 44118
216.371.3457

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I’ve been compelled by mid-century American modern music for some time,” pianist Geoffrey Burleson said during a Zoom conversation. “I’ve recorded all of Roy Harris’s piano music and Vincent Persichetti’s 12 piano sonatas. I recently played some of Irving Fine’s music at Mills College under the auspices of Other Minds. I’m always saddened when people dismiss the mid-century neoclassic style. I just love it and I’m doing all that I can to revive it.”

On Friday, May 2 at 7:00 pm, “No Exit Presents” will host Geoffrey Burleson for a concert at The Bop Stop. The program, which will include works by Mid-century and 21st-century American composers, will be repeated on Saturday at 7:00 pm at Heights Arts. Both events are free.

Burleson, who serves on the faculties at Princeton University, Hunter College of the City

University of New York, the Mostly Modern Festival, and Italy’s Interharmony International Music Festival, said that he looks forward to returning to Cleveland.

“I’ve performed there quite frequently, mostly at Cleveland State University. For some years there was a composers’ recording institute run by Andy Rindfleisch. He’s an old friend of mine — we go way back to our student days in Boston.” Burleson has also been featured on a number of No Exit concerts.

When asked about his program, the pianist said that he has performed versions of it for a while. “The commonality with those programs is that I had both George Antheil’s

“Airplane Sonata” and something by Frank Zappa. So I’ve been calling the program *From Antheil to Zappa*, even if some of the other pieces change.”



Burleson described George Antheil’s *Sonata No. 2, “The Airplane,”* as a boisterous, satirical work that is full of verve and energy, and harmonies that still sound fresh today. “It’s kind of frenetic — ragtime on amphetamines — that I think makes it a really fun opener.”

The program then moves on to Robert Patterson’s *Variations & Fantasies on an Accordion Song*. The pianist said that he thinks

Patterson’s music reminds him of the neoclassicists and neo-romantics of the American school. “I’ve been the Chair of Piano at the Mostly Modern Festival for three years now and we’ve worked together quite a bit. I’ve played a lot of Rob’s music but I’ve never played this piece.”

What is an accordion song? “Patterson deals with that very ingeniously,” Burleson said.

Vincent Persichetti’s 1982 *Sonata No. 12, “Mirror,”* is written so that the right and left hands are exactly mirrored in terms of intervals, distances, and rhythms. “He manages to get a wealth of variety out of that technique. Persichetti wrote a whole set of mirror etudes, as well as this mirror sonata and they occupied him through a lot of the late period of his life.”

What Burleson didn’t know is that Gerald Strang used the same technique in his 1932 work *Mirrorrim*. “Strang studied with Arnold Schoenberg in California, and in the last phase of his career he became something of a electronic music pioneer,” Burleson said.

“It’s interesting that he did this much earlier than Persichetti, so I thought it would make a cool companion piece on the program.”

The program also includes Mary Kouyoumdjian’s *Aghavni* (2009). Burleson explained that Aghvani is Armenian for doves. “The piece is based on a triptych of poems that deal with the Armenian genocide — just before, during, and long after. It’s a devastating piece that uses Armenian folk materials as well.”

The eclectic program also features some jazz, by way of Herbie Nichols’ 1955 tune, *The Gig*. “I learned about him around the same time that he was being rediscovered in the ‘90s,” Burleson said. “He wrote the jazz standard *Lady Sings the Blues*, and recorded I think four albums with his trio, three of them for Blue Note. But it was this tune, *The Gig*, that captivated me. So I made my own transcription of it and rearranged some

things to make it more idiomatic for solo piano since it was originally written for his trio.”

Frank Zappa’s *BeBop Tango* is not only a piece Burleson has been playing for a long time, it was also a mainstay of Zappa’s touring band in the ‘70s. “Of course, the piece has both tango and bebop elements in it that collide with each other in very wacky ways. When they played it there was always a lot of improvisation and that’s something that I bring to it as well. But I try to play the composed parts verbatim. It’s kind of like a piano transcription of something that was written for a rock band.”

The program concludes with Neil Rolnick’s *Lockdown Fantasies 4 & 5, for piano & electronics* from 2021. Although the piece was written during the Pandemic, Burleson said that it’s not a morose piece about isolation.

“It has an electronic part, and I trigger lots of things with a pedal board. Stylistically it’s all over the map from allusions to Bach to Latin jazz. The entire piece has five fantasies and takes about almost an hour to perform. But I’m only playing the final two to close the program.”

If you’re wondering, Burleson’s program will last around 70 minutes with no intermission. “That is the perfect length for a concert.”

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