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Chester Englander & his cimbalom return to No Exit this weekend



On Friday October 23 at Praxis Fiber Workshop and Saturday 24 at SPACES, No Exit New Music kicks off their season with a program featuring cimbalom virtuoso Chester Englander.

The 7:00 pm free programs will include music by John Adams, Joseph Pereira, György Kurtág, Kaija Saariaho, Alfred Schnittke and Miklos Rozsa.

The following interview has been reposted with the permission of No Exit.

by Laura King

Internationally acclaimed percussionist and cimbalom virtuoso Chester Englander has helped redefine the possibilities of the cimbalom, an instrument traditionally associated with Eastern European folk music, and brought its extraordinary sonic palette to the forefront of contemporary classical music.

Praised by *The New York Times* for his "brilliant clarity," Chester has performed with many of the world's leading orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, and Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

An adventurous champion of new music, Englander continues to expand the instrument's repertoire through commissions, premieres, and collaborations with contemporary composers and ensembles, including No Exit. (For more insight into Chester's journey of discovery with the cimbalom, visit No Exit's website to read his April 2022 interview in News**,** and a repost of Mike Telin's article for ClevelandClassical.com, "The Big Cimbalom Thing.")

Laura King: Chester, you have been at the forefront of bringing the cimbalom into the world of contemporary classical and avant-garde music. How has your own understanding of the instrument's expressive possibilities evolved over the years? Are there sounds or techniques you're exploring today that you couldn't have imagined when you first began playing it?

Chester Englander: When I began playing the cimbalom, I had zero impressions of what the capabilities of the instrument were beyond that it was organized in a maniacal way that felt impossible to comprehend. To quote John Adams, "it must have been made by Dracula!" As I have grown as a cimbalom artist and embarked on a vast exploration of the instrument through the demands of contemporary repertoire, it has been revealed to me that the cimbalom has a depth of emotional and sonic power that surpasses the standard complement of the percussion family. Which is not surprising, considering that it is actually a chordophone, a cousin of the harp and piano. The sustain and color of the cimbalom evokes not only emotion, but you can sense the long chronological arc that has accompanied the various diasporas since the origins of these instruments, with roots in Mesopotamia in the form of the psaltery.

With regard to extended techniques, I have been challenged by the technical virtuosity required by the works of György Kurtág which has forced me to "level up" again and again in terms of my physical awareness of the instrument. *Michelangelo Fragments* (featured on this coming program) uses harmonics for great emotional affect, and also my hands alone to activate the strings through plucking and striking.

LK: You've worked closely with some extraordinary contemporary composers, including John Adams, and have helped inspire new works for the cimbalom. What does that creative exchange look like? Do composers arrive with ideas that challenge you to discover new possibilities, or do your own experiments with the instrument sometimes inspire their compositions?

CE: Working with composers is easily the most gratifying component to my career as a cimbalom artist. Serving as a muse to composers has provided a way to make an impact on the repertoire that goes far beyond performance. I view my role as one of exploration, coming up with new ideas for sonic combinations rather than experimenting with new physical techniques.

Rather than limit myself to solo repertoire or with orchestra, I have sought to find ways to not only collaborate with composers, but to create opportunities to work with other artists that I deeply respect. Through these collaborations, we are creating new sound worlds by combining the astringent twang of the cimbalom with other instruments in pairings that have never been tried before. For example, next season will see premieres of works for cimbalom and saxophone with the great Tim McAllister, and I am also

exploring creating new works for cimbalom and guitar with Dan Lippel. These collaborations are both tremendously exciting for me, as I have been a long time admirer of their collective artistry and it is very humbling that they are enthusiastic about taking a unique artistic journey with me.

LK: Your collaboration with No Exit goes back several years and has included premieres of works written specifically for you and the ensemble. What makes this partnership particularly rewarding, and how does performing with a group dedicated to adventurous new music expand what you can do with the cimbalom?

CE: I am so grateful to Tim Beyer and No Exit, as they have been steadfast artistic partners since 2019. We have had two successful commissioned works, and being able to record them with these fine musicians has produced indelible evidence of the impact that our partnership has produced. The purity of their pursuit of introducing a wide range of repertoire to Cleveland audiences and beyond is inspiring and essential for the future of our craft. They have a courageous openness to experimentation that is breathtaking, and I couldn't be more gratified when I'm invited to participate.

LK: For audiences encountering the cimbalom for the first time, its remarkable range of sounds can be quite a revelation. What would you encourage listeners to pay attention to during Cimbalom Sounds? And what do you hope they'll take away from hearing this centuries-old instrument in such an unexpected musical setting?

CE: The repertoire being introduced on the *Cimbalom Sounds* program runs the gamut of color and style. *Michelangelo Fragments* by LA-based composer Joseph Pereira is an unprecedented sonic exploration of the colors and emotional power of the cimbalom. The six movements are deeply contrasting and require a range of extended techniques that span a wide spectrum of color and articulation.

Tre Pezzi/Tre Altri Pezzi by György Kurtág are classic examples of his unique compositional style, six vignettes that are expansive at times, yet still contain intricate interplay that stimulate and challenge the listener.

Our arrangement of *Phrygian Gates* by John Adams is a reinvention of his Opus 1 piano solo, his first work that could be called "minimalist". We have incorporated colors and compositional ornaments that became signatures of his evolving compositional style, like cimbalom, crotales, tuned gongs, vibraphone and harp. Applied retroactively, this arrangement has created a new work that sounds like modern John Adams despite being originally composed in 1977-78.

I hope that audiences leave this program with recognition of the cimbalom not as a novelty, but as an exciting addition to the modern ensemble.

LK: Where are you headed next?

CE: To Naples, Florida to perform Adams: *Scheherazade.2* with violinist Leila Josefowicz and the Naples Philharmonic, with Markus Stenz conducting!

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