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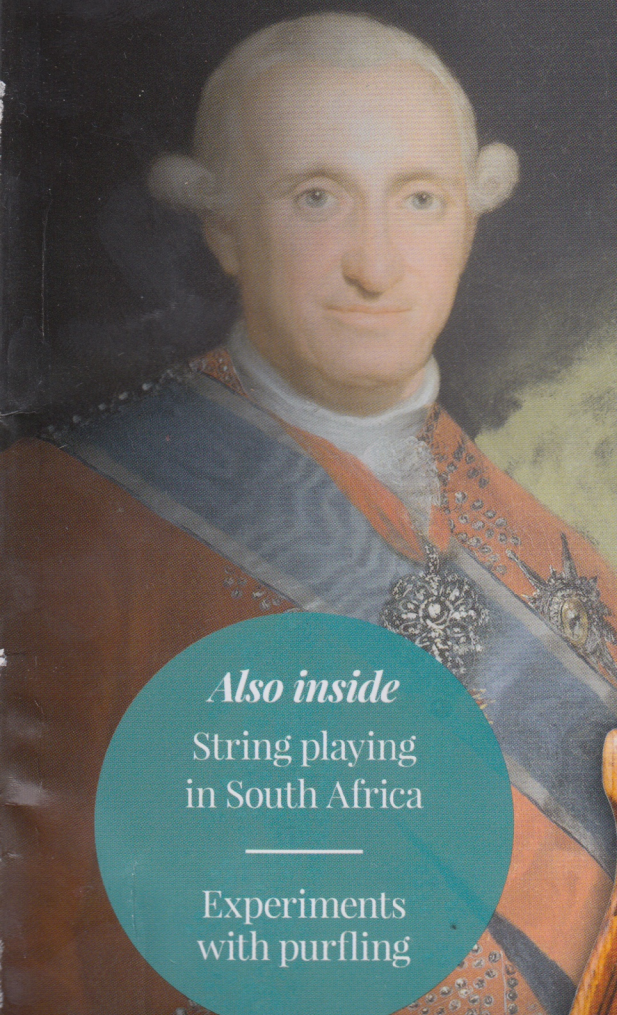
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ONLY CONNECT

British violinist Madeleine Mitchell's new album naturally follows the strong links inherent in a line of 20th- and 21st-century composers, as she tells **Harry White**

Shortly after our conversation, Madeleine Mitchell is due to set off for New York, marking a period of reconnection with a number of key musical figures in the city. Lunch with Thea Musgrave is on the agenda, and it's during our chat about Mitchell's busy schedule that it becomes clear just how important 'connection' is to her most recent project. The concept of human connection has been both scrutinised and revolutionised following the pandemic, and it's the DNA upon which Mitchell's album *Violin Conversations* is built.

Indeed, 'Connections' might have been just as apt a title for her latest album of 20th- and 21st-century violin works. And the figure of Musgrave becomes a symbolic reference point for this. The composer immediately invited Mitchell to lunch upon hearing the final cut of her 1960 work *Colloquy*, which features on the album. And while the invitation marks a personal connection born from the recording, Musgrave herself becomes something of a point of contact with other artists on the record, most pertinently with American–Australian composer Douglas Knehan, a former student of hers whose *Mist Waves* (written for Mitchell in 2019) for violin and piano also features.

The links don't end there. Like Musgrave, US-born composer Kevin Malone, represented by his cheeky *Your Call Is Important to Us* (2022 – also for Mitchell), won a Fulbright scholarship to study in Paris, the city that also educated



'NONE OF THE COMPOSERS ON THE ALBUM ACTUALLY PLAYS THE VIOLIN, BUT THE MUSIC IS STILL DEEPLY IDIOMATIC'

Joseph Horowitz under Nadia Boulanger's watchful eye and whose *Dybbuk Melody* (1980) is the second work on the album. (Musgrave, too, was a student of Boulanger.) Alan Rawsthorne's Violin Sonata, the record's curtain-raiser, was premiered in 1960 at the Cheltenham Music Festival, during the same concert in which Musgrave's *Colloquy* received its premiere. Rawsthorne and Martin Butler (represented on the album by his 2020 piece *Barcarolles*) are interconnected by their student roots in Manchester, but the latter is also inextricably tied to the project's North American dimension by his Fulbright scholarship to Princeton.

Mitchell was herself Fulbright/ITT fellow at New York's Eastman School of Music (where Malone also studied) and was baptised into the contemporary music scene during the 1980s as a player in the chamber ensemble the Fires of London, the brainchild of Mancunian *enfants terribles* Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies.

It's a fascinating creative network, but the connections on Mitchell's album are deeply personal, not merely circumstantial. Butler's *Barcarolles*, the longest work in the collection, arrived 'out of the blue' in the post as a gift to Mitchell. It's one of no fewer than six featured compositions on the album that were written specifically for the violinist, a testament to her integrity not only as an artist of the highest order but as a champion of the contemporary voice. Pianist Andrew Ball provides a particularly moving personal connection. Mitchell's musical collaborator for more than two decades, he died of Parkinson's disease in 2022, and his characteristically astute playing can be heard on her live recording of the Rawsthorne Sonata – a poignant memorial to a musical partnership that became a benchmark in the interpretation of contemporary music.

As a distillation of the theme of personal and artistic connection, *The Ice Princess and the Snowman* by Howard Blake (*above*) leaves an indelible mark as the final work on the album. Born from the *pas de deux* from *The Snowman* stage show, Blake's arrangement for violin and piano was conceived specifically for

Mitchell in 2018. 'At one point, I thought I might end the album with the Malone because it's so bang up to date,' says Mitchell. 'But then I considered that the Blake is such a beautiful piece. I've known Howard and worked with him my whole career, so to end the album in this way seemed appropriate.'

Above all, *Violin Conversations* is a celebration of contemporary music and stylistic diversity. Rawsthorne's intense Sonata, dedicated to Joseph Szigeti and in which Mitchell notes more than a 'flavour of the Hungarian', and Musgrave's serialist *Colloquy* represent 20th-century classics, while the newest work, by Malone, drips with sardonic wit, a powerful contrast against the spaciousness of the Knehans and poeticism of Wendy Hiscocks's *Caprice* (1990, rev.1999). 'The album has gradually come together over time,' says Mitchell. 'I started really thinking about the project a few years ago. Richard Blackford's *Worlds Apart* arrived in the spring of 2020. I already had the Blake and I gradually became conscious that I had all these new pieces which didn't have recordings. And so I began to consider what I could put with them. I immediately thought of the Rawsthorne as a tribute to Andrew Ball, with whom I recorded the work for the BBC, and from there the album began to take shape. The record is just under 80 minutes long, so it's absolutely packed with contemporary classics and these incredible very new pieces.'

The album is a delightful pot pourri of recording contexts, featuring live and studio sessions from around the UK, including the Royal College of Music (RCM) and universities of Cardiff, London and Manchester. 'The Rawsthorne is a live BBC recording from 1996,' says Mitchell. 'I like this recording very much and it obviously has that real energy that comes from a live performance. And while you can't recreate that exactly in a studio, there were circumstances that gave various studio sessions a special atmosphere.' This includes recordings of four works with the composers themselves at the piano (Blake, Butler, Hiscocks and Errollyn Wallen) and a session at the RCM with the composer present.



Pianist Nigel Clayton and composer Wendy Hiscocks with Madeleine Mitchell (right) at a recording session

'Wendy Hiscocks was there for the recording of her *Caprice*,' says Mitchell. 'She's a very poetic person and would say these wonderful phrases that would just inspire you to understand the character of the music. For Howard's piece, I originally had recorded the work in 2018. But Naxos needed a higher technical specification, so we re-recorded together quickly one evening! Having the composer at the piano adds authority.'

Can Mitchell trace where her terrific enthusiasm for and commitment to contemporary music came from? 'I'll let you into a little secret,' she laughs. 'I used to enjoy writing myself, starting off with little pieces from the age of nine. Then the violin took over, but it was always there somewhere in the back of my mind, as an interest in the "now".' And for Mitchell, the violin remains one of the most relevant instruments to convey the fresh and sometimes challenging perspectives of contemporary composers. 'There's just so much you can do with it,' she says. 'Martin Butler once told me that my lyricism inspired him to compose, and this is something that I do particularly love about the violin. Also, its range, colour and flexibility; the violin is

extremely powerful. And none of the composers on the album actually plays the violin, but the music is still deeply idiomatic.' I suggest that presumably Mitchell has helped composers to bring this out, and she responds: 'Like so many collaborations in the past, like the one between Brahms and Joachim, the composer is able to ask things like, "Can you try it this way?" or, "How would it sound like this, instead?" Working with a composer is a great privilege.'

WORKS Blackford *Worlds Apart* Blake *The Ice Princess and the Snowman* Butler *Barcarolles* Hiscocks *Caprice*, *Dry White Fire* Horowitz *Dybbuk Melody* Knehans *Mist Waves* Malone *Your Call Is Important to Us* Musgrave *Colloquy* Rawsthorne *Violin Sonata* Wallen *Sojourner Truth*
ARTISTS Madeleine Mitchell (vn) Andrew Ball, Nigel Clayton, Ian Pace, Howard Blake, Martin Butler, Wendy Hiscocks, Errollyn Wallen (pf)
RECORDING VENUES Various (Cardiff University; City, University of London; University of Manchester; Royal College of Music; St Silas Church, London, UK)
RECORDING DATES Various (1996–2023)
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