

# In The Middle Of Things

Chamber Music By

**MICHAEL ZEV GORDON**



resonus



**JULIAN BLISS CLARINET**  
**FIDELIO TRIO**

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Michael Zev Gordon (b. 1963)

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Julian Bliss *clarinet*  
Fidelio Trio  
Darragh Morgan *violin*  
Adi Tal *cello*  
Mary Dullea *piano*

About The Fidelio Trio:

*'[...] the Fidelio Trio give a performance  
of terrific impetus and refinement'*  
Gramophone

About Julian Bliss:

*'Poise, agility and alertness permeate  
these winning, infectious performances'*  
BBC Music Magazine

## Fragments from a Diary (2005)

for clarinet, violin and piano

1. breakable objects [0:46]
2. the time has come to have a home [1:08]
3. all too brief [0:26]
4. ...And those who are beautiful,  
oh who can retain them?... [1:35]
5. elegiac [1:04]
6. ...you can still catch the echo [2:28]
7. Listen my heart, as only saints  
have listened [3:45]

## 8. False Relations (1994)

for violin and piano

[10:22]

## 9. Grace (1999)

for violin and piano

[3:22]

## 10. Roseland (2008)

for cello and piano

[8:56]

## Three Short Pieces for Clarinet (2016)

11. A Lotus Flower [3:24]
12. Un canto di sospiri [2:44]
13. Freilach [1:15]

## Diary Pieces 2015

for piano

14. Long Time [0:48]
15. Shining Day [0:33]
16. Another Space [1:20]
17. Summer Waltz [1:06]
18. A Line of Light [0:17]
19. Grilli [1:18]
20. Epitaph [1:43]

## 21. A Small Folly (2002/2016)

for clarinet, violin, cello and piano

[6:32]

## 22. In the Middle of Things (2014)

for violin, cello and piano

[15:12]

Total playing time

[70:16]



Michael Zev Gordon (Photography: Claire Shovelton)

### In the Middle of Things

One of my recurring aims as a composer has been to take the listener on different kinds of musical journey that begin in places perhaps quite known and familiar, but move towards something which, I hope, is less familiar, even strange. The idea of 'seeing the familiar as strange', stretches back to the Romantic vision of the late eighteenth-century German philosopher Novalis (1772–1801). But the wish to write music that lifts the listener beyond the everyday is mine too – even if the twenty-first century musical means and materials by which I am trying to do this are rather different.

Often the starting point of my work is quite simple – short, graspable melodic phrases, harmonies that recall tonality or modality, the feel of something gradually unfolding. But as the ideas are elaborated, they move into choppier, harmonically ambiguous, and indeed, at times, atonal waters. As well as this, strangeness has to do with the way materials can be sharply juxtaposed, fragmented or multi-layered. The wish to include the tonal and atonal in the same work – to be lyrical but also to break up singing lines – reflects something, perhaps, of our pluralist

present, and questions what wholeness or unity in art is. But my overriding reason for bringing all these elements together is not driven by stylistic experiment, but rather by a strongly expressive urge. The way my music twists and turns, sways and churns, is about trying to embody the many strains of human passions. But equally, the journeys I make are, more often than not, also to do with a desire to still the passionate.

The first work on this compilation, **Fragments from a Diary**, is a collection of small, disparate pieces, and exemplifies my inclusive aesthetic. The first piece, 'breakable objects', is itself a collection of even tinier slivers, starting with something that recalls eighteenth-century classicism, but rapidly dissolves into the contemporary. But most of all this piece is expressive of a recurring character in my music: the fragile. The second piece, 'the time has come to have a home', is a quotation from a poem by the Italian writer Primo Levi (1919–1987), written just after the end of World War 2. His extraordinary testimony to the horrors of the Holocaust is well known. Here, the poem is about an urgent need to find security following those horrors; my musical analogy evokes Klezmer, originally Eastern European Jewish music of celebration, but from a post-war perspective, it always has for me a tinge of something

lost. No. 3, 'all too brief', is indeed over in less than a minute, a snatch of a folksong of the imagination, while No. 4, '...And those who are beautiful, oh who can retain them', comes from another favourite poet of mine, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). The line suggests fleetingness and loss, and the music, for piano solo, at first dances on the spot, then gives way to a tiny, repeated, lyrical moment. Such poignancy is given another kind of inflection in No. 5, 'elegiac', while No. 6 responds again to a quote from Rilke, '...you can still catch the echo'. This is the fastest and most elaborate piece of the set, opening up, as I see it, like a flower bud, giving rise to a kind of vigorous dance, only to close down again, ending where it began, on a simple triad. The final piece, 'Listen my heart, as only saints have listened', another Levi line, gives focus for me to the whole work. A very slow chordal litany leads to music of great, expressive intensity, but in that passion something of the stillness I am searching for is also touched upon.

**False Relations** for violin and piano was my first piece deliberately to mix together music of different styles, and the movement between my 'new' music and the quotations of the 'old' was central not only to the expression of the work but

also to its form. The music I quote is from a *Pavana* by the Late Renaissance lutenist composer Robert Johnson (1583–1633), a piece itself arranged for keyboard by Giles Farnaby (c. 1563–1640) and found in the keyboard collection known as the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*. My work is in part a kind of dreaming of this early music, sometimes quite clearly, at other times more murkily, always fragmentarily. But as the ancient increasingly rubs shoulders with the modern, the music takes ever more unstable turns. The title might be seen to refer, then, to apparent tensions between these two worlds. Yet it is also the term given to an especially beautiful, bitter-sweet kind of dissonance, much favoured in music of the English Renaissance; and the exquisite example of this from the *Pavana* creates an underlying link to the harmonic flavour of my work. Perhaps the relations between these styles and identities are closer, less 'false', than first thought.

The over-riding harmonic colour of **Grace** is also one that hovers betwixt and between – seemingly quite modal, but never quite fully resolving and spiced with occasional darkening chromaticism. But this piece – originally composed for a Faber Music educational publication – aims for a more delicate character of musical speech than

*False Relations*, and its intended gracefulness stems too from the lilting metre in groups of three, a predilection of mine. Gentleness also lies at the core of **Roseland** for cello and piano. But its series of fragments, the stops and starts, the deflections from one kind of material to another, tell more of an ongoing search for tranquility, rather than a straightforward expression of it. Some of these materials allude to other music, and there are three direct quotations – from the jazz standard *My Funny Valentine*, from a Jewish liturgical chant, and, at the end of the piece, from the first song of Robert Schumann's (1810–1956) *Dichterliebe*. This last emerges out of the motif heard at the very start of the piece, as though a memory, long lost, is for a moment recovered. Such thoughts about the emotional power, yet fleeting fragility, of memory has been a recurring theme in my music. But, as here, it often also combines with the desire to settle into calm – where memory ceases to be a restless tug. And the very close of the piece indeed settles onto a triad, if in its not-quite-resolved second inversion voicing. This moment of serenity chimes with my personal experience of a strip of land in Cornwall, which gives the piece its name.

Capturing in music an external image, or the mood attached to it, has been fruitful for me. But as with a favourite work of mine, Claude Debussy's (1862–1918) Preludes for piano – in which the titles are placed in brackets at the end – I see my music poised between the figurative and abstract; this is also my favourite kind of art. In the first of my **Three Short Pieces for Clarinet**, the lotus flower of the title gave me a starting image, a sense of delicacy and also a Buddhist symbol of enlightenment sprouting forth from darkness. But once the piece was begun, it was as much the musical patterns, growing, varying, morphing, that I worked with. This worked similarly with the idea and shape of a sigh in No. 2, 'Un canto di sospiri' – also a nod to Luigi Nono's (1924–1990) *Il canto sospeso*; while the final 'Freilach', a type of Klezmer dance, starts in that world, but the modes and shapes that the music goes through are more of my own. The **Diary Pieces 2015** for piano are rooted still more in personal images and experiences. A hot summer spent in Italy contributes to Nos. 2, 5 and 6; No. 7 is a response to the death of a relative. But the personal here is also about my love of other music, and the wish to juxtapose different musical sources: a Bach-like invention in No. 1, minimalist stasis in No. 3, a 'popular' waltz in No. 4 – the modern and the traditional, the classical and the non-classical all in the same basket.

The interlocking of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art is that much more elaborate in **A Small Folly**, the arrangement of this piece made especially for the performers on this album. Its unfolding results from how a modernist haze slowly coalesces into a Latin jazz bossa nova, *Insensatez*, by the Brazilian Antonio Carlos Jobim (1927–1994), via Frédéric Chopin’s (1810–1849) E minor Prelude, Op. 28, No. 4 – to which Jobim’s falling harmonic sequence strongly relates. What do these different parts add up to? A dream-world? A web of memories swirling in my head? A madness or absurdity, in other words a ‘folly’, the translation of the Portuguese title? All of these. But also, I hope, these strange, expressive, unexpected elisions may also transport the listener to seeing, and hearing, the apparently known anew.

In the recording’s title piece, **In the Middle of Things**, I again explore, on a more extended canvas, the effects of mixing, eliding and juxtaposing materials of quite different hues and manners – only here they are all of my own invention. The concept of *In medias res* also, quite literally, launches the piece, with my musical journey beginning as though entering into a passage of rich, modal lyricism in mid-flight. There are subsequently leaps to very different ideas,

by turns meditative, yearning and turbulent. Eventually the piece returns to its opening, only for it to become part of a longer, ongoing line, which winds simultaneously ever higher and lower. And in all these ebbs and flows, there is another subject that I want to engage with and shape, at the heart of music, but also deeply connected to perceiving the world anew: time. How can I shape music to appear to make time rush forward or to stretch out, to be something close to our sense of clock-measured time, but then appear as if unmoving and timeless? That final, contemplative idea – of a temporal serenity – is, for me, at the heart of turning the known into the unknown of which Novalis speaks, even if it is only occasionally glimpsed.

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*Thanks are due to the University of Birmingham for their support in making this recording.*



## Fidelio Trio

The 'virtuosic Fidelio Trio' (*The Sunday Times*) is Darragh Morgan, violin, Adi Tal, cello and Mary Dullea, piano. Shortlisted for the 2016 Royal Philharmonic Society Music Awards, the Fidelio Trio is an enthusiastic champion of the piano trio genre, performing the widest possible range of repertoire on concert stages across the world; it has broadcast regularly on BBC Radio 3, RTÉ Lyric FM, WQXR, and featured on a Sky Arts documentary.

Since their debut at London's Southbank Centre, the trio has appeared at the Wigmore Hall and Kings Place, at festivals including Spitalfields, Cheltenham, St. Magnus and Huddersfield. In Ireland it regularly performs at National Concert Hall, Dublin, Kilkenny Festival and Belfast Festival at Queen's as well as overseas in Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Porto, Paris, Venice, Florence, Johannesburg, Harare, New York City, Princeton, San Francisco and Boston.

The trio's extensive discography includes Ravel and Saint-Saëns for Resonus Classics; Philip Glass *Head On & Pendulum on Orange Mountain*; Korngold and Schoenberg (*Verklärte Nacht* arr. Steuermann) for Naxos; the complete Michael Nyman

Piano Trios for MN Records; multiple releases on NMC, Delphian Records including portrait albums for composers such as Luke Bedford and Michael Zev Gordon. Their previous release of French Piano Trios for Resonus was a *Gramophone* Editor's Choice.

The Fidelio Trio has given masterclasses at Peabody Conservatory, Curtis Institute, NYU, NAFA Singapore, and Stellenbosch Conservatorium South Africa. They have been artists-in-residence at St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, and the State University of New York.

The Trio has premiered music by composers including Toshio Hosokawa, Charles Wuorinen, Johannes Maria Staud, Michael Nyman, Gerald Barry, Donnacha Dennehy, Joe Cutler, Evan Ziporyn, Simon Bainbridge, Judith Weir, Alexander Goehr and Kevin Volans.

The three members of the trio are Artistic Directors of the annual Winter Chamber Music Festival at Belvedere House, Dublin City University and continue to be passionate in advocacy for the piano trio across the world.

[www.fideliotrio.com](http://www.fideliotrio.com)



### **Julian Bliss (clarinet)**

Julian Bliss is one of the world's finest clarinetists excelling as a concerto soloist, chamber musician, jazz artist, masterclass leader and tireless musical explorer. He has inspired a generation of young players as guest lecturer and creator of his Conn-Selmer range of affordable clarinets, and introduced a substantial new audience to his instrument.

Born in the UK, Julian started playing the clarinet age four, going on to study in the U.S. at the University of Indiana and in Germany under Sabine Meyer. The breadth and depth of his artistry are reflected in the diversity and distinction of his work. In recital and chamber music he has played at most of the world's leading festivals and venues including Gstaad, Mecklenburg Vorpommern, Verbier, Wigmore Hall (London) and Lincoln Center (New York).

As soloist, he has appeared with a wide range of international orchestras, from the Sao Paolo Symphony, Chamber Orchestra of Paris, and Auckland Philharmonia, to the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, London Philharmonic and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

In 2012 he established the Julian Bliss Septet, creating programmes inspired by

King of Swing, Benny Goodman, and Latin music from Brazil and Cuba that have gone on to be performed to packed houses in festivals, Ronnie Scott's (London), the Concertgebouw (Amsterdam) and across the U.S.

Album releases receiving rave reviews from critics, album of the week spots and media attention, include his recording of Mozart and Nielsen's Concertos with the Royal Northern Sinfonia. The latest chamber discs include a new piece for clarinet & string quartet by David Bruce – Gumboots – inspired by the gumboot dancing of miners in South Africa and a recital album of Russian and French composers with American pianist, Bradley Moore.

Recent highlights include an exciting new concerto by Wayne Shorter, with the Argovia Philharmonic, extensive USA tour with his septet, and chamber concerts with the Carducci Quartet.

[www.julianbliss.com](http://www.julianbliss.com)



## Michael Zev Gordon

Born in London, Michael Zev Gordon is a composer of highly crafted, richly expressive works. Influences from his wide range of teachers – Robin Holloway, Oliver Knussen, Franco Donatoni, Louis Andriessen and John Woolrich – have coalesced into an eclectic, individual voice.

In Gordon's music, an inclusivity of different styles is often present, and memory and time are recurring subjects. Gordon has been performed by many leading performers, including Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, London Sinfonietta, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, The Choir of King's College Cambridge, Jukka-Pekka Saraste, Huw Watkins, Nicholas Daniel, Toby Spence, Richard Watkins and Alina Ibragimova.

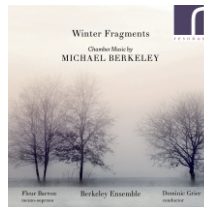
The BBC Symphony Orchestra have commissioned him twice – for *Bohortha*, a large-scale orchestral work, and a Violin Concerto with Carolin Widmann and Sakari Oramo. Gordon has twice won the choral category of the British Composer Awards, a Prix Italia for his radiophonic work *A Pebble in the Pond*; and *On Memory*, a piano music portrait disc on NMC, was in *The Times* top ten

contemporary discs in its year of issue.

Gordon is also strongly committed to working with students, amateur and younger players. He has led composition teaching on the Contemporary Music for Amateurs summer school, and was Director of the Cheltenham Festival of Music Composer Academy during 2016–2018. He has taught composition at the universities of Southampton and Durham, the Royal College of Music, the Royal Northern College of Music, and has been invited to work with composers and performers internationally, including at Juilliard in New York. Since 2012, Gordon has been Professor of Composition at the University of Birmingham.

[www.michaelzevgordoncomposer.com](http://www.michaelzevgordoncomposer.com)

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