

JENNIFER FRAUTSCHI, VIOLIN
JOHN BLACKLOW, PIANO

American Duos

WORKS BY
Stephen Hartke + Steven Mackey
Elena Ruehr + Dan Coleman
Barbara White

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This disc of American duos for violin and piano represents many years of collaboration between us and our composer-colleagues. As frequent performers of contemporary music, we have given serious attention to composers of our generation. We are particularly enthusiastic about fearless composers with undeniably individualistic voices. A common thread among these works is the composer's incorporation of his or her visceral inspiration of life experiences directly into the music — whether it is Mackey's ingenious blending of the sounds of instruments tuning into the score itself; White's transformation of Welsh poetry or of Qigong practice into a musical embodiment; Ruehr's melding of jazz and gamelan, taking a Chinese poem as a departure point; or Hartke's exotic tonal palette, inspired by tiny Japanese carved figures. Their creativity and inspired visions are the motivating force behind this recording.

We commissioned Barbara White to write *Before I was released I was in many things* and premiered it at Wellesley College in spring of 2011; Dan Coleman's *Sad and Ancient Phrases* was also written for Frautschi. As a duo we toured Steven Mackey's Sonata extensively in Europe, and have also worked closely with both Hartke and Ruehr. Most importantly, all five composers represented on this disc have written extensively for chamber music ensembles, but in our opinion their compositions for violin and piano have not been performed nearly often enough and deserve to be heard much more widely. Our hope is that this disc will help these works reach a broader audience of music lovers, students, and fellow performers alike.

— JENNIFER FRAUTSCHI & JOHN BLACKLOW

The Music

Stephen Hartke: *Netsuke* (2011)

Stephen Hartke, born in 1952 in Orange, New Jersey, is widely recognized as one of the leading composers of his generation. Winner of the 2013 GRAMMY Award for Best Contemporary Classical Composition, his work has been hailed for both its singularity of voice and the inclusive breadth of its inspiration. He has had major commissions from Glimmerglass Opera, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall and the Harvard Musical Association, the IRIS Chamber Orchestra, the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the National Symphony Orchestra, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Chamber Music America, the Fromm Foundation, Meet The Composer, and the National Endowment for the Arts. He has also won the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, two Koussevitzky Music Foundation Commission Grants, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. From 1987 to 2015, he was Distinguished Professor of Composition at the University of Southern California, and is currently Professor and Chair of Composition at Oberlin Conservatory.

Netsuke are Japanese miniature carvings that were originally made to secure objects suspended from a man's sash. Often very intricate in design, they represent a broad range of subject matters from depictions of animals and people, to scenes from folk-tales and literature as well as everyday life, to fanciful supernatural creatures. This piece was inspired by six exquisite carvings from the Bushell Collection at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

In the first movement, a *tengu*—a hawk-like goblin—takes on the appearance of a monk to lure a religious hypocrite to his doom. The second carving, Tadamori and the Oil-thief, is a wonderfully kinetic depiction of a midnight scuffle between a samurai and a poor servant whom he has mistaken for a thief. A *tanuki* is a raccoon-like creature thought to have the power to change its appearance. In this small sculpture one is seen dressed in a

robe quietly playing the *samisen*. In my piece, I found myself thinking of the *samisen* duels that one frequently hears in Japanese theatrical music. While quite fearsome looking, with the head of an elephant and a lion's mane, the *baku* is a shy creature that performs the useful service of protecting sleepers from nightmares. In the carving that inspired the fifth movement, a rich man has apparently set off on a journey, but instead of being carried by his usual bearers, seven demons have hijacked his sedan chair and gleefully cart him down to Hell. The final *netsuke* shows a serene mountain landscape intricately rendered in a water-drop-shaped piece of ivory. Gnarled wind-blown trees and the verandas of handsome pavilions can be discerned through the mist.

Commissioned by the McKim Fund in the Library of Congress, *Netsuke* is dedicated in friendship and gratitude to Matt Albert and Lisa Kaplan of eighth blackbird.

—STEPHEN HARTKE

Elena Ruehr: *Rumengling* (2012)

Elena Ruehr, born in 1963 in Michigan, is known for her bold lyricism, which is informed by her ability to combine musical structures from worlds as diverse as the second Viennese School and minimalism. Honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2014 and a Fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute in 2008. She was composer-in-residence with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, who recorded her opera Toussaint Before the Spirits (BMOP Sound) and her complete orchestral works (BMOP Sound, O'Keeffe Images). In addition to her work with BMOP, her recordings include Averno (Avie Records, Trinity Choir, 2012), How She Danced: String Quartets of Elena Ruehr (Cypress String Quartet, 2010), Jane Wang considers the dragonfly (Albany, various artists, 2009) and Lift (Avie Records, Irina Muresanu, Jennifer Kloetzel, Sarah Bob and Ethan Filner). Her six string Quartets have been championed by the Cypress, Biava, Borromeo, Lark and Shanghai String Quartets. She studied composition at the University of Michigan and The Juilliard School, and has taught at MIT since 1991.

Inspired by a poem by Chinese poet Li Qingzhao (1084-1151), I wrote *Rumengling* in 2012. In translation by Nathan Sturman, the poem reads:

Last night through squalls of rain and gusty wind
In heavy sleep without my cup of wine
I dreamt I asked a person of the scrolls
About the cherry-apples of their time.
Doest thou know/
Doest thou not?
The answer, only
“Young, old, plump, and slim.”

The following year I decided to compose two additional movements, and *Rumengling* became the first movement of my Second Violin Sonata. The sonata is dedicated to William Bolcom, who was my teacher for many years. Influenced both by Bolcom's own violin sonatas and his love of jazz, the piece floats between a sense of my own style and jazzy moments reminiscent of his.

—ELENA RUEHR

Steven Mackey: *Sonata for Violin and Piano* (1996)

Steven Mackey was born in 1956 in Frankfurt, Germany to American parents and raised in northern California. As an electric guitarist, his compositions are influenced by rock and jazz; he frequently performs his own compositions for electric guitar, which include a Concerto for electric guitar and orchestra (Tuck and Roll) and two works for electric guitar and string quartet (Physical Property and Troubadour Songs). His awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, two awards from the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and the Stoeger Prize for Chamber Music from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. Since 1985 Mackey has served as a Professor of Music at Princeton University.

I have been interested in the combination of violin and piano for a long time. In fact, my first piece ever was a duo for violin and piano. I am interested because it is a preposterous, awkward liaison. The two instruments could not be more different in terms of construction, physics, sound, character, and playing technique. It is obviously well suited for a melody in the violin and restrained accompaniment in the piano but achieving any other kind of workable co-conspiracy requires some imagination. It is like having a baby: it's really hard but millions of people do it and the challenge does you good.

I developed my interest in this combination in college where I, as a young rock guitar player, first encountered chamber music. My music theory and music history teachers frequently appeared as a violin and piano duo and their performance of sonatas by Debussy, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, the *Duo Concertante* of Stravinsky, and other mostly twentieth-century works literally changed my life—I became a composer. Perhaps that is why the title of this piece is nostalgic and quite unlike my other titles such as *Eating Greens*, *Banana/Dump Truck*, or *On All Fours*.

There are two features which deserve special mention. First, the violin part makes occasional use of microtones—notes in between the familiar equal-tempered tones. Second, the two movements are highly asymmetrical. The first is about two minutes long and the second is closer to 18 minutes.

Sonata for Violin and Piano was written in 1996 for David Abel and Julie Steinberg and was commissioned by the McKim Fund at the Library of Congress.

—STEVE MACKEY

Dan Coleman: *Sad and Ancient Phrases* (1999)

Dan Coleman, born in 1972 in New York City, was educated at the University of Pennsylvania and The Juilliard School. In 1994 he became the first composer-in-residence for Young Concert Artists. His music has been commissioned and performed by the American Composers Orchestra, Cypress String Quartet, Dallas Symphony, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the Tucson Symphony Orchestra, where he has held the post of composer-in-residence since 2002.

Sad and Ancient Phrases was commissioned by Jean-Paul Bierny and Chris Tanz for the Arizona Friends of Chamber Music, and was composed in part at the MacDowell Colony during the summer of 1999. It was premiered by Jennifer Frautschi and Pedja Muzijevic in Tucson, Arizona, during the winter of 2000. It is my fourth sonata for violin and piano, and is structured in a single, continuous movement. While it roughly follows an ABA form, the return of the opening material is transformed and influenced by what has happened in between. In the beginning of the sonata melodies appear in succession and later are heard simultaneously. The heart of the piece is an instrumental reworking of a song for soprano and piano entitled *Dissolving Views*, which was set to a poem by Rachel Wetzsteon. The poem, the song, and this violin and piano work all explore an undercurrent of alienation that runs beneath friendship, love, and romance. The musical metaphor in this case is an uneasy counterpoint between the instruments that sounds at once nostalgic and unstable. The title 'Sad and Ancient Phrases' is meant to convey the melancholy, Brahmsian music that appears opposite more contemporary sounds.

—DAN COLEMAN

Barbara White: *Before I was released I was in many things* (2011)

*Composer Barbara White is a prolific composer of chamber music, in addition to creating theatrical performances incorporating words, movement, video, and onstage ceremony. She is also an idiosyncratic clarinetist, exploring the wonders of the sounding breath through a kinship with the solo Zen repertoire of the Japanese bamboo flute. Honors and awards include a Fellowship from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, three awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a 2003 Guggenheim Fellowship, and commissions including the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Aspen Music Festival. White's fourth solo CD, a recording of the opera *Weakness with a libretto by the composer*, was released on Albany Records in 2013. In 1998, she joined the faculty of the Princeton University Music Department, where she is now Professor of Music.*

Before I was released I was in many things, commissioned by Jennifer Frautschi and John Blacklow and premiered in 2011, takes its title and its inspiration from a line by the Welsh poet Taliesin, and, more generally, from the story of his birth as a poet. While Taliesin's life and poetry have been historically documented, this episode is more akin to myth—but as with many Celtic stories, its most improbable aspects seem especially “true.” Depicting the poet's awakening into higher consciousness, the narrative presents all manner of vivid imagery, including a chase scene between a goddess and the boy initiate, multiple instances of shape-shifting, and the poet's successive births and extended travels. So, as Taliesin undergoes his transformation, he does indeed find himself “in many things.” But the many things cannot be choreographed or scripted: thus, in the music, rapid “scene changes” alternate with a certain amount of waiting and an unhurried progress from one moment to another. Fantastical aspects notwithstanding, Taliesin's journey conveys too the value of openness, attentiveness, and modesty. It offers a bold invitation to accept one's fate—to sing one's given song whether or not it turns out to conform to the ego's parochial and self-interested desires. In that spirit, Taliesin's well-known “Boast” refers to numerous identities, referring both the taking and action and to being acted upon:

I have been a director in battle;
I have been a sword in the hand;
I have been a shield in fight
I have been the string of a harp;
I have been enchanted for a year in the foam of water.

In shaping this duo, I found myself composing something akin to a tone poem or an imaginary ballet, musing once more on the magic of musical shape-shifting and the by-now expected unexpected. As if to bear out the content of the story, I sketched parts of the piece in March 2007 and returned to complete it almost four years later, after many interruptions and transformation—accompanied by unflinching yet patient encouragement from Jennifer and John. When I dug out my original sketches, they had indeed transformed themselves. Later, my own version of Taliesin's “Boast” found its way, to my surprise, into the ending of my 2012 opera *Weakness*.

Before I was released I was in many things is dedicated to my mentor and friend, composer Eric Moe, ever inspiring in his intelligence, integrity, and generosity.

—BARBARA WHITE

The Performers

Jennifer Frautschi and John Blacklow have been performing together since 1996. Selected by Carnegie Hall for its Distinctive Debuts series, they made their New York recital debut at Carnegie's Weill Hall in 2004. As part of the European Concert Hall Organization's Rising Stars series, they also made their debuts as a duo that year at ten of Europe's most celebrated concert venues, including London's Wigmore Hall, Salzburg Mozarteum, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Vienna Konzerthaus, and La Cité de la Musique in Paris. They have performed recitals in Boston, Cincinnati, Detroit, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, San Diego, Sarasota, and various other cities in the States, and released a recording of the three Schumann Sonatas for Violin and Piano in 2014 for Albany Records.



Two-time GRAMMY nominee and Avery Fisher career grant recipient Jennifer Frautschi has gained acclaim as an adventurous musician with a wide-ranging repertoire. Her discography includes three widely-praised CDs for Artek: an orchestral recording of the Prokofiev concerti with Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle Symphony and highly-acclaimed discs of music of Ravel and Stravinsky, and of 20th century works for solo violin. She has also recorded several discs for Naxos, including the Stravinsky Violin Concerto with the Philharmonia Orchestra, conducted by the legendary Robert

Craft, and two GRAMMY-nominated recordings of Schoenberg's Concerto for String Quartet and Orchestra and Schoenberg's Third String Quartet. In addition to her 2014 release of the Schumann Sonatas, her most recent releases are a recording of romantic horn trios, with hornist Eric Ruske and pianist Stephen Prutsman, and the Stravinsky Duo Concertant with pianist Jeremy Denk. She performs on a 1722 Antonio Stradivarius violin known as the "ex-Cadiz," on generous loan to her from a private American foundation.



Acclaimed for his "powerful and eloquent" performances (New York Times) and his "high pianistic sense of fantasy" (Salzburger Nachrichten), pianist John Blacklow has performed as soloist and collaborator with prominent ensembles and collaborators, nationally at the Kennedy Center in Washington and Carnegie Hall in New York; and internationally at the Konzerthaus in Berlin, the Royal Conservatoire in Brussels, the Musikverein in Vienna, HOAM Hall and Kumho Art Hall in Seoul, Royal Albert Hall and Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, and the Louvre Auditorium and Salle Gaveau in Paris. He

serves on the piano faculty of the University of Notre Dame, and has recorded for Universal Music, Ltd., Deutsche Grammophon, iTunes, Bridge Records, Albany Records, and EDI Records, Ltd. Blacklow is a Steinway Artist.

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Elena Ruehr *Rumengling* available direct from the composer

Barbara White *Before I was released I was in many things*
available direct from the composer