

## With A Little Help From Our Friends: A Conversation with Palisades Virtuosi

by Robert Schulslaper

When flutist Margaret Swinchoski, pianist Ron Levy, and clarinetist Don Mokrynski first united as Palisades Virtuosi, they joined a select group of chamber trios devoted to exploring the rather arcane world of music written for their combined instruments. Now, after years of dedicated commissioning, they've expanded those formerly limited horizons to include 90 contemporary pieces, as well as a plethora of arrangements and transcriptions. In previous interviews (*Fanfare* 34:2 and 38:2) they revealed how they met, looked back at the history of pre-PV repertoire, delved into their recordings, the origin of their *New American Masters* series, and more. At the time of our last conversation they'd previously released five volumes of that groundbreaking survey, with today's encounter bringing us up-to-date about Volumes 6 and 7. Overflowing with good-humored enthusiasm for "their" composers, they're ideal guides with whom to discover the delights of PV country.

*It's been a while since we last spoke, 2014, in fact; by that time, you'd released five volumes of your New American Masters series. Today we're going to hear about Volumes 6 and 7, but before we do, have you been busy concertizing in the intervening years?*

MS: Yes, we've continued doing our subscription series concerts in New Jersey, and we also have done a lot of run-out concerts in the vicinity and the tri-state area. The run-out concerts a chance for us to do more performances of these works that we've commissioned. And that's one of the reasons that I think that composers like to write for us, because they know that we have a really active performing apparatus, and we also record, and we do everything we can to get their works out there and distribute them to as many people as possible. We've done three to four premieres every year since then [2014]. Volume 6 came out in 2017, and that's being reviewed in this issue of *Fanfare*.

*Why the delay in submitting it for review?*

MS: We just never went through the reviewing/interviewing process for that one just because we're talking about a nonprofit, small chamber arts ensemble: we don't always have the resources to fund getting the piece out there with the attendant publicity. So that's why Volumes 6 and 7 are bundled together.

*Over the years, Palisades Virtuosi has commissioned many new works; are you still at it?*

DM: Absolutely. Besides the concerts, we've mostly been very active in continuing commissioning. Such wonderful new works! I'm always astounded with the quality, especially with the young talent!

MS: We actually have three of our newer commissions waiting in the wings right now for us to be able to get back on stage. We were toying with the idea of doing a hybrid event last fall—a combination of live and online performance—and we started to get a date set for it. Then all the infection rates started spiking and we thought, it's just not safe to do it now. Ron doesn't really want to do a virtual performance, he's so busy. He and I have had a completely different experience through this entire pandemic. He's been nonstop under siege with his job and playing, while I've been on unemployment for a year. He does a lot of accompanying—he calls himself an accomplice, and I've been teaching virtually through the Ridgewood Conservatory; we all teach there and are in-residence there.

DM: The pandemic rules have frankly kept us on the edge of our seats as to which way to go. We're constantly debating! And unfortunately we're all dealing with making our living and getting through this. It's a horrible time that way, even as new possibilities are clearly presenting themselves.

*Who came up with the phrase "Mission to Commission?"*

MS: I have to give credit where it's due: We were doing a radio interview with David Osenberg, probably 14 years ago at WWFM. It's a public station down in Trenton, and we were talking about how we were doing this commissioning thing, and what we really wanted to do was keep commissioning new music for this ensemble because there wasn't a lot of music written for flute, clarinet, and piano. At that time we had about 25 works (now there are 90!) and he just said, "So, you kind of have a mission to commission?" And that was it. Now we've trademarked it—when you see it on our website it's got a little trademark next to it.

*Are composers still sending you unsolicited pieces in spite of the pandemic?*

DM: Yes! It's a little daunting, but we have gotten known for this, so we are receiving many requests, which I think is so marvelous and exciting. It's just a matter of time and money—and, at our age, a matter of reality. But we do plug forward and try to do as much as possible. Our latest recording project, while monumental and "COVID" challenging, was most rewarding. We would have loved completing our scheduled obligations for the last year, but we just couldn't. So we are well prepared for, hopefully, the fall.

RL: Our "Mission to Commission" seems to be alive and well despite the vicissitudes of the past year or so. I think we have actually received more unsolicited music and inquiries than normal. When people are incarcerated in their homes with their computers they tend to explore, and some composers have stumbled upon us.

*Do Palisades Virtuosi concerts follow any particular format?*

MS: Well, we always have a premiere of a new trio that's written for us. But on that same program, if we have a guest artist, we might do a piece with clarinet, voice, and piano, another for flute and piano, and one with flute, voice, and clarinet. So we mix it up. On any program of ours, there are generally at least three specific trios for flute, clarinet, and piano. We'll take an older work and recast it for our instrumentation, and then sometimes we'll use standard repertoire, of which there's not much for this combination. And then we'll have at least one (or sometimes two) of our commissioned pieces. Sometimes we'll bring back a piece that had been previously premiered on one of our concerts and has entered our standard repertoire. We like to do a lot of thematic programming, so we try to devise a concept for the programs, with pieces that are related to the themes. Just off the top of my head, one program we did was *South (and North!) of the Border*, pieces from South America and North America that had a South American flavor to them. Some of the other programs we've done in the past include *Women in Music*, with all the pieces by women composers; *Remembrance and Rebirth*, for which we had a piece that was written by a composer who, very sadly, has passed away since then, and was sick with cancer. The piece was his whole journey, and then at the end of it there's this kind of apotheosis where he got to a beautiful place (that's on Volume 5). And on that same program we also had a piece called *Wind Space*, which is something that we commissioned back in 2007; it's a 9/11 commemorative piece. We did *Around the World in 80 Minutes*, which was really fun, as we performed pieces from countries around the world: We did a piece by Nina Rota, we did a piece by Tchaikovsky, we did a piece about Japan, another piece that was by a composer from Hawaii—music from around the globe. Then there was *Music Born of Adversity*. That was just things that were related to the struggles of humanity. We did *PV Goes to the Opera*. That was the program on which we premiered *Songs From The Laurel Tree*, with Barbara Dever, now on Volume 7. We did an arrangement of the Overture to *Tremonisha*, Scott Joplin's surviving opera (he wrote another, *A Guest of Honor*, but sadly and tantalizingly the score was lost). Also on that program was Frederic Chopin's Variations on 'Non piu mesta' from Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, arranged for flute and piano, and an arrangement of the Flower Duet from *Lakmé*. Sometimes we use pre-existing arrangements, but for the most part we do our own and we call them corruptions. One program was called *Everything Five*, in which one piece was an opus 5, and another had five movements; all the music had some loose relationship to the number five. And then there was *When They Were Young*, consisting of

pieces by composers that they had written in their youth. That one was really fun because we did a guessing game; we had blank spots on the program, and everybody had to write in whom they thought the pieces were by. And after the piece was over, we had a friend come in and do drum rolls and we flipped a big page on an easel to see whom the composer was. And the tape of that concert is really funny to listen to, because you can hear laughter when the audience couldn't believe that *this* composer wrote *that* piece. So that's just a sampling of some of the thematic programs we've done over the years.

*Alone in your previously issued discography, Volume 7 is the first in the series completely devoted to "newly-commissioned works for flute, clarinet and piano that ALSO include songs and narration (and a cello!)."* How did the idea for this album evolve?

MS: Over the years, Ron would sometimes say something like, "I know this composer would like to do a commission with a guest artist," or we'd get a piece and we'd think, this would be so great with narration to fill in and explore more of the character of the music. The last piece on the album, Kerry Turner's *Vathek Revisited*, was originally written as straight music, but Ron told Kerry he thought it'd be really cool if we included some of the readings from the chapters about the characters that the movements are about. So we did that and we had a narrator in the premiere. Thomas Juneau's *Songs From The Laurel Tree*, with mezzo Barbara Dever, was actually commissioned for her; that was an incredibly gorgeous piece. She has a glorious voice, she's a Met opera singer—just fabulous, a beautiful person and lovely artist and such a joy to work with; we were so thrilled. And then the other of the big pieces that has a soprano, Seymour Barab's *The Sea Princess*, is actually the oldest of the pieces; it was commissioned in 2005. At the time, Bob McGrath, who is from *Sesame Street*, was on our Board of Directors. So when it came time and we were putting this idea together to collect all of the works that we had that had been done with a singer or with a narration, we tried to get hold of Bob. I actually went and saw him, and I gave him the score again to look at, but he's older now and he felt like it was going to be a little bit too much for him to get through, endurance-wise; I mean, it's a 50 minute mini-opera. So we decided to go in a completely different direction and use a female voice. It was a stroke of genius and we're really happy with the result. To me, this is fabulous. Timmie [Timothy Maureen Cole] is an amazing singer. I had met her on a recording session for another group a couple of years earlier, and she was spot on with rhythm and pitch. And that was more contemporary music, a little bit harder, with difficult intervals and all of that stuff. And she was bang on every time and through long recording sessions: She was wonderful. So we selected her, and she was just amazing to work with. She was so talented and so spot on, and she really got into the all the different voices and characters. She's the king, she's the queen, she's the princess, she's the sister, she's the witch, she's the professor—she's all these different characters, and she did a fantastic job; it's a real *tour de force*.

And then, of course, we have Frank Basile, who was just wonderful. He was the narrator on two of the pieces, and he also sang Ron's piece, *El Dorado*. He's an incredibly gentle, generous, beautiful man; he really is. He's wonderful, and has a beautiful voice. He did the poetry for *Paterson*, and he also did the readings for the *Vathek* piece. And then our other surprise guest artist was John Ostendorf, who's our producer; he's done our last four albums, but before he became a producer he sang with the City Opera. He was a real singer and a performer, and we thought of him when we decided we wanted a different type of voice for Martin Sedek's *Portraits of Van Gogh*. And he was so beautiful; he has such an incredibly genuine aspect in his voice that really speaks to the pathos. He's amazing; we love him. He puts up with all our *mishegas* and gets us through these recording sessions.

So, anyway, those are our artists, along with my friend Marisol Espada playing cello (beautifully!) on *Paterson*. That's kind of a cool piece, too, for which Jeffrey Kaufman, the composer, put together MP3 files mimicking rhythmic factory machines, a waterfall, and a glass harmonica that adds a very cool sheen to the sound in one part of the piece. *Paterson* is famous for being a silk factory city from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. It was the silk factory barons who ran the city of *Paterson*. *Portraits of Van Gogh* was

commissioned and premiered in 2010 at the Lambert Castle in Paterson. Lambert was one of the silk barons of Paterson, and his home is now a museum. He did have a couple of Van Goghs (a version of *Sunflowers* among them), but sadly they, along with most of his collection, had to be sold off to pay his debts. Altogether, it was a perfect setting for us. It's the story of the artist's life as told through four of his paintings: *The Potato Eaters*, *Bedroom at Arles*, *Starry Night*, and *Sunflowers*. I think it's a tremendous piece, written by a guy who was a graduate student at the time; he was very young. He writes mostly choral music now. Ron tapped him because he was at Montclair University—Ron is always looking for the next new talented composer coming through. We have played the work a number of times over the years, especially the *Starry Night* movement. It fit perfectly into our program, *Diamond in the Sky*, when we premiered our 75th piece, Roger Stubblefield's *Fire Diamond*. And as you may know, a 75th anniversary is a diamond anniversary. So we did everything diamond-related and star-related—it was really cool. We've repeated each of these pieces on this album in more than one context over the years. By 2017 we had finished Volume 6. Early in 2018 I wanted to get the next recording project started, and I had the idea that I brought to Ron and Don of bringing back all of these pieces for a collection of songs and stories, and that's how that all came together in life.

*There is, however, one purely instrumental piece on the program.*

MS: Yes, *Fire Diamond*, by Roger Stubblefield. This is the only piece that doesn't have a guest artist on it. He conceived it as kind of a tone poem or programmatic piece illustrating a story he wrote, which we've posted online. And, like all the others, it's a very cool work. All these pieces have really grown on me and, like everything we do, they've become part of the fabric of my musical life. We're very proud of Volume 7; it was a big endeavor, not least because it was very spread out. Thankfully, we finished the final recording about two weeks before everything shut down. I think we came home from the studio March 1.

*Don, is there anything you'd like to add?*

DM: Well, Margaret's been very thorough! But I will say that Thomas Juneau's *Laurel Tree* is one of the most personally satisfying—I love vocal music and I think Thomas is one of our preeminent composers in the genre. I have heard many of his choral works, and they always amaze me. Not only was *Laurel Tree* a pure pleasure to play, it was superbly written for the ensemble, and of course Barbara was simply amazing.

Kerry Turner's *Vathek* was challenging, as the clarinet part is meant to replicate some very specific Middle Eastern techniques like slap tonguing, among others, to give an impression of the region's players and local instruments. I tried to give it the flavor, even if I wasn't quite adept at the techniques. It was worth the effort, though, as it serves the narrative so well.

And from Volume 6 I really enjoyed the 12-tone-type writing that Matthew Baier's *Syzygy* required. Even though I'm a Classicist/Romanticist at heart, I have always enjoyed works from the great 12-tone writers and found this piece to satisfy that. It was originally written for violin, clarinet, and piano, and I'm so grateful to Ron for having it arranged for us. Again, I think it was very worthwhile.

*Ron?*

RL: Volume 7 evolved over time—a veritable “talus slope” of pieces from past years. PV often tries to insert either a mainstream chamber piece, or a commissioned piece that departs from our usual trio configuration, into some of our concerts for variety. Volume 7 represents the accumulation of these “departure pieces.”

A word about Frank Basile; I first met him back in 2004, when I did a concert with him and his wife [the legendary Celeste Holm]. My husband Elliot and I have remained close friends with Frank, especially in the time since Celeste passed away. Barbara Dever and I teach together at Montclair University, where she is Distinguished Artist in Residence. She is one of my favorite singers, and also a dear friend. Marisol was introduced to the group by Margaret—a wonderful cellist and colleague, she was fun to work with!

*In addition to being Palisades Virtuosi's pianist, you arranged your song, "El Dorado," for the group. What can you tell us about it?*

RL: I've always been fascinated by mythology devoted to a monomaniacal search for something: Faust, Don Quixote, Yeats's witch, Poe's gallant knight. I love Poe's poem, written the last year of his life, during the Gold Rush. The song is imbued with the tritone, that traditionally "forbidden" interval, "the devil-in-music," for the obvious reasons.

*Have you ever thought of writing something specifically for Palisades Virtuosi?*

RL: I've kind of kept my compositional activities under wraps—it's mildly confusing when a performer admits to other creative activities. Mostly I've done piano pieces and song settings; I have ruined great poems by Shakespeare, Yeats, Poe, Edna St. Millay, and others. I would love to write a "from scratch" piece for PV, but I'm not sure they can afford me. Seriously, I prefer to write in a concentrated fashion—no interruptions until the piece is finished. I would have to be on a sabbatical from my other jobs for this to occur, especially if the piece were large-scale.

*And now, on to Volume 6*

MS: Volume 6 begins with music by Adrienne Albert. She's a California-based composer, an absolutely incredibly warm, genuine human being, and just one of the sweetest people I know. When she wrote *Dog Tales* she was remembering how her dog ran away one time, and how he actually ended up finding his way home from one side of LA to the other. Oh, my God ... it's very programmatic. There's this part where there's a solitary clarinet solo and, you just know, the dog is all alone. It's so blue, and then you know exactly when he gets home because the whole world opens, the sunshine is out, and there's this little tiny quote from *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* right at the end of that movement; it's such a sweet piece. And the last movement is absolutely hysterical. Adrienne describes it as "a short and, I think, humorous homage to a chihuahua (think small dog = piccolo) and a Great Dane (big dog = bass clarinet) who try to figure out how to get along and live together."

*Szyzygy* [Matthew Baier] is probably one of the pieces that we've had over the years that is the most divergent in character, more in the academic style. It's somewhat of a 12-tone piece, but it has kind of a dance feel to it, and a little fugue that gives it a lot of structure.

*Is that a bit of a stretch for your fans?*

MS: Our audiences pretty much like almost everything we bring to them, which is very gratifying.

*What else is on Volume 6?*

MS: We did Gary Friedman's *Reflections*. That's a very nice kind of jazz-crossover-fusion piece. I really like it a lot; it's very pretty. My friend Ed Matthew was the clarinet soloist on Gary's clarinet concerto, *Passages* [available from 150 Music]. Gary's great. I met him when I was playing at the Lancaster Music Festival in Ohio, and I'd wanted to commission him for a while. Every now and then Ron runs dry of ideas and the rest of us get to put in one of our people [chuckles].

Ting Ho was on the faculty at Montclair, so that's another Ron connection. His is very whimsical writing—it's kind of adorable, actually; very nice stuff.

And Linda Marcel, she's very fun. Her piece is done with Tibetan prayer bowls, the singing bowls, so we had to learn how to play them. This was my debut on the bowl [laughs]. It's very hard to do. You have to keep very steady pressure to make that singing thing start happening, and then keep it at the right place without skipping or bumping because it will break the sound. Linda used the bowls inside the piano, and at one point Don had to drag a bowl back and forth inside the piano while Ron was playing. It's a pretty cool piece, very mystical and eerie, with an evocative sound that's really neat.

*Poem for a Lost King* is by Jeffrey Scott. He's amazing. I don't know if you know who he is. He's a horn player with the Imani Winds, and he's written just dozens and dozens of pieces. This is a very

programmatic work. It pays homage to the African kings who were abducted and brought over to be slaves here, even though they were kings in their villages. But despite the subject, it's really peaceful and very joyous in the end.

Gary Shocker, of course, is pretty well known too. He's a flutist and we are almost exactly the same age. Our birthdays are just a few days apart and we were born in the same year. He's really talented and very prolific and he's written a lot—lots of wind writing and a lot of flute pieces. The first moment is very frisky, and the second is very Poulenc-y, Romantic, beautiful stuff. And then the last moment is called *Fancy Pants*. It's one of those "How fast can you play?" pieces; it's kind of a fast minuet. It goes along moderately, and then all of a sudden there's a whole pile of 32nd notes.

*Now that you've accumulated such a treasure trove of new music, have you ever been tempted to publish an anthology?*

MS: Oh, we would love to do that. It's a tremendous endeavor. First of all, there are some pieces we would never be able to include because there are composers who have exclusive contracts with certain publishing houses. But for the rest, we'd love to have a new *American Masters* series published. It would definitely be something with which to cement our legacy, but as I've said, it's a tremendous undertaking with a lot of legal complications. So while we probably couldn't do them all, I would say we'd be able to do at least half of them. Meanwhile, we've recorded 46 of the 90 we've commissioned, so we still have a ways to go.

*When I was listening to the songs and stories from Volume 7, it occurred to me that the use of music to heighten the effect of the written word might be somewhat analogous to film music.*

MS: You know, we did a program about film composers, *It Didn't Stop With The Movies*. It was a selection of "serious" works not intended for the cinema. We had Nina Rota, Aaron Copland, Lalo Shifrin, Miklós Rózsa, and Joseph Turrin, in addition to Ben Model, who was our commissioned composer for that concert; he's also written a lot of things for film. That was a really fun program.

Film music is so amazing. I'm a big fan of film music, especially composers like John Williams; the *Harry Potter* film scores are just phenomenal. There are so many really great film composers, people like James Horner and Michael Kamen, and many more. But in the movie theater you don't hear the music the way you hear it when you're just listening to the soundtrack—it's very different. So much of the music is just underscoring the action. My dad and I always had this argument about which is more important, the words or the music, but in the end it's very personal.

DM: Frankly I don't hear Volume 7's music as movie-like, or even theatrical (except for the Barab), but rather as poetic. I love music best that way. Not that words don't matter; they certainly do. But most important for me is the overall feeling of the music in general. And in the same way, I love more the feeling or overall concept that the poetry is conveying in all of the pieces. For instance, even though the Van Gogh piece has a specific narrative, I feel that it's the music that supplies the poetry, if that makes any sense.

*Are most composers flexible when working with you, or do they insist everything has to be done their way?*

RL: The majority of our composers are quite easy to work with—they want us to like their music and be comfortable with it. They usually listen sympathetically when we are having difficulties, and usually try to amend the score or suggest a solution. Inevitably, we have encountered a difficult individual or two (You know who you are~!!!!).

DM: We've worked with both easygoing and strict composers. But really most of them, especially as time has gone by and we've become better known, have been very flexible. By the way, while flexible is usually preferable I have no problem with someone being exacting, especially when a composer perfectly understands what he or she is asking. I really want to give the composers everything they want if I can.

*How far in a contemporary direction are you willing to lead your audience?*

MS: You know what? I've got to tell you something: Composers are not writing that much atonal music anymore. Generally, when you say 20th- or 21st-century woodwind music, people start to cringe and back off. But, fortunately, not all the music is like that. And most of the composers, even the ones who like to stretch tonality, are really aiming for a total center. When you have a tonal center and the music is coherent, then you can perform it and make everyone come along with you. Eric Ewazen wrote a beautiful piece for us on our third album. Speaking afterwards about contemporary music, he said, "You know, I went to Princeton and I studied with Milton Babbitt and I wrote 12-tone music. Somewhere around 1980 I decided to write music that people wanted to listen to!" We do love him. He's one of our original good guys. He's so special.

We do treasure our audiences' contributions and their comments afterward; sometimes they don't like the pieces, but most for the most part they do. And that's why we do a program that touches all different genres: There'll be some Romantic music, some Impressionist music. There may even be something Classical or Baroque. And then there'll be a couple of new pieces, so it's definitely a cross-section.

DM: Our audiences all seem to tolerate everything we've thrown at them so far. All people have their own tastes, and I'm proud that we've presented enough variety to satisfy everyone. It's fun to perform repertoire that serves the layman and yet attracts the many composers who come to our concerts to hear their colleagues. We get a lot of feedback from audiences, different comments of every variety. Of course the most wonderful is when you have clearly moved someone. That's my immediate goal. But also, as tough as it can be, I also particularly like when I get an occasional comment that suddenly gives me some insight that I hadn't thought of into a piece that I can apply to the future. That's where I learn the most.

As a performer, I really relish all genres if well written. I have my strengths, which I think are fairly mainstream: classic clarinet playing. But I try to give it my all. I also love jazz and many folksy genres, and will give them the most flavor I can, but I'm not as adept at what are considered extended techniques on clarinet, such as unusual tonguing or extraneous multiphonic fingerings, some of which require a different embouchure or even equipment. I am getting better at it! There is a lot of music out there that is probably written beyond my specific technique, but then most composers realize that, and we haven't been pressed to go too far. The three of us probably have slightly different ideas on where that threshold lies, but I think we all really want the music to be as enjoyable, and moreover as interesting, to the listener as possible, something I think most all of our commissions have achieved. And don't forget that we hope that most of our works are something that the majority of players out there feel comfortable with and are interested in playing.

RL: Although our collection might, at first blush, indicate otherwise, the three of us are actually quite interested in state-of-the-art music; some of our pieces use multiphonics, key clicks, piano strumming and drumming, etc. We have talked about commissioning pieces that employ aleatory and electronic techniques. Stay tuned!

*Do you keep in touch with the composers? Have many of them become friends over the years?*

DM: Yes, and it's so wonderful when a composer seems to enjoy how you play and even writes specifically for you. It doesn't happen often, even while many are knowledgeable enough to write terrifically for us. But it's doubly special when you know you are playing something "tailored" for you. It sort of feels personal, and very wonderful. Godfrey Schroth wrote a piece for me and Ron, and Joseph Turrin wrote specific movements for each of our personalities. Rodger Stubblefield said that our personalities had some influence, but I think overall he clearly had his own wonderfully imaginative story most in mind.

MS: Joe Turrin and Jeffrey Kaufman come to a lot of our concerts. We're always going out to eat and drink afterwards. Joe and his wife Dorian have been coming to our concerts for over a dozen years, and every time it's, "OK, where are we going tonight?"

RL: We do indeed keep in touch with our composers (many of whom were friends to begin with). First, we try to let them know when we are going to revisit their piece(s); some of them actually enjoy coming to our concerts and hearing new pieces first-hand. We love our composers!!!

*Well, thanks to each of you for speaking with me; we'll be looking forward to Volume 8. Any other projects in mind?*

DM: Besides recording some of our many PV arrangements, we would also love to do a Christmas or Holiday album.

RL: We have threatened for years to do an Xmas album, and a CD of PV "corruptions" (transcriptions). We will see.

MS: Volume 8! ... and that publishing project....

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