

Kyle Adam Blair presents:

“WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS...”

4.6.2018 / 7 PM

Conrad Prebys Concert Hall

to my father, Charles, with love

Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations) (1997)

Stuart Saunders Smith

(The following titles are not attributed to the movements by Smith, but instead describe the 14 component images of the Stations of the Cross. They are provided here for the listener to draw comparisons as they wish.)

I. (Pilate condemns Jesus to die)

VIII. (Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem)

II. (Jesus accepts his cross)

IX. (Jesus falls for the third time)

III. (Jesus falls for the first time)

X. (Jesus is stripped of his clothes)

IV. (Jesus meets his mother, Mary)

XI. (Jesus is nailed to the cross)

V. (Simon helps carry the cross)

XII. (Jesus dies on the cross)

VI. (Veronica wipes the face of Jesus)

XIII. (Jesus is taken down from the cross)

VII. (Jesus falls for the second time)

XIV. (Jesus is placed in the tomb)

Radius (2017)

Annie Hui-Hsin Hsieh

brief intermission

(tunes from Ives's "Concord" Sonata will be played in the concert space during intermission)

Piano Sonata No. 2 (Concord, Mass. 1840-1860) (1911-1915)

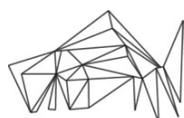
Charles Ives

I. "Emerson"

II. "Hawthorne"

III. "The Alcotts"

IV. "Thoreau"



Performer's Notes:

From my vantage point, this solo piano concert encapsulates themes of friendship, community, craftsmanship, experimentation, portraiture, and reverence. Though there will be notes about the pieces themselves below, I hope you'll indulge me by forgiving a bit of storytelling as well.

My father's favorite musical performance of all time undoubtedly was Joe Cocker's rendition of The Beatles' "With A Little Help From My Friends" sung at Woodstock 1969. He would watch it almost weekly on our den computer, in awe at the grit and passion Cocker beautifully evoked. My father was a musician of sorts himself, in a former time the lead singer and drummer of a western Pennsylvanian Top 40 bar band called "Home Station". My modern classical music tendencies might have been a bit lost on his musical preferences, but he still always listened with open ears and an open mind to my concerts and recordings (he was always extremely fond of a recording of Steve Reich's Music for 18 Musicians that I was fortunate to be a part of, recorded in the very same hall as this concert over six years ago).

My father and I bonded over craftsmanship in broader senses than those purely musical. He was a brilliant welder, electrician, woodworker; a true renaissance man when craftsman's tools of seemingly any type were involved. After his retirement from years on labor crews in the power plants of Pennsylvania and Ohio, he tirelessly pursued his passion of restoring old vehicles, "hot rodding" as the jargon goes. He woke up every morning and took a cup of coffee out to the garage, rarely to be seen again throughout the day save for breaks, meals, and the 6 o'clock news that heralded the end of his daily work. On those breaks (he with grease on his hands, me with a score in front of me, both of us with half-finished coffees) we would talk about the merits of spending one's day making things with one's hands. He in the garage and I at the piano, we would pore over the task of carefully sculpting our chosen materials, frustratingly walking away from seemingly impossible obstacles, triumphing over them upon return, and acknowledging our shared dogmatic truth that God is, truly, in the details.

To this day, every time I approach my morning work with the same cup of coffee at the ready, I think of the way he engineered, crafted, sculpted, and perfected with his hands. Without him, without that, this concert would not be possible.

***Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)* – Stuart Saunders Smith**

Stuart Saunders Smith has been a dear friend of mine for the past seven years. We met during my single year at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, where he taught for over 35 years, the same year he announced that he would be retiring. I experienced his profundity and his music through a group he led called the REDS Ensemble, comprised of composers and performers who would explore non-traditional notation systems both famous and those of his own design. Through that experience we became close, and kept in touch after my exodus to San Diego through handwritten letters and phone calls. He's visited San Diego on two occasions while I've been here, and I've had the fortune and pleasure of hosting him in my/our home (The Regal Eagle for those familiar, shout-outs to Celeste, Dan, James, and Allison, my rocks and wings) where he spent time composing on our delightfully quirky spinet piano which used to belong to my dear friends Dustin Donahue and Rachel Beetz, also friends of Stuart.

I've learned and performed eight of Stuart's pieces thus far, and Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations) still strikes me as among the most enigmatic and unique that I've encountered. Many of Stuart's pieces consist of movements that develop material over a substantial amount of time. These 14 movements, however, are all extremely short, some as brief as 10 seconds. As a result, all the material presented feels new and expositional in nature, and not so much developed or evolved. Given that Stuart refers to these movements as "stations", seeming correlations to the 14 Stations of the Cross are unavoidable. The Stations of the Cross are a set of 14 images to be pondered, spanning the time and tribulations between Jesus' sentencing to death by Pilate and his being laid in his tomb. Given the brevity of these movements, one can almost hear each one all at once in the way that one can view the entirety of an image in a gallery. As with some of Stuart's pieces of the last 20 years or so, Stuart provides notes and rhythms for the performer, but leaves the articulations, dynamics and phrasing up to that individual to compose, though not to improvise. In this way, even more so than with traditionally-notated scores, the preparation and performance of Stuart's music becomes a communion of the musical thoughts the composer AND the performer, reminiscent of the ways in which a jazz performer approaches a lead sheet before putting their individual stamp on a jazz standard like "Summertime" or "Round Midnight".

***Radius* – Annie Hui-Hsin Hsieh**

Annie Hui-Hsin Hsieh, beloved by this department for many years, recently (and enviously) moved to my adopted hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, accepting a faculty position in composition at Carnegie Mellon University. I admired her music as a listener ever since her arrival at UCSD, striking me as often economical in means but intricate, lush, and utterly gorgeous in sound and scope. *Radius* seems to me to be born of a more complex set of considerations. Annie wrote the piece during the summer of 2017, and upon introducing the piece to me in preparation for her dissertation concert in December remarked that *Radius* consists of efforts to subvert her own natural tendencies as a pianist at the keyboard.

In Annie's own words:

The piece focuses on the idea of intersecting radiuses from a single source point. Centering around the presence of the pianist, the axes here are presented in forms of pitch relationships, degrees of resonances, the aural and physical spaces within which dialogues are formed in the presentation of these trajectories. In navigating between the delicate fluidity of corporeality and the activation of sound, the piano becomes an instrument of extensions: of the self, the past, the familiar and the uncertainties, venturing through a status of continual renewing.

From the perspective of this performer the sense of distance in *Radius* manifests both in the sounds produced and the theatricality of physical motions necessary in order to create them. Annie thoroughly, cleverly, and beautifully explores the piano's interior within *Radius*, utilizing an extensive palette of sounds both familiar and foreign, both sturdy and ephemeral, both common and arcane.

Piano Sonata No. 2 (Concord, Mass. 1840-1860) – Charles Ives

I admired my father's work on his old vehicles. He loved shopping around on Craigslist for classic cars in states of disrepair and giving them a new home where he would spend his days in retirement making them into works of art. I admired his persistence at a difficult and demanding craft that he pursued in leisure. More than just a hobby, these undertakings gave him purpose and vitalized him in ways that little else could.

Ives learned a tremendous amount about music from his father, a bandleader, and engaged in all sorts of anachronistic musical experiments with him involving music in different keys and bands playing different music at the same time.

Much of Ives' compositional output parallels my father's post-retirement activities in that neither took on their various pursuits as an occupation, or for need of an income. Ives was very successful in the insurance business, and never relied on commissions or performances of his work in order to make money. Rather, his compositional endeavors remained largely isolated from paid patronage. Hypothetically, it is difficult to say for certain whether or not his compositions would be different with the added influence of investors, but I find it easy to imagine that the bold sense of experimentation that Ives imbued into his music benefited from it being free from concerns of finance.

Few would disagree with the assertion that *The Concord Sonata* stands out as one of Ives' greatest compositional achievements. Composed over the course of at least four years and subject to numerous revisions throughout his life, the sheer density of musical ideas within the piece combined with its massive scope dumbfounds me each time I approach the instrument to perform it. Although the bulk of the sonata is built on only a few simple tunes (which I will introduce you to before performing the piece), the thick musical textures constantly threaten to obscure the melodic lines.

In my opinion this obfuscation is programmatic in nature. Ives admired the transcendentalist writings of the mid-19th century, and even named the four movements of this piece after Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Alcott family, and Henry David Thoreau, respectively. At its core, transcendentalist philosophy asserts that there is knowledge within each individual that surpasses their mere sensory input, and that through individual search one can attain that knowledge that is connected to a greater human understanding, or even to the divine.

In this way I imagine the simple tunes against dense accompanying obstacles as metaphorically indicative of the individual search for divine truths amongst the many worldly trials one endures throughout the search. Furthermore, I think Ives proposes slightly different, though related truths and obstacles for each of the four movements presented.

At this point, I'll give my brief descriptions of each movement, followed by some of Ives' own words, given here in quotation marks, which he published in a volume entitled "*Essays Before a Sonata*".

I. "Emerson"

A truly massive exposition of dense, complicated ideas, "Emerson" seems a turbulent sea crashing against the rocks with giant cresting wave after wave of thought manifesting itself in both complex rhetoric and flowing verse.

Ives: "It has seemed to the writer, that Emerson is greater—his identity more complete perhaps—in the realms of revelation—natural disclosure—than in those of poetry, philosophy, or prophecy. Though a great poet and prophet, he is greater possibly as an invader of the unknown, America's deepest explorer of the spiritual immensities, a seer painting his discoveries in masses and with any color that may lie at hand—cosmic, religious, human, even sensuous; a recorder, freely describing the inevitable struggle in the soul's uprise...

We see him standing on a summit, at the door of the infinite where many men do not dare to climb, peering into the mysteries of life, contemplating the eternities, hurling back whatever he discovers there—now, thunderbolts for us to grasp, if we can, and translate—now placing quietly, even tenderly, in our hands, things that we may see without effort—if we won't see them, so much the worse for us..."

II. "Hawthorne"

A wild, kaleidoscopic scherzo that embraces fantasy and whimsy in response to Emerson's profundity, this movement evokes a stringing together of episodes that coalesce and vanish, but still, often, with the through-line of truths proposed in the previous movement.

Ives: "...Any comprehensive conception of Hawthorne, either in words or music, must have for its basic theme something that has to do with the influence of sin upon the conscience—something more than the Puritan conscience, but something which is permeated by it. In this relation he is wont to use what Hazlitt calls the 'moral power of imagination.' Hawthorne would try to spiritualize a guilty conscience. He would sing of the relentlessness of guilt, the inheritance of guilt, the shadow of guilt darkening innocent posterity.

...This fundamental part of Hawthorne is not attempted in our music (the second movement of the series) which is but an extended fragment trying to suggest some of his wilder, fantastical adventures into the half-childlike, half-fairylike phantasmal realms."

III. "The Alcotts"

A moment of repose, perhaps, this far simpler movement tends toward clarity and assertion in a sketch of a familial scene and the unspoken divine bonds that can exist within a household.

Ives: "...Concord village, itself, reminds one of that common virtue lying at the height and root of all the Concord divinities. As one walks down the broad-arched street, passing the white house of Emerson—ascetic guard of a former prophetic beauty—he comes presently beneath the old elms overspreading the Alcott house. It seems to stand as a kind of homely but beautiful witness of Concord's common virtue—it seems to bear a consciousness that its past *is living*, that the 'mosses of the Old Manse' and the hickories of Walden are not far away...

...Within the house, on every side, lie remembrances of what imagination can do for the better amusement of fortunate children who have to do for themselves—much-needed lessons in these days of automatic, ready-made, easy entertainment which deaden rather than stimulate the creative faculty. And there sits the little old spinet-piano Sophia Thoreau gave to the Alcott children, on which Beth played the old Scotch airs, and played at the Fifth Symphony..."

IV. "Thoreau"

Soft and thoughtful, but not without verve, this peaceful closing movement provides an alternative to the heavy blows of "Emerson" and the unmitigated imagination of "Hawthorne". Instead, Thoreau seems to chronicle the days at Walden Pond, taking note of subtle changes in his surroundings and gleaning what wisdom he can from nature's small progressions.

Ives: "...And if there shall be a program let it follow his thought on an autumn day of Indian summer at Walden—a shadow of a thought at first, colored by the mist and haze over the pond:

Low anchored cloud,
Fountain head and
Source of rivers...
Dew cloth, dream drapery—
Drifting meadow of the air...

...but this is momentary; the beauty of the day moves him to a certain restlessness—to aspirations more specific—an eagerness for outward action, but through it all he is conscious that it is not in keeping with the mood for this 'Day.' As the mists rise, there comes a clearer thought more traditional than the first, a meditation more calm..."

Special thanks:

Karen Blair, Bryan Neal Blair, Jessica C. Flores, Aleck Karis, David Espiritu, Joe Garrison,
James Beauton, Celeste Oram, Daniel King, Allison Harden, Michael Matsuno,

Charles Blair, Jr.