

# Hybrid Worlds

Three new works by Alex Stephenson

Ph.D. Dissertation Recital  
Tuesday, May 31, 2022 – 7:00 p.m.  
Conrad Prebys Concert Hall

## *Three Reflections* (2020–21)

Shaoai Ashley Zhang, piano & synthesizer

## *Adrift* (2021)

Duo Axis  
Zach Sheets, flutes  
Wei-Han Wu, piano

– *Intermission* –

## *Chamber Concerto* (2022, world premiere)

Michael Jones & Rebecca Lloyd-Jones, percussion  
Shaoai Ashley Zhang, piano & synthesizer  
Kyle Adam Blair, synthesizer  
Ilana Waniuk & Pauline Ng, violins  
Alex Taylor, viola  
Peter Ko, cello  
Matthew Kline, double bass  
Steven Schick, conductor



I've increasingly come to think of composition as an act of exploring hybrid worlds. Rather than focusing on how my creative practice manifests a unified, totalizing system, I'm interested in how it embraces multiplicity, how it attempts to initiate dialogues and create meeting places. I experience composition as a site of hybridity on several levels at once: in terms of harmony, as a dialogue between acoustics and culturally specific musics and tuning systems; in terms of modes of listening, as a dialogue between what I call narrative and spatial music; and, perhaps most importantly, in terms of community, as a dialogue between my own voice and those of my valued collaborators.

Tonight, I'm delighted that an all-star team of musicians will conjure up hybrid worlds in three performances. We'll hear two recent works (*Three Reflections* and *Adrift*) alongside the premiere of a brand-new piece (*Chamber Concerto*). Thank you for being here, and welcome!

Alex Stephenson

### ***Three Reflections*** (2020–21) for solo piano and synthesizer

Each of these three pieces extends the pitch and timbre palette of the piano via a custom digital synthesizer, which the pianist controls using a second keyboard. The resulting doppelgänger-like effect is at times seamless and sonorous, at others caustic and confrontational. I was also inspired by Ashley's versatility as an artist—her ability to intertwine the old and new—and found myself pondering historical composers that have, in different ways, been meaningful to me. This is another sense in which these pieces deal with “reflection.” I think of them as self-portraits, each seen through the distorting mirror of a different historical music.

1. “Tuning Up (after Ives).” A free, meditative exploration of a chord (two perfect fifths separated by a minor third plus a quartertone) that Charles Ives proposed in his 1925 article “Some Quarter-Tone Impressions.” In many cases the chord is reached through glissandi in the synthesizer, as if the performer is gradually tuning the instrument into the harmonic world that Ives had imagined. Toward the end, a quotation from Ives' song “Religion” gently wafts in.

2. “Clocks (after Nancarrow).” A shifting mobile of different musical characters. The characters themselves are simple and instantly recognizable, yet their relationships are constantly in flux. There are no quotations here, yet the piece pays homage to Conlon Nancarrow's use of primary harmonic materials as a means of exposing more complex temporal designs. In the coda, the characters combine into a sonorous harmonic field on E-flat.

3. “Nocturne (after Berg).” A slow, somber, expressive movement. Much of the harmony is loosely based on a chord progression from Act 1, Scene 2 of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*. Around the middle of the movement, the progression briefly comes into focus as a direct quotation. A higher, slithering layer—scored in Berg's original for piccolos, oboes, and xylophone—is reimagined as an almost playful melodic line doubled at three-quarters of a tone.

### ***Adrift*** (2021) for flute, piano, and electronics

*Adrift* stages a dialogue between what I've called narrative and spatial music—between music, in other words, that seems outwardly communicative and expressive, and music that seems only to curate an ambiance in which outward expression might (or might not) happen. Over a bed of sonorous piano harmony, the flutist continually negotiates their place in the texture. At times, they present a simple, ambient oscillation of long tones; at others, they behave much more like a “traditional,” lyrical soloist. This narrative-space spectrum is traversed not only through the flutist's sonic material but also theatrically, in terms of their position onstage.

The electronics engage in a similar sort of role negotiation. In several passages, they are quite subtle, consisting only of pure tones that resonate the acoustic instruments. In others, they present much more complex textures that assert themselves to the ear as active, independent entities.

Despite the continuous flux underlying the music, much of the piece presents itself as calm, focused, and meditative.

## ***Chamber Concerto*** (2022) for nine players and electronics

*Chamber Concerto* is a celebration of instruments and the musicians who play them. As in *Three Reflections*, an emphasis is placed on the synthesizers of the ensemble, with their ever-shifting tuning and timbral identities often helping to articulate the form of the work. This is not only a synthesizer concerto, however: ultimately, everyone has their say and comes to the fore as soloist at different times. And, at the apex of the piece, the paradigm of soloist-versus-tutti is set aside altogether: here, the entire ensemble metaphorically breathes together, as if a single organism.

After having made a series of intensely focused, inward-facing works amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, I see *Chamber Concerto* as a more gregarious type of piece that celebrates the multiplicity of its materials. Aspects of some of my earlier works make appearances here, sometimes in direct quotation, sometimes in more abstract ways. *Chamber Concerto* is thus in part a sonic retrospective on my time at UC San Diego. I'm tremendously grateful for the ways this community has shaped me and my music-making over the past five years. This work is an expression of that gratitude.

*Chamber Concerto* unfolds in a single, continuous movement. Many may wish simply to listen and form their own impressions, but for those interested in a "guided tour" of the form, a rough outline follows:

1. A rhapsodic, microtonal synthesizer solo is joined by an atmospheric ensemble accompaniment. Gentle clouds of spatial audio briefly encircle the audience. The tempo quickens into a quasi-waltz, leading to...
2. A B-flat-minor outburst on the piano—an apparition of Rachmaninoff? Almost as soon as it appears, the music is again microtonally inflected by the synthesizer and winds its way back to the opening texture. Suddenly...
3. A brisk, playful toccata begins. Wooden and skin percussion instruments feature prominently, as do synthesized harpsichord and harp timbres. The toccata eventually topples into...
4. Another fast section, this one more impassioned in character. A hyper-expressive line is passed between the cello and viola, winding its way down in register while being interrupted by fast, aggressive gestures.
5. The ensemble eventually settles into a calmer mode. Spatial audio returns, as does the Rachmaninoff-esque material, now sounding like a faded memory. Up to this point in the piece, the cello's lowest string (typically a C) has been tuned down to B-flat. This fact is now overtly revealed in a series of gently pulsing B-flat overtone chords. The "apotheosis" of the B-flat string having now been reached, the music progresses to...
6. A dreamlike "tuning interlude." The ensemble and audience are constantly enveloped by spatialized sound as the cellist tunes the B-flat string back up to C. Immediately following this interlude...

7. The ensemble plays a long, calm meditation on falling perfect fifths. The synthesizers (now generating sine tones) and strings tune harmonies in just intonation. Bowed vibraphones continually outline the fifths cycle. A simple yet expressive viola solo grows out of the texture. Suddenly...

8. The music snaps out of its dream: the fast toccata material returns. After being the sole focus of attention for an extended passage, the toccata becomes something of a formal “hub,” enabling several other ideas from earlier in the piece to be revisited as well. The work concludes in a manner both playful and reflective.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my profound gratitude to tonight’s performers. Ashley, Zach, and Wei-Han commissioned the first two works on the program, and I cherish their friendship and collaboration deeply. So, too, am I grateful to Mike, Rebecca, Kyle, Ilana, Pauline, Alex, Peter, and Matt, all of whom gave very generously of their time and artistry in bringing this evening’s music to life. Steve Schick’s visionary, generous, and masterful artistic spirit is a constant source of inspiration. Thank you for leading tonight’s premiere and for all the ways you share your wisdom and support.

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To the entire UC San Diego Department of Music community, thank you for being such a nourishing home to me over the past five years.

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