



red fish blue fish

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Susan Narucki, voice
Aleck Karis, piano

Amores (1943)

John Cage

Prepared Piano
Nine Tom-toms and Pod Rattle
Seven Wood Blocks
Prepared Piano

Aleck Karis, Prepared Piano

Double Music (1941)

John Cage/Lou Harrison

Okho (1989)

Iannis Xenakis

intermission

The Winds of Destiny (2004)

George Crumb

Songs of Strife, Love, Mystery, and Exultation

- I. Mine Eyes have Seen the Glory
- II. When Johnny Comes Marching Home
- III. Lonesome Road
- IV. Twelve Gates to the City
- V. De Profundis: A Psalm for the Night-Wanderer
- VI. All My Trials (Death's Lullaby)
- VII. Go Tell it on the Mountain!
- VIII. The Enchanted Valley
- IX. Shenandoah

Susan Narucki, Voice
Aleck Karis, Piano

PROGRAM NOTE

A CONCERT OF PERCUSSION MUSIC including classic American works by John Cage, Lou Harrison, and George Crumb inevitably seems to be *about* the American experimentalist percussion tradition. We American percussionists are partly to blame since, whether justifiably or not, we often claim the distinction of launching the 20th century's percussion revolution. We cite John Cage's famous dictum, "Percussion music is revolution," as easily as a grade school student recites "four score and seven years ago." Whether we really played a foundational role or not, American percussionists have developed an identity, self-proclaimed, as central to the growth of percussion music in the 20th century. We lay claim to the early experimentalists like Cage and Harrison, but also tout the importance of followers like John Luther Adams and James Tenney, as well as the enormous influence of the new New Yorkers from Morton Feldman to Steve Reich. There is music inspired by popular idioms, and of course the mavericks and loners from Edgard Varèse to Harry Partch to Paul Drescher. Of course, no single concert can represent all of that, but to the extent tonight's performance indicates anything about American percussion music it does so by representing Americans' willingness to absorb the raw influences of culture and restate them in new ways. From the repurposing of junk in the pieces by Cage and Harrison to the repurposing of Americana in George Crumb's recent songbook, *The Winds of Destiny*, material seems evaluated less for its intrinsic value and more for its utility. With us it's all about how something can be used.

The early pieces still fascinate. *Double Music*, the product of a Cage/Harrison collaboration, is deeply indebted to the utility of noise, although it never really becomes what anyone would call "noisy." Likewise *Amores* lacks the physical power that listeners have come to expect from percussion. It's a gentle exploration of prepared piano, tom-toms, and woodblocks. Loving one might even say. The presence of *Okho* on our concert is as an outlier. It's a piece unlike the others, which by virtue of its external position allows us to observe something important about the rest of the program. Iannis Xenakis wrote it as a commission to celebrate the French bicentennial. And, of course the choice of *djembe*, an African hand drum, offers an explicit and unavoidable comment on France's colonial past. It is not possible to listen to *Okho* without an examination of context, perhaps not without an acknowledgement of the irony of its orchestration.

But the critique leveled by *Okho* has an additional purpose tonight as it highlights the noticeable lack of critique in George Crumb's settings of well-known "Americana." We do not include here the texts of these songs: you already know them, from "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" to "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." Often Crumb's strategy is a straightforward re-harmonization and re-orchestration of these well-known songs. But I wonder, what keeps this music

from being ordinary – as though a soprano, a pianist, and four percussionists were stranded in a blizzard somewhere and, tired of playing cards, decided to pass the time playing well-known American tunes? We should certainly avoid giving the impression that there are no sharp edges here. But as in much of Crumb they are often hidden, coming sometimes when you least expect them and when they seem most pointed. A good example is the setting of “Shenandoah” where the vocal line is enshrouded in clouds of ringing piano and metallic percussion. The sense of listening through instruments to hear the voice is one of trying to retrieve a memory through the mists of lost generations. It’s a strange accompaniment indeed that serves not to support but to occlude. Or in “Go Tell it on the Mountain” the distinctions between the original and its copies seems relevant. This most classic of recent American aesthetic dilemmas is played out by Crumb as rapidly hocketing rhythms that ape echoes ricocheting off rock faces or canyon walls. It’s often hard to tell who has played first and who is imitating. *The Winds of Destiny* has its share of twists but overall it is very earnest music. The occasional approach to irony is rebuffed and skitters away quickly in embarrassment. Maybe this is apt music for a program *about* American percussion music. In it the spaces are large and resonant, and the project of filling the space proceeds with a kind of determination that sometimes borders on the dour. In fact even the stage full of instruments points to another Americanism: we love our open space, but the instant we see some we do our best to fill it to the brim.

--Steven Schick

