

presents...

MIRANDA CUCKSON | Violin
BLAIR McMILLEN | Piano

Thursday, November 2, 2023 | 7:30pm
Herbst Theatre

JANÁČEK

Sonata for Violin and Piano

Con moto
Ballada
Allegretto
Adagio

BEETHOVEN

Violin Sonata in G Major, Opus 30, No. 3

Allegro assai
Tempo di Minuetto, ma molto moderato e grazioso
Allegro vivace

INTERMISSION

PROKOFIEV

Violin Sonata No. 1 in F Minor, Opus 80

Andante assai
Allegro brusco
Andante
Allegrissimo

FINNEY

Fiddle-doodle-ad: Eight American Folk Tunes for Violin and Piano

Rosin the Bow
Rye Whiskey
Wayfaring Stranger
Cotton Eye Joe
Rippytoe Ray
The Nightingale
Oh, Lovely Appearance of Death
Candy Girl

Miranda Cuckson is represented by Colbert Artists
180 Elm Street, Suite I #221, Pittsfield, MA 01201-6552 colbertartists.com

Blair McMillen pianoblair.com

Steinway Model D, Pro Piano, San Francisco

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ARTIST PROFILES

Tonight is the San Francisco Performances recital debut of Miranda Cuckson and Blair McMillen.



Violinist **Miranda Cuckson** delights audiences internationally as soloist and collaborator in a wide range of music, from older eras to the most current creations. In recent years she has become one of the most acclaimed and passionately committed performers of contemporary music, playing innumerable concerts and premieres of new works and moving new music more into the center of musical life.

Upcoming highlights of her 2023–24 season include recitals at San Francisco Performances, Princeton University, Florida State University, and a performance of the Georg Friedrich Hass: *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra No. 2*—written for and premiered by Cuckson with the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra—with the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra. Cuckson embarks on a Germany recital tour in October and performs multiple concerts in New York State including Hudson View Gardens and at PS21: Performance Spaces for the 21st Century.

Cuckson released a double album, *Világ*, in January 2023 featuring a Stewart Goodyear piece, which is a new work written for her. The album also includes the Bartók *Sonata*

for *Solo Violin* and music by Aida Shirazi, Manfred Stahnke, and Franco Donatoni.

Venues and festivals have included the Berlin Philharmonie, Suntory Hall, Casa da Musica Porto, Teatro Colón, Guggenheim and Cleveland Museums, Art Institute of Chicago, Strathmore, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra's Liquid Music series, and the Bard, Marlboro, and Portland Music festivals. She made her Carnegie Hall debut playing Piston's *Violin Concerto No. 1* with the American Symphony Orchestra, and new violin concertos written for her by Haas (in Tokyo, Stuttgart and Porto), and by Marcela Rodríguez in Mexico City.

Her acclaimed discography also includes the Korngold and Ponce violin concertos; albums of music of American composers; her ECM Records album of Bartók, Schnittke and Lutoslawski; *Melting the Darkness*, an album of pieces by Xenakis, Bianchi, Rowe and more. Her recording of Luigi Nono's *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura* for violin and electronics (Urlicht AV), which was named a Best Recording of 2012 by *The New York Times*.

Miranda Cuckson teaches at the Mannes School of Music at New School University in New York. She studied at The Juilliard School, from Pre-College through her doctorate, and won Juilliard's Presser Award.



Hailed by the *New York Times* as “prodigiously accomplished and exciting” and as one of the piano’s “brilliant stars,” pianist **Blair McMillen** has forged a musical life that is unbounded by convention. He is well-known for his advocacy of living composers and contemporary music, as well as for championing very early keyboard music and more recent neglected masterpieces. For more than two decades, McMillen has divided his time as piano soloist,

chamber musician, music festival director, and educator/teacher.

Blair McMillen has performed in major concert venues in New York, throughout the United States, and around the world. Recent appearances include concertos with the American Symphony Orchestra in Carnegie Hall, solo appearances with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and a three-week solo tour of Brazil sponsored by the US State Department. He is a member of several prominent ensembles, including the American Modern Ensemble, the six-piano “supergroup” Grand Band, and the Perspectives Ensemble, among others. For 10 years he was pianist for the Naumburg Award-winning Da Capo Chamber Players. He has also performed with the International Contemporary Ensemble, the Knights, and the LPR Ensemble.

As a teacher and pedagogue, McMillen is in high demand. He has taught at Bard College and Conservatory since 2005, and he serves on the piano and collaborative piano faculty at Mannes at the New School in New York City. He regularly adjudicates at competitions and festivals throughout the United States and abroad.

His first solo CD, *Soundings*, was released to critical acclaim in 2001. Since then, McMillen has been featured on dozens of commercially-released solo, chamber, and orchestral recordings. An album of two-piano music with Stephen Gosling, *Powerhouse Pianists II*, was declared “one of the finest piano recordings in 2016” by NPR. An ECM recording with violinist Miranda Cuckson was hailed by *The Guardian* for “...playing that is frank and urgent, with powerfully stripped-back quiet passages and gritted-teeth ecstatic climaxes.” In 2021, Naxos released McMillen’s recording of Joan Tower’s piano concerto *Still/Rapids* with the Albany Symphony Orchestra.

Blair McMillen is the co-founder and co-director of the Rite of Summer Music Festival, a free, outdoor contemporary-music series held on New York City’s Governors Island. The festival has presented boundary-pushing artists such as the JACK Quartet, Bang on a Can All-Stars, Tigue, Theo Bleckmann, Todd Reynolds, Contemporaneous, and Don Byron’s New Gospel Quintet.

Blair McMillen holds degrees from Oberlin College, Manhattan School of Music, and The Juilliard School. While at Juilliard he was selected as concerto soloist on a tour of Japan with the Juilliard Orchestra. While there, he won the school’s Gina Bachauer Competition and the Sony “Elevated Standards” Career Grant.

PROGRAM NOTES

Sonata for Violin and Piano

LEOŠ JANÁČEK
(1854–1928)

Leoš Janáček composed his *Violin Sonata* in 1914, just as Europe was engulfed by World War I. That war brought catastrophe to millions, but Janáček welcomed it, believing that the Russian army would sweep in and liberate his Czech homeland from German subjugation: “I wrote the *Violin Sonata* in 1914 at the beginning of the war when we were expecting the Russians in Moravia,” he later wrote. Janáček would be disappointed by the Russians, and at first the *Violin Sonata* brought disappointment as well—Janáček could find no violinist interested in performing it. He set the music aside, returned to it after the war, and revised it completely; the first performance of the final version took place in Brno in 1922.

Listeners unfamiliar with Janáček’s music will need to adjust to the distinctive sound of this sonata. Janáček generates a shimmering, rippling sonority in the accompaniment, and over this the violin has jagged melodic figures, some sustained but some very brief, and in fact these harsh interjections are one of the most characteristic aspects of this music. Janáček also shows here his fondness for unusual key signatures: the four movements are in D-flat minor, E major, E-flat minor, and G-sharp minor.

The opening movement, marked simply *Con moto*, begins with a soaring, impassioned recitative for violin, which immediately plays the movement’s main subject over a jangling piano accompaniment. Despite Janáček’s professed dislike of German forms, this movement shows some relation to sonata form: there is a more flowing second subject and an exposition repeat, followed by a brief development full of sudden tempo changes and themes treated as fragments.

Janáček originally composed the *Ballada* as a separate piece and published in 1915, but as he revised the sonata he decided to use the *Ballada* as its slow movement. This is long-lined music, gorgeous in its sustained lyricism as the violin sails high above the rippling piano. At the climax, Janáček marks both parts *ad lib*, giving the performers a wide freedom of tempo.

The *Allegretto* sounds folk-inspired, particularly in its short, repeated phrases (Janáček interjects individual measures in

the unusual meters of 1/8 and 1/4). The piano has the dancing main subject, accompanied by vigorous swirls from the violin; the trio section leads to an abbreviated return of the opening material and a cadence on harshly clipped chords.

The sonata concludes with a slow movement, and this *Adagio* is in many ways the most impressive movement of the sonata. It shows some elements of the *dumka* form: the rapid alternation of bright and dark music. The piano opens with a quiet chordal melody marked *dolce*, but the violin breaks in roughly with interjections that Janáček marks *feroce*: “wild, fierce.” A flowing second theme in E major offers a glimpse of quiet beauty, but the movement drives to an unexpected climax on the violin’s *Maestoso* declarations over *tremolandi piano*. Janáček regarded this passage as the high point of the entire sonata—he identified the piano *tremolandi* with the excitement generated by the approach of the Russian army during the first months of the war. And then the sonata comes to an eerie conclusion: this declamatory climax falls away to an enigmatic close and matters end ambiguously on the violin’s halting interjections.

Violin Sonata in G Major, Opus 30, No. 3

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(1770–1827)

In the spring of 1802 Beethoven left Vienna for the small town of Heiligenstadt in the Austrian countryside. It was his custom to spend his summers in the country, but this visit was unusual, for it lasted half a year—Beethoven did not return to Vienna until October. This was an extremely troubled time for the composer, for he was coming to terms with the inescapable fact of his growing deafness. In October, just before his return to Vienna, he wrote to his brothers the extraordinary document that has come to be known as the “Heiligenstadt Testament.” In it, he admitted his deafness and tried to justify his rude behavior as a result of it. He also clearly hinted that the prospect of deafness had driven him to consider suicide.

Beethoven’s despair during that summer did not make itself felt in his music. Ironically, the stay in Heiligenstadt produced some very sunny music, including his *Second Symphony*, two piano sonatas, and the set of three violin sonatas that make up his Opus 30. The *Sonata in G Major*, the last

of the three violin sonatas, has deservedly become one of his most popular. If the first is characterized by quiet nobility and the second by turbulent drama, the last is marked by high spirits and energy. Of all Beethoven’s violin sonatas, this one looks the most “black” on the page, for its outer movements are built on an almost incessant pulse of sixteenth notes. But for all its energy, this sonata never sounds forced or hurried. Throughout, it remains one of Beethoven’s freshest and most graceful scores.

The very beginning of the *Allegro assai* sets the mood: quietly but suddenly the music winds up and leaps upward across nearly three octaves. It is a brilliant beginning, and Beethoven will make full use of the energy compressed into those three quick octaves. Almost instantly the flowing second theme is heard, and these two ideas—one turbulent, the other lyric—alternate throughout the movement before the music comes to a sudden close.

Beethoven marks the second movement *Tempo di Minuetto* but specifies *ma molto moderato e grazioso*. The key signal there is *grazioso*, for this is unusually graceful music. The beginning is wonderful. The piano has the haunting main theme, while the violin accompanies. But the violin accompaniment has such a distinct character that it is almost as if Beethoven is offering two quite different themes simultaneously. Both ideas are part of the development, interrupted at times by other episodes before the quiet close, during which the main theme breaks down into fragments and vanishes in a wisp of sound. The concluding *Allegro vivace* is a perpetual-motion movement: the piano launches things on their way, and both instruments hurtle through the good-natured finale. A second theme tries to establish itself but is quickly swept aside by the opening theme, which powers its way cheerfully forward. There are some nice touches along the way: at one point the music comes to a screeching stop, and then over the piano’s “oom-pah” rhythm Beethoven launches into the “wrong” key of E-flat, only to make his way back to a brilliant close in the home key of G major.

Violin Sonata No. 1 in F Minor, Opus 80

SERGE PROKOFIEV
(1891–1953)

Prokofiev’s *First Violin Sonata* had a difficult genesis. Prokofiev began work on it in

1938 during the one of the most horrifying moments in Soviet history—the period of Stalin’s purges—but found that he could not complete it. He set the score aside, but before he could return to it, another of the most traumatic events in Russian history—the Second World War—occurred. In response to the war Prokofiev wrote some of his greatest scores, including the opera *War and Peace* and the mighty *Fifth Symphony*. Only after the war was over did he return to complete this sonata, eight years after it was begun. David Oistrakh gave the premiere performance in Moscow on October 23, 1946.

The tone of Prokofiev’s *First Violin Sonata* is grim, and Soviet commentators were quick to put the politically-correct interpretation on it: some heard it as resistance to the Nazis, others as a portrait of oppressed Russia, and so on. Eighty years after the composition of this sonata, it is far better to let the music speak for itself than to impose extraneous interpretations on it.

Beneath the lyric surface of this music, the mood is often icy and dark—even brutal. Some of this unsettling quality comes from Prokofiev’s extremely fluid metrical sense: in this score, the meter sometimes changes every measure. The marking for the opening *Andante assai* is 3/4 4/4, and Prokofiev alternates those two meters, though he will sometimes fall into just one of them for extended passages. The somber first movement opens with an ostinato-like piano passage over which the violin makes its muttering, tentative entrance. Much of the main section is double-stopped, and

in the final moments come quietly-racing runs for muted violin; Prokofiev said that these should sound “like the wind in a graveyard,” and he marks the violinist’s part *freddo*: “cold.”

The second movement, *Allegro brusco* (“brusque”) is in sonata form. The pounding opening subject gives way to a soaring second theme marked *eroico*; the brusque and the lyric alternate throughout this movement, which ends with the violin rocketing upward to the concluding high C. Prokofiev began the *Andante*—which he described as “slow, gentle, and tender”—before the war, but did not complete it until 1946. Muted throughout, the violin has the main subject over rippling triplets from the piano. The concluding *Allegrisimo* brings back the metrical freedom of the opening movement: Prokofiev’s metric indication is 5/8 7/8 8/8. The alternating meters give the music an asymmetric feel, which is intensified by the aggressive quality of the thematic material. The cold winds from the first movement return to blow icily through the sonata’s final pages.

Fiddle-Doodle-Ad

ROSS LEE FINNEY
(1906–1997)

American composer Ross Lee Finney graduated from Carleton College and the University of Minnesota, then went on to private study with some very distinguished teachers, including Nadia Boulanger, Alban Berg, and Roger Sessions.

He taught briefly at Smith College and had a long and distinguished career on the faculty of the University of Michigan, where he taught from 1948 until 1974. Finney’s works include four symphonies, four concertos, chamber works (eight string quartets and three violin sonatas among them), and music for voice. As a composer Finney evolved from a sort of Stravinsky-an neo-classicism as a young man to serial composition during the 1950s and 1960s.

Such an evolution might sound formidable, but in Finney’s case it was tempered by a lifelong fascination with folk music and folk tunes. He shaped his serial techniques so that they had a tonal foundation, and he incorporated folk melodies into some of his works. Composers who use folk melodies often draw them from fiddle tunes, simple unharmonized melodies that can have a haunting appeal all their own. Finney’s attraction to folk music is sensed most clearly in his *Fiddle-Doodle-Ad*, composed in 1945, when the composer was 39. In this arrangement of seven American fiddle tunes, Finney took those tunes, provided a piano accompaniment, and gave them a sort of formal coherence. The old folk melodies still predominate in these arrangements, but now they have a structure that makes them good recital music. The seven movements are all quite brief—most last about a minute—and listeners may discover that they already know some of them.

—Program notes by Eric Bromberger



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