

Sinta Saxophone Quartet

Saturday, April 9, 2022
7:30 PM
Bethel United Methodist Church Hall,
Lewes, DE

Spirits in the Machine

PROGRAM

Volcanic Ash

Chris Hass
(b. 1993)

String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 132
III. Molto Adagio "Heiliger Dankgesang"

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)
arr. Graser

Ex Machina

Machine I (let the funk out)
Machine II (flowing)
Machine III (not quite, but almost pensive; sunflowers in love)
Machine IV (dancing a mean ghastly dance)
Machine V (the morning after)
Machine VI (flowing, lyrical & songlike)
Machine VII (aggressive & funky)

Marc Mellits
(b. 1966)

INTERMISSION

Cerulean

I. Sirens
II. Lullaby
III. Goof Groove

David Biedenbender
(b. 1984)

Selections from *Die Kunst der Fuge BWV 1080*

J. S. Bach
(1685 – 1750)
arr. Graser

Unquiet Spirits

John Mackey
(b. 1973)

Program Notes

Spirits in the Machine

Inspired by the writings of composer Marc Mellits (of the saxophone quartet functioning as one machine powered by four individuals), this program highlights contemporary works for the ensemble. These are influenced by funk, soul and minimalism - all with a lyrical tone that fuses with earlier works from the chamber music/classical canon. This highlights a full palette of compositional and instrumental colors.

HASS

Volcanic Ash (2017)

(Winner of 2017 DSQ Composition Competition)

Volcanic Ash is a boisterous and lively piece for saxophone quartet, fusing the harmonic language of Middle Eastern music with the form, rhythms, and overall intensity found in heavy metal. The piece features constant meter changes, low open fifth “power chords”, and sweeping *arpeggios*, but is complemented by a calm and reflective chorale.

Volcanic Ash was written for Donald Sinta Quartet's Composition Competition in 2017, taking Dan Graser's advice of writing a quartet that is "harder, faster, and louder than my first saxophone quartet, *Polar Vortex*, in an attempt to challenge the incredibly talented ensemble”.

BEETHOVEN

Molto Adagio “Heiliger Dankgesang” from *String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132 (1825)*

This beautiful slowly unfolding *Adagio* forms the formal and emotional core of Beethoven’s String Quartet No. 15. It was written while the composer was recovering from a serious intestinal inflammation that he at many points thought would spell his demise. He headed the movement *Heiliger Dankgesang* (Sacred Song of Thanks). The structure of the music alternates slower sections in the churchlike Lydian mode with faster more upbeat sections that Beethoven dubbed *Neue Kraft fühlend* (feeling new strength).

The movement begins with all four instruments overlapping in large rhythmic structures spelling a brief *motif*, followed by the actual chorale of the movement, in turn followed by the “new strength” music. Each time this slow introduction gets more rhythmically complicated and more connected to the chorale, ultimately ending in quiet reverent thanksgiving in the upper registers of all instruments.

MELLITS

Ex Machina (2017)

This work was commissioned from Chicago-based composer Marc Mellits, by a consortium of seven American saxophone quartets from across the USA. As such, each of the seven movements was inspired by a unique quality that Marc found in the individual quartets; the result is an amalgamation of their lyrical, timbral, and ensemble characteristics.

However, the common thread among all of the movements is the use of the saxophone quartet as one large machine, occasionally functioning in four parts, and at other times functioning as one single gigantic entity. As with much of Mellits' writing for saxophone, the instrument's history in funk and soul music is brought into his minimalist style by way of seemingly simple yet in fact quite complex rhythmic grooves.

The work is dedicated to the seven saxophone quartets: Donald Sinta Quartet, Project Fusion, Barkada, Mirasol, Kenari, Zzyzx, and Assembly.

BIEDENBENDER

Cerulean (2017)

"*Cerulean* was inspired by my son Izaak. From the moment he was born, he was extraordinarily curious and inquisitive. He often looked around the room, searching for interesting objects, enthusiastically turning his head, and opening his big, beautiful blue eyes wide to get a better view of the world around him. He also loved (and still loves) to find and follow interesting sounds, including the sirens of passing fire trucks, police cars, and ambulances.

"In the first movement, *Sirens*, I imagined waves of sound approaching and then departing in slow motion, like some strange police siren heard through a baby's distorted sense of time.

"The second movement is a simple lullaby. Rather than sing the same lullaby for him each night, I often found myself humming long, repetitive, improvised phrases that eventually, over the course of rocking him to sleep, coalesced into a more coherent melody. The movement begins with soft, hushed waves—different waves than the first movement. These waves eventually transform into something more ecstatic, as I imagine him making the transition from consciousness to the exciting, magical place of a baby's dreams. Finally, I find the tune for which I was searching, played by the soprano saxophone and accompanied by a hymn-like chorale played by the rest of the quartet that has been slightly distorted, as if the sound has been refracted through the flickering flame of a candle that is warmly illuminating Izaak's room as he sleeps.

"The final movement, *Goof Groove*, is inspired by this goofy dance Izaak liked to do in our living room. As a baby, he would sit and awkwardly bob his torso back and forth in a

peculiar meter while singing his own crazy, lilting tune; however, as he got older and learned to walk, he began to run and spin in circles, dancing and singing silly songs. I imagined the goofy bobbing of his infancy transforming into the spinning circular dancing he now does at four years old, eventually spinning out of control, finally arriving in a tired, happy, dizzy heap on the floor.”

~ David Biedenbender

Cerulean was written for and commissioned by the Donald Sinta Saxophone Quartet. It was premiered by them at the 2017 North American Saxophone Alliance National Biennial Conference.

BACH

Die Kunst der Fuge BWV 1080 (post. 1751)

Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Art of Fugue* was begun towards the end of his life. It represents the last great collection by the master composer. The work was written as an open score, without instrumental specifications, but most scholars agree that it is a harpsichord work. In its entirety it consists of fourteen fugues and four canons all in the same key (originally D minor) and all utilizing the same motto theme. Don't expect jazzed-up Bach here; this is a thoroughly classical work. Bach never heard a saxophone, but the clarity, virtuosity, and restrained expressivity of this family of instruments would probably have pleased him greatly.

By the time of Bach's death in 1750, fugue writing had gone out of style and *The Art of Fugue* did not receive the commercial success that his family had hoped. Nevertheless, the work took the idea of contrapuntal design to a new level and represents the output of a seasoned composer at the height of his artistic and intellectual genius. Never before nor hence has there been such a fusion of beauty and logic in the exploration of the principles of counterpoint.

MACKEY

Unquiet Spirits (2012)

The piece's title reflects the unsettled and unsettling moods evoked in the three movements. The restless first movement propels the ensemble to a climactic bout of raucous rhythmic gestures. The second movement is an off-kilter dance, featuring acrobatic counterpoint throughout the ensemble and an eerie, waltz-like middle theme. Finally, the third movement is a fiendish *moto perpetuo*, described by the composer as a "barn burner." The ensemble trades incessant sixteenth-note runs and jarring syncopated rhythms in a swirl of mixed meters. The tenor saxophone tries to lure the group into a sinewy melody, but is soon swamped by the ensemble's relentless motion.

Commissioned by the Zzyzx Quartet in 2012, *Unquiet Spirits* is the first original, multi-movement work for saxophone quartet by American composer John Mackey. It premiered at the 36th annual Navy Band Saxophone Symposium in 2013.