

# Westfield

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*Tilman Skowroneck, Editor*



A very warm welcome to the summer edition of the Westfield Newsletter of 2015. As the *Fortel/Piano* Festival in early August is approaching, we begin with a few teasers from the program: *Damien Mahiet* introduces the *Beethoven Reunion Concert*, which will take place in the Kiplinger Theatre, Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts (Cornell University) on Saturday, August 8, 5:00–6:00 PM (Part I) and 8:00–10:00 PM (Part II). The concert celebrates the twentieth anniversary of a unique project, initiated by *Malcolm Bilson*, to perform (and ultimately to record) all Beethoven’s piano sonatas on period pianos. One of the participants, twenty years ago and this August, *David Breitman*, adds his inside perspective, ending with a tribute to Malcolm and Elizabeth Bilson.

Moving from Beethoven to Scriabin, I asked outstanding pianist and Scriabin specialist Matthew Bengtson seven questions about his concert schedule in this “Scriabin year,” and his upcoming *Fortel/Piano* performance (Matt will play as part of the Scriabin & Sibelius anniversary concert, also in the Kiplinger

Theatre on Sunday, August 9, 4:30–6:30 PM). We also include the announcement for another Scriabin event: the *Scriabin Centenary* at Cornell, October 22-25, 2015.

*Laurence Libin* has kindly given us permission to publish as a special feature his thought-provoking text “After Conservation, What?” Here you will find suggested measures towards the preservation and documentation of pipe organs (of any kind and from any period). Libin specifically addresses typical environments such as are inevitably encountered in the majority of churches; his recommendations contain many insightful and crucial, yet often easily achieved, measures that will safeguard the future life of these valuable instruments.

During the Westfield Festival *Environs Messiaen* this March, Andrew Zhou had the opportunity to interview *Marilyn Nonken*, celebrated pianist of the American new music scene. This highly readable interview is here published in its entirety.

—*Tilman Skowroneck*



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THE BEETHOVEN REUNION CONCERT AT  
*FORTE/PIANO: A FESTIVAL CELEBRATING PIANOS IN HISTORY*

BY DAMIEN MAHIET

The seven pianists featured in this two-part evening of music by Beethoven have a strong connection formed two decades ago at Cornell University. Together, they offered the first live performance of Beethoven's piano sonatas on period instruments—eight concerts sponsored by the Department of Music, the School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions, and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences in July of 1994.

The Beethoven piano sonatas were and remain works central to the concert hall repertoire, with a long and daunting performance history. As Malcolm Bilson noted in his program notes at the time, “performance of this music represents a level of erudition and deep contemplation probably unequaled by the works of any other mainstream composer.”

The novelty was to include, as an aspect of study, the “pianos” of Beethoven's time. The highlighting of the plural—already in the original—was crucial. Beethoven lived at a time of active innovation in piano construction. Each instrument of the period, Bilson explained, offers not only a different gamut of sounds, but also suggests “different gestures from those proffered by the modern piano.” The result was “a *first step* toward a fresh evaluation of this repertoire, one that might open up new paths of thought and suggest untried expressive possibilities.”

The step was successful. The concert series was repeated in New York at the Merkin Concert Hall with lectures by James Webster and Neal Zaslaw, in Utrecht in the Netherlands, and then again, in 1999, in Florence, Italy. According to music critic Allan Kozinn, writing for the



Back, left to right: Bart van Oort, David Breitman, Zvi Meniker, Andrew Willis, Malcolm Bilson. Front: Tom Beghin, Ursula Dütschler.  
Photo: Peter Morenus, Cornell University Photography

*New York Times*, “what emerged in these performances was an unusually clear sense of how revolutionary these works must have sounded in their time.”

Thanks to an anonymous donation by a Cornell alumnus, the “Cornell Seven”—as they came to be known—launched a recording project that included the complete cycle along with the three early Bonn sonatas and the “Andante favori” performed on nine different pianos. The recording engineer was Jean-Claude Gaberel who had just played a key part in the prize-winning recreation of a castrato voice for the movie *Farinelli*. In 1997, the Swiss label Claves Records released the 10-CD set, which received wide critical attention both in the United States and abroad. The recording found praise both as a “model of collective work” (Jacques Bonnaure)

and as a diverse exploration of Beethoven’s music.

“Anyone who gets involved with early pianos at Cornell soon discovers that the true priorities are moving, tuning, and playing—in that order,” Andrew Willis wrote in a piece celebrating the group’s friendship and published by *Piano & Keyboard* in 1998. Performing on a plurality of instruments often has the effect of turning the unsuspecting keyboardist into a true handy(wo)man; many of the pianists featured in this *FortelPiano* festival are also passionate tinkerers, expert movers, and agile tuners. If a sense of collective enterprise and adventure still animates the group of pianists we will hear during the festival, that spirit of entrepreneurship and/or craftsmanship is not incidental: it, too, is crucial to historically informed performance at the keyboard.



## THE BEETHOVEN SONATA PROJECT

BY DAVID BREITMAN

It’s hard to believe that twenty-one years have passed since the seven of us gathered here on the Cornell campus to perform all of the Beethoven piano sonatas. It’s easy to forget that this wasn’t originally a recording project. From today’s perspective, the big box of CDs may have made the greatest impact, but the original objective—a daring and ambitious one—was the live performance in New York. I will never forget wheeling our four fortepianos along the crowded Broadway sidewalk to Merkin Hall from our rehearsal space in Lincoln Center! The eight concerts, along with lectures and an exhibition, were a major event of the season, with ample media coverage, and audiences that included many of New York’s prominent musicians. The series created quite a stir, and only the near-universal comment “when are you going to record this?” made us look at each other and ask—“well, when (and how) are we going to record this?”

The whole operation, mind-boggling logistics and all, was Malcolm Bilson’s brainchild, and for all of us, his former students, it was only one more example of Malcolm’s vision, persistence, and generosity. Generosity above all: it felt like a gigantic graduation celebration: one more gift from Malcolm—or, more precisely, from the Bilsons, because Elizabeth worked every bit as hard for this project as her husband!

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*I will never forget wheeling our four fortepianos along the crowded Broadway sidewalk to Merkin Hall from our rehearsal space in Lincoln Center!*

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The Merkin concerts and the CLAVES box left their mark on the musical world in 1994, but for us the true high point came only a few years later, when we repeated the series at the Accademia Bartolomeo Cristofori in Florence. What a treat! Since there was limited practice space, and the concerts were spread out over two weeks, there was ample time for us to explore the city together. Now, reunited in Ithaca, our shared memories are not only of music, but also of glorious architecture, glorious art, and glorious food!

From all of us, thank you, Malcolm and Elizabeth!

## SEVEN QUESTIONS TO PIANIST MATTHEW BENGTON

AN INTERVIEW BY TILMAN SKOWRONECK

1) *Matt, you just came home from playing a solo recital with a full Scriabin program: sonatas and smaller works. What's even more special about it: you played at noon on solstice day, at the Thikse Gompa Buddhist Monastery in central Ladakh, India, at the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains. The recital was part of a larger celebration marking the 100th anniversary of Scriabin's death. Why solstice day? Why the Himalayas?*

Scriabin imagined his “Mysterium” to be held in the foothills in the Himalayas because he thought of India as the cradle of civilization, spiritually. The progress of the sun was supposed to symbolize the path to enlightenment, with the solstice as the climax. He intended to combine all kinds of sensory experience in the event: music, color, dance, perfumes, architecture, and also the landscape. To my knowledge, in 100 years this was the first event to have attempted to combine all these sensory experiences in a Scriabin festival. It was quite stunning to witness the beauty and grandeur of the landscape and a real kick to smell Michel Roudniskta's perfumes designed for the occasion, and to collaborate with the monks of the monastery in their traditional Cham dance.

2) *When I first met you I immediately got the impression that Scriabin has a special place for you—for me as a listener, it seems that you have a strong emotional affinity with this music. How did you get to know this music?*

Like many piano enthusiasts, I enjoyed listening to Horowitz's performances and also saw them on television. So of course I heard him play the famous D# minor Etude and the early C # minor op. 2, no. 1. Horowitz passed away while I was in high school, and his *New York Times* obituary listed a select discography. I always liked to explore, so on a whim, I bought his Scriabin CD on CBS Masterworks just to see what other music there might be by this intriguing composer. It was a transformative experience.

Of course, there were these Romantic miniature jewels that I fell in love with immediately. I wanted to play some Etudes, and they were among the pieces that really made me work seriously at the piano for the first time; sight-reading skills will not suffice when facing this level of difficulty. That was a turning point where I really started to enjoy practicing. *Vers la Flamme*, which Horowitz called



Matthew Bengton  
Photo: David Aretz

“psychedelic music,” was also featured on this disc, as were the Ninth and Tenth Sonatas. I was pretty conservative in taste at this time, and had hardly played any 20th century music at all. I didn't understand these pieces at first, but there was something earth-shattering about them, and after repeated listenings I was bitten by the bug and started to collect recordings of this repertoire and learned a lot of it in a short time.

3) *You are one of rather few musicians I know who seem completely fearless when juggling the intellectual and emotional elements of musicianship, slipping in and out of both modes at will, and using them in tandem. This also made it possible for you to talk (in another interview) about the “the healthy and liberating effect” performance practical knowledge has on the recreative process. Many pianists would, in contrast, probably think that (intellectually based) performance practical knowledge restricts (emotionally based) artistic choices and thus narrows down the large array of potential musical choices to The One choice of what “should” be done. Talking about Scriabin specifically, what are the performance-practical key points, and how are they “liberating” for you when you play his music?*



One thread I have found throughout performance practice studies is rhythmic flexibility, and this is nowhere more germane, and essential to successful interpretation, than in Scriabin. There may be no more accurately recorded rubato than the Scriabin piano rolls as prepared by Pavel Lobanov, including a beat-by-beat metronome graph of tempo fluctuations. Anatole Leikin's study of this material relates his ebb and flow quite convincingly to musical logic. As a performer, I always felt (intuitively, or emotionally) that Scriabin's music needs extremely strong characterization through colors and timings, and when I play, being able to trust the authenticity of such an approach is quite liberating.

4) *In the well-known film documentary about Horowitz in Moscow, a little scene shows the pianist entering a room to play on Scriabin's own piano. He lifts the lid, makes a face, and says "Bechstein" in a disappointed tone of voice. He then sits down and plays nevertheless. What are your experiences playing Scriabin on different pianos?*

I am speculating, but it's possible the Bechstein may have been Scriabin's preferred instrument, since he owned one in his residence off Arbat Street in Moscow for his last years. He also went to Bechstein's when he needed to practice in London, where he enjoyed his greatest public successes. I did get to play an all-Scriabin recital on a fantastic Bechstein piano at Chatham University that was re-broadcast on WQED-FM's Performance in Pittsburgh. I am accustomed to playing this repertoire on Steinway and Steinway-type pianos, which do have many advantages in this music, generating a rich and powerful sonority and highlighting parts of these complex textures. However, I must say it was quite a treat to play that Bechstein, which made many new things possible. In my understanding, Bechstein pianos effectively combine German and English characteristics, and even this 20th century instrument was a delight for making a veiled and colorful Romantic sonority. Clearer and less heavy attacks, a slight after-ring, and greater distinctions between the registers made it easier to produce the kind of chiaroscuro effects that are often effective in this music. It is also nice to feel comfortable playing at times without pedal without fear of dryness. Since Scriabin was not known as a powerful player but was renowned for his magical sonority with many pedal shadings, it stands to reason that these features would have made a good fit for his performing style.

5) *One reason for this interview is obviously your planned participation at Westfield's Forte/Piano Festival (in a joint anniversary concert for Scriabin and Sibelius, together with Tuija Hakkila and Miri Yampolsky). What is special about bringing Scriabin to this festival?*

The festival promises to be an extraordinary event on many levels. It is great to bring this cherished repertoire to any audience, of course, but it is particularly interesting to play to an audience that is keenly attuned to performance practice issues. Scriabin may not be often studied along the lines we apply to earlier eras, but in fact many of those techniques work quite effectively in this repertoire.

6) *You have issued all of Scriabin's sonatas on a set of highly acclaimed CDs. At Cornell, you are playing other works: Préludes, Poèmes, Études and other pieces. Will you record this repertoire as well?*

I very well might, and the critical response has certainly been most encouraging. I don't have a specific plan yet for which pieces or when, but I have a good number of these pieces in my fingers and they could make for some interesting future projects.

7) *What will you do in the remainder of this "Scriabin year"?*

I have a number of Scriabin recitals planned in various locations including the complete sonatas in two concerts in Philadelphia, a week's tour of the midwest, performances at Boston College and Ithaca College, and at the diMenna Center in New York. There may be some more to come in 2016 as well. I am also working to co-author a new book on Scriabin for Rowman and Littlefield, together with John Bell Young and Lincoln Ballard—my own role being primarily to discuss interpretive challenges and the recorded tradition. It's meant to be both a friendlier introduction to the composer for the uninitiated and a more reliable work of scholarship than what is readily available at present. We feel that some new work on Scriabin in English is overdue!

*Thanks very much for this interview, and I am looking forward to hearing your concert!*

For the program of the Scriabin & Sibelius concert at the *Forte/Piano* Festival, please visit <http://westfield.org/festival>. You can also visit Matthew Bengtson online at <http://www.mattbengtson.com>.

THE SCRIBIN CENTENARY  
CONCERTS AND LECTURES AT CORNELL UNIVERSITY  
OCTOBER 22–25, 2015

This fall, the Westfield Center for Historical Keyboard Studies will celebrate the centenary of Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915) with a series of lectures and concerts. Cornell pianists Xak Bjerken, Becky Lu, Ryan MacEvoy McCullough, Miri Yampolsky, Andrew Zhou, and Ithaca College's Dmitri Novgorodsky will trace Scriabin's stylistic evolution through performances of the complete piano sonatas over two concerts.

Speakers with wide-ranging expertise, including Simon Morrison of Princeton (Musicology) and Geoffrey Waite of Cornell (German Studies, Comparative Literature, and Visual Studies), will offer interdisciplinary perspectives on Scriabin's piano music and *fin-de-siècle* Russian artistic developments, and assess the landscape of Scriabin studies. To address issues of performance practice, the pianists

and speakers will assemble for a panel discussion that includes demonstrations on Cornell's newly refurbished 1876 eight-foot Blüthner grand with Aliquot resonating strings and performances by Scriabin himself—via his 1910 Welte Mignon piano rolls.

Stanislav Ioudenitch, Gold Medalist at the 2001 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, will draw the weekend's festivities to a close with a program of short pieces by Scriabin, Chopin, and the monumental and rarely performed second sonata (original version) by Scriabin's contemporary, Rachmaninoff.

All events will be free and open to the public. Please check the Westfield website regularly for the latest schedule and further information.



AFTER CONSERVATION, WHAT?  
BY LAURENCE LIBIN

*Laurence Libin is emeritus curator of musical instruments at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, past president of the Organ Historical Society, and editor-in-chief of the Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments for Oxford University Press.*

Although much has been said and written about conservation of historical organs, fine old instruments, and even newer ones in good condition, continue to vanish at an alarming rate, taking with them a precious part of our musical heritage. Conservation work, no matter how thorough, cannot assure an organ's survival. Unpredictable or seemingly unmanageable threats endanger organs especially in churches but also in schools, concert halls, museums and other institutions, in storage and in private possession—wherever they are located, no matter how “safe.” Among these threats are fires and floods, vandalism, abandonment of buildings, changing liturgical and musical fashions, venal or uninformed custodians and property developers, and misguided government interference (such as laws prohibiting sale of instruments with legally imported ivory keys and stop knobs). Such risks are largely beyond the control of organists, but this is no reason to overlook sensible precautions. Above all, be aware and proactive; your job may depend on it.

Most organists nowadays recognize that historical organs are a scarce, irreplaceable resource for performers, music and cultural historians, students of design and engineering, and of course listeners. Obviously, we will never have more old organs (or pianos, or anything else) than exist right now; tomorrow we will inevitably have fewer. With this in mind, apart from conservation measures, what can we do to slow the pace of loss, both of instruments and of the unique information they embody? Two avenues are straightforward: prepare for disaster, and carefully document important organs before disaster strikes, so vital data, at least, can survive. Both avenues are widely ignored, even though costly restoration and conservation work are pointless if an organ then remains unprotected. Rather than grieve and cast blame after a loss, take preventive measures. Here are some ways to minimize risk and preserve information:

**Prepare**

**1** Keep the organ and the area around and over it clean and ventilated, free of flammable material and obstacles, vermin, dampness, children, and other hazards.

Regularly inspect the organ's interior and surroundings for signs of leaks, cracked or crumbling surfaces, settling, infestation, mold, etc., and report and keep a record of any findings. Keep emergency apparatus (e.g., tarpaulins, large flashlight, class ABC—preferably dry chemical—fire extinguisher, ladder) handy near the organ—it's cheap insurance.

**2** Keep the loft, chambers, and blower room locked when the area is unsupervised. Securing the organ's perimeter to prevent unauthorized access, especially to pipes, is mandatory. Adequate lighting with motion-detector switches can prevent accidents and deter vandals.

**3** Invite your local fire protection officer and building manager to visit the installation with you (and your organ technician if possible) and inspect together the chamber or case interior and blower room; explain the purpose and fragility of pipes, trackers, console, and other components; discuss how best to provide emergency access while avoiding water damage and crushing as much as possible; also inspect the space above the ceiling and in the blower room for fire hazards, bad wiring, and presence of working fire alarms and extinguishers. Bad wiring should be replaced; intact old wiring and circuitry in good condition need not be unless required by code and insurance terms.

**4** Give your phone number to the fire protection officer and local fire station and post it near the organ so you (or the organ technician or other alternate) can be contacted quickly in an emergency if the building office is closed and staff are absent.

**5** Do not allow contractors to work unsupervised around or over the organ. Consult the building manager or project supervisor to ensure compliance, and don't trust verbal assurances. Roofing and any work involving a heat source are particularly dangerous, so make sure fire extinguishers are nearby and easily located.

**6** Discuss rerouting water pipes (including for fire suppression systems), roof drains, steam and condensate lines, so these do not pass above the organ; anything that could leak or drip eventually will.

**7** Install surge protection on electrical circuits to avoid frying if lightning strikes nearby.

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*Apart from conservation measures, what can we do to slow the pace of loss, both of instruments and of the unique information they embody? Two avenues are straightforward: prepare for disaster, and carefully document important organs. . .*

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**8** Try to maintain reasonable climate control but know that HVAC (heating, ventilating, air conditioning) systems will break down, usually when most needed. Sudden drastic drops or peaks in humidity are more dangerous than gradual seasonal shifts. A sharp drop is likely to occur when an unheated building is quickly warmed in winter. Discuss this risk with the building manager and explain the cost and wear-and-tear of frequent retuning of reeds, etc. Monitor fluctuating temperature and humidity levels at different heights within the organ and take steps to mitigate excessive swings before they cause damage.

**9** If any part of the organ, including the blower, is located below or at ground level in a flood-prone area, see if it can be elevated. If not, be prepared to isolate it from encroaching water, including from backed-up drains.

**10** Communicate well and regularly with the organ technician especially about any problems you notice, and keep to a consistent inspection and maintenance schedule. Long-deferred maintenance busts budgets. A neglected organ that does not perform reliably is more likely to be scrapped.

## **Document**

**1** A stop list isn't enough. The more important the organ, the more thorough documentation it deserves. Photos and audio recordings should supplement written descriptions, measurements, and drawn plans. No amount of documentation will enable construction of an exact replica of a lost organ and its acoustical setting, but work toward that goal as if the organ's virtual survival depended on it.

**2** Organs under threat (potentially, all organs) need informed advocates. Enlist volunteers—students, choristers, members of a congregation—in the task of

documentation so they become familiar with the instrument and have a stake in its preservation. Collaborators may have skills such as mechanical drawing, close-up photography, 3D imaging, audio recording, or spreadsheet preparation, that needn't involve handling pipes or other delicate parts.

**3** Review available models for documentation at varying levels of specificity; pick a level that matches your capabilities and don't exceed your level of competence. If you need expert advice, get it; talk to your organ technician (and the builder or restorer, if possible). Like practicing music, documentation is a never-ending process that can be systematically learned, extended, and improved.

**4** Start with basics, adding details as resources allow. Don't overlook oral accounts; interview persons knowledgeable about the organ's history.

**5** Especially for pre-industrial organs, try to include measurement of pitch, temperament, and wind pressures; analysis of pipe metal composition and scales; identification of wood species; description of console and chest layouts, action type, and winding system; dimensions of keyboards (including size of keys and placement of accidentals, distance between manuals and between lowest manual and pedals, depth and weight of touch, and other quantifiable playing characteristics); details of tuning and voicing methods and of tool marks and construction guide lines; recording of makers' and others' inscriptions, plaques, markings on pipes, and graffiti; evidence of earlier states, e.g. prior location, façade decoration, previous voicing and tuning, stoplist and mixture composition, pipe racking, winding system, etc. Expert help is available; ask a museum conservator for advice and referrals.

**6** Don't confuse precision with accuracy, but use common sense; measurements of a thousandth of an inch or fraction of a cent in pitch are practically meaningless. Clearly distinguish surmise and opinion from observed fact.

**7** Keep copies of the organ's documentation, including original and revised design drawings, technical specifications, builder's and rebuilders' contracts, records of

relocations, alterations, and major repairs, and everything else pertinent to its history, structure, and condition in a secure place apart from the building where the organ is located; if the building is destroyed, these vital records may be saved. Make sure several persons know where they are deposited, preferably in a well-managed archive, not in your closet.

**8** Include among these papers a copy of the organ's up-to-date insurance policy. If the organ isn't separately insured, either as part of the building's fabric or as a furnishing, make it so, because the policy can be useful objective evidence of the organ's condition and replacement value. This valuation can help forestall efforts to discard the instrument.

**9** Don't rely too heavily on computerized data storage systems (including audio and picture files) that depend on electronic devices prone to obsolescence and glitches; tangible records can be more durable and long-lasting.

**10** Start documentation now; don't wait for an instrument to become endangered but assume it already is. In addition to detailed conservation reports on specific organs, for example by the Göteborg Organ Art Center (GOArt), these books offer useful insights:

Jim Berrow, ed.: *Towards the Conservation and Restoration of Historic Organs: A Record of the Liverpool Conference, 23-26 August 1999* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000);

Robert Barclay: *The Preservation and Use of Historic Musical Instruments: Display Case and Concert Hall* (London and Sterling, Va.: Earthscan, 2005), with bibliography;

John R. Watson, ed.: *Organ Restoration Reconsidered: Proceedings of a Colloquium* (Detroit Monographs in Musicology/Studies in Music, No. 44) (Warren, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press, 2005);

John R. Watson: *Artifacts in Use: The Paradox of Restoration and the Conservation of Organs* (Richmond, Va.: OHS Press, 2010), with bibliography.





AN INTERVIEW WITH MARILYN NONKEN  
CONDUCTED ON MARCH 5, 2015 AND CONDENSED  
BY ANDREW ZHOU

*Marilyn Nonken is one of the most celebrated pianists in the American new music scene, having premiered and presented important performances of works by, among others, Milton Babbitt, Pascal Dusapin, Michael Finnissy, Liza Lim, and Tristan Murail. Currently Director of Piano Studies at NYU's Steinhardt School, she recently released *Voix Voilées*, a CD featuring works by Joshua Fineberg and Hugues Dufourt, and a monograph *The Spectral Piano: From Liszt, Scriabin, and Debussy to the Digital Age*, published by Cambridge University Press. She took the time to share some insights on her career and recent projects between rehearsals for the *Environs Messiaen* festival, for which she contributed concert performances and a presentation at the composer's forum.*

*Marilyn, you are a special figure on the American performance scene for various reasons, not least because you received your doctorate in musicology (theory). Can you explain how you chose to go down that path and how you see the relationship between the worlds of music scholarship and music performance?*

I started out as a performance major at Eastman. I don't come from a family that plays classical music. When I got into a real conservatory environment such as it was at the time, I found that I was playing the same music as everyone else did. I don't have quite that mindset, and although I was working with wonderful teachers, it wasn't a good fit. I was very interested in working with the composers I had met, and wanted to be really useful to them, playing their music, learning where they were coming from, learning from these classes for creating music, reading scores. That was not what my teacher wanted me to be doing as an undergraduate performance major. It just wasn't the kind of route that one takes, so I switched out of performance to go into theory; when I looked at journals like *Perspectives of New Music*, all the people writing for these seemed to be composers. Even after I switched, I continued to work with David Burge, who is a great pianist of new and old music, but I finished as a theorist. At that point, a lot of people said, "well, if you are interested in that kind of music, there's not a career in that anyway, so why don't you get a degree in something else?"



Marilyn Nonken

Photo from <http://www.marilynnonken.com/photos.html>

It made sense to study at Columbia, where theory is considered a part of musicology. While I was there doing my doctorate I ended up performing more and more and started an ensemble, and a career did actually happen around performance. Although I got my degree in musicology, I've never actually taught any classes in musicology or theory. And when I left, I was a freelance performer, and after years of freelancing ended up running the piano program now at NYU.

I think having more background in theory and musicology and having the mindset of knowing what is happening around performance is really valuable. And programs like the one here [at Cornell] and at NYU that

encourage students [not] just to focus strictly on the art of playing instruments but also to put that in context, in general create interesting players.

*You have said that as a pianist in your early twenties, you were attracted to “difficult” works by composers like Babbitt, Ferneyhough, Finnissy, and Jason Eckardt, seeing their complexity as “an aesthetic strength,” and that you were curious to know “what distinguished [you] from others who found the same music needlessly opaque and ungratifying.” Could you describe the musical atmosphere in which you grew up and that led you to become interested in this music, and did you ever find your answer to this question?*

I mentioned that I didn't come from a musical family, but I had a great-uncle who was a sort of “failed” pianist. He had come out to New York in the 40s from the Midwest and took a stab at it—it didn't really work out and he returned to the Midwest and taught high school music and private lessons. He was very interested in the real modern music of his time, in Bartók, Schoenberg and his students. I will say, he was not a good player, but he was a passionate one and used to have these crazy salons with his friends, all amateurs, in which they would slog through Bartók, Zemlinsky, Schoenberg, even minor disciples of Schoenberg like Dika Newlin, and explore this early 20th-century atonal music. They would play these, not particularly well, and I would turn pages for these chaotic salons. I found it baffling but I was also very curious—it wasn't scary to me, so I grew up in this atmosphere with music that had this taste for adventure. My great-uncle also had expressionist paintings around his house and I was just drawn to this. I don't think he was a model as a player, I didn't get much sense of what the music was about, but looking back, the sense of this “new music” and adventure was attractive—very exciting. When people sit down for a standard classical music concert, it was never the same, it was a different kind of goal. One of the first atonal pieces I ever really played was by Schoenberg, and for my junior recital at undergraduate I did the complete works of Schoenberg, which was quite unusual then.

*How did you feel that those early experiences impacted your career later?*

Having an enthusiasm and not being afraid of looking at a daunting score. Whenever you approach a score by a composer like Schoenberg, Ferneyhough, or even Messiaen, it's kind of unreadable at first and you have to

take time to learn what it's about. There's a big learning curve. I think a lot of classical players, if they can't sight-read something, they take it very personally. I think there is a lot of discomfort when performers who work so hard to learn how to play fluidly are put in front of a piece in which they feel like a beginner again, and they feel like that's not OK.

And because I felt it was OK, I was willing to tackle pieces of which people would say, “that's impossible” or “oh that's too hard” or “it doesn't make sense;” pieces that had different types of notation, that make different performance demands. So early on, when I came to New York, I developed a reputation of being somebody [about whom] people could say, “throw this at her, she'll do it.” I remember someone called me and said “this piece is totally impossible so you'll do it, right?” So it becomes that kind of challenge, and more often than not, I find those experiences very rewarding.



Marilyn Nonken

Photo from <http://www.marilynnonken.com/photos.html>

*Your monograph The Spectral Piano: From Liszt, Scriabin, and Debussy to the Digital Age was published by Cambridge University Press last year. I'd like to discuss how this project began and your experience of writing the book.*

Most pianists don't write books, but being at a research university like NYU, there is pressure on faculty, even in the arts, to write and to demonstrate scholarship, and this was an area that I felt that all of my experience was leading towards: formalizing ideas about a certain kind of piano repertoire. The more I looked at different composers, I found this development of an idea or an attitude towards the piano—that is not to say it is the only, or the best way—that is not defined by era. Pianists tend to think in eras or nationality, and this seemed a way to talk about piano music that transcended a national or historical approach, and about composers who had similar fascinations with the piano and were drawn to it for similar reasons.

*I'd like to discuss your particular understanding of the word "spectral." Is there truly a genre of "spectral music" and "protospectral music," or is it perhaps rather a "spectral attitude" that one can apply perhaps to all music?*

It's definitely a more vague label. We tend to associate spectral music with a very particular group of French composers whose work was directly influenced by spectral analysis and the rise of the computer and acoustics and psychoacoustics. The term *musique spectrale* came up around 1979 and works well for this group of composers, writing in the 70s and 80s. But I think to say something is *protospectral* [implies] the same sort of things that interested Liszt, Scriabin, Debussy, and Messiaen, continuing to influence other composers who were also interested in similar aspects of sound but who maybe weren't directly tied to acoustics and psychoacoustics.

I think the label was never meant to refer to any school. There are some spectral techniques that French composers like Murail and Grisey used, whereby they would look very specifically at analyses of sounds, and directly transfer those ideas into the writing of pieces. And then you look at someone like Hugues Dufourt, who has written a lot of piano music and he just doesn't use the overtone series at all. Some would not call him a "spectral composer." Maybe his methods are not directly related but the ideas inform his work to different degrees.

*Could you give us an overview of what spectral composers were interested in doing?*

With the rise of digital computers we have become capable of analyzing sound to see what it is made of—so you could see a spectrogram, or a visual representation of sound with the fundamental and the harmonics. Of course, great orchestrators like Rimsky-Korsakov or Ravel had ideas of what separated one kind of sound on one instrument from another. That is really the art of orchestration: putting together sounds in different ways. But with spectral analysis you can see this in a really quantifiable way and you can see exactly what goes into a piano sound and what it is that makes an attack characteristic in a specific way. How is a piano different from a trombone or a voice . . . almost like seeing an X-ray of the sound. So the first-generation spectralists would take these analyses and would not create pieces for them, but would take characteristics, generating, for instance, harmonies to reflect the way a certain overtone series was constructed. In Grisey's famous *Partiels*, he took a series from a trombone and translated it into an entire orchestra. So it is about taking the idea of how a sound works and applying this metaphorically in composition.

*In discussing spectral music from a "sound qua sound" perspective, it may be tempting for some to see it as pure sonic sensuality. Is there a role still for traditional notions of motif, structure and development and if so, how do these arise from the spectral attitude?*

I suppose a composer would answer that quite differently. The spectral idea of time and process and form really has more to do with the evolution of sounds, almost in the sense of a traditional developing variation—what happens to a sound as the piece goes along? So a lot of times we won't have traditional forms dictated by genres like the sonata form. It isn't that you don't find themes and motifs, but as Grisey says, "music is what the sound becomes." There is more of a focus on sound itself and what it becomes as the basis of a musical work.

It might seem strange to say, because music is all sound, but not all music is *about* sound. Grisey talks about the erotics of sound and asks, "what is wrong with listening just for the sake of listening?" It is about listening to sound in and of itself rather than sound as a metaphor for something else. You take a piece by Milton Babbitt, for instance, who wrote in a certain style: no matter what instrument you play it on—a piano, string quartet, or a jazz band—it's still his music overlaid on various instruments (the same is said about a Beethoven piano sonata being like a string quartet, or a piano work

being “orchestral”). From a spectral perspective, you’d never do that, because if a composer has written for the piano, it’s about the piano’s own distinctive timbre and the way that instrument works, which is inherently different from a violin; it’s a different kind of priority.

*You explain that preparing the works of composers like Murail, Joshua Fineberg, and Hugues Dufourt changed the way you conceived of the instrument. How so? What are some of the challenges you faced when you came to get to know this music? Could you offer one or two specific examples of new discoveries you made?*

Because the music is so much more about developments of sound in time, the scores are very specific with regard to dynamics in relation to one another. When you have a very long *crescendo* or *decrescendo*, or a process with different polyphonies of sounds, if you make a slight mistake with that dynamic, it ruins the whole process. Since it’s really about an interplay of sounds, a misgauging of timing or intensity makes it incomprehensible. When I recorded a piece by Fineberg called *Lightning*, which starts with **pppp**, he would say, “that’s not four p’s.” The dynamics are such a crucial quality, and with that the articulations. I think there’s more of an emphasis on being accurate and clear about these. Traditional repertoire is not as demanding in that respect. You look at the Romantic repertoire—the *cantabile*, *rubato*, *legato* are stylistically very important, but when the piece is about the sound, there’s a greater imperative to be ever more specific.

*Given that you must be so attuned to the lifespan of a sound in the performance of spectral music, and yet the pianos and the acoustics of the hall are notorious for their variability, how do you prepare both in your studio and when you first enter the hall and get to know the piano? (Feel free to name passages from specific works.)*

I think spectral music is about acoustic processes, and as long as you know what you are after, when you get to a new hall and piano, you deal with it. With spectral music, there is more of a spontaneous element. In a lot of works by Fineberg, or in Murail’s *Territoires de l’oubli*, the pedal is down for long periods of time and you are playing with something akin to stratigraphy like with rock layers, as time is passing. And when you are dealing with the consequence of a sound that will ring for a minute, 30 sec., 20 sec., and playing off existing sounds—I find that’s always spontaneous, and different in each case. So there is a real necessity to be listening to what the instrument can

do. Murail will write *quasi p* or *quasi f* so every dynamic is always relative to all other dynamics and the sounding resonance; there is not a fixed scale. There is a spontaneous, live feel, which makes a live performance more exciting. You are not attempting to reproduce what you did in the practice room, but rather you are trying to create these sound fantasias in real time, which is always a challenge.

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*You describe an “ecological” approach to performance in your book. Can you tell us a bit about this?*

It sounds so imposing! I’ve always had the impression that in playing pieces from any era, you are always trying to invite the listener into a certain kind of environment, and you want to define what that piece is about. We talk with regard to traditional repertoire about being stylistically appropriate and wanting to have a certain timbre, touch, and attitude to what you play. A piece of Ferneyhough or Babbitt or Rzewski outlines pretty clearly a different kind of environment.

When some people feel put off or scared by newer music, they are being asked to go into an environment they don’t quite understand yet, and the performer’s job is to be a guide for this and define it as clearly as possible so the listener is able to find his/her way through it. It has to do with taking into account the subjective world of the listener and the real world of sound. I once played Feldman’s *Triadic Memories*, which lasts about ninety minutes. Somebody told me after the concert, “I entered the piece and then I fell asleep and then I woke up twenty minutes later and was still in the piece.” I think there’s something beautiful about that: it was a place where they went; they fell asleep but they were still in that world.

*I’d like to talk about being a pianist in contemporary America. What do you think are the challenges of the 21st-century pianist performing contemporary music, and what role do you see her playing for modern audiences?*

I don’t think this ought to be restricted only to contemporary music, but the relevance of live, acoustic music is not something we should take for granted. People



have a lot of access to sound and music and it's fantastic we can go to YouTube and see performances by all sorts of different pianists and performers. You need to make a case for yourself that people should go out and buy a ticket and watch you play; it's a curious position to be in. There are perhaps too many pianists who take it for granted that what they do is relevant. I think there is a need for an artist to define, first for themselves and then for their audiences, why live performance is valuable. I feel it is. Especially with the ubiquity of recordings, what we do is tremendously important. It's like going to a circus at this point, to go to the opera and to get 200 people to sit on stage.

Live performance is something fantastic and unusual and it's not something that the broad public really has exposure to. The challenge is to re-educate people as to why it is interesting to watch a piece by Murail, or a Chopin ballade, or a Bach partita. It's interesting, but unusual and anachronistic; there's a bigger challenge about—in a good way—justifying the use of people's time. Murail says when he writes a piece he recognizes that he is asking twenty-five minutes of the listener's time and how can he make that time well spent?

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*What role does commissioning new works play in your work? What, for you, are the roles of composer and performer when working together on a piece?*

The second you put music in a museum, it ceases to be a living thing anymore. So much of classical music is about presenting artifacts and canonized works. There's nothing wrong with that, but the idea that that is somehow a replacement for new works, I find kind of unacceptable and arrogant. Even when we have graduate auditions, students now have to bring a 20th-century work written before 1945, and a contemporary work after, which is an unusual audition requirement. It's ridiculous—the number of people who don't know anything written in the last eighty years—and that that is somehow acceptable I find disturbing. The art form continues to evolve, and it's not all downhill. Would you not read a book or watch a movie

from the past eighty years? There's somehow a concept that something stopped and doesn't exist anymore.

I think it is important to bring new works to people, increasing the chance that listeners hear something that interests them and breaking down the idea that they don't like works written in the 20th and 21st centuries. Perhaps the idea that is written by a living composer would appeal to them because they are responding to the same world. I have a project next year celebrating the 70th anniversary of Grisey's birth, and I've commissioned six young composers to write works in his memory. It's a way of bringing attention to Grisey's music, which is already rather "old," and at the same time showing the influence he has already had on a younger generation of composers.

*You are currently Director of Piano Studies at the Steinhardt School at NYU. What place does teaching have in your day and what impact has musicology and new music had on it?*

I don't believe in programs purely specialized in new music and in terms of learning to play the music, we are so lucky to have such a rich repertoire. In our program, all the faculty have the understanding that performing works from the past fifty years or so is part of training proficient and *current* musicians. A conservatory conserves and maintains a conservative approach. We have two courses on contemporary music, one on performance practice, entrepreneurship, and professional initiatives and one about the repertoire. There is an attempt to show this as part of a continuum. I think there is too often a separation of either only playing new or old music. Perhaps this is where my musicological background comes in: seeing that what we do is historically relevant, and that it wasn't as if one day things "broke" with Schoenberg. There's a dialogue that continues, especially with composers like Hugues Dufourt, who writes a lot about, and in response to, Schubert and Liszt. It's an important perspective in our program.

*You have students who will go on to play a variety of roles in the classical music scene and beyond. What are some of the philosophies or messages you wish for them to take away after having studied with you?*

Being somebody who tends to play music by composers that many don't know, or that listeners are skeptical of, dismissive of, or afraid of, I come to learning a piece with a mission. I think anybody who plays contemporary music seriously realizes the necessity of waving the flag and corralling her or his audiences, and feels the need to

communicate the importance of what he/she does. No matter what repertoire you play, you need to have that kind of conviction. I feel that all repertoire is endangered right now and it is the complacency of people not playing new music or playing only acknowledged great works. I hear a lot of standard repertoire played beautifully with no attempt on the performer's part to show why it's special, why it was revolutionary, what makes it great, or why it's important to listen to *them* play it. No matter what repertoire they are playing, performers need to be advocates for their composers. I say to students playing, say, Ginastera sonata, *why* are you playing this and why should I listen to this?

*If there were one aspect about the classical music scene these days that you'd like to see change, whether it has to do with infrastructure, recording, publishing, or even audience attitudes, what might that be?*

There's a feeling in our culture that going to a concert is an exceptional experience, that it's a special occasion. Tickets are expensive and there is an impression that live instrumental concert music is a distant, privileged elite thing. It's hard to combat that idea, because most of our institutions foster it and propel it forward: for example, when you have a recital series of "great performers." This makes it difficult for young performers, or idiosyncratic performers, or different kinds of performers to find audiences and spaces to play—there's very minimal coverage. So the concert life is shrinking, because there are so many options for hearing music outside of the concert hall, so that the experience of listening to live music has become very marginal.

In New York, you find a few people curating

interesting series in small venues, but there are really few places in which composers, performers, and audiences really meet. One of the hardest things for young pianists is simply finding places to play. Recital programs need to be brought to people. Many young performers become very entrepreneurial but there really is not that kind of infrastructure. I think it's strange when you unleash these skilled, passionate, educated musicians and there aren't that many places to go. Often, they have to accommodate the presenter with the kinds of music they are playing, so it's hard for performers to grow creatively owing to the pressures of finding an audience.

We try to create small concert series so that performers can get out and play for people—only by playing over and over can you really refine your craft. It shouldn't be only for the top 2%, who win competitions and happen to become the anointed representatives of their generation.

*What are some of your future projects?*

I recorded Murail's complete piano works and then Fineberg's piano works with Dufourt. My next project is to record composers who have been influenced by them, like Christopher Trapani or Edmund Campion, whom we might call "post-spectral." Dufourt wrote a fantastic group of works based on Schubert's settings of Goethe. I recorded *Erlkönig* but there are three others. I'm performing those pieces next season alongside the Schubert lieder with baritone and maybe exploring the earlier 20th-century music by Scriabin, early music of Jolivet, which I love but haven't always had the opportunity to play. Some people start further back and work their way into the future, whereas I've started in the present and am slowly making my way backwards.



## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### WESTFIELD AT THE 2016 BERKELEY FESTIVAL

Looking ahead to next year, please mark your calendars for the Westfield Center's Keyboard Days at the 2016 Berkeley Festival, Friday, June 10 and Saturday, June 11.

More information will be available in the next issue of the Westfield Newsletter.



INTERNATIONAL ORGAN COMPETITION CAVAILLÉ-COLL  
VILLE D'AVRAY—NEUILLY-SUR-SEINE—TROUVILLE  
MARCH 17–20, 2016

**Program**

1st round (Trouville, March 17–18, 2016)

1. Mel Bonis: *Fughette* (page 83, Tome 2) (Editions Fortin-Armiane)
2. Louis Vierne: *Intermezzo* (*Pièces de Fantaisie*, Tome 1) (Editions Lemoine)
3. Edouard Devernay: *Pièce Symphonique sur "O Filii et Filiae"*

Final (Neuilly-sur-Seine, March 19, 2016)

1. Jehan Alain: *Intermezzo* (Tome 2 page 24) (Editions Leduc)
2. Jean-Louis Petit: *Postlude du Tryptique à Marie* (Editions Fortin-Armiane)
3. Maurice Duruflé: *Fugue sur le nom d'Alain* (without the Prelude) (Editions Durand)

**Jury**

Jean-Michel Louchart, Loïc Mallié, Nicole Marodon-Cavaillé-Coll, Jean-Louis Petit, Philippe Sauvage

**Observers**

Patrick Pouradier Duteil, Françoise Labaste

**Rules**

1. The competition is open to all candidates of any nationality without age limit.
2. The first round will be held on March 17 and 18, 2016 and the finals will be on March 19, 2016. The final round is open to the public.
3. The competition registration fee is 50 Euros.

4. The contestants will be notified as to what time they will compete in the first round. Contestants' names will be randomly drawn on March 1, 2016, and scheduled according to the order in which they were drawn. *Deadline for sending back the application form: March 1, 2016.*
5. The jury's decisions cannot be appealed. The jury reserves the right to interrupt a candidate when necessary.

The application form can be found at this address:

<http://www.orgue-neuilly.org/uploaded/File/Concours%20Orgue%20Mars%202016.pdf>

The completed form can be sent to:

FESTIVAL DE MUSIQUE FRANCAISE.

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tel. +33 (0)1 78 33 14 57

e-mail: [concours@jeanlouispetit.com](mailto:concours@jeanlouispetit.com)

**Prizes**

First Prize: 1500 Euros (Prix du Conseil Départemental des Hauts-de-Seine). Second Prize: 1000 Euros (Prix de la Commune de Ville d'Avray), Prix du Public, Prix spécial Saint-Pierre de Neuilly-sur-Seine remis par le Père Rabel, (800 Euros), Prix de Trouville (500 Euros), Several concert engagements may be offered to the competition winner or winners, however with or without payment.

For more information, please visit [www.orgue-neuilly.org](http://www.orgue-neuilly.org) and [www.orgues-trouville.org](http://www.orgues-trouville.org).



ACADÉMIE D'ÉTÉ ORGUES ET CIMES  
FINHAUT EN VALAIS, SWITZERLAND  
AUGUST 2–9, 2015

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Printed leaflets are available on request: [betty.maisonnat@orgues-et-cimes.org](mailto:betty.maisonnat@orgues-et-cimes.org).





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<http://westfield.org/donate/>

**Submissions to the Westfield Newsletter may be directed to:**

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