

In Context Eduard Franck may be the most famous composer you've never heard of. He was an esteemed pianist and teacher. He knew Wagner and Chopin, and he was a close friend of Robert and Clara Schumann. He was a favorite of the King of Denmark. Most significantly, he was Felix Mendelssohn's prized student and protégé, and his accompanist for violin recitals. Mendelssohn was a huge early influence on Franck's composing style, and the two musicians' paths crossed through the rest of Mendelssohn's life—in fact, Franck was a pallbearer at his mentor's funeral.

This year is the bicentennial of Mendelssohn's birth, occasioning celebratory concerts worldwide. But **Close Encounters With Music**, the Berkshire-based presenting ensemble, is placing the great composer in historical context, programming his works with those of his contemporaries—his sister Fanny, both Schumanns, Chopin and, most unconventionally, Franck. In a series of concerts in various cities, starting with a pair in New York's Merkin Hall, CEWM is offering American premieres of a group of Franck works—a string sextet, a piano trio, and several solo pieces.

Franck was a scion of an assimilated Jewish banking family, and in the latter part of his career he encountered anti-Semitic obstacles. The Nazi era all but extinguished his reputation: he ceased to be part of Germany's musical history. But CEWM hopes to right the balance. "We take a few great names and put them on pedestals, but we forget there was a musical milieu," says cellist Yehuda Hanani, CEWM's artistic director. "If you look at a forest, there are a few big oaks—but



it's the shrubs underneath the canopy that make the scene."

It may be an unusual way of celebrating the Mendelssohn year, but that's standard procedure for CEWM. The organization strives to frame music unexpected ways. To celebrate the 2005 Mozart 250th, for instance, the group commissioned a clarinet/piano/cello trio from Paul Schoenfield, based on themes from *Le nozze di Figaro* but incorporating a very different kind of wedding tradition—klezmer music. To protest the planned building of an environmentally ominous cement plant in the Hudson Valley, CEWM programmed a night of political-protest music, including a new song cycle by John Musto. Each CEWM concert features commentary by Hanani, aiming not simply to explain the music, but to make each piece relevant to extra-musical concerns.

"Over the years we've segregated classical music," Hanani says. "People don't feel any longer that it speaks to them. Even religious music—we've secularized that. What we're trying to do in sound is what painters do with a brush, or poets with words. We're finding those underground tunnels that connect everything." www.cewm.org



ABOVE,
EDUARD FRANCK;
TOP, RIGHT:
CEWM'S
YEHUDA HANANI

Twin Peaks

For **Richard** and **John Contiguglia**, it was a homecoming of sorts. This past November, the duo pianists played a midday concert as part of the annual Dame Myra Hess Day festivities at London's National Gallery. The day commemorates Hess's famed series of World War II lunchtime concerts. But the event had additional resonance for the Contiguglia twins. They first met Hess in the early 1960s, when they were students at the Yale School of Music and she was playing with the New Haven Symphony. She told the brothers to look her up if they were visiting London; that casual invitation turned into a four-year relationship in which the late pianist coached the pair in the four-hand repertoire that she herself had played with Irene Scharrer during the war.

"We had gotten degrees as soloists," says John Contiguglia. "But we hadn't a clue about how to pursue a career. When we got to London, it seemed like the natural thing to do to start studying the duos she had performed."

"It was the beginning of our career as a duo," says Richard Contiguglia.

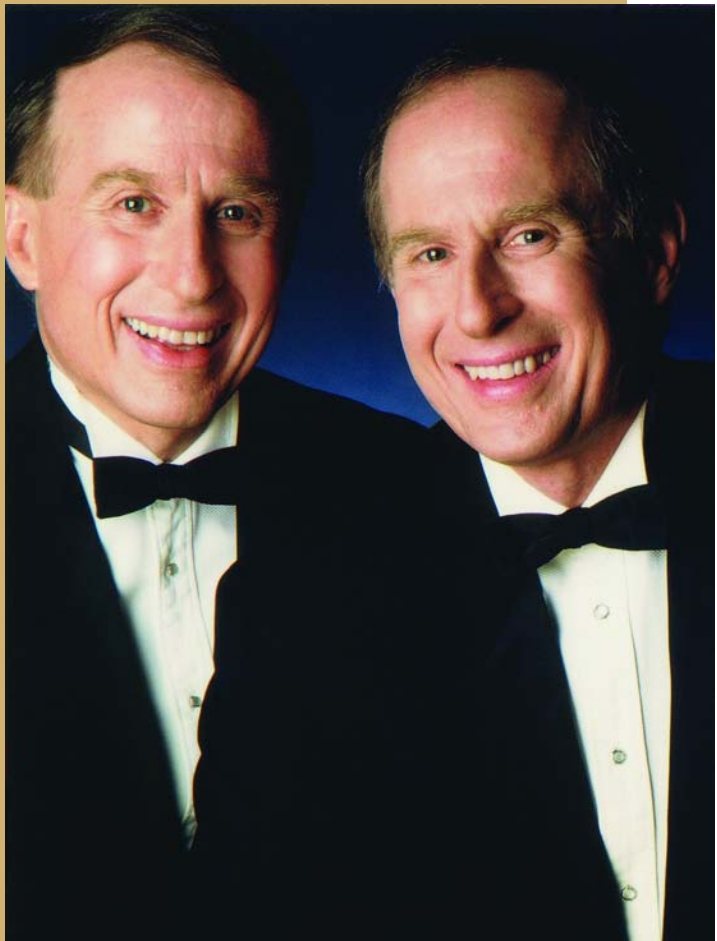
The brothers' repertoire encompasses Mozart, Liszt, and Percy Grainger—an early influence on their career. But one work on their National Gallery program has particular resonance for them: Schubert's Variations on an Original Theme in A-Flat Major. The piece has been a staple for the twins since they studied it with Hess more than four decades ago. It's also one that tests their mettle as musicians. "Schubert wrote so many details into each part," says John. "You have to think of yourself as a performer playing four or five different string parts."

The brothers look at duo piano as such an intimate form of collaboration that it almost demands a familial closeness. "I think it's the most difficult ensemble there is," Richard says. "The mechanism has no leeway for accommodation—once that hammer hits a string, it creates a sound. If it isn't together with another person, it's so noticeable."

"The curse of most piano-duet playing is the use of accents and downbeats to play together," says John. "We're able to breathe the right amount of time so that we can be synchronized without those accents."

"Twins have the ability to interact in ways that perhaps other people can't," says Richard. "We take it for granted." As he sees it, there's a clear label for their brand of music-making: "What we're doing is chamber music."

www.duopianistscontiguglia.com



RICHARD AND JOHN CONTIGUGLIA

Majoring in Latin

The term “string quartet” conjures up a distinctly European tradition. But the **Cuarteto Latinoamericano**

has forged a career by concentrating on the music of Mexico and South and Central America. “When we started as a quartet, we had the usual aspirations of playing the mainstream European repertoire,” says Saúl Bitrán, the ensemble’s first violinist. “But we were living in Mexico, and we started to inquire into the [Latin American] repertoire. A lot of fantastic music was published in the ’30s, ’40s and ’50s, but it languished—works by Villa-Lobos, Ginastera, Chávez. Then we started meeting young composers, and many of *them* had written quartets.”

In the years since, the quartet’s core repertoire has only grown, partly through its own commissioning efforts. The group programs the European classics (“We have to keep an eye on the audience,” Saúl Bitrán says), but its efforts on behalf of Latin American music have been extraordinary. Its discography of more than fifty CDs concentrates on this repertoire—including a traversal of Villa-Lobos’s complete string quartets.

The quartet is largely a Bitrán family affair: Saúl’s brothers Arón and Alvaro play second violin and cello. They grew up playing the string quartet repertoire with their father, an amateur violist. The ensemble was launched professionally in 1982, with one necessary casualty: “The moment we became professionals,” Saúl says, “my father had to pack and leave the quartet.” The Cuarteto’s violist is now Javier Montiel.

In recent years, the group has turned its attention to El Sistema, Venezuela’s extraordinary nationwide musical education system. The players have been going



CUARTETO LATINOAMERICANO

to Venezuela two to three times a year to coach the young orchestral musicians in chamber music performance; starting this year, their efforts will be formalized in the Latin American Academy for String Quartets, and they’ll visit the country four times a year to coach five young quartets.

“There’s something there that’s fantastic,” says Saúl. “When you go to Caracas, there’s chaos on the street, but then you enter a building, built specifically for music. You hear five or six orchestras in different halls, playing with a discipline that makes Suzuki playing seem slack in comparison.”

The four players of the quartet live in different cities, coming together for a complicated rehearsal and touring schedule. “It’s a logistical nightmare, but it gives us a family space—time to practice and cook and be with our families,” says Saúl. “Every time we meet, we feel refreshed. But you couldn’t do it if you hadn’t had years before of learning to be a quartet.”

Clearly, those childhood sessions in the Bitrán living room have paid off. “Our dream was always to do this for a living,” Saúl says. “We couldn’t believe it could happen—but it happened.”

www.cuartetolatinoamericano.org

Up to Date in **Kansas City**

Kansas City is a fabled jazz mecca. It has three professional orchestras, two opera companies and a ballet troupe—not to mention a professional baseball team. But historically it has not been a center for new music. That's where **newEar** comes in. For the past sixteen years, the self-presenting ensemble has followed a mandate of bringing

new and recent music to Kansas City audiences.

The group grew out of new-music activity at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, where founding members Mark Lowry (percussion) and Tom Aber (clarinet, sax and other woodwinds) went to graduate school. "The faculty had a contemporary music chamber group, whose concerts were always the most interesting," says Lowry. "Those faculty members went by the wayside and the group disbanded, so the two of us started to do our own concerts." The percussion-clarinet duo soon "morphed" into newEar.

"If you go to hear Beethoven's Ninth, you know you're going to love it, and you wait for those big moments," Lowry says. "But some of the most intensely real experiences that I've had personally were listening to pieces I didn't already know—they did something I didn't see coming."

With a core group of four musicians and three composers, newEar is more of a performance collective than a distinct performing entity. The group often draws from the ranks of the Kansas City Symphony. It has performed at the 2007 Festival of New American Music in Sacramento, CA, and sometimes visits St. Louis. NewEar does not tour; its focus remains Kansas City itself. "We want to be a part of Kansas City," says Lowry. "We want to keep getting a wider footprint in the community—so that Kansas City owns us and wants to keep us here."

A seat-of-the pants operation in its first years, the group has entered (in Lowry's term) its "adolescence." It has broadened its board membership and devised "more coherent" marketing, fundraising, and audience-development strategies. Audience size has grown in recent years but typically remains at between 100 and 150 people. Still, by presenting the kind of music that can be found nowhere else in the city, newEar has definitely created its own niche.

Says Lowry: "I tell people: 'You'll probably hear something you like; you'll probably hear something you don't like. But you'll definitely leave saying, 'What are they going to do next?'" www.newear.org



Wind Song

They don't live on the West Coast and they don't play wind instruments. But in 1969, when a group of six Manhattan-based singers were looking for a name for their new vocal ensemble, they hit upon "O Western Wind," an anonymous 16th-century lyric. "It was the age of the Beatles, and we wanted a name that had a contemporary sound," explains countertenor William Zukof. "And we all lived on the West Side." A member of **The Western Wind** ever since he helped found the group, Zukof is also its artistic director.

"We wanted to show that we did not just do early music, but could move backward and forward in time," Zukof says. In the 40 years since its founding, the group has lived up to this ambition, encompassing in its repertoire medieval and Baroque music, traditional Sephardic songs, sacred and secular Christmas music, Hanukkah programs, '50s rock-and-roll, Billy Joel and Philip Glass (that's The Western Wind on the soundtrack for *Koyaanisqatsi*).

While the group occasionally performs with instrumentalists, the core of its repertoire is *a cappella*. "It's hugely challenging," says Zukof. "Balance, intonation—you've got no mechanical recourse; it's all done through your body. I don't think there's anything harder in music."

The Western Wind places an emphasis on the dramatic qualities of its music, as evidenced by a recent project: "Bar La Barca," a pairing of two madrigal comedies, written 400 years apart, Adriano Banchieri's 1605 *Barca di Venetia* and Eric Salzman's 2008 *Jukebox in the Tavern of Love*. "We're always very text driven," says Zukof. "We work on texts, personalizing them. We don't want to be hermetic and abstract, but engaging as musical performance art."



TOP: CURRENT MEMBERS OF THE WESTERN WIND; BELOW, THE WESTERN WIND C.1975

Inevitably, the ensemble has seen personnel changes over its four decades—only Zukof and his co-director, baritone Elliot Z. Levine, remain from the founding—but once singers join the group, they become an organic part of a conductorless organism. "We bring in people who won't get freaked out by working in a collaborative way," says Zukof. "People stay with the group a long, long time."

"When we started, we were just having fun," Zukof says. "But we've stayed together for 40 years. It's been such a fascinating journey. We barely noticed the years passing." www.westernwind.org

SEQUESTES

Violist **Kirsten Monke** has left her positions as principal violist of the Santa Barbara Symphony and the Santa Barbara Chamber Orchestra to join the **DaPonte String Quartet**, in Damariscotta, Maine. A former member of the California-based Anacapa and Gove County String Quartets, Monke succeeds longtime DaPonte violist Mark Preston.

Adam Frey, executive director of the **San Francisco Contemporary Music Players** since 1991, will resign his post at the end of the 2008-09 season. During Frey's tenure—and under the artistic leadership of Stephen L. Mosko, Donald Palma, Jean-Louis LeRoux, and David Milnes—the ensemble won nine CMA/ASCAP Awards for Adventurous Programming.

George Steel has been appointed New York City Opera's general manager and artistic director. Steel was executive director of the Miller Theatre at Columbia University from 1997 to 2008. Earlier this season, he briefly served as the general director of The Dallas Opera.

In Memoriam

Valentin Berlinsky, founding cellist, Borodin Quartet

Betty Freeman, new music patron

Fenno Follansbee Heath, Jr., composer, teacher; choral conductor, Yale Glee Club, Litchfield County Choral Union, University Glee Club of New Haven

Richard Hickox, founding conductor, City of London Sinfonia and Collegium Musicum 90

Israel Horowitz, record producer; columnist, *Billboard*

Freddie Hubbard, trumpeter

Joza Karas, violin faculty, Hartt School; violinist, Hartford Symphony; discoverer of works composed at Terezin concentration camp

David "Fathead" Newman, saxophonist

George Perle, composer and theorist

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