Life Story

A kernel of autobiography is at the core of every piece Jeff Haas writes. The pianist and composer blends three different influences in his works: European classical music, traditional Jewish music and African American jazz. The amalgam reflects Haas’s life story. He’s the son of the late Karl Haas, a co-founder of the Chamber Music Society of Detroit and host of the long-running, nationally syndicated radio program “Adventures in Good Music.” The elder Haas taught his son a love of European masters, and by bringing the boy with him to Detroit’s Temple Israel, where he was music director, he introduced him to the Jewish musical tradition.

I grew up on the organ bench,” Jeff Haas says. “My dad would point to the first note of the service and let me play it. It was quite thrilling for a little kid to press a note and make a sound for the twelve hundred people in the temple.”

The jazz came later—a passion that emphatically began outside the bosom of the Haas family.

“My father was focused on classical music, where he was very open-minded—anything from early music to Xenakis,” Haas says. “He was not open-minded outside the classical realm.” The Haas kids weren’t allowed to listen to jazz or pop at home; Jeff’s sister hid a John Coltrane/Thelonious Monk album under the mattress. But when, as a teenager, he got his first exposure to the music of Coltrane, Monk, Charles Mingus and Miles Davis, he became entranced.

Haas saw jazz not so much as a departure from the music of his childhood as an extension of it. “What I heard was very similar to the Jewish music I heard in the synagogue,” he says. “It spoke to the human condition, full of hope and despair at the same time.”

Given the diverse strands woven into Haas’s music, it’s little wonder that he and his eponymous quintet have become virtual ambassadors of diversity. The group has given over 500 “diversity workshops” in Detroit schools. Haas helped develop a program in Traverse City, MI, which brought high school kids together for ten weeks, rehearsing an original composition for a Martin Luther King celebration.

Recently, Haas’s quintet played a performance in Sheboygan, Wisconsin—a city where, as Haas says with only slight hyperbole—“There are no Jewish or African American people.” After the show, an older man walked up to the group, and at Haas relates, “He looked like he had had a bit of a rough life. He said ‘I don’t like black people; I have never met a Jew—but I love your music!’ Needless to say, a pregnant pause ensued, as the quintet’s members—which also includes a Filipino, a WASP, and two African American Americans—took in the import of what the man was saying.

A response like that could prove daunting to even the most open-minded performer. But as Haas notes: “We certainly were not preaching to the choir in that situation!” After the dust had settled, it was clear the Jeff Haas Quintet had accomplished just what it set out to do. www.jeffhaasmusic.com

Folk Wisdom

Musiqa was founded in Houston by five composers—Kurim Al-Zand, Anthony Brandt, Shih-Hui Chen, Pierre Jarlbert and Rob Smith—with the express aim of serving contemporary music. Its programs are dotted with names like Reichberg, Lisztoswski, Andresen and Dallapiccola. Which is why some of its adult audience might be surprised to find Musiqa’s players leading a group of schoolchildren in a rendition of “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain.”

In fact, one of the group’s most important endeavors is a program presented in the spring to thousands of fourth-graders.

Starting as a pilot education program, for the last two seasons “Around the World with Musiqa” has taken place at the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts in downtown Houston. The program is provided free to schools, which sign up on a first-come, first-served basis. Over the course of four days and eight performances in May, 4,000 kids file into Zilkha Hall, many of them getting their first taste of live music. The event turns concert-going from a realm that might seem forbidding into something friendly and approachable. “The Hobby staff greets the children warmly,” says Brandt, Musiqa’s co-founder and president. “They get to sit in a beautiful, wood-paneled space. We’re up there doing something that’s obviously very well-prepared. They can tell that somebody really cared for them.”

For all of its reliance on folk songs that children can recognize, the program isn’t the naive romp that it might appear at first glance. “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain” becomes the basis for Al-Zand’s theme-and-variations, “Red Pajama”—and an opportunity for Brandt to point out how music can be varied and augmented. “Children are used to hearing the same performances over and over again,” says Brandt. “When you introduce them to the idea of transformed, rather than literal, repetition, you introduce them to the idea that music is alive and developing—it doesn’t have to sound the same way twice. You open up the door to all sorts of music.”

“Around the World with Musiqa” also gently leads the children toward modern music. Proceeding from the basic folk songs themselves, the concert presents folk-song settings and folk-influenced music by Bartók, Ives, Crumb and Berio. At one point soprano Soprano Karol Bennett soothes a caterwauling Sesame Street Ernie doll with a lullaby by Shih-Hui Chen, written in a distinctly modern, Asian-influenced idiom. “We take them step-by-step to stuff that even cultured adults wouldn’t be listening to every day,” says Brandt.

Four out of Musiqa’s five principals are parents—a factor that adds significance to the project. (Brandt’s daughter attended this year with her fourth-grade class.) In future seasons, Musiqa plans to expand the program to the neighboring school district of Spring Branch, and the group hopes to create other child-friendly programs, such as an hour of fables and folktales, with each composer contributing a 10-minute narrative piece. “This is such an important part of what Musiqa does,” says Brandt. “The chance to do something for kids means so much.” www.musiqahouston.org

Detroit’s Temple Israel, where he was music director, he introduced him to the Jewish musical tradition.

Jeff Haas
The city is famous for blue crabs, the Orioles and the films of John Waters. But Baltimore is also home to a thriving classical music scene, with a top symphony orchestra, an opera company and a leading conservatory. And it’s the breeding ground for the Poulenc Trio, a three-year-old oboe, bassoon and piano ensemble quickly establishing an international reputation.

The trio’s genesis came when its members decided to explore the unexpected combination of their three instruments. “We got together to see how far it could go,” says Bryan Young, the group’s bassoonist. Young is a principal with the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra; both he and pianist Irina Lande serve on the faculty of the Peabody Institute; Irina’s husband, Vladimir Lande, is principal oboist with the Baltimore Opera. The group’s name was a natural: Poulenc is after all the composer of the most famous piece written for these quirky forces.

For Young, the group offers a whole new level of professional satisfaction. “I’ve always loved chamber music over orchestral playing,” he says. “It’s more intimate, more lyrical. As a bassoonist, I don’t always have to play the buffoon.”

The ensemble has expanded the oboe/bassoon/piano repertoire through commissions, and also broadens its musical possibilities through collaborations with other musicians, such as the Jacques Thibaud Trio and violinist Hilary Hahn. Last year the musicians achieved a new measure of local visibility when they became musicians-in-residence at Baltimore’s Walters Art Museum. The position not only calls upon the Poulencs to perform but to serve as the museum’s music curators. The first year’s season was sold out; this year, four concerts are scheduled, along with “field trips” to the National Gallery in nearby Washington.

The Poulenc also tours extensively in the U.S., and has performed in venues as far afield as Italy’s Ravello Festival and the White Nights Festival in St. Petersburg. The ensemble’s touring schedule calls for the musicians to be on the road roughly two weeks a month. “One of the problems we’re running into—a good problem to have—is that as we expand, we have to figure out where to put all the time,” says Young. “It’s an adjustment between the things you used to do and the growing demands of the trio.”

www.poulenc trio.com

The Poulenc trio

Lyric Impulses

A concert series built around a guitar/flute duo might be unusual enough in one of the world’s major musical centers. But Red Cedar Chamber Music, featuring the Boland-Dowdall Flute & Guitar Duo, is giving its tenth season of successful concerts centered in the towns of Cedar Rapids and Marion, Iowa—a thriving area, but not a cultural hub. The husband-wife team of Jan Boland (flute) and John Dowdall (guitar) are the constants; the violinist David Miller often joins them, and guest artists round out the programs. Given in museums, libraries and churches that usually seat fewer than 150 people, the programs are so popular that often repeat concerts have to be scheduled.

“The response is somewhat to flute and guitar, but more so to the fact that people enjoy the intimate experience of chamber music,” says Boland. “It’s so much nicer to be close to the instruments.” Part of the sense of audience involvement, too, comes from the talks that the musicians give during the concerts. “It pulls them into the experience,” Boland says. “If you impart passion, the audience will be involved.”

Red Cedar’s activities are rooted in deep community ties. Boland is a native Iowan. Dowdall hails from St. Paul, but attended the University of Iowa, where the two met. In the early years of their professional lives, they lived the life of touring musicians, playing dates across the U.S. and abroad. But Iowa was home base, and as their joint career advanced, so did their allegiance to the community. “We decided we wanted to bring back home to eastern Iowa that wonderful music we heard when we were out and about,” says Dowdall. A CMA grant in 1987 helped them put together outreach programs, creating a community presence that paid off when they founded Red Cedar Chamber Music.

The concert series is only the most visible of Red Cedar’s many activities. In a given year, the group will perform between 60 and 80 concerts in schools, senior citizen homes and public spaces. Through its Chamber Music Now program, the organization works with talented high school and college students, coaching them not just on musical matters, but on their presentation skills. Boland and Dowdall stage a summer festival, specifically for flute/guitar duos, and incorporate training in the business aspects of performing.

Red Cedar’s Rural Outreach program stages concerts in small towns within a roughly fifty-mile radius of Cedar Rapids/Marion. Red Cedar does the fundraising; the communities themselves are required to pay a mere $200, which they can recoup in ticket sales. “It’s critical that we ask them for something,” says Boland. “An even that’s free isn’t looked at the same way as something you have to pay for.” The financial structure of Rural Outreach gives Red Cedar an unusually high profile in its area. “It replaces the model of the eighties, when we would generate publicity materials and send them out to venues around the state,” says Dowdall. “With those kind of booklets, a wants to look for new performers every year. But because we do the fundraising, they look to us on an annual basis.”

Taken together, Red Cedar’s activities have given Boland and Dowdall a work situation matched by few other professional musicians—full-time work that depends on neither teaching nor touring. “At first, I didn’t see this as a full-time model,” says Dowdall. “But I didn’t understand our community would get behind us the way it has.”

www.redcedar.org

Local Heroes

Red Cedar’s many community activities have reached far beyond Iowa’s hilly cornfields.
Making Imprints

The six-year history of Seattle Chamber Players can almost be seen as a long-range education in contemporary music. Starting (in the words of flutist Paul Taub, a founding member) as “a group of friends who liked to play chamber music,” SCP’s early programs would mix classics with emerging mid-career composers from Scandinavia, the Baltic republics and Russia; a weekend of three different “Composers Portraits,” a program devoted to 20th- and 21st-century Italian works; and a collaboration with the Seattle Symphony presenting contemporary works from Central Europe. Aside from its hometown series at Benaroya Hall, SCP this year will head overseas for concerts in concerts in Turin, Copenhagen, Stockholm and at the Moscow Autumn Festival. Even though SCP strives to include its core members in each concert, the programming is driven by repertoire, not personnel. The strategy brings in a wildly eclectic group of collaborators, ranging from an ensemble of Persian musicians, to Xenia Firkusny discovered he had been double-booked and cancelled his trip from Europe back to New York. A panickled Laredo phoned Joseph Kalichstein, whom he’d once met at a benefit through Isaac Stern and who knew he had performed the Dvořák piano quintet. Kalichstein was available: “I knew the quartet but not the quartet—but I can,” says Kalichstein. (“Yossi lied. He said he knew the quartet, too,” recalls Robinson with a laugh.)

The experience was positive nonetheless. “It was so easy and natural and fun to play together,” says Robinson, “that the next year, when Jaime and I started to consider the idea of a piano trio, we both thought of Yossi first.” Kalichstein signed on in August 1976; the group began to rehearse in September; and—as luck, reputation, and educators; and Laredo, who is still artistic director of Chamber Music at the Y, is a busy guest conductor and directs both the Vermont Symphony and the New York String Orchestra. How does the constant going apart and coming back together affect things musically? “You can put a work away and take it out again years later,” says Robinson, “and the miracle is you find you’ve grown at the same speed and in the same directions—which is amazing given the different things we all do. But I think it has nourished the trio and not taken away from it.”

“We have passed, SCP has evolved into Seattle’s go-to ensemble of Persian musicians, to Xenia, the avant-garde Italian string quartet. It’s a recipe for musical excitement, if not everything—which is why our subscription base has grown little by little each year.”

It’s All About Balance

How did the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio get together? Blame it on management. It was 1975. Violinist Jaime Laredo and cellist Sharon Robinson were slated to play an all-Dvořák program with famed Czech-American pianist Rudolf Firkusny at New York’s 92nd Street Y. Five days before the scheduled performance, Firkusny discovered he had been double-booked and cancelled his trip from Europe back to New York. A panicked Laredo phoned Joseph Kalichstein, whom he’d once met at a benefit through Isaac Stern and who knew he had performed the Dvořák piano quintet. Kalichstein was available: “I knew the quartet but not the quartet—but I can,” says Kalichstein. (“Yossi lied. He said he knew the quartet, too,” recalls Robinson with a laugh.)

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“As a trio, we self-limit to no more than forty concert dates a season,” says Kalichstein, “and we also limit our teaching. It’s hard to wear all hats.” But the hats have, if anything, multiplied. Last year Laredo was appointed to an endowed professorship at the University of Indiana School of Music, where Robinson has also accepted a faculty position. To compensate, Laredo finally gave up the studio he had maintained at Curtis Institute of Music since 1971. (Trying to maintain both positions “wouldn’t be fair to the students at either school,” he confesses.) Frankly, he adds, “playing with the trio is the most fun”, but “teaching is perhaps more important than anything else, because it’s what I will leave behind.”

Laredo and Robinson slow down only during summer. “I am not a good ‘crammer’ as far as music goes,” says Robinson, “that’s why Jaime and I base ourselves in Vermont in the summer and live a normal life and build the next year’s repertoire.” Kalichstein adds that “keeping things fresh and happy is a question of planning two years ahead of time and setting aside the time to work.”

What’s the future of chamber music? Kalichstein, a New Jersey resident who has held the Edwin S. and Nancy A. Marks Chair in Chamber Music at the University of Indiana School of Music, feels that our field is experiencing a resurgence: “Certainly that was the main point of establishing the chair. Historically, chamber music was always at the center of musical activities,” he observes. “And somewhere in the 19th century, we moved away from music was always at the center of musical activities,” he observes. “And somewhere in the 19th century, we moved away from music was always at the center of musical activities,” he observes. “And somewhere in the 19th century, we moved away from...
Eight Is Enough

Tarab is an Arabic word describing the ecstasy induced by beautiful music. Florent Renard-Payen hoped to evoke just that state when he gathered eight cellists together in 2000 to start the Tarab Cello Ensemble. Dedicated to commissioning and performing new music by American composers, the octet will have its New York City debut this January at Alice Tully Hall in the world premiere of a work for eight cellos and orchestra by Ricardo Zohn-Muldoon.

The ensemble formed at the Eastman School of Music, and in the years since, its members have established careers throughout the country. Scheduling rehearsals requires the skills of a travel agent, but nonetheless, twice a year Tarab gathers for two weeks, taking over one lucky member’s home. (This summer was San Diego, D.C. is next.) “It’s a happy family going on vacation,” says Renard-Payen, who is a teacher of cello at Colgate University and string chamber music coach at Hamilton College. The rehearsals prepare the ensemble for its two annual tours, summer and winter. The group has made it a special goal set to expand the eight-cello repertory by commissioning new works by American composers—two years ago, although the group is always tempted to take on more.

“Every composer who has the opportunity to write for eight cellos is absolutely ecstatic,” says Renard-Payen. The list includes David Liptrak and Dan Tatum, both of whose works Tarab has recorded for Bridge Records. Tarab’s composers generally work alongside the group preparing the new pieces; this season, along with the Zohn-Muldoon commission, Tarab will work with Martin Scherzinger on a genre-bending piece based on African rhythms. “He’s asking us to ‘Africanize ourselves,’” Renard-Payen says. The close involvement of the composers with these eight gifted musicians makes Tarab truly, in its founder’s words, “a family affair.” www.tarabcello.com

In Memoriam

Malcolm Arnold, composer
Etta Baker, guitarist
Miguel Diaz, congá player
Rufus Harley, jazz bagpipes
Duke Jordan, pianist
Bismillah Khan, shehnai artist
Milton Kaye, pianist and arranger
Norman Kelley, tenor
Alfred Mann, musicologist
Dika Newlin, composer and musicologist
William Howard Parker, French horn, Metropolitan Brass Quartet
Leopold Simoneau, tenor
Ruth Schonthal, pianist and composer
Thomas Stewart, baritone
Rosa Tompkins, pianist
Aastid Varnay, soprano

SEGUES

S6 Percussion’s new member is Josh Quillen, a percussion impresario and steel pan virtuoso. Quillen recently received his M.M. degree in percussion performance from Yale University. He succeeds founding S6 member Doug Perkins, who is concentrating on a new duo project, The Merchants/Doug Duo, while teaching and coaching chamber music at Dartmouth College.

Violist Helen Callus has been named artistic director for classical music for Centrum, in Fort Townsend, Washington. She succeeds Tom Stone, a violist with the Bay Area-based Cypress String Quartet. Stone has recently joined Chamber Music America’s board of directors.

David J. Baldwin is now the executive director of the Shriver Hall Concert Series in Baltimore. Baldwin was most recently director of ICM Arts, London Ltd. A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Baldwin earned a diploma in piano accompaniment from the Curtis Institute of Music and an MBA from Columbia University.

David Kim, a student of Kim Kashkashian and Carol Rodland at New England Conservatory, has won the 2006 Lionel Tertis Internationa Viola Competition, held on the Isle of Man. Kim was among the young musicians chosen last year to take part in Lincoln Center’s Chamber Music Society II.

John Hunt has succeeded the late Ethan Bausch as bassoonist of the New York-based Dorian Wind Quintet. Hunt is professor of bassoon and chair of the department of winds, brass, and percussion at the Eastman School of Music and serves on the faculty of the Festival–Institute at Round Top, Texas. Karl Kramer-Johansen has joined the Dorian Quintet as hornist. An active recitalist, lecturer, conductor, and composer, he is a member of the Jupiter Symphony Chamber Players.

Eric Lind has been appointed managing director of Present Music. Lind’s most recent posts were director of corporate and foundation giving at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater and development director for the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s Peck School of the Arts.