

SWITCHBACK

Contemporary American Duos
for Violin and Piano

John Corigliano *Sonata*

Christopher Dietz *Morra*

Jennifer Higdon *String Poetic*

Aaron Jay Kernis *Two Movements (with Bells)*

Caroline Eva Chin, violin
Laura Melton, piano

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDING

AMERICAN ECLECTIC

Ryan Ebright

Music, the composer Aaron Jay Kernis once remarked, ‘should contain everything at the same time.’¹ More than just a provocative ideal, this statement reveals something about the reality of making and experiencing music today, when the past remains present via performances and recordings, and a panoply of styles and genres jostle together. It also reflects, perhaps, the dynamic pluralism of American culture, one which the composers on this album express in different ways in their duos for violin and piano.

Kernis’ maximalist ideal fuels the stylistic eclecticism that has come to define his compositions, where jazz, salsa and funk are apt to collide with mediaeval dance or minimalism. It is an animating principle that echoes Gustav Mahler’s maxim: ‘The symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything.’² Although this aesthetic is most readily audible in the expansive sonic canvases of Kernis’ celebrated orchestral works, it is equally present in more intimate chamber works like his Pulitzer Prize-winning Second String Quartet, *Musica Instrumentalis*, and *Two Movements (with Bells)* for violin and piano.

This latter piece, composed in 2007, is one of several that marked a shift in Kernis’ sources of inspiration from public events – the Los Angeles riots of the early 1990s, the Gulf War, the Holocaust – to private: the birth of his twins and deaths of his parents in the first decade of the new millennium. Kernis describes *Two Movements* as a



Photograph: Molly Sheridan

¹ Leta Miller, *Aaron Jay Kernis*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign, 2014, p. 5.

² Erik Tawaststjerna, *Sibelius*, Vol. 2: 1904–1914, transl. Robert Layton, Faber and Faber, London, 1986, p. 77.

‘memory piece’³ in honour of his father, Frank Kernis, who loved the early-twentieth-century Broadway showtunes, popular songs and jazz standards that constitute the great American songbook. (A reference to Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* is particularly prominent in the second movement [2].) Both movements revel in contrast. At times, the violin launches into passages evoking the virtuosic improvisations of post-war jazz; elsewhere, it spins out glassy, ethereal lines. The piano, meanwhile, veers between sustained, bell-like sonorities and syncopated chords recalling the ‘comping’ of post-war jazz, a freer, less rhythmically predictable approach to piano accompaniment that still complements a soloist’s improvisation. Then again, Kernis’ eclecticism means that the complex harmonies and rhythms in the piano part might just as easily allude to the transcendent colours and metrical ambiguities of Olivier Messiaen’s ecstatic meditations.

Jennifer Higdon’s *String Poetic*, composed just a year earlier than Kernis’ *Two Movements*, plays less with musical allusion. It is possible to sense in it, however, a reflection of Higdon’s bucolic childhood in eastern Tennessee. ‘I often think a lot of the mountains in all my pieces’, Higdon says,⁴ and her titles for movements one, three and five – ‘Jagged Climb’ [3], ‘Blue Hills of Mist’ [5] and ‘Climb Jagged’ [7] – suggest the importance of place for *String Poetic*. In spite of their contrasting moods, these three movements share a common sound-world. In each, the pianist transforms the sound of the instrument by reaching into it and using the fingers to dampen the strings, creating a dry, percussive quality reminiscent of an Appalachian dulcimer. Open sonorities, energetic rhythms and vibrant melodies, all hallmarks of Higdon’s compositional style, further amplify this rustic feeling.

Higdon describes the five movements of *String Poetic* as ‘poetic songs sung in the voice of violin and piano.’⁵ This song-like quality is most prominent in the elegiac lyricism



Photograph: Candace DiCarlo

³ Aaron Jay Kernis, ‘Composer Note: Two Movements (with Bells)’, WiseMusicClassical.com, <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/36243/>.

⁴ Christina L. Reitz, *Jennifer Higdon: Composing in Color*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson (NC), 2018, p. 8.

⁵ Jennifer Higdon, ‘Program Notes: “String Poetic”’, *JenniferHigdon.com*, <http://www.jenniferhigdon.com/pdf/program-notes/>

of ‘Nocturne’ [4] and ‘Blue Hills of Mist’, as the violin unfurls long, soaring ribbons of melody. In ‘Maze Mechanical’ [6] and the paired outer movements, the violin takes on a more virtuosic role, trading melodic and rhythmic ideas with the piano in a dizzying web of sound. *String Poetic* was the first of three notable string pieces Higdon created in the late 2000s. One year after *String Poetic*, in 2007, she composed the bluegrass-inspired *Concerto 4-3* for the string trio Time for Three, followed by her Pulitzer Prize-winning Violin Concerto in 2008.

Christopher Dietz composed *Morra* on Mackinac Island, in Lake Huron, during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, initially for violin and classical guitar. The title refers to a Mediterranean hand-based game of chance, along the lines of Rock Paper Scissors, that dates back thousands of years. The manual dexterity and facility demanded of players by the piece recalled for Dietz the game of morra, which in ancient Rome was called *micare digitis* – ‘to flash with the fingers’. ‘The hands of the violin and guitarist, they’re very visual,’ Dietz says. ‘If you’re watching them play, you can’t help noticing them.’⁶ Just as there are different versions of the game, there are different versions of the piece. In 2024 Dietz arranged *Morra* for violin and piano for his Bowling Green State University colleagues Caroline Chin and Laura Melton.

The sense of play suggested by the title *Morra* is manifested in the jaunty, shifting rhythms and metres of the first movement, marked ‘Heavy, solid’ [8], which highlight the alternation between chordal punctuations (played *pizzicato* in the violin) and stretches of melody that are unpredictable in their length. The atmosphere of the second movement, ‘Suspended, fluid’ [9], by contrast, is pervaded with a sense of hushed expectancy that eventually is pierced by a crystalline, miniature violin cadenza. Rolled



String-Poetic.pdf.

⁶ Christopher Dietz, interview with Ryan Ebright, Perrysburg (OH), 30 May 2025.

chords and brief flourishes in the piano reflect the original scoring for guitar. The third-movement Tarantella [10] – a fast-paced southern-Italian dance characterised musically by compound metres and recurring long–short rhythms – brings *Morra* to a close.

When John Corigliano composed his Sonata for Violin and Piano, he was decades away from the large-form works that would catapult him to fame, such as his Grammy Award-winning First Symphony, his opera *The Ghosts of Versailles* and his Oscar-winning score for the film *The Red Violin*. In 1962 and 1963, when Corigliano was just setting out as a composer, he began writing a divertimento for his father, John Corigliano, Sr., the concert-master of the New York Philharmonic, and his mother, Rose Buzen, an accomplished amateur pianist. This divertimento grew into a duo, and then finally into a full-fledged four-movement sonata. The piece, Corigliano says, is ‘full of all the things I had in my head from listening to my father and from my love for kind of an American style of music.’⁷

Although Corigliano, unlike Kernis, eschews pop idioms, his music is similarly pluralistic. ‘Its eclecticism, its rhythmic energy, and its bright character give the Sonata a very American quality’, Corigliano writes, noting its mixture of tonal, polytonal and non-tonal harmonies.⁸ The second-movement *Andantino* [12], which he composed first, was designed as lyrical Americana in the vein of Samuel Barber or Leonard Bernstein. Like Kernis, Corigliano appears to be in dialogue with music history; the composer Mark Adamo notes that the third movement, *Lento (quasi recitativo)* [13], reflects, and in some ways rebuts, César Franck’s 1886 Violin Sonata in A, one of Corigliano’s father’s signature recital pieces.⁹ The closing-movement rondo *Allegro* [14] weaves a lively theme and material from previous movements together into an exuberant *moto perpetuo* finale.



⁷ John Corigliano, interview with Ev Grimes, New York (NY), 26 June 1987, Yale University, Oral History of American Music, OHV 194 a–i.

⁸ Mark Adamo, *John Corigliano: A Monograph*, Arc Publications, Todmorden (Lancs.), 2000, p. 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Ryan Ebright is an associate professor of musicology at Bowling Green State University. His research centres on American opera and contemporary music, and his work appears in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Opera News* and various scholarly publications.

Described by *Time Out*, New York, as 'Incisive, industrious, and creatively restless', **Caroline Eva Chin** has concertised throughout the United States, Europe and Asia in venues that include the John F. Kennedy Center and the White House in Washington, DC, the Carnegie and Weill Halls in New York and the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. She gave her solo debut at age twelve and has since performed with several orchestras throughout the United States.

An avid chamber musician, she has been a member of the Hudson Piano Trio and Ensemble Epomeo and collaborated with Raphael Wallfisch, Colin Carr, Nobuko Imai, Charles Neidich and Piers Lane. She has been featured as a guest artist at the Scotia Music Festival in Canada, the 2 Rivers Festival in the UK, MahlerFest Colorado in Boulder, Consonances Festival in France, Schiermonnikoog Chamber Music Festival in the Netherlands, the Scotia Festival in Canada and the Newburyport Chamber Music Festival in Massachusetts.

An advocate of new music, she has performed the works of Samuel Adler, Richard Carrick, Gabriela Lena Frank, Jennifer Higdon, Aaron Jay Kernis and Jessie Montgomery, and gave the world premiere of the triple concerto *Da Camara* by the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer George Walker. Her recordings include the world premiere of Elliott Carter's *Tre Duetti* for violin and cello on Centaur Records as well as albums on Avie, Somm and New World Records.

While on tour, she has given master-classes at universities and colleges throughout the United States, including Oberlin Conservatory, New York University, the University of Colorado-Boulder, University of North Texas, Michigan State University and University of South Carolina. She has toured the US and Japan with the tap-dancer Savion Glover and performed as concert-master of the String Orchestra of New York City and the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra. As the Artistic Director of Musica Reginae from 2007 to 2011, she worked to bring high-quality music performances to the ethnically diverse communities of Queens, New York.



Caroline Eva Chin is Associate Professor of Violin at the College of Musical Arts at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, and sits on the violin faculty of the Brevard Music Center Festival. She received her degrees from The Juilliard School and the Indiana University School of Music.

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Laura Melton, piano, Professor of Piano at Bowling Green State University, has performed in Asia, Europe, South America and throughout the USA. A prize-winner in several major international competitions, she has appeared as a soloist with the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, the San Francisco Chamber Players and the International Chamber Orchestra in California and the orchestra of the Freiburg Musikhochschule in Germany. She has been featured on Südwestfunk Radio in Germany, Kol Israel, Radio Nacional de España and *Performance Today* on National Public Radio in the US in celebration of the birthdays of the composers Samuel Adler and John Corigliano.



She has received enthusiastic reviews for her Naxos American Classics album *Solo Piano Works of Sebastian Currier*. *Gramophone* hailed her as 'an artist who can tame formidable technical beasts and bring colourful delineation to a multiplicity of moods and textures', and *The New York Times* found her playing 'expressive and with dexterous flair'. Her additional recordings include solo-piano, duo-piano and chamber-music works by Samuel Adler for Naxos and Toccata Classics; Currier's violin-and-piano works for Albany Records with the violinist Yehonatan Berick; and *Summer Triangle* (Bandcamp), with piano trios by Braxton Blake, Sebastian Currier, Christopher Dietz and Stephen Hartke, with the violinist Stephen Miahky and clarinetist Kevin Schempf.

Laura Melton is an avid chamber musician and has appeared in several US summer festivals, including Ravinia, Aspen and Sarasota, as well as European festivals in Germany, Greece, Holland and Switzerland. She holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland, where she was a student of Nelita True; a master's degree from the University of Southern California, under John Perry; and a doctorate from Rice University, where she was a graduate fellow and

teaching assistant to John Perry. As a student of Robert Levin, she spent three years in Germany as a Fulbright Scholar, earning the Solistendiplom while studying at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Freiburg.

A graduate of the Interlochen Arts Academy and student of Michael Coonrod, Laura Melton taught at the Interlochen Arts Camp for twelve summers. Before her appointment at Bowling Green in 1999, she served on the faculty of the Idyllwild Arts Academy in California. She also serves as a College Examiner for the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto.

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Caroline Eva Chin and Laura Melton

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SWITCHBACK Contemporary American Duos for Violin and Piano

AARON JAY KERNIS

b. 1960

Two Movements (with Bells) (2007)

[1] I *Presto*

[2] II *A Song for My Father*

18:00

10:36

7:24

JENNIFER HIGDON

b. 1962

String Poetic (2006)

[3] I *Jagged Climb*

[4] II *Nocturne*

[5] III *Blue Hills of Mist*

[6] IV *Maze Mechanical*

[7] V *Climb Jagged*

20:44

2:17

5:05

7:16

3:15

2:51

CHRISTOPHER DIETZ

b. 1977

Morra (2021)*

[8] I *Heavy, solid*

[9] II *Suspended, fluid*

[10] III *Tarantella*

9:08

1:43

3:24

4:01

JOHN CORIGLIANO

b. 1938

Sonata for Violin and Piano (1963)

[11] I *Allegro*

[12] II *Andantino* (with simplicity)

[13] III *Lento (quasi recitativo)*

[14] IV *Allegro*

22:57

2:57

6:35

4:43

8:43

TT 70:51

Caroline Eva Chin, violin

Laura Melton, piano

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