Contrasts Ensemble

Introduction

The Contrasts Ensemble is a group of three women virtuosi whose instruments include clarinet, violin, and piano. Founded in 2001, the ensemble was originally named "Contrasts Quartet" (with added cello), to describe the contrasting timbres of their instruments as well as the variety of their repertoire. The present "Contrasts Ensemble" keeps three contrasting instruments – violin, clarinet and piano – as its core members, and performs often with guest musicians and artists.

Our Story

Although the group has always performed standard traditional works – duos, trios and quartets of Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Stravinsky, Hindemith and Messaien – the ensemble has premiered and worked with many contemporary composers, including Aaron Jay Kernis, Ned Rorem, Michael Torke, Scott Johnson, Lisa Bielawa, Jing Jing Luo and Derek Bermel. The ensemble has released two CDs on the Phoenix label: premiere recordings of the music of Aaron Jay Kernis as well as the music of Ned Rorem. Their recording of Rorem's Nine Episodes for Four Players (commissioned by Contrasts) was nominated for a 2006 Grammy Award.

Contrasts has advocated the works of young composers in many readings, workshops and performance premieres. Such projects have taken place directly with composers and also in residencies and collaborations with organizations such as The American Composers Forum, The Atlantic center for the Arts, and Norfolk Summer Music Festival. The group initiated and organized commissioning consortiums with other ensembles across the country for composers such as Ned Rorem and Derek Bermel. Contrast has also premiered and performed the works of Aaron Jay Kernis extensively. They have often traveled and participated in residencies with Mr. Kernis for organizations such as Detroit Pro Musica/Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Bowdoin College, Phillips Exeter Academy and California State/Sacramento. Other Contemporary festivals include the MATA Festival, Wall to Wall Stravinsky at Symphony Space, the Danish Music Festival, Composers Concordance and the Mostly Women Composers Festival in New York City.

The Contrasts Ensemble has enjoyed giving talks to children as well as adults as an integral part of their concerts and residencies. These residencies have included a collaboration with the Fitchburg Public School, Fitchburg Library and Fitchburg State College in Massachusetts. For this residency, the Contrasts Quartet won a Chamber Music America grant to give lecture-recitals to sixth graders as well as to adults, culminating in a performance at the College. Similar residencies have been given at Penn State/Erie and Music in the Parks Series in Minnesota.

The group has been invited to perform in Europe and across the United States. Concert appearances have included performances at Carnegie's Weill Hall, Miller Theater, Merkin Hall and live appearances on New York's WNYC Radio and the nationally syndicated St. Paul Sunday radio program. Their concert tours have taken them from San Francisco to Spain. The Ensemble has been honored with awards and grants from the American Composers Forum, Meet the Composer, the Fromm Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Aaron Copland Fund for Music and Chamber Music America.

Meet the Ensemble

Ayako Oshima, clarinet

Nurit Pacht, violin

Evelyne Luest, piano

Acclaimed for their exhilarating performances of old and new repertoire, Contrasts Ensemble is a group of three extraordinary virtuosi whose instruments include clarinet, violin, and piano. The group chose its name to describe the contrasting timbres of their instruments, as well as the variety of their repertoire. The ensemble performs a mix of duos, trios and quartets with guest musicians, presenting a broad range of programs from the Baroque through today's repertoire. The Contrasts Ensemble has worked with many living composers and has commissioned and premiered works of Aaron Jay Kernis, Michael Torke, Ned Rorem, Scott Johnson and Derek Bermel, among others. Their recording of Ned Rorem's Nine Episodes for Four Players was nominated for a Grammy Award.

The ensemble has been invited to perform in Europe and across the United States. Concert appearances have included performances at Carnegie's Weill Hall, Merkin Hall, Miller Theatre, Symphony Space, and live appearances on New York's WNYC Radio and the nationally syndicated St. Paul Sunday radio program. Their concert tours have taken them from San Francisco to Spain. The ensemble has also been invited to participate in many residencies, including Norfolk Summer Festival in Connecticut, the Atlantic Center for the Arts in Florida, Music in the Park Series in St. Paul, Minnesota, Detroit Pro Musica, Penn State/Erie, Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, Bowdoin College in Maine and the Fitchburg Public Schools and Fitchburg State College in Massachusetts.

The group, on the Phoenix label, has recorded a CD of the works of Aaron Jay Kernis, all premiere recordings, and a CD of the works of Ned Rorem. The Ensemble has been honored with awards and grants from the American Composers Forum, Meet the Composer, the Fromm Foundation, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Aaron Copland Fund for Music and Chamber Music America.

Ayako Oshima

Clarinetist AYAKO OSHIMA, winner of numerous international competition including the 55th Japan Music Competition in Tokyo, the Winds and Percussion Competition in Japan, and the 17th International Jeunesses Musicales Competition in Belgrade, where she also received the "Golden Harp" award given to the favorite of the audience and critics, is one of the most popular clarinet soloists in Japan.

She performs on a regular basis both in recital and in concerto appearances with orchestra, highlights of which have included performances in Osaka, Nagoya, Kobe, Tanuma, at the Casals Hall, Keoi Hall, and Bunka Kaikan in Tokyo, and with the Hiroshima and Osaka Symphonies. She is quite active in chamber music festivals. Festivals at which Ms. Oshima has appeared include Kuhmo Festival in Finland, the Festival Consonances in France, the Sarasota Summer Music Festival, and in Japan the Mt. Fuji, Lilia International Chamber Music Festivals, and the Kirishima International Music Festival where in addition to performing and teaching she has produced innovative multimedia concerts for children on themes such as the composers Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and George Gershwin, two centuries of music in Vienna, and music in Paris and the international Exposition of 1899, combining live performance, spoken text and computer generated slides and images.

Ayako Oshima has recorded for Toshiba EMI, Victor Japan, Naxos, and with "Mozzafiato" for Sony Vivarte. She has recently recorded "Songs of Japan" for the Aurora label and her most recent recording "Bel Canto" music for two clarinets will be released in September.

In addition to her performing career, she maintains a high profile as a teacher and is on the faculties of the State University of New York at Purchase, the Juilliard School, and Hartt College. She has kept her connection with the Toho School and gives regular master classes there. She has also served on the juries of both the Japan Music Competition and the Japan Winds and Percussion International Competition. She has founded and is the Director of the Kita Karuizawa Music Seminar which attracts clarinet students from all over Asia. With her husband, Charles Neidich, she has written a book on the fundamentals of clarinet technique for the publisher, Toa Ongaku Inc. and writes a monthly column on music and the clarinet for Pipers Magazine.

Nurit Pacht

Violinist NURIT PACHT was a top prize winner in international competitions including the Irving Klein International Music Competition in California and the Tibor Varga International Violin Competition in Switzerland. As a soloist she was featured in major world events such as the European conference for the inauguration of the Euro in Brussels and under the auspices of the European Commission and United Nations she toured the former Yugoslavia, during the cease-fire in 1996. In 2015, she performed for Pope Francis on his visit to New York and gave a State Department funded recital tour of Ukraine. She has collaborated with stage director Robert Wilson, choreographers such as Bill T. Jones and has worked closely with many of today's celebrated composers. She has toured as soloist with orchestras around the world including the Houston Symphony, the Pacific Symphony, the Rhode Island Philharmonic and the Israel Chamber Orchestra. The Israeli Composer Noam Sheriff dedicated the violin concerto "Dibrot" to her and she performed it in several prestigious venues of Israel. As a baroque violinist, she has a master's degree from Juilliard's Historical Performance program. Ms. Pacht has recorded for Nimbus Records and Toccata Classics.

Evelyne Luest

Pianist EVELYNE LUEST, is an accomplished soloist and chamber musician and has performed and toured in Europe, South America, Asia and the United States. She has won several competitions, including the Artists International Competition in New York as a soloist, in addition to many awards with the Contrasts Quartet. Ms. Luest has performed as soloist in Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall, the Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds in Italy and on the St. Paul Sunday National Radio Show. Recent performances include festivals and concert venues in Norway, France, Japan, Spain, California and Minnesota. Her list of premieres includes compositions by Joan Tower, Jing Jing Luo, Aaron Jay Kernis and Ben Weber. Ms. Luest's recent CD releases include solo and chamber works on CRI, Phoenix Records, North/South Recordings, and North Pacific Music. She studied with Gilbert Kalish at SUNY/Stony Brook, where she received an M.M. and D.M.A. in piano performance. She lives in New York City with her husband, Aaron Jay Kernis, and their two children.

Personal Websites:

Ayako Oshima
https://www.ayakooshima.com

Evelyne Luest
https://evelyneluest.com

Nurti Pacht
http://nuritpacht.com

Reviews

"Each member [in Brahms Clarinet Trio] can make her instrument sing with purity and precision. ---a rapt account of Hindemith's clarinet quartet of 1938, was elegantly restrained yet agile and vivid."
~The Washington Post

"Drawn to what's next, not what has been---impassioned reading, polished performance."
~The New York Times

"Approachable and appealing---humane and direct."
~American Record Guide

"If this is what comes of residencies, bring more."
~Detroit Free Press

"This Grammy-nominated disk features stellar performances of the Episodes for Four Players, which Contrasts co-commissioned, as well as Dances for cello and piano, and Spring Music for piano trio. With the exception of Spring Music, which is recorded on a long out-of-print Phillips anthology of American piano trios performed by the Beaux Arts Trio, all are world premiere recordings."
~Chamber Music
by Frank J. Oteri

"They played as one voice. What made the performance special was how personal the playing was. It swept the audience along."
~The Post-Star

"...extraordinary female virtuosi gives exhilarating performances of these innovative pieces, ...their refreshing approach will certainly win these works many new fans."
~Classical Net
by Gerald Fenech
Link: Classical Net Review - Contrasts Quartet

"...beautifully played with an absolute degree of insight and sensitivity by the all-woman Contrasts Quartet. This disc not only deserves its Grammy nomination but your immediate and guaranteed gratified patronage."
~Fanfare Magazine

“...masterful and bold performance”
~The Sacramento Bee
by Edward Ortiz

Programs

Program 1
(Musical Connections with Nadia Boulanger)

Maurice Ravel: Sonata No. 2 (1927) for violin and piano
Gian Carlo Menotti: Trio (1996) for clarinet. violin and piano
Aaron Copeland: Sonata (1943, arr.1980) for clarinet and piano
Igor Stravinsky: L'Histoire du Soldat (1918) for clarinet, violin and piano

***Program 2**, with guest cellist*
(Musical Connections with Nadia Boulanger)

Lili Boulanger: Nocturne (1911), Cortege (1914) for violin and piano
Leonard Bernstein: Sonata (1942) for clarinet and piano
Astor Piazzolla: Oblivion (1982), for clarinet, violin and piano
Aaron Jay Kernis: Fanfare Con Fuoco (2002), for clarinet, violin, cello and piano
Maurice Ravel: Piano Trio (1914) for piano, violin and cello

Program 3
(Around the World)

Darius Milhaud: Suite (1939) for violin, clarinet and piano, Op. 157b
Paul Shoenfield: Trio (1990) for clarinet, violin and piano
Astor Piazzolla: Oblivion (1982), for clarinet, violin and piano
Dmitri Shostakovich: Duets for violin, clarinet, and piano (transcribed)
Bela Bartok: Contrasts (1938), for violin, clarinet and piano, Sz. 111, BB 116

Program 4
(Three B's)

Ludwig Van Beethoven: Sonata No.5 (1801) for violin and piano, Op.24 (Spring)
Johannes Brahms: Sonata (1894) in E-flat major, Op.120 NO.2 for clarinet and piano
Bela Bartok: Duets (1931), for violin and clarinet (transcribed)
Bela Bartok: Contrasts (1838), for violin, clarinet and piano, Sz111, BB116

Other programs with guest cellist:

Program 1
Aram Khachaturian: Trio in G Minor, for violin, clarinet and piano
Aaron Jay Kernis: Trio in Red (2000-1) for clarinet, cello and piano
Intermission
Derek Bermel: Quartet for violin, clarinet, cello and piano
(written for Contrasts, 2003)
Antonin Dvorak: Dumky for piano Trio

Program 2
Igor Stravinsky: L'histoire du Soldat for violin, clarinet and piano
Aaron Jay Kernis: Trio in Red (2000-1) for clarinet, cello and piano
Intermission

Max Bruch: Three pieces from Eight Pieces, opus 83 for clarinet, cello and piano
Ned Rorem: Nine Episodes for Four Players, 2001, for clarinet, violin, cello and piano (written for Contrasts Quartet)

Program 3
Laudi for clarinet, violin and cello Michael Finckel, Arr.
Trio for clarinet, cello & piano in Eb Major Ludwig van Beethoven
(Arranged from Septet, Op. 20) (1770-1827)
Intermission
Still Movement with Hymn Aaron Jay Kernis (b. 1960)

Program 4
Fanfare con Fuoco for clarinet, violin, cello & piano Aaron Jay Kernis
Ballad for cello and piano (2004) Aaron Jay Kernis
Trio for clarinet, cello and piano Gabriel Faure
Intermission
Quartet for clarinet, violin, cello and piano Peter Schickele

Another possible program can includes Messaien's Quartet for the End of Time and Bartok's Contrasts.