

Date du récital/Date of recital: Sunday, March 25, 2018

Nom/Name: Joel Miller

Classe de/Class of: Professor John Rea

These program notes are written by the student performing, and are presented by the student in partial fulfillment of the requirements of their course. Ces notes de programme sont écrites par l'étudiant-interprète et sont présentées en tant que réalisation partielle des critères de leur cours.

“Meet together and know one another in that which is eternal, which was before the world was,” advised George Fox at the founding of Quakerism in 1656.

My mother, Edith Miller, used that phrase in one of the poems in her book, *Crow Impressions*. Throughout her 85 years, she practiced “meeting together” - communicating and communing - with all sorts of people, creatures, and manifestations of “that which is eternal.” For her, birds, and particularly crows, were messengers of Spirit. In August of 2017, she took her exit from this life here on Earth, and I imagine she is currently enjoying a more direct meeting with Spirit. This concert is dedicated to her.

In keeping my mother’s advice, and with the traditions of concert hall music, the ensemble will be performing entirely acoustically.

The eternal impetus for change

When I was a kid, I used to lose my sense of time when I wandered the beach at low tide, fascinated by the hundreds of snails leaving their trails in the wet sand. One time when I paused to pick up a snail, I found an angry hermit crab glaring at me from the snail’s shell. I think we were both surprised!

Years later, I heard the story that hermit crabs outgrow their shells at certain points and “move” into a new shell. How funny they must look, wandering around naked in search of new, unoccupied shells to accommodate their growth.

Lately I find myself asking, “What makes one hermit crab decide it’s time to move while another prefers to put it off for as long as possible?” Certainly, forces of nature like temperature changes, the rhythms and patterns of tides, and the circadian clock must have some influence. I am also certain there’s more to it than “just nature.” I think some stubborn, maybe fearful, crabs procrastinate and stay in their shell until it becomes unbearable, and only then do they move on. Other crabs are more courageous, daring. Curious perhaps. Maybe they

have a longing for something different. And then there's competition for resources... indubitably, there are myriad influences. All of those influences come together to produce change, a forward movement that just can't be stopped.

A few years back I was feeling a bit like the funny little hermit crab, looking for a different shell. There was a familiar impulse, an instinct, a desire to compose melodies, but the part that was new to me was a yearning to create many, many melodies. Multiple melodies for multiple instruments. Polyphonic, textured, morphing creations. I needed help. I needed an orchestra! All of this led me back to McGill, to the Schulich School of Music, and to John Rea.

Creating a new instrumental form

From the 1923 piece *La Creation du Monde*, John Rea showed me how Darius Milhaud "folded" the alto saxophone right into the string section, replacing the viola. This was a bold and risky move given the assumed weight of the string section, but what a thrill it turns out to be!

To help bring my ideas to life, I decided to go fishing in a deep talent pool of students and professionals to create a similar ensemble. The woodwinds and brass are almost identical to *La Creation du Monde* and, of course, I removed the strings. I chose to specify which instruments I want to retain the jazz propulsion (piano, sax, bass and percussion) and which others (woodwinds, brass and pitched percussion) stir in a bit of classical attention to expression. I've also added my own secret ingredients: a modern jazz drummer; a virtuoso Brazilian percussionist/drummer who can play Afro-Peruvian rhythms; and a modern jazz saxophonist. I'm incredibly grateful to have such a diverse and dedicated group of artists to work with.

When it came to selecting someone to conduct my compositions, I greedily imagined someone like Guillaume Bourgogne, who taught the conducting class I took in 2017. But I knew that I would need to follow the spirit of the Band Rules of brilliant 1980s legend XTC, "...if you write the song, you sing it!" I knew I had to take what I learned in Guillaume's class and apply it to my own music and conducting. I asked him to be my conducting coach for the entire project, and to my delight he said yes!

The Band:

conductor, tenor and soprano saxophones: Joel Miller
flutes: Rachael Cohen, Pierre Mendola,
clarinets: Myriam Roy, Julie Olson
bass clarinet: Jennifer Bell
horn: Flo Rouseau
trumpets: Bill Mahar, Lex French, Hannah Boone
trombone: Alexandre Lavoie
tenor/soprano saxophone: Jeremy Sandfelder
piano: David Ryshpan
pitched percussion: Dylan Cochran
percussion and drum sets: Kevin Warren, Sacha Daoud
acoustic bass: Fraser Hollins
vocals: Jeanne Laforest, Sarah Rossy

The Compositional Process

What You Can't Stop, the piece which lent its title to this recital, took a long time to compose but it also led to my epiphany about the processes of growth and change. At first I was musing over the sacred feminine in ancient Egyptian cults and wanted it to be represented musically, then I imagined it as a tribute to some kind of character like Strauss' *Don Quixote* or perhaps *Don Juan*. And so on. I was overthinking it and I was stuck, until one afternoon when I heard on CBC Radio some scientists debating the moral implications of using a game-changing medical technology with the capacity to alter DNA. Things just clicked for me when one scientist suggested that they were debating the wrong question. What I took from this was that it's not particularly useful to spend time trying to decide if or how we should try to control the evolution of something that already exists and is making an impact. The time for thinking had passed, and now is the time for doing. Being used is not particularly useful. Yes folks, whether the cat's out of the bag, or the genie is out of the bottle, it's too late. It's here. Stop grumbling about social media being a drag. Adapt. My big realization was that this was what the music was to me: a force with its own propulsion. My role is to let it be what it needs to be as I'm hearing it, to hang on tight and it will take us where it wants and you can't stop it! Why would we even want to try?

Song Story was written originally for Jean-Nicolas Trottier's McGill Chamber Jazz Ensemble in 2016. It is a large ensemble suite of three contrasting movements, with pauses in between. My intentions were simply to tell a story entirely through music. I invite the audience members to recall or create your own images, or none at all, to accompany the three sections of my *Song Story*.

Pachamama The stage is sacred. I honour mother earth through music.

The fish gets bigger was written for Jon Hollenbeck's compositions class. I'm not sure exactly how it will be performed and that's kind of the point.

Ta da! Like in some kind of concerto, there are spaces for some kind of soloist to fill. And that's exactly what Kevin Warren did and it became part of the piece. Ta da!

Entrain was written during one of Joe Sullivan's composition assignments. He had us write trio, duo and finally solo pieces. I was the most pleased with this vocal duet with Renée Yoxon and myself because we had so much fun rehearsing and performing it.

Sunset In 2017 I had lot's of fun on Friday afternoons playing in Nilton Antonio Moreira's Brazil music sessions led by Lisa Lorenzino, We played Samba, Frevo, Choro, Baião and my favourite: Partido Alto. I discovered that the Partido Alto rhythm was a perfect "fit" for a piece that I was constructing for Joe Sullivan's class. When it came time for a performance of Sunset, I asked conductor and trombonist Jean-Nicolas Trottier if I could invite guests Rodrigo Simoes and - Aquiles Melo, whom I had played with in the Brazil workshop, to guest with the McGill Chamber Jazz Orchestra. He gave me a curious look that said "but of course Joel, it will be great, the more the merrier!" followed by a "we rehearse tomorrow night". It was this spirit of trust and warmth that I felt from so many great students and professors, during my two years of study at McGill. I am especially grateful for this.

In addition to losing my mother in 2017, I also lost other special women in my life, including my beloved Aunt Lucy May Carver, and my dear friends Anne-Marie Bergeron and Regan Cooper. Although I had just been reintroduced to Eleanor V. Stublely after a long hiatus, I felt her loss deeply and I wish to acknowledge her contribution to the McGill Graduate School music community.

Many thanks to my wife Christine and daughter Liv, my dad Michael Miller, Kevin Dean, John Rea, Remi Bolduc, Jean-Michel Pilc, Lena Weman, Jean-Nicolas Trottier, The McGill Chamber Jazz ensemble, Renée Yoxon, Julie Lefebvre, Taylor Donaldson, Scott Macleod, The Smits family, Christopher B.J. Smith, Guillaume Bourgogne, Melony McCarthy, Ella Miller and all of the musicians in the ensemble.