

. . . Space and Time, Measured by the Heart: Memory and the Music of Stuart Saunders Smith

In composing,
many try to be consistent—
the illusion of mind whole, a puzzle to complete;

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. .
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Let music drift, contradict itself,
be inconsistent,
that is mind, unbalanced at its core.

—Stuart Saunders Smith

The Proustian equation is never simple. The unknown . . . is also the unknowable.

—Samuel Beckett

In his essay “Beckett and Proust,” William S. Burroughs proposes a spectrum upon which to place authors and their work; points on this spectrum correspond to the degree to which an author is concerned about time, place, characterization, context, *terroir*—what Burroughs calls “interpsychic data.” Burroughs places an author at each of the spectrum’s endpoints: Samuel Beckett, who cares the least about such things, and Marcel Proust, who makes these things the very subject of his work. Most of Beckett’s works could take place anywhere (or anywhen), and his dialogue can be so abstract and circular as to border on the amnesiac—consider *Waiting for Godot*, which doesn’t suffer for failing to explicate Vladimir’s or Estragon’s childhood. Proust, on the other hand, places supreme importance on specificities of time and place: without time and place, memory is impossible, and for Proust, memory is all.

The temptation to transpose this spectrum to other media is strong; one can easily imagine the thought-games that might arise. Which painter is most Beckettian? (Kandinsky? Late Rothko?) Which composers fit best at the extremes of this spectrum? In his *Earbox* blog, composer John Adams offers the recently deceased Robert Ashley in Proust’s place:

In fact Ashley’s work from then on was not unlike Proust’s, basically a single unending internal monologue that runs like a subterranean aquifer through *Perfect Lives* and *Private Parts* and almost everything else he created.

I clung to the minute in which my grandmother had stooped over me.

—Marcel Proust, *Cities of the Plain*, part two, chapter one

Given Proust’s capacity for meandering volubility, Adams’s suggestion seems like a good one—until, that is, one considers the specific mechanism that propels *In Search of Lost Time*: involuntary memory. Proust’s epic novel is studded throughout with moments where an action or sensation floods the narrator with a burst of rich, detailed memories. Part of the magic of these moments is that the trigger of the onrushing memories is often only tenuously related to the subject of the

memories themselves. The tea-soaked madeleine episode is the most famous of these; in his monograph *Proust*, Beckett offers as his favorite a passage from the novel's fourth volume, *Cities of the Plain*, in which the act of tying his boots causes the narrator not only to vividly remember his deceased grandmother, but to confront and accept her death for the first time. It is in the immediacy and vibrancy of his vision, contrasted with his knowledge that it is only a vision, that the narrator finally appreciates the impossibility of being with his grandmother again. Proust's narrator calls these moments "the intermittencies of the heart," in which "all our inner wealth, our past joys, all our sorrows are perpetually in our possession," and

if the context of sensations in which they are preserved is recaptured, they acquire in turn the same power of expelling everything that is incompatible with them, of installing alone in us the self that originally lived them.

Proust's reliance on these singular, subjective, intensely personal moments gravely weakens the case for Ashley, for however rich, deep, and beautiful Ashley's work is, he does not rely on the Proustian device, instead drawing on his Midwestern upbringing in a broad, impressionistic way.

Now.
At the beginning of the end of my life
it all seems
like
one
memory.
—Stuart Saunders Smith

Instead, it is Stuart Saunders Smith who is music's Proust. Born and raised in rural New England, longtime teacher at the University of Maryland–Baltimore County, it is Smith whose work contains these singular intimate mysteries of time and place that remind us most of Proust. (Music's Beckett, in turn, might very well be Smith's Maryland-based colleague and friend Thomas DeLio, but that is something for another day.) Some of the clearest examples are his series of *Family Portraits*—solo and chamber works not merely dedicated to, but depicting in sound, his relatives, himself, and in one case, a treasured family vacation spot:

As a child, I spent my summers at Embden Pond. Although not one of the biggest lakes in Maine, it is one of its sparkling gems. The water is clear enough to see the bottom far out into the lake. It is also one of the deepest lakes in Maine. I loved it. Embden Pond was family. I would get up early, take the boat out, and come back at dusk.

The degree to which Smith divulges the specific codings of these memories varies from piece to piece. In *Family Portraits: Embden Pond*, the atmosphere of the work is befittingly serene; two vibraphones represent "the water and timing of the lake" and an alto flute monologue floats on top. The mystery is increased in *Family Portraits: Delbert*, where a solo percussionist plays two logs arranged on a pile of crumpled newspapers like a campfire—a bit of iconographic theater that

remains a mystery unless you knew that Smith's great-grandfather Delbert worked in logging camps, often clearing and burning loose brush as part of his duties, and that in his old age he would do the same at home with his belongings, piling them in the middle of his living room and attempting to set fire to them. *Family Portrait: Self (14 Stations)* is a multi-stave thicket for solo piano, presented with little explanation. Regardless of the extent to which Smith pulls back the curtain, though, each of these pieces retains a poignancy that deepens along with one's listening. And just as Proust's narrator's memories are no less powerful for the fact that we are not immediately made privy to the mechanisms that connect his boots and his grandmother, Smith's works succeed in touching the listener without requiring any keys that he does not provide. The mysteries may even retain strength by remaining such.

My music tends to be a succession,
hard to remember,
hard to predict.
When I compose
I focus on sculpting the present
rather than using any long term design.
In this way, I try to escape
the fallacy of tense.

—Stuart Saunders Smith

Minor and *Hearts*—the unaccompanied violin works on this album—offer a Janus-faced comparison of two interrogatory paths. *Minor* is unifocal, a soliloquy that delves into and elaborates upon a singularity. *Hearts*, on the other hand, is a series of miniatures that articulates a complex idea by moving from perspective to perspective, like a photographer trying to capture a sculpture by taking pictures of it from many angles. Both works, though, evince the characteristics of Smith's compositional language: free atonality, occasional nods toward the extended triadic harmonies of avant-garde jazz, the intuitive use of pitch cells, and registral displacements that create implied counterpoint and compound melodies within single lines. Violinist Airi Yoshioka navigates these works with passion, drive, and great skill.

Minor (2001) was written for the violinist Rachel Koblyakov. As she explains in the score, she approached Smith after hearing a concert of his music, and asked him to write a piece for her. She was nine years old at the time. In a letter to Koblyakov, Smith mentions that the title of the piece refers both to the minor triads that act as the work's "centers of gravity," and to the fact that Koblyakov was, for a commissioner, quite young. Rather than being childlike, though, Smith's composition looks toward the adult she was becoming. The result feels intermittently bound and released, as though something is trying to find its expression but is only occasionally successful. Little repetitions, especially at the beginnings of phrases, give the impression that this process of expression is difficult, even painful, and that thoughts are being expressed as soon as they are formed, requiring self-correction in real time. The result is an interrupted but growing eloquence. The arpeggiated minor triads become axes that govern motion without stopping it, creating an underlying atmosphere of pain and heaviness that colors the more chromatic material around them.

In contrast, *Hearts* (2004) is positively kaleidoscopic. Part of what lends the work its variety is the range of extended techniques that Smith calls for, including portamento, Bartók pizzicati (more forceful and percussive than conventional pizzicati), humming, singing, and a wide, exaggerated vibrato that recalls the Japanese *koto*. In the score, Yoshioka's foreword describes the resultant sound world as "angular yet flowing, lyrical yet tense, expressive yet contained, soaring yet grounded." Each of the seven movements corresponds to one of our seven hearts; after all seven are broken, Smith posits, we die. Of particular note are the third movement, depicting the heart in physical love, fluttering in fits and starts; the fourth movement, a portrait of the heart broken by alcoholism, with the violin and voice in thorny and difficult counterpoint; the sixth, a short humorous romp where extended techniques are particularly dense; and the seventh, titled "palindrome—the shape of the heart." This last movement is exceptionally poetic, in that the palindromic arrangement of pitches is largely accurate, but imperfect. This is not surprising, given Smith's distaste for predeterminate compositional systems, but his choice—as well as the range of topics addressed by the other movements—beautifully points up the difference between the cartoonish shape found on Valentine's Day cards and the altogether real, imperfect organ beating in our chests.

I am not interested in the *idea* of complexity.

I am interested in *complexity*.

—Stuart Saunders Smith

The four chamber works on this album rely to varying degrees on elements of what Smith calls "music of coexistence"—music where each performer's material is set, but its deployment in time in relation to other performers is not fixed. (Smith has sometimes referred to this practice as writing parts without a score.) The scores for these works do not appear to be especially complex—they look similar to his conventional solo and chamber scores—but by adjusting the synchronic relationships of the performers, Smith creates sounding objects that are breathing, vivid, and complex beyond the confines of intellectualism.

Another distinction: while these works all allow for a measure of indeterminacy in their performance, they contrast starkly with the works of John Cage. This is due to Smith's interest in taste and preference: while Cage's work and methods after 1950 were largely attempts to suspend personal taste in musical decision-making, Smith calls for the performers to choose material, dynamics, tempi, or other characteristics according to their taste, giving intelligent and sympathetic performers the opportunity to deepen the communion of their chamber-music-making.

Perhaps the clearest example is the album's earliest work, *A Gift for Bessie* (1971). It recalls a free-improvisation group Smith founded as a teenager; two short prologues (a blues for solo singing violinist, and a piano/bassoon duet) are followed by a large main section in which the performers are given phrases of material to play, but are asked to improvise their order, tempi, timbre, and dynamics. What these performers do with this opportunity is heartily exciting—their ability not only to react to each other in the moment, but also to create sensible structure over longer time-frames, is impressive, and results in an interaction and consciousness impossible to achieve in any other way.

Three for Two (1972) is a colorful miniature triptych for violin and viola in which each movement is named after a place in rural inland Maine, on the Kennebec River. About halfway through the first movement, “Across the Kennebec,” the performers pause together before exploding into a burst of *fortissimo* activity. “The Forks” is a very small village that Smith found to be full of adventure as a child, and the sprinkling and scattering of pizzicati between the two players suggests not only youthful enjoyment but also a constant stream of small wandering discoveries—leaves here, nice stones there. The addition of the performers’ voices in “Caratunk”—which Smith describes as “a slow village of old ones sitting on the porch”—adds a stark sense of humanity and yearning that contrasts sharply with the youthful ease of “The Forks.”

In the two remaining works, Yoshioka’s playing has a wonderful feeling of propulsion within the general pacing of the pieces. This propulsion gives the ends of sections or movements a feeling of being on the edge of a precipice, with the beginning of the next movement acting as a reassurance. This is especially the case in *A River Rose* (2005). Smith offers a program for the work: a woman falls into a river and grabs onto a floating log that carries her downstream, to a clearing with one single rose in the middle. Each of the piece’s five movements tells the complete story in a different way, rendering conventional Romantic notions of musical program useless. Instead, as with the multiple perspectives of *Hearts*, Smith creates a contemplative space for the listener, suffused with poignancy and fragility.

Whatever feeling of fragility exists in *A River Rose* is balanced by the sturdiness of *I’ve Been Here Before* (2009). The overall shape of the piece, and the relationships between the two players, suggest the kind of arguments that can only arise within deep, loving, decades-old friendships: the first part of movement I is full of jockeying for position, attempting to raise one’s own utterance above the general level of discourse, vying for whatever upper hand might be available; Smith seeds the second part of the movement with longer and more numerous periods of silence without altering the general dynamic, leaving each player with occasional stark soliloquies, and opportunities to listen in turn; the second movement offers resolution, and while the pitch material may not suggest complete closure, the unison texture brings about the only important conclusion one can draw in such a situation: wherever these two are headed, they’re heading there together.

—Bill Sallak

Bill Sallak is a percussionist, scholar, interdisciplinary artist, and member of the Akros Percussion Collective. He is Chair-Elect of the Percussive Arts Society's New Music/Research Committee, and an Assistant Professor at Kent State University.

Impassioned, rhapsodic, pleading, whimsical . . . These are some of the words that come to mind when describing Stuart Saunders Smith’s works. His music is profound and yet playful, wailing and yet soothing, innovative and yet traditional. This CD is a result of my ten years of collaboration with the composer. Performing and recording his music have pushed me as a musician in innumerable ways. In four of the six works, I sing while I play. Singing and playing an interval of minor seconds and other dissonances in *Hearts* expanded my aural skills tenfold. Additionally, I had to overcome timidity about my untrained voice. Stuart reminding me repeatedly that it was not the beauty of the voice that he was after but the rawness and the heartfelt delivery was reassuring. The Music of Coexistence (*A River Rose* and *I’ve Been Here Before*) presented another type of musical quandary. The focus of the rehearsals was not about listening

to each other and organizing places to line up (a traditional mode of playing chamber music) but simply sharing the moment with another player without regard for what he is playing. Since every take was unique in timing and therefore impossible to edit, the following pieces—*A River Rose*, *I've Been Here Before* and *A Gift for Bessie*—are all unedited. In working with Stuart, he gave me the opportunity to develop my own relationship with the works. He would simply provide the story, location, or the image that he had in mind and invite me emotionally and mentally to go there on my own. This CD is a personal journey that explores a terrain that is at times paradoxical, gripping, and painful.

—Airi Yoshioka

Stuart Saunders Smith (born 1948 in Portland, Maine) is a confessional composer in the New England tradition. “My music is about my life. I am after the particular, for the revelations of the particular speak to the universal. Composition, for me, is autobiographical. Composing means making sense of my person and personal history. I keep company with myself, and come to understand myself.”

Smith has been awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Maryland State Arts Council, and the Pittsburgh Film Forum, as well as the Hartt College of Music Distinguished Alumni Award, and a Percussive Arts Society Citation for Distinguished Editorship. His work is published by Sonic Art Editions and is recorded on New World Records, 11 West Records, Centaur Records, Opus One Records, OOdiscs, Cadenza, and GAC Sweden.

He has been on the faculty of the Atlantic Center for the Arts, the Darmstadt Musikinstitut (Germany), Percussion Workshop Poland, and the University of Maryland at Baltimore County. Residencies include University of California–San Diego, Yale University, Documenta 1992 (Kassel, Germany), the University of Gothenberg (Sweden), and New College Florida. In March 2008, the University of Akron hosted AT SIXTY—a celebration of the sixtieth birthday of Stuart Saunders Smith with four concerts of his music, including his first piece, composed in 1970, and several world premieres.

Smith does not compose using any pre-compositional systems or designs. He holds that each sound is intelligent, and when listened to, can direct the course of events in the composition. So Smith listens to each sound to tell him what sound should come next, until the piece is finished. He is currently writing *Composing, Thoughts*, a book of experimental writings about aesthetics, language, composition, listening, and the religious life of creation. Part I is forthcoming from Routledge Press.

Airi Yoshioka has concertized throughout the United States, Europe, Asia, and Canada as a soloist, recitalist, and chamber musician. She is the founding member of the Damocles Trio and the Modigliani Quartet and has performed and recorded with the members of the Emerson, Brentano, and Arditti Quartets. An enthusiastic performer of new music, she was one of the original members and concertmasters of the New Juilliard Ensemble and regularly appears with Continuum, ModernWorks, Son Sonora, RUCKUS, and Ensemble Pi. A winner of a concerto competition at The Juilliard School, she holds M.M and D.M.A. degrees from The Juilliard School and a B.A. from Yale University, and currently teaches at University of Maryland–Baltimore County as an Associate Professor of Violin. Her solo and chamber recordings can be heard on the New World, Naxos, Claves, Mode, Albany, Parma, and Pony Canyon labels.

Sue Heineman has been principal bassoonist of the National Symphony Orchestra since September 2000. Prior to joining the NSO, she held positions with the New Haven, Memphis, New Mexico, and New Zealand symphony orchestras. Ms. Heineman holds a Bachelor of Music degree from Eastman and a Master's degree from Juilliard. She also completed a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Rochester, graduating *summa cum laude* with Phi Beta Kappa honors and was the recipient of a Fulbright scholarship to Salzburg. Her teachers include Shirley Curtiss, David Van Hoesen, Milan Turkovic, Judith LeClair, and Stephen Maxym. A frequent guest clinician at conservatories throughout the U.S. and Canada, Ms. Heineman is on the faculty of the University of Maryland School of Music.

Lee Hinkle, D.M.A. serves on the faculty at the University of Maryland and is the principal percussionist with the 21st Century Consort. As a percussion soloist, he regularly presents solo recitals, master classes, and concerti performances at venues in the U.S. and abroad. Notable performances have included engagements with the National Symphony Orchestra as well as tours with Bernadette Peters and the American Wind Symphony Orchestra. As a recording artist, Dr. Hinkle's recordings can be heard on the Capstone, Town Hall, and C. F. Peters Corporation labels. Dr. Hinkle proudly endorses Remo drumheads, Innovative Percussion, and Grover Pro Percussion.

Brazilian percussionist **José “Zeca” Lacerda** has worked alongside such composers as Steve Reich, George Lewis, Elliott Sharp, Jeff Herriott, Christian Wolff, Bob Becker, and Stuart Saunders Smith, premiering works by the latter four. He has performed with leading Brazilian ensembles such as the Brazilian and the Petrobras symphony orchestras. Mr. Lacerda has released a solo vibraphone album and has published an article in *Percussive Notes*. His awards include Percussive Arts Society and Zildjian scholarships. He holds an M.M. in Performance from the University of Miami and is currently pursuing a D.M.A. in Contemporary Music, working as a studio TA at Bowling Green State University.

Violist **Maria Lambros** is a former member of the Mendelssohn, Ridge, and Meliora string quartets and has performed throughout the world in such venues as Amsterdam's Concertgebouw and Carnegie Hall. She has appeared as a guest with the Guarneri, Cleveland, Juilliard, Brentano, Borromeo, and Orion Quartets and at festivals including Santa Fe, Tanglewood, Aspen, La Jolla, Caramoor, and with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. A winner of the Naumburg Chamber Music Award and a Diapason d'Or, as well as a Grammy nominee, she has recorded for RCA and Telarc. She is on the faculty of the Peabody and New England Conservatories and the Yellow Barn Music School.

Grammy-nominated pianist **John Novacek** regularly tours the U.S., Asia, and Europe, appearing as recitalist, concerto soloist, and chamber musician. Venues include Carnegie Hall, Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center, Hollywood Bowl, Suntory Hall (Tokyo), Théâtre des Champs-Élysées (Paris), Wigmore Hall, and the Barbican (London). Novacek has collaborated with Yo-Yo Ma, Joshua Bell, Leila Josefowicz, Truls Mork, and Lynn Harrell, and his compositions and arrangements have been performed by the Pacific Symphony, Concertante, The 5 Browns, the Ying Quartet, and the Three Tenors. He has recorded more than thirty CDs for such labels as Philips, Nonesuch, Arabesque, Koch, Warner Classics, and EMI.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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STUART SAUNDERS SMITH (b. 1948)
A RIVER ROSE: MUSIC FOR VIOLIN

80754-2

Hearts (2004) 11:51

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2. II. passage to heaven 1:23
3. III. physical love 1:43
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5. V. a couple having a picnic and watching the clouds go by 2:34
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Airi Yoshioka, violin

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12. *Minor* (2001) 4:52

Airi Yoshioka, violin

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14. II. 3:10
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16. IV. 2:43
17. V. 3:02

Airi Yoshioka, violin; José “Zeca” Lacerda, vibraphone

I've Been Here Before (2008) 14:59

18. I 13:57
19. II 1:02

Airi Yoshioka, violin; John Novacek, piano

TT: 61:36

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