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STUART SAUNDERS SMITH (b. 1948)
PALM SUNDAY

KYLE ADAM BLAIR, PIANO



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File Under:
 Classical/Contemporary/
 Smith, Stuart Saunders

Thicket (2010) 12:37
 for solo piano or orchestra
 bells

1. I. 5:53
2. II. 1:19
3. III. 2:17
4. IV. 1:01
5. V. 2:07

6. *Pinetop* (1977) 7:00

*Family Portraits:
 Self (in 14 Stations)*
 (1997) 9:50

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8. II. :40
9. III. :27
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13. VII. :45
14. VIII. 1:04
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18. XII. :39
19. XIII. :42
20. XIV. 1:09

Palm Sunday (2012) 21:13

21. I. 7:46
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25. *Among Us* (2007) 11:56

TT: 62:35



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STUART SAUNDERS SMITH was born on March 16, 1948 in Portland, Maine. Smith's eclectic musical tastes were reinforced at an early age. He credits Charles Newcomb as his first composition and percussion teacher when Smith was just six years old. Newcomb had the young Smith transcribe scores by hand, and study many different styles, including Dixieland jazz and Latin music.

After a brief stint at the Berklee School of Music, Smith studied percussion performance and composition at the Hartt School of Music from 1967 to 1972. He studied composition with Ed Diemente, another musical eclectic who embraced polyphonic church music, Gregorian chant, and jazz, in addition to his contemporary musical vocabulary. Diemente also served as the director of the electronic music studio at the Hartt School for a time. Smith studied percussion with Al Lepak. Smith tells that Lepak used to have students drop a coin and Lepak would tell them the pitch without fail.

Smith went on to study at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign from 1973 to 1977. His teachers included Salvatore Martirano, Ben Johnston, and Herbert Brün. Sal Martirano's compositions integrated serial techniques and jazz idioms. Martirano's piano solo *Cocktail Music* (1962) contains fleeting jazz-like gestures that formally and melodically speak closely with Smith's *Pinetop*. Smith recalls that their lessons included performing jazz at Martirano's home with Smith on the drumset and Martirano on the piano.

He conducted an interview with Herbert Brün in 1975 entitled "Towards Composition," in which the two discuss the responsibilities and societal implications of composers and composition, the function of systems within composers' processes, and the manner in which entertainment and

revolutionary art-making can be at odds with one another. The interview reveals Smith's deep inquiries regarding the craft of composition in different forms and styles. Brün's interests in electronics led to the creation of electroacoustic works as well as non-traditional graphic notations, some of which could be interpreted by performers, such as the computer-generated drawings of *Mutatis Mutandis*.

Ben Johnston combined his experimentations in just intonation and serial techniques with traditional musical forms and folk music idioms, manifesting a singular, unique compositional voice through the embodiment of an eclectic set of musical inclinations and interests. Johnston's string quartets and microtonal piano music seamlessly blend the known and the unknown, the new and the familiar. Smith summarized his studies with Johnston with the following anecdote:

"Then came Ben Johnston. I knocked at his studio door. I went in. There was silence everywhere. He was in his rocking chair, staring out the window. I showed Ben the score I was working on. I played through it on his piano. He asked after I finished, 'How did you make it?' I said, 'I don't know. I worked it out by ear.' There was a long wait. Finally he said, 'well, we better not change that!' So went my lessons with Ben."¹

I mention the work and relationships between Smith and his teachers in order to express what is to me the most important distinction of his compositional voice. An insatiable listener, learner, and reader, Smith has taken

¹ Stuart Saunders Smith, "Stuart Saunders Smith," Wikipedia, accessed May 2, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Saunders_Smith.

into his mind and spirit myriad styles of musical performance spanning centuries, methods of compositional practice of all sorts, and innumerable close personal relationships with artists of all disciplines. He has absorbed this vast expanse of knowledge, art, and personal experience, and rather than mimicking anything he has encountered along the way, he has manifested a truly personal, honest voice that rings true to himself and to all of his inspirations.

In John Welsh's *The Music of Stuart Saunders Smith*, Milton Babbitt echoes these sentiments:

“When as a young man from Maine he ventured out into our hypercompartmentalized, ultrapluristic compositional society, he was disposed to be no one’s myrmidon, and so his music has displayed no more the explicit influences of the succession of strong-willed composition teachers with whom he studied and from whom he surely learned than that of jazz which he professes to be (or, at least, to have been) his primary musical influence. For he has forged a personalized seamless musical compound, a vast collection of awarenesses fused into a unified, single, and singular vision in which the individual sources retain little of their literal characteristics.”²

It seems that Smith gained something from each of his teachers along the way. From an early age, he gained instruction in a wide variety of musical styles and an appreciation for popular music from Charles Newcomb.

² John P. Welsh, *The Music of Stuart Saunders Smith*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995, p. xiii.

Ed Diemente and Sal Martirano both exhibited strong tastes for jazz, but also composed music that illuminated the ways in which jazz and twelve-tone composition could speak to one another. Although Smith says that he didn’t always agree with Herbert Brün, their discussions about politics and art helped to shape Smith’s own specific views on the greater context of his own composition, and it would be difficult for me to believe that his desire to experiment in new off-the-staff notation systems was not in some way influenced by Brün. Finally, Ben Johnston and his music provided a model for the marriage of the understood vernacular and the experimental, to me an inextricable facet of Smith’s compositional practice.

When asked in an interview with Jeremy Muller if Smith agreed with his traditionally notated works being sometimes thought of as composed-out improvisations, Smith responded by saying, “Yes and no. I think of composing as a very slowed down improvisation. I don’t use engineering principles in order to write a piece. I believe that there is intelligence everywhere, and if we listen to it and get out of the way, we can notate it.”³ Smith has said as much to me about the composition of his piano works, specifically in the case of *Palm Sunday*. He has often remarked that he composes by “receiving,” wherein he plays a note at the piano and actively listens to that note in order to hear what the following note should be. Upon composing a set of pitches, he will slowly play the set of pitches repeatedly and listen closely again to determine the pitches’ rhythmic relationships to one another, creating a

³ Stuart Saunders Smith, “Amidst the Noise: Stuart Saunders Smith’s Percussion Music.” Interviewed by Jeremy Muller, *Percussive Notes*, July 2014, 6–15. Retrieved from http://jeremymuller.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Muller_SSSPercMusic.pdf.

rhythmic and melodic line. Smith has referred to this practice as “line-drawing,” describing interactions of complex melodies both locally in counterpoint with one another and globally over time.

Smith’s spirituality and Quaker faith also depends upon a practice based on careful, intent listening. At Quaker meetings the gathered will sit together in silence, listening and interacting with the still, small voice of God that the Quakers believe is present within each of us. At times, Friends will be moved to share what they hear by speaking aloud, and at other times entire meetings will pass in silence.

In my experience with Smith’s music, it seems that to me that through listening intently to each individual note he pens, and to the voice of God within, Smith is communicating with the summation of all his past and present experiences in the creation of his music. Smith’s compositional practice weaves together his faith, his appreciation of the written word, his experience as a percussionist, his love of jazz, his knowledge of American popular music styles, his studies with practitioners of twelve-tone technique, his affinity for the music of Bach, and his relationship with avant-garde artists outside the realm of music into a personal voice from which no component part can be easily extracted without the others.

Regarding the interactions and circumstances that led to this recording, I met Smith in 2010 during his final year living in Baltimore. Always a kind and grounded presence, Smith frequently spoke to me after performances, offering warm congratulations and often his personal insights into the works performed. During that year I participated in an ensemble led by Smith called REDS, which explored the performance of nontraditionally

notated music. These pieces often eschew the five-line staves and clefs associated with printed sheet music in favor of unique graphic systems with instructions for their interpretation.

Smith led the ensemble in explorations of his own “off-the-staff” notation systems as well as those of Earle Brown and Herbert Brün. These pieces often require performers to compose responses to specific instructions regarding the handling of various musical parameters such as dynamics, articulations, and time. The results often vary widely in different performers’ hands. Through his work with REDS, Smith clearly demonstrated his interest in “compositional” input from performers.

In four of the works presented here, specifically *Thicket* (2010), *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)* (1997), *Palm Sunday* (2012), and *Among Us* (2007), Smith calls upon the performer to provide the musical dynamics, articulations, and phrasing to the traditionally notated pitches and rhythmic structures he provides. This charge extends the performer’s contribution well into the realm of composition.

Given that this is a prevalent trend in Smith’s more recent music, I asked if he could provide insight into this facet of his compositional practice. Often referring to himself as a “jazz composer,” Smith likened this semi-open quality of his scores to the reading of an exceedingly complex jazz lead sheet. He remarked that many jazz performers frequently utilize the same shorthand music notation (often as simple as a melody accompanied by chord symbols) to produce a wide variety of sonic results. Despite the vast array of possible sonic realizations of music notated in this way, listeners often can recognize that two significantly different performances of the same jazz standard still harken back to the same original tune or chord changes.

In making personal musical decisions regarding dynamics, articulations, and phrasing, given the contrapuntal density of the material Smith composed, it became important for me to remove the mental burden of choreographed performance from the process and make my choices from the listener's perspective. This process involved the making and reviewing of a series of self-recordings that gradually led to the versions of the pieces I present here. The recurring issue in preparing these pieces was negotiating the balance between larger dramatic gestures, illuminating formal clarity in longer works, and shaping local nuance to assist the listener in aurally parsing dense passages.

The first piece in this collection, *Thicket*, was composed in five parts and can be performed on the piano or on orchestra bells. It was dedicated to percussionist Trevor Saint and pianist Anne Rainwater, who premiered the piece on November 24, 2013. The first movement, the longest by far, presents foundational musical material that is developed in the following shorter movements. In this way, one could say that *Thicket* mimics a loose “theme and variations” form. The lengthier opening lends itself to a larger musical arc, while the other movements tend more toward musically consistent character pieces. Movements II and IV move quickly, prominently featuring bold, rhetorical statements in open intervals, while movements III and V provide contrast with slower, more fluid chromatic slinkiness.

Pinetop was composed for and premiered by pianist Paul Hoffmann in 1977. *Pinetop* may well seem like an outlier in the context of this collection, given that its specificity of dynamics, phrasing, and articulation differs from the compositional and interpretive freedom Smith allows the performer in the other pieces included here. However, *Pinetop* being the first piano solo Smith

composed and the first one I studied, the piece has informed the manner in which I approach the dense, rich counterpoint in Smith's later works. In his notes to the performer, Smith encourages the pianist to “Dig in!” to what he calls his own version of a “boogie-woogie,” a genre of early jazz piano-playing innovated by the piece's dedicatee, Clarence “Pinetop” Smith. In construction, the piece unfolds in a rhapsodic chain of rapidly changing musical characters. Smith writes that *Pinetop* should be performed as “one long continuous phrase.”

Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations) undoubtedly refers to the fourteen Stations of the Cross, a sequence of images depicting Jesus's journey toward his crucifixion. Also composed for Paul Hoffmann and premiered in 1998, the Stations are by far the shortest movements included in this collection. At times these pieces strike me as reminiscent of Prokofiev's *Vision fugitives* in their brevity and individual character traits. Averaging well under a minute each, my interpretations of these kaleidoscopic “Stations” strive for vivid characterizations through small gestures, as the musical consideration of larger forms becomes less necessary. It seems to me that one can almost hear these movements as one sees an object: all at once.

In 2011 I commissioned *Palm Sunday*, the largest of Smith's piano pieces to date, and premiered it on January 30, 2014. Of all Smith's piano music, *Palm Sunday* might come the closest to mimicking a four-movement sonata form. The first movement—the longest, as in *Thicket*—tends to meander through melodic and harmonic material, sometimes repeating, sometimes progressing, sometimes doubling back in order to develop differently. The counterpoint evolves slowly, so I chose to reflect the formal stages of development with broad dynamic changes. Smith describes the

second movement as being inspired by the heavy left-hand and deft right-hand figurations of the great jazz pianist McCoy Tyner. The three repeated sections in this movement provide opportunities for variation in dynamics and character, highlighting different contrapuntal voices each time through. The third movement, to me reminiscent of a true jazz standard, begins with the piano softly accompanying a hummed tune, but upon repetition grows in volume and density as humming becomes full-voiced singing. Finally, the fourth movement brings the entirety of *Palm Sunday*, in all its amassed complexity and density, gently down to a series of simple gestures separated by meditative periods of rest, concluding with a text on the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem that retrospectively shades the previous movements of the work with its imagery and weight.

The final piece presented here, *Among Us*, is the longest continuous movement in this collection. Smith dedicates *Among Us* to Paul Hoffmann, Joseph Kubera, and Thomas Moore. Moore premiered the work in 2007. In interpreting *Among Us*, Smith specifies that the performer employ a dynamic range between “very, very soft” and “medium loud.” Compounded with his initial tempo marking of “introspective,” the parameters Smith provides lend the piece a gentle quality throughout. The slight tempo variations Smith indicates throughout the score provide openings for subtle variation in dynamics and phrasing in order to highlight changing moods, even within a pervadingly calm and peaceful landscape. Given the sense of spirituality conveyed in numerous references within this collection of Smith’s piano works, a reproduction of his own program note for *Among Us* seems a fitting closing statement, just as this piece brings this collection to a close:

I always assumed
That for there to be light
There must be darkness.

In the gospel of Thomas
Jesus says:
“If God is in the sky
then the birds will see Him first.
If God is in the ocean
Then the fish will seem Him first.
I say God is among us.”

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·
·
Perhaps darkness
Is light
That does not know
It’s light.

—Kyle Adam Blair

In nearly fifty years of composing music, **Stuart Saunders Smith** (b. 1948) has amassed a body of well over 150 works that have consistently defied the status quo. His compositional aesthetics are broad and somewhat different in every piece—many compositions feature wholly unique notational systems that the

composer himself has invented. In categorizing Smith's work, one finds four primary areas of focus: music of extreme rhythmic and melodic intricacy; musical mobiles with instrumental parts that freely interact; text-based compositions; trans-media systems for any kind of performing artist(s). At the core of each of these styles there is a focus on language—body language, melody, and speech—which Smith uses as his primary tool for contemplating a deeper question: How do we perceive and interact with the sounds we hear around us? Smith's percussion-theater music forms the core of that literature, with such pieces as *Poems I II III*, . . . *And Points North*, *Tunnels*, and *Clay Singing* among his twenty-six compositions in that genre.

Smith's compositions are widely recorded and appear on such labels as New World Records, Ravello Records, Centaur, Innova, 11 West Records, O.O. Discs, Equilibrium, GAC, Soundset Recordings, and Chen Li. In addition, anthologies of new music have included his theater music, and rhythmically intricate concert music: *Here and There*, MacMillan Publishing, NYC; *Return and Recall*, Assembling Press, NYC; *Faces*, ASUC, NYC; and *Transitions and Leaps*, Mark Batty Publications, NYC. Articles on his music have been published regularly throughout the years in such journals as *Perspectives of New Music*, *Percussive Notes*, *Interface*, and *extempore*.

Kyle Adam Blair's pianistic interests lie in complexity, dissonance, and lyricism. His major focuses are on the creation of new works in collaboration with composers, and the performance of the American art-music repertory of the 20th and 21st centuries, particularly the music of Charles Ives, Donald Martino, Elliott Carter, and Stuart Saunders Smith. Outside of his frequent

engagements as a solo and collaborative pianist in southern California, Blair's most memorable performances have included world premieres of Bruno Ruviano's twelve *Pos-Tudos* piano etudes, Stuart Saunders Smith's *Family Portraits: Sylvia at 70*, and concerts with the Bang on A Can All Stars. Beyond concert music, Blair's curiosities regarding text and theater spark frequent collaborations with actors, singers, and dancers. Most recently, he has worked closely with Grammy-winning soprano Susan Narucki as the repetiteur for premieres of contemporary operatic works, most notably Lei Liang's *Inheritance*, and Stephen Lewis's *Noon at Dusk*. Blair received his D.M.A. in Contemporary Music Performance from the University of California, San Diego in 2018, under the mentorship of Aleck Karis.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

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Crux. Chen Li Music CLM 103.

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Welsh, John P. *The Music of Stuart Saunders Smith*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995.

Producers: Fiona Digney (*Pinetop*), Stephen Lewis (*Palm Sunday*), Kyle Adam Blair (*Among Us*, *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)*, *Thicket*)

Chief Recording Engineer: Andrew Munsey

Recording Engineers: Tahereh Afghah, Clinton Davis, Andrés Gutiérrez Martínez

Mixing and Mastering: Andrew Munsey

Thicket, *Pinetop*, and *Among Us* were recorded October 12–15, 2015. *Palm Sunday* was recorded May 16–17, 2016. *Family Portraits: Self (in 14 Stations)* was recorded June 9–10, 2016.

All tracks were recorded in UC San Diego's Conrad Prebys Concert Hall, La Jolla, CA.

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC

Cover photo: NoSystem Images

Design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc.

All compositions published by Smith Publications.

Acknowledgements:

The University of California, San Diego; the staff of the UC San Diego Department of Music; Jessica C. Flores; Aleck Karis; the Blair family; and the Smith family.

This recording was made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

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