



ONE COMPOSER, ONE COMMUNITY ~ REENA ESMAIL WEEKEND
April 19-20, 2024

PROGRAM NOTES

***Acharanga* (2018)**

Acharanga is a vibrant, driving piece that derives its name from the Acharanga Sutra — a sacred Jain text. While Jainism is a religion most commonly known for its peaceful preservation of all forms of life, the text that inspired this piece is fiery and prescriptive, imploring the listener to act and think responsibly.

The original version of this melody, with the words above, comes from movement 6 of my oratorio, *This Love Between Us*.

***Chardonnay* (2001)**

Chardonnay is one of my earliest pieces — I wrote it when I was seventeen years old, and just beginning to grapple with composition seriously.

The piece is so indicative of where I was at that time in my life: it is inspired in equal parts by Debussy's incredible solo flute piece *Syrinx*, and the designs on a glass of Chardonnay at dinner at a restaurant in downtown Los Angeles.

I went home after that dinner and wrote this piece in a single night — partially because I was inspired, and mostly because I had to. Up until this time, composing had just been a fun creative outlet for me. But suddenly the ground was shifting under me, as major composition programs started calling me back for auditions I never fathomed I would be offered. Some auditions required more pieces than I had in my portfolio... and so I wrote *Chardonnay*, had a recording made, and got on a plane with 48 hours of seeing that glass of wine.

Years later, I think the piece still has the tentativeness, urgency, and wild abandon of a teenager trying to find her place in an ever-expanding world.

***Crystal Preludes* (2020)**

The title "*Crystal Preludes*" has taken on many meanings. The texture of these pieces can be brilliant and luminous at times. The succinct, pithy form of the prelude has allowed me to crystallize elements of my own piano writing that I've been yearning to explore.

But truly, this set of preludes is named for the person they are written for: my dearest friend, pianist Crystal Rivette. Crystal and I became friends as teenagers, when all our dreams were still ahead of us. Over decades of friendship, we've supported one another's dreams as they've found their way into being.

These pieces are as much for the professional musicians we are today as they are a tribute to the

intense, awkward, wildly creative, passionate people we were then. Young pianists, finding your way in the world: These are for you.

We see you. We were you. We've got you.

Concerto for You (2019)

I. Panem Nostram

This piece is an arrangement of the melody of the first movement of my violin concerto, Concerto for You. It's an unusual piece, because it is written for professional solo violinist, and youth string orchestra. The "you" in the concerto isn't the soloist, but each member of the orchestra – young people who are just beginning their musical journeys, and might be able to see things with fresh eyes and open hearts.

The main theme of this movement came from a choral piece that I started and never finished – it set the text from the Lord's Prayer that translates to "give us this day, our daily bread". I grew up Catholic, and learned this prayer as a child. But it was only as an adult that I started thinking about what that phrase meant to me: What is that life-giving sustenance that is absolutely essential to our existence? It might be different for each person, but it's so important to connect daily with what feeds us, both physically and spiritually.

Darshan (“Seeing”)

III. Charukeshi

Darshan means ‘seeing’ in Hindi. In the Hindu religion, to give ‘darshan’ is to see and worship God. As Vijay and I worked on this music together over three years, we began to see the divine in one another.

This movement, in Raag Charukeshi, is the first movement of five, which will be written over a span of five years. It explores grief, in its many facets and forms.

Hallelujah

I wrote this arrangement of the Leonard Cohen *Hallelujah* for Vijay Gupta to play as part of Street Symphony events.

Jhula, Jhule (2014)

This piece was originally written for violin and piano. These are the program notes for the original work.

When writing this piece, to be based upon Indian folksong, I cast a wide net for source material – I scoured the internet and my large collection of Indian music, listening to everything from Bengali Bauls, Rajasthani folk singing. I even tried to find songs from Goa and Gujarat, the places my parents are from in India, typing every conceivable search term into Google. However, the material I felt most connected to in the end didn't come to me from a distant corner of India, but in the most common way folk music can be transmitted: through the generations of my own family.

This piece uses two folk melodies. The first is a song called “Ankhon vina andharon re,” which I found on a recording my mother's father made long before I was born. Of his five grandchildren, I am the only one who never met him. But as I've grown up, I realize how much we have in common, including our deep love of music. My mother often tells me stories of listening to records of Beethoven Symphonies on hot

nights in Kenya, where my grandfather spent most of his life. All the lights were turned off, and they would listen as a family, in the silent darkness, following his lead as he taught them to savor each note. We still have recordings of my grandfather singing songs in many languages – English, Marathi, Konkani, Portuguese and others – which I listen to from time to time, imagining what it might have been like to know him.

The other song comes to me from my grandmother, my father’s mother. My father’s parents (who even our American friends affectionately called Mamma and Pappa) moved to the US the year before I was born, and lived with us for most of my childhood. I grew up speaking to Mamma only in Gujarati, a language that I spoke to no one else until she died in 2007. As a baby, Mamma would often sing me this lullaby: *Jhula Jhule, Jhula Jhule / Reena Rani Jhula Jhule* which translates: *Back and forth, back and forth / Reena the Queen swings back and forth*. It has been years since I have thought about this melody, but while working on this project, it suddenly popped back into my mind. I’m so glad it did – it is one of the few musical memories I have of her.

Working on this piece was very special for me. I spent most of my childhood as a first-generation American unconsciously trying to separate my home life from my outside life. I became aware very early on that there was no real resonance for my Indian culture in my American surroundings. As a composer, I’ve often quoted from pieces I love (mostly by other western composers, and more recently from Hindustani bandishes). But this is the first time I’ve felt able to bring songs from my own family into my music, and into the western concert hall. I think – I hope – I’ve finally found a point of resonance.

Kabir Songs (2022)

Dhire, Dhire

I am constantly drawn to the ‘dohe’ (couplets) of [Kabir](#). His statements are pithy but their meanings are vast. They have been set and sung for hundreds of years in the Hindustani classical tradition, and they seem to meet each generation of performers and listeners in a unique way.

This tiny couplet (Dhire Dhire) is about patience. The singer beckons her own mind to be patient — that everything will come in its own time. Just as a seed can be watered a hundred times, it will only bloom in spring.

This work was written specifically for young musicians. I know that the music I learned early on in my musical training made a deep impression on me — perhaps because I was learning music itself through those pieces. If anything about this work stays with the young musicians who encounter it, I hope it is Kabir’s timeless message.

Piano Trio (2019)

These program notes were written by Aaron Grad, ahead of the premiere performance of the work, in November 2019.

“I wish I could live in India and America at the same time,” says Reena Esmail (b. 1983), the daughter of Indian immigrants who has become one of the most respected young composers in the United States; “I wish they shared a border, and I could build a little home right in between them. I know I can’t do that in the physical world, but this is where I live every day in my music.”

Esmail’s compositions straddle two of the world’s most sophisticated musical traditions. On one side is the art music of Europe and its system of tonal harmony that developed over the last 400-plus years, and

on the other, Hindustani classical music from North India, organized around collections of tones known as raags that go back many centuries further.

Studies at the Juilliard School and the Yale School of Music grounded Esmail in the practices of the West's classical music, including its precise system of notation that allows performers of any background to interpret unfamiliar nuances. As a Fulbright-Nehru Scholar, she was able to spend a year in India studying the classical music of her ancestors, absorbing the oral tradition built on complex patterns and pitches that often can't be categorized within Western norms.

Writing a Piano Trio has fulfilled one of Esmail's oldest ambitions as a musician. Growing up as a talented pianist, trios with violin and cello were her favorite form of chamber music, and she won a life-changing competition that resulted in her performing Mendelssohn's Second Piano Trio with members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. She also counts Ravel's Piano Trio as an all-time favorite work, noting, "So much of what I've learned about color and texture in my writing comes from Ravel." After three years of work and a pile of sketches that is up to 300 pages and counting (with less than three weeks to go before the premiere), Esmail is still polishing off this substantial score that reckons with the rigorous tradition of the four-movement piano trio.

Authentic raags appear in each movement of the trio, including the monsoon season raag known as Megh that informs a chorale from the strings and other gestures in the first movement. In a tempo marked "Ephemeral," the smooth modal phrases and long slurs highlight Esmail's affinity with Ravel, who also looked outside the Western canon to expand his shimmering soundscapes. Flutters, slides and harmonics continue in the slow movement, creating a sense of improvisatory freedom while the music slips in and out of time.

By casting the quivering third movement as a scherzo, Esmail acknowledges her debt to Mendelssohn (the king of those elfin, lighter-than-air diversions), but moments of manic hilarity and sheer muscle recall a more subversive master of the piano trio, Shostakovich. In the finale, a singing string melody supported by "luminous" piano filigree surges to a droning climax marked "powerful, broad, intense."

When the unhurried ending arrives with glimmering harmonics and crystalline chords, this work completes an arc that places it squarely within the storied lineage of the "classical" piano trio—while making it clear just how irrelevant such boundaries truly are.

Promontory Studies (2024)

I've always loved those places on the earth where a little piece of land juts out into water, where you are standing on a promontory, looking out onto nothing but blue. Those places have always held such significance in my life: watching the first sunrise of a new year in Montauk, the eastern tip of Long Island, NY. Traveling to Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of India, to throw a ring into the water and make a promise to the land I came from that I would return. This set of works (the first of which you will hear tonight), is my homage to those and many other promontories -- natural and man-made -- that have shaped my life.

I've also always loved the piano ensemble repertoire. I went to an arts high school, and because there were so many pianists, we would play piano chamber music all the time -- four hands, two pianos, six hands, eight hands at two pianos -- we did it all. That music holds such a special place in my heart, and it has been my dream to add to this rep. My hope is that you are hearing the very first version of what will turn into a much larger work for piano ensemble.

Sunaao (सुनाओ)* (2023)

Sunaao is a set of three pieces designed to introduce young choirs to the Hindi/Urdu language. Aao beckons us to share our musical traditions with one another, exploring changing open vowels. Khattar Pattar uses a distinctive style of Hindi/Urdu onomatopoeia to describe how we sometimes let our thoughts run out of control. Behta Jaa invites us to lean into ease and levity, to not be too hard on ourselves, as it contrasts dark and light sounds.

The word “sunaao” literally translates as “have me listen”, but is closer in meaning to “tell me” or “sing for me”. It is the act of engaging someone in a sonic experience by listening to others, of sharing and hearing sounds that are meaningful to us with others. Each song is designed to teach linguistic concepts of Hindi, musical concepts of Hindustani music, and to remind us to approach new ideas from a place of curiosity instead of judgment.

III. Behta Jaa

Na-daal khud pe tu zyaada zor
Bhool jaa duniya ka yeh saara shor
Nadi ke saath behta jaa
Havaa ke saath urta jaa

Don't be too hard on yourself
Forget the noise of the world
Go on flowing with the river
Go on flying with the wind

Take What You Need (2016-2019)

Of the many performances of *Take What You Need*, very few of them have been in traditional concert halls. Most performances have taken place in jails, homeless shelters, support groups, schools, memorial services, places of worship — in places where people can gather to see and honor the humanity in one another.

Take What You Need was first written for Urban Voices Project, a choir made up of people who are experiencing or have recently experienced homelessness — so many of whom have trusted this piece with their own stories of loss and redemption, and who I am so honored to count among my dearest friends. But this piece is also meant to be a resource for musicians and communities to come together and build the lasting relationships that plant seeds for social change.

Take a moment
Take a breath
Take time
Take care

Take hope
Take heart
Take a step
Take a chance

Take courage
Take charge
Take a stand
Take pride

Take joy
Take pause
Take a moment
Take a breath

Take what you need.
Take what you need.
Take what you need.

Testament (from *Vishwas*) (2014)

The word *vishwas* (विश्वास) expresses the concept of fervent belief, or faith, in Hindi. Meera Bai, a celebrated saint-poet from 15th century India, is the quintessential embodiment of vishwas. Though she is forced into a traditional marriage to unite two kingdoms, she believes she is married to the Lord Krishna, a Hindu deity, and the events of her life are shaped around her fervent devotion to this intangible but omnipresent figure.

Testament is the final movement of a three part work for bharatanatyam (Indian classical) dancer and orchestra. In Meera's stubbornness, she stages a hunger strike outside the temple of her Lord Krishna, refusing to eat until the doors are opened. One night, after days of fasting, she is extremely weak and lays down to rest. A storm brews, and the high winds begin to swing the lamp outside the temple's wooden door, causing the door to catch fire. As the storm builds, the door burns, eventually causing the entrance to the temple to reopen. This piece incorporates one of Meera's own bhajans (devotional songs), in Raag Malhar, the raag that beckons rain. Krishna has used the forces of nature to show himself, and to honor Meera's faithfulness to him. Even as the flames surround her, Meera walks calmly into the temple to honor her Lord.

Vishwas makes use of traditional Hindustani raags, which are woven through the fabric of the composition. It is fitting that all the information we currently have about Meera Bai and her struggles for self-expression are from her own songs.

Twinkle Variations: Rhythm* (2024)

Exploring Classical Indian/Hindustani music through Twinkle Variations

These variations teach some of the rhythmic patterns you might encounter in Hindustani classical music. Start by having your students speak the rhythms (using the audio files that accompany this piece) until they gain comfort, and then move to speaking while playing. When students are comfortable doing both, they can move into just playing, increasing speed as desired. It is also perfectly acceptable for them to learn these rhythms aurally -- as this is how a Hindustani musician would learn them.

Two Tones (2007)

It is difficult for me to find something insightful to say about a piece that is so close to my heart. I think Rilke's text says it best.

Lyrics by Rainer Maria Rilke

Everything that touches us, me and you,
Takes us together like a violin's bow
Which draws one voice out of two separate strings
Upon what instrument are we two spanned?
And what musician holds us in his hand?

Varsha (2019)

Varsha was written for the Haydn Seven Last Words project, for Juilliard415. The project commissioned seven composers (including Nico Muhly, Paola Prestini, Jessica Meyer, Tania Leon, Caroline Shaw and Colin Jacobsen) to write interludes between each of the Haydn quartets.

This piece, Varsha, serves as an interlude between Sonata V (*Sitio* – “I Thirst”) and Sonata VI (*Consummatum Est* – “It is finished”) of Haydn's Seven Last Words. The combination of Hindustani *raags* used in this piece are from the Malhaar family, which are sung to beckon rain.

I imagined an interlude between these two sonatas: Christ thirsts. Rain comes from the distance ([Megh Malhaar](#)). There is a downpour around him ([Miyani ki Malhaar](#)), but he grows slowly weaker. His next words make clear that even the rain is not enough: his thirst is of another sort, which cannot be quenched by water. And so, it is finished.

*** composed/arranged for Music Institute of Chicago students**