

AGO 2019 *Student Commissioning Project*

BY ALEXANDER MESZLER



Gu Wei



Mi Zhou



Carle Wirshba



Samuel Kuffuor-Afriyie

This year, the AGO continued its annual Student Commissioning Project, where student composers write pieces in collaboration with student organists. Four grants of \$1,000 were divided among four composer-organist pairs for the composition and performance of new works for the organ. Students submitted a joint application that included samples of the work of both the organist and composer, a statement about the proposed project, and, because the project is collaborative at its heart, a statement related to how working with each other would enhance the proposed piece. Both the composer and the organist must be full- or part-time students at accredited U.S. academic institutions. Since the project is left open-ended, the resulting pieces typically vary significantly in style, and this year is no exception. To satisfy the requirements of the grant, upon completion of the composition, the piece is premiered and then played in at least two subsequent performances. This is the fifth year of the Student Commissioning Project, which has now commissioned works from 18 student composer-organist pairs.

This year, the selected composer-organist pairs were, from the Peabody Institute, Gu Wei and Mi Zhou; from Syracuse University, Carle Wirshba and Samuel Kuffuor-Afriyie; from the University of North Texas, Mark Vaughn and Christoph Hintermüller; and, from the Eastman School of Music, Jasmine Thomasian and Zhen Piao. Though it was the case this year, it is not required that pairs be enrolled at the same institution.

Both students at the Peabody Institute, **Gu Wei**, currently a doctoral student in composition, met **Mi Zhou** during her master's work in organ. Zhou completed her undergraduate degree in organ in Shanghai, where she played primarily electronic organs in studio-size rooms. Though she remembers these times fondly, Zhou smiles as she recalls her first experience playing a pipe organ in a big room; it was not in the U.S., but rather, at the monumental Müller instrument in Haarlem, the Netherlands, during their biennial festival. She recalls this moment with considerable

reverence since, for her, it solidified her future goals to be an organist, and it was only a year later that she began her work at Peabody. Now, having finished her master's, she is working toward the completion of her graduate performance diploma in organ. Wei's trajectory, beginning in Singapore, has also led him to study internationally, including work at King's College London and now the U.S. His compositional philosophy is encapsulated by his desire to build cultural bridges. He says, "For me, I think what's being written nowadays should be a reflection of society. I want my music to connect people of different backgrounds—different social groups, cultures, etc.—so they contemplate what they share in common."

Wei's vision for the piece was to explore traditional Chinese music in a decidedly Western context, which the organ embodied for him. In his piece, *when the mountains sing* . . . , Wei chose to feature the traditional Chinese folk tune "When does the *huaihua* bloom?" The tune comes from Sichuan province, where Wei grew up. Wei writes in the preface to the work,

Huaihua is a flower native to many parts of China; for many people it symbolizes purity, beauty, and the desire for true love. The original song depicts a young lady who is in love with an unnamed man, and spends her day waiting for his arrival by the *huaihua* tree. When her mother asks her what she is looking at, she responds that she is waiting for the *huaihua* to bloom.

The use of preexisting material is atypical of Wei's compositions, but he says that in this piece it seemed right. In addition to being a direct way to introduce a non-Western element into the music, the use of a Chinese tune is reminiscent of a long tradition of tune-based organ music. The piece features continuous 16th notes in somewhat-patterned figuration from the very first beat until the piece finally settles on a final open fifth in the last bar. Wei cites the influence of minimalism and postminimalism in his work, an example of his interest in blurred style between popular



Mark Vaughn



Christoph Hintermüller



Jasmine Thomasian



Zhen Piao

music and traditional classical music.

For Zhou, the experience of working with a composer was brand new. She says, “I play a lot of French Romantic music. I really love that. But I was interested in doing something new, and the idea of ‘Chinese’ organ music intrigued me. Plus, I knew a collaboration with Gu Wei would be successful no matter what.” Upon receiving the first copy of the piece, Zhou worked with Wei on the revisions, and she recommended some changes to the last page. Most of the piece remained unchanged, but Wei was extremely receptive to Zhou’s ideas, and he ended up changing almost the entire last page. While making some suggestions when it came to the performance of *when the mountains sing* . . . , Wei left most choices up to Zhou. Wei says, “I think it’s great when people play differently; it’s what makes the piece alive.” Both have plans to continue their education in the U.S. and expressed interest in continuing to collaborate on new works for the organ.

Composer **Carle Wirshba** and organist **Samuel Kuffuor-Afriyie** met and premiered their project while at Syracuse University. Wirshba started his studies at SUNY Binghamton in neuroscience and biochemistry while also exploring psychology before he turned his full attention to music—a decision that extended his undergraduate tenure by a full year. Though he has always been intensely interested in music, his formal musical training comes mostly from college—in high school, he played a lot of electric guitar and did some songwriting. Now, he has just completed his master’s in composition. Though he says that having started his compositional work later than nearly all his colleagues has some serious disadvantages, he feels that much more grateful for every opportunity and loves every minute of discovery. Kuffuor-Afriyie is completing his undergraduate degree in organ. Though initially a saxophonist, he was exposed to the organ at a young age because his uncle played organ in church. He was always interested in learning the organ because, he says, “I enjoy a challenge.” His interest in studying the organ as a career path was sparked late in high school by his participation at a Pipe Organ Encounter hosted by the Brooklyn AGO Chapter in 2015.

Interrupted Introduction and Passacaglia in C# combines Wirshba’s many different interests and unique musical background in a hybrid musical form. Wirshba approached the organ, as he says many composers do, with a degree of reverence. From even his earliest thoughts about writing a piece for the organ, he knew he wanted to write a piece in some sort of “interrupted baroque-classical form.” The use of an old form demonstrates his

reverence for its long, distinguished history, but the interruptions, as he says, “enable me to be me.” The juxtaposition of these two formal elements allows Wirshba to “be the rocker that I am in the rhythmic sections and the singer-songwriter in the melodies of the more structured sections.” This was his first serious effort composing for the organ, but also his first use of the passacaglia structure. Wirshba combined elements of Reger, Bach, and the latest rock-pop genres.

Kuffuor-Afriyie says that the biggest challenge for him was working with a non-organist, since their starting places are so different. While starting to chuckle, Wirshba says, “Writing for organ was definitely a challenge. Pedals aren’t just an extra limb—they have a specific role.” Despite these challenges, Kuffuor-Afriyie appreciated Wirshba’s willingness to listen and adjust passages that were unnecessarily challenging. Wirshba says, “Sam’s collaborative attitude was beyond freeing. He was really concerned that I be allowed to write in my voice. He basically said, ‘you write it, and we’ll figure it out.’” Feeling particularly at home in French Romantic repertoire, Kuffuor-Afriyie says he does not play a lot of new music. However, he welcomed this opportunity warmly, and he found it interesting to work with someone who has such a different taste in music. Wirshba is excited about continuing to explore genre crossovers using the organ in his future work, and is going to continue his education in composition. Kuffuor-Afriyie plans on finishing his undergraduate work next May and applying to graduate schools.

Meeting at the University of North Texas, composer **Mark Vaughn** and organist **Christoph Hintermüller** come from extremely different musical backgrounds. Hintermüller, having grown up in Germany, recalls fondly a moment in the U.S. equivalent of fourth or fifth grade where, as a normal part of his schooling, he attended regular religious services. These services included a steady rotation of the same hymn tunes. He remembers being particularly bored with the monotony of the interpretation, and in a particularly confident moment for a young child, thought, “I could do that.” From that point, he knew he wanted to be an organist, and the course of his life has pointed that direction ever since. Because of his early interest, he learned the organ in what he calls a “rather traditional way” for a German. He is currently working toward his master’s in organ. Vaughn, on the other hand, had no musical experience until he was 17, at which point he started playing electric bass. It was not until college at Montana State University that he delved into his formal musical training.

He found himself absolutely enthralled with experimental music. Initially thinking he would do something in music technology, he pursued it as a degree. However, his knowledge and proficiency in technology, combined with his interest in composition and experimental music, were quickly manifested in electronic composition. He would eventually go on to get his master's in music composition, and is now pursuing his PhD.

Firma | Foundation is entirely comprised of direct quotations of the music of, among many others, J.S. Bach, Frescobaldi, Dieterich Buxtehude, John Bull, Camille Saint-Saëns, François Couperin, César Franck, and Charles Ives. Vaughn calls it a sort of “referential portrait of the organ formed of derived structures and materials.” He is influenced by other collage pieces, like those of John Zorn, but he also wanted to do something different. Vaughn says, “Every instrument has an individual canon aside from the one the broader culture of classical music recognizes—Beethoven, Bach, etc. The canon of organ music, for instance, contains and emphasizes all sorts of composers and pieces that other professional musicians may be unaware of.” By directly acknowledging this within a musical work, Vaughn says a piece can function meaningfully at several cultural levels. He says, “In many ways, I want to challenge assumed ideas about legitimacy and meaning in music and the conception of composers as solitary, wholly original geniuses.” *Firma | Foundation* reflects these philosophical goals while also being, as Hintermüller says, “a super fun piece for both the organist and the audience.” Though Hintermüller says he was uninvolved in the composition process, Vaughn says he was invaluable when it came to getting to know the organ repertoire and registering at the organ. Both say that the piece can and should be interpreted liberally, both stylistically and in terms of registration.

Hintermüller is interested in studying American organ music and bringing it to Germany, where he says it is underplayed and frequently completely unknown. He plays a lot of music by Dudley Buck, John Knowles Paine, and Eugene Thayer, and when he tours Germany, it is warmly received. When it comes to performing new music, he says he finds it to be a real challenge to connect. However, he says that this particular piece has really allowed him to approach new music with an open mind and to share that openness with his audiences. He is glad to have had the opportunity to work with Vaughn, who equally appreciated the experience to write for the organ.

Composer **Jasmine Thomasian** and organist **Zhen Piao** are both doing doctoral work at the Eastman School of Music. Piao began his college musical career as a pianist, receiving his master's in piano from the University of Illinois. It was not until his time in Illinois that he was really exposed to the organ. Quickly fascinated by the instrument's sounds and architecture, he decided to change course, finishing an artist's diploma in organ at the University of Illinois and now pursuing his DMA at Eastman. About the importance of new music in general, Piao says, “I like to play new music. I understand deeply that new music has true power to keep an instrument alive.” Thomasian (they/them) began college as a religion major. Though they loved composition, they did not fully embrace the title “composer” until they had already begun their master's in religion. During this time, they decided to change course to pursue a master's degree in composition at Eastman. One of the things Thomasian loves most about composition is

exploring an instrument's sound world through the lens of a collaborator's unique skill set.

Composed specifically for the Craighead-Saunders organ at Christ Church in Rochester, New York, *Translucent Threads* is for “Baroque organ and live electronics.” Talking about their recent interests in music and composition, Thomasian says,

Lately, I've been interested in the way that each sound we hear is made up of many different frequencies at various volumes. Together, these frequencies create the distinctive timbres that help us identify individual sounds. However, if we separate out bands of these frequencies, we can create new sounds that are only barely (if at all) recognizable as related to their original source sounds. These bands of frequencies, separated out, are what I refer to with the title of this piece, *Translucent Threads*.

The live electronics require a second performer, but in addition to that, it is almost obligatory to have two additional registrants at the organ (Thomasian even includes a short preface specifically for the registrants). The score, in graphic notation, delineates time by second measurements, where each system equals about 20 seconds, except the last, in which the organ does not play—a full minute. The piece is a total of six minutes. Thomasian uses a rather standard graphic notation style to indicate clusters, but clarifies irregularities in the preface.

Working on experimental music requires a great deal of flexibility from the performer, and Thomasian recognizes the real collaborative benefits of working with someone as open and flexible as Piao. “Zhen was very willing to work with me in developing new techniques like the one he used to create the cluster glissandos at the start of *Translucent Threads*,” says Thomasian. They describe how Piao would sit at the keyboard while they stood just behind or next to the keyboard. Thomasian would do their best to describe or demonstrate what kind of sound they were looking for, and both would work together to find and develop the extended techniques required to achieve the sounds Thomasian had in mind. Piao describes the challenges of performing with live electronics:

In our premiere, Jasmine played the electronic part downstairs, and I played the organ upstairs, which was a challenge. All I heard was my own playing, so the parts where the electronics and organ are in dialogue were very difficult to perform.

Despite the real challenges, Piao thinks the piece was a real success for the audience. Piao would like to return to China to teach at a university, where he is interested in sharing the organ and its music with China. Thomasian will continue their education in composition and media technology at Northwestern University as a PhD student next year.

The pieces discussed above will soon be posted on the AGO website: Agohq.org/ago-student-commissioning-project. While you are there, be sure to explore AGO's other commissioning projects and awards. If you are currently a student and interested in this project, contact AGO Headquarters at competitions@agohq.org.

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