

From the Artistic Director



It's springtime. Or at least it is in Southern California, where I am writing these words. With desert flowers in the offing and blooming jacaranda not far behind, our attention turns to things that grow.

Or, in the case of this concert, to things that change.

On the surface tonight's concert looks like a crazy quilt of divergences, but dig a little deeper and you'll note that everything grows from a common ground. All of these pieces started from a remarkably similar impulse, but each has grown in its own way. To torture the metaphor a bit more, from the same soil will grow fantastically varied flowers.

Tonight we present five composers. Each is rooted in a particular branch of the American experimentalist tradition. Each was an accomplished performer before becoming a composer. And for each, the elaboration of a known tradition has been guided by forces external to that tradition. Those external forces are what Robertson Davies has referred to as the "Fifth Business:" they are catalysts designed to destabilize an otherwise balanced system. Without such a force nothing can change; with it everything does.

Take Paul Drescher for example. Paul has been a central figure in the Bay Area music scene since he relocated here after his studies at the University of California, San Diego, where he worked with Robert Erickson. The Erickson philosophy, with no small influence from Harry Partch, Lou Harrison and musical visionaries from African and Asian traditions, led Drescher along a path of musical invention and instrument fabrication

that has made him an iconic and profoundly influential West Coast composer. The instrument you'll hear tonight, the "quadrachord," is just one of his many inventions. But Paul has also worked as much in the theater as he has in the concert hall. And his theatrical disposition has led him to understand not just how music *sounds* but also how it acts. The result is a lively, virtuosic, and fully embodied variation on the California experimentalists.

Iconoclast, intellectual, and sensualist, Eve Beglarian, is represented by *I'm worried now, but I won't be worried long*, a brief but alluring work for solo violinist and a pre-recorded tape of the processed sounds of leaky pipes. If the standard trope of American Experimentalists has been, "it's all about the sound," Beglarian's take on it may well have been, "it's all about the experience of the sound." For Eve, music is about what happens to you when you listen. Her most effective pieces are always the most affecting ones. This is a small-ish sample, but imagine what can happen when she uses a big canvas. For more see her evening-length piece for the cellist Maya Beiser or her continuing musical essays on a one-woman, human-powered trip she made down the length of the Mississippi River in 2009.

Tonight we present five composers, each rooted in a particular branch of the American experimentalist tradition... yet each guided by forces external to that tradition.

Stuart Smith's version of the American impulse comes from the other side of the country. His work has drawn self-consciously on the tradition of American Transcendentalism. Indeed much of his work has been informed by a world-view that places humans and nature in correlative resonance. Beyond that a long series of pieces written for remarkably similar instrumentation alludes to Emerson and Thoreau. Note his set of eleven "Links" for

vibraphone solo spanning more than twenty years. Smith calls these works “essays,” and they vary so little from one another in terms of color, texture and musical language that they function more as journal entries than as pieces of music. With Smith’s music the outlying force is his love of jazz and his willingness to quote it overtly, both as material and inspiration. *Pinetop*, for piano solo, refers to Pinetop Perkins, who lived nearly a hundred years and influenced practically everyone who has played any kind of blues or rock music.

No simple categorization of George Lewis is possible. But if you trace his roots back far enough they will lead you to the trombone and to the communal musical-making of the African American tradition. But that’s just the beginning. On a recent trip abroad I had to fill out a visa form. When I got to the line where I listed my occupation, I suddenly smiled and thought of George. What would he do here? There was not a box for “scholar, designer of nearly the first real-time interface between performers and computers, teacher, advocate of musical communities of extraordinary diversity, performer, and more recently and very fruitfully, composer.” George is all of the above and has touched nearly every area of music and nearly every musician I know. We are very pleased to give the first performance of his latest work, *Hexis*.

My first act as Artistic Director of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players was to ask Mark Applebaum to write a piece for us. I told the board to consider the commission “truth in advertising.” I wanted SFCMP to retain the identity of its distinguished past while aggressively re-evaluating the impact of that past on the future. I knew that Mark would write our anthem. *Rabbit Hole* did not disappoint. It is a work firmly rooted in the most rigorous practices of contemporary music, but one that produces a singularly ludic and seemingly undirected flow of events. It could have been written by one of the Marx brothers if he had studied with Webern and Derrida. It is a

piece full of detail: from sounds that are almost but not quite played, to highly virtuosic instrumental passages, detailed stage movements, Dada-esque hand signals, and special wristwatches (I am not kidding). You will soon experience it, so there is no reason to describe it further. Suffice to say that it is extremely aptly named.

Yes, thoughts have turned to spring: to the way we start as one thing and become something else. It's the becoming that's so sweet, the way that things, even when you think you know them well, can become something unexpected. One of the fondest memories I have of my father was watching him walk out onto the black plowed earth of our Iowa farm and sniff the warming spring air. "We'll plant now," he announced, and with that everything began to change.

We send our warm thanks and vernal greetings to the five wonderful composers on tonight's program and to you, our intrepid listeners.

– Steven Schick

San Francisco Contemporary Music Players
Steven Schick, Artistic Director

Rabbit Hole

Monday, February 25, 2013 • 8:00 pm

Herbst Theatre

Stuart Saunders Smith

Pinetop

Keisuke Nakagoshi, piano

Paul Dresher

Chromatic Quadrachord

Paul Dresher, quadrachord

George Lewis

Hexis

Intermission

Eve Beglarian

I'm worried now, but I won't be worried long

Roy Malan, violin

Mark Applebaum

Rabbit Hole

The Performers

Steven Schick, conductor

Tod Brody, flute

Jeff Anderle, clarinet

Justin Emerich, trumpet

Keisuke Nakagoshi, piano

William Winant, percussion (Applebaum)

Daniel Kennedy, percussion (Applebaum, Dresher)

Megan Shieh, percussion (Applebaum, Lewis)

Elizabeth Hall, percussion (Lewis)

Roy Malan, violin (Beglarian)

Graeme Jennings, violin (Applebaum, Dresher, Lewis)

Nanci Severance, viola

Stephen Harrison, cello

Greg Kuhn, audio engineer

Robert Shumaker, recording engineer

About the Composers

Mark Applebaum (b. 1967, Chicago) is Associate Professor of Composition. He received his Ph.D. in composition from the University of California at San Diego where he studied principally with Brian Ferneyhough. His solo, chamber, choral, orchestral, operatic, and electroacoustic work has been performed throughout the United States, Europe, Africa, and Asia with notable premieres at the Darmstadt summer sessions. He has received commissions from Betty Freeman, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, the Fromm Foundation, the Paul Dresher Ensemble, the Vienna Modern Festival, Antwerp's Champ D'Action, Festival ADEvantgarde in Munich, Zeitgeist, MANUFACTURE (Tokyo), the St. Lawrence String Quartet, the Jerome Foundation, and the American Composers Forum, among others. In 1997 Applebaum received the American Music Center's Stephen Albert Award and an artist residency fellowship at the Villa Montalvo artist colony in Northern California.

Applebaum is also active as a jazz pianist and builds electroacoustic instruments out of junk, hardware, and found objects for use as both compositional and improvisational tools. His music can be heard on recordings on the Innova, Tzadik, Capstone, and SEAMUS labels. Prior to his current appointment, he taught at UCSD, Mississippi State University, and Carleton College.

Eve Beglarian is a composer, performer, and audio producer whose music is "an eclectic and wide-open series of enticements" (Josef Woodard, *The Los Angeles Times*) and who has been described as "One of new music's truly free spirits" (Kyle Gann, *The Village Voice*) and "a remarkable experimentalist" (Albert Innaurato, *The New York Times*). Her chamber, choral, and orchestral music has been commissioned and widely performed by The Bang on a Can All-Stars, the Los Angeles Master Chorale, and the American Composers Orchestra among many others. Highlights of Beglarian's work in music theatre include music for Mabou Mines' Obie-winning *Dollhouse*, *Animal Magnetism*, *Ecco Porco*, and *Choephorai*, all directed by Lee Breuer; *Forgiveness*; a collaboration with Chen Shi-Zheng and Noh master Akira Matsui; and the China National Beijing Opera Theater's production of *The Bacchae*, also directed by Chen Shi-Zheng.

As both a composer and performer, **Paul Dresher** is uniquely able to integrate different musical influences into a coherent and remarkably personal style. He composes and performs experimental opera and music theater, chamber and orchestral music, and instrumental electro-acoustic music, often creating and performing on newly invented musical instruments. Born in Los Angeles in 1951, Dresher earned his undergraduate degree in music from UC Berkeley and his

MA in composition from UC San Diego where he studied with Robert Erickson, Roger Reynolds, Pauline Oliveros and Bernard Rands. For many years he studied music of Asia and Africa, learning Ghanaian drumming from C.K. and Kobla Ladzekpo and Hindustani classical music from Nikhil Banerjee. A 2006-07 recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Dresner has been commissioned by the Library of Congress, Spoleto Festival USA, the Kronos Quartet and the San Francisco Symphony among numerous others, with his music being performed throughout North America, in Asia and Europe.

George E. Lewis is the Edwin H. Case Professor of American Music at Columbia University, and the 2013 Ernest Bloch Visiting Professor of Music at the University of California, Berkeley. The recipient of a 2002 MacArthur Fellowship, a 1999 Alpert Award in the Arts, a 2011 United States Artists Walker Fellowship, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Lewis studied composition with Muhal Richard Abrams at the AACM School of Music, and trombone with Dean Hey. A member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) since 1971, Lewis's work in electronic and computer music, computer-based multimedia installations, text-sound works, and notated and improvisational forms is documented on more than 140 recordings. His work has been presented and commissioned by a number of organizations including the American Composers Orchestra, International Contemporary Ensemble, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, 2010 Vancouver Cultural Olympiad, OPUS (Paris), and IRCAM, among others. His widely acclaimed book, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (University of Chicago Press, 2008) is a recipient of the American Book Award, and he is the co-editor of the forthcoming two-volume *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*.

Composer, percussionist, and poet **Stuart Saunders Smith** describes himself as "a confessional composer who focuses on revealing in his music the most personal aspects of his life, in the belief that the revelations of the particular speak to the universal." He was born and grew up in Maine and studied with Edward Diemente at the Hartt School of Music. In 1977, he received a DMA in composition from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where his instructors included Edward Miller, Salvatore Martirano, Herbert Brün, and Ben Johnston. He teaches at the University of Maryland and has also taught at the Atlantic Center for the Arts. He served as executive editor of the *Percussive Arts Research Edition* from 1982 to 1984. Chromatic, atonal, and rhythmically complex, his music uses intuitively selected pitch material rather than the twelve-tone technique – it is often theatrical, asking the performers to speak, sing, act, and perform/pantomime in addition to playing their instruments. Many of his works are inspired by the environment and history of Maine.

Mark Applebaum on *Rabbit Hole*

There seem to be two kinds of musicians. The first type says, “This is what I do; write me something like that.” The second type says, “This is what I do; please (please!) challenge me to do something different.” To my mind, Steve Schick is decidedly in the second category.

So when Steve asked me to compose for the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players I felt at liberty to pursue an astonishingly ridiculous idea I had been mulling for almost two decades: to write a piece of music based on page turns. Until *Rabbit Hole* the “page turn piece” was only an absurd mental musing provoked by a logistical dilemma: annoyed by the challenges of finding reasonable moments for players to turn the pages of their parts (due to my habit of composing dense, overly prolix music that keeps the arms constantly engaged) I vowed to one day compose the page turns first – the page turn as principal *musical material*. I would then compose the mute changes for brass instruments and the mallet changes for percussionists. Precise rhythmic moments would be identified for trading the alto flute and piccolo, for adjusting the violin bow’s tension, for oiling a trumpet valve, for picking up claves and putting them down, and so on. There would even be composed states of attentiveness: high for body language suggesting imminent sonic production; medium for tracking musical flow in a slightly relaxed state; and low to describe what the body might do during a full movement of rest. The very last thing to be determined, and only grudgingly, would be pitches and rhythms.

What was once an asinine concept has been realized as the serious – or at least fastidious – musical enterprise that is this piece. (It may still be asinine.) I recognize the seeming irrationality of a project that eschews the utility of conventional musical materials and replaces them with structures based on musical marginalia. The result may make you smile cheerfully

or shake your head in exasperated disbelief, or both. But it's not supposed to be comedic. It aspires to the absurd side of the ludic.

Exploring this particular rabbit hole appealed to me for four main reasons:

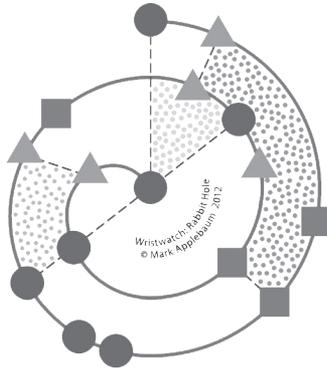
First, the piece makes virtually no sound. Increasingly I've become annoyed that music, for most people, seems to demand sound. Must it? Some of my recent pieces have veered away from that supposition, whether through the addition of increasingly predominant visual elements (e.g. *Concerto for Florist and Orchestra*, *Aphasia* for hand gestures synchronized to sound, *Echolalia* consisting of 22 Dadaist rituals, the *Mouseketier* sound-sculpture which functions as both an instrument and as visual art), or through the active suppression of prescribed sound in the compositional phase in order to invoke real or imagined sound in performance (e.g. *Tlön* for three conductors and no players, *The Metaphysics of Notation* – a 72-foot graphic score without instruction).

Second, the Eurocentric preoccupation with pitch as the (tediously) foremost parameter is subverted, simply sidestepped. (The players do get to play exciting, conventionally virtuosic, and highly mercurial contrapuntal passages made up of idiomatic and extended techniques with precise – and lovingly chosen – pitches. But, perversely, the players are asked to play at the impossible dynamic *ppppp* – a gorgeous sound, if paradoxically compressed, concentrated, and squashed.)

Third, the focus becomes a theater made up of ancillary musical praxis, the ritualistic margins of performance culture, a way to floodlight neglected edges of what Christopher Small inclusively calls *musicking*. (By the way, I'd hate for actors to perform this piece. This is a kind of music, however weird, for musicians – special, intrepid ones who are not insulted by an invocation to care about things that are not central to their conservatory training).

Finally, the logistics should be eminently practical. In theory, this should be a piece that works easily. After all, the germinal impulse was to obviate difficult page turns and patronize the incidence of “extra-musical” actions.

Regrettably this is not a practical piece after all. There are 90 page turns (everyone reads from full 180-page scores in which each page has a five-second duration – but with no two pages made up of the same meter and tempo arrangements, thereby creating a deliberate choreography of conduction). Furthermore, it is preposterously swollen with events – picking up mallets, changing mutes, etc. – each at a precisely specified time. Moreover, additional categories of material crept in, ones that seem ancillary but are in fact fundamental: fussy hand gestures; frequent physical relocation; and the migration of the printed score to the forearm as players read from custom-made wristwatches (responding to various glyphs as the second hand passes over them).



There is indeed something perplexing about a piece whose counterpoint demands that the audience ask, at a given moment, “Should I pay attention to the cello’s nearly inaudible melody, or to the percussionist’s lifting of an instrument (which will not be played, by the way), or to the flutist who just started walking to another position on stage?”

And some will be inclined to ask “Is it even music?” I’m convinced that this is not the right question. The question should be: “Is it interesting?”

Increasingly I’ve pursued the things that seem intriguing to me, even when, as artistic formulations, their likeness to familiar models – those traditionally defined pieces that one is supposed to make as a *composer* (beyond which a judgment of dilettantism or lunacy is invited) – is tenuous. Becoming unhinged from a paradigm can be pretty interesting. Or, at the very least, it encourages a trip down a rabbit hole which, however terrifying (it may never end...there may be no return...), is rarely boring.

* * *

Rabbit Hole, scored for octet of flute, trumpet, three percussion, violin, viola, and cello, is affectionately dedicated, with gratitude, to Steven Schick, San Francisco Contemporary Music Players director and intrepid collaborator. It was commissioned through *Meet the Composer’s Commissioning Music/USA program*, which is made possible by generous support from the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Helen F. Whitaker Fund.

Q & A with Eve Beglarian

SFCMP: *There seems to be a theme running in the titles of your work where there's a question of anticipation or acknowledging a distance of time or space in these strangely specific and personal yet ultimately ambiguous ways – How I Like That Time, I am writing to you from a far-off country, I will not be sad in this world... Could you offer some insight towards how this current flows in your very large body of works?*

EB: It happens that in the last two pieces you mention, along with tonight's piece, *I'm worried now but I won't be worried long*, I'm using source material from traditional Armenian music, though in very different ways in each piece. The titles themselves come from a range of different places: *How I Like That Time* is a line from an interview about sex, *I am writing to you from a far-off country* is the title of the Belgian surrealist Henri Michaux's poem that I set in the piece, *I will not be sad in this world* is the title of the Armenian song I am working with in that flute piece, and *I'm worried now but I won't be worried long* comes from Delta bluesman Charley Patton's *Down the Dirt Road Blues*.

I think it might be meaningful that all the titles are quotations from other people, not my own invention. While I always aim to make my work emotionally available to the listener – that's why I'm writing it, after all – I am not exactly a confessional artist. It's not really about me.

SFCMP: *One of the most interesting things about pieces for a solo instrument and electronics is that it often becomes very easy to tell which "player" the sound is coming from, and in tonight's piece one of the roles of the electronics seems to be that of an entirely distinct accompanying ensemble. What is the relationship between the violin and the electronics in I'm worried now but I won't be worried long?*

EB: The original recording of leaky pipes in a bathroom at the Beijing Conservatory is the basis of the whole piece. The rhythm and sonorities grew from that material. Along with transformations of that bathroom recording, there are counter-melodies in the pre-recorded track that flesh out a sort of hazy quartet that accompanies the live violinist. Sometimes some of those parts are performed live. The delay on the live violin lines up with the delay on some of the pre-recorded tracks as well, so perhaps the relation of live vs. recorded in this piece is malleable.

SFCMP: *Approaching your music from a fairly broader angle, you've been identified a number of times as a post-minimalist composer, and it's not difficult to hear qualities associated with the music of Steve Reich or Philip Glass in I'm worried now but I won't be worried long. How do you place yourself in terms of the legacy that this title implies? How do you approach the minimalist language when writing music?*

EB: Lately, I've been mulling over Robert Alter's analysis of the structure of repetition in the Psalms. Repetition isn't just simple parallelism, but a growth and transformation, a deepening of the idea that's nominally repeated. There's a through line in *Worried Now* that for me is quite different from the purity and clarity of classic minimalism. But that's true of the later music of Reich and Glass as well, of course. Purity and clarity only take you so far, then everything gets messy again.

Q & A with Paul Dresher

SFCMP: *To start, could you share a few thoughts on your approach to instrument building?*

PD: An idea for an instrument usually starts with the question “What would happen if...”. The “if” in that answer might be something like “we put strings on a 16-foot long beam?” or “we explore the way a hurdy gurdy mechanically bows strings?” or “dispense with the keyboard and invent new ways to play a pipe organ?” Of course, behind any of these questions is a curiosity about sounds and a desire to discover either a new sound world or a new way of creating or controlling sounds that might already be in our musical vocabulary.

SFCMP: *What is the process of orchestration like now that you’ve created such a wealth of new sounds with the instruments you’ve built?*

PD: It is always a substantial compositional step when one attempts to move beyond what may be a seductive and thoroughly intriguing single sound of a new invention in order to create a more layered or complex music. Of course, if you are combining that sound with other newly-invented sounds, you probably have a bit more freedom. But if one is combining that invented instrument with conventional instruments, one has to grapple with the very basic issues of the tuning system one chooses to use, and of course, important characteristics of timbre (sound “color”) and dynamics (the relative loudness and balance). The latter two are an issue that any composer deals with when writing for two different instruments and this is best learned through direct experience. In this work, which is one of my first to combine the Quadrachord with conventional instruments, I decided to explore that question directly by choosing an ensemble that combined different instrumental families: bowed strings (violin), clarinet (woodwind), struck strings (piano) and percussion (marimba). And because the Quadrachord does NOT play in the same tuning system as these conventional instruments – all its intervals are derived from the natural harmonic series – I decided to make the difference between their tuning systems one of the main subjects of the work itself.

SFCMP: *In an interview about your Concerto for Quadrachord & Orchestra, you talk about some of the challenges of trying to blend or distinguish the voice of the instrument with that of the orchestra. Could you talk a little bit about the “voice” of the Quadrachord and how we’ll be hearing it in tonight’s piece?*

PD: I’ll apologize in advance for the overly-technical description in the following paragraph – one that is likely indecipherable to anyone not well-versed in the tuning of the intervals of the natural harmonic series. Fortunately, I don’t expect anyone listening to the work to follow the development of the music in any way different from how one might normally listen to chamber music except to offer the hint (or perhaps a warning) that in some places, some phrases will not sound “in tune” with one’s expectations of normal ensemble tuning.

What we’ll hear from the Quadrachord in tonight’s performance is a relatively simple (in terms of formal structure) and somewhat systematic exploration of the two different parameters that shape the composition: orchestration and intonation. The piece begins with the Quadrachord alone, establishing its distinct sound world and playing the simple bowed pattern that it will use throughout the work. The musical content at that point is simple and entirely in tune with the tuning systems that all the other instruments will use. (The Quadrachord playing the 6th harmonic on all but one of the strings). As the piece develops, each instrument plays a short duet with the Quadrachord. At each entrance, the Quadrachord moves to a new harmony that incorporates at least one of the next ascending intervals of the harmonic series on one of the four strings. At that point there is divergence between the tuning of the notes on the Quadrachord and on the conventional instruments. As the piece progresses, duets turn into trios, then quartets and then the full quintet towards the end. And at each instrumental change, the Quadrachord moves higher in the harmonic series, ascending stepwise (hence the “chromatic” of the title) until its final harmonic pattern that uses the 17th, 15th, 13th and 18th harmonics respectively on the four strings (that are tuned Ab, F, F, and Db).

George E. Lewis on *Hexis*

This is the third in a series of pieces I've composed in the last year that, like *Tractatus* and *Mnemosis* (both 2012), explore notions of temporality and historical change. William Peterson interprets the 1st-century Roman rhetorician Quintilian's use of the Greek word *hexis* as describing "the fixed tendency that results from repeated acts." As classical scholar Glyn P. Norton has observed, "Just as *kairos*, in the Aristotelian tradition, defines how we respond ethically to contingent events, so *hexis* retains a similar ethical value by showing how what we do, rather than paste itself to a kind of tensile, modular ethics recalling Stoic *firmitas*, is conditioned largely by our behavioral suppleness." In both the writings of Quintilian and Pliny's *Letters*, *hexis* becomes a hallmark of superior rhetorical extemporization-improvisation. In *Hexis*, it is the listener who improvises rather than the performers; the work is meant to manifest a behavioral suppleness that encourages us to catch the bus and go along for the ride, unburdened by teleologies, motivic elaboration, or global form. All three pieces draw inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche's classic 1882 conception of the eternal recurrence, and proposition 6.4311 of Ludwig Wittgenstein's 1921 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Both philosophers treat history, memory and experience as existentially recursive, allowing progress to coexist with stasis, an apparent paradox that this piece confronts.

A Brief Chat with Stuart Saunders Smith

We managed to grab a few seconds with **Stuart Saunders Smith**, composer of *Pinetop*, and who joins us from New England for tonight's concert.

SFCMP: *Starting with the title of tonight's piece, could you talk a little bit about how Pinetop Perkins enters into the music you've written and perhaps offer some insight towards the importance of his legacy?*

SSS: Pinetop was an outstanding pianist with a wonderful touch. He was one of the founders of boogie-woogie, the audience music of the turpentine mills of the mid-west. The title is a tribute, not an attribute. Pinetop is my boogie-woogie. Do you care to dance?

SFCMP: *A collective "thank you" from our audience for that invite!*

Let me ask you about something in the performance note for Pinetop, where you write that the piece "should be performed as one long continuous phrase." Yet the score has many moments where rests, contrasts of energy, timbre and dynamic, or rhythmic and textural groupings go exactly towards the kind of phrased understanding you tell the player to avoid.

SSS: Our lives are full of irony, chaos, and contradiction.

SFCMP: *True enough. Now, aside from music you also write poetry, and a good number of your compositions feature spoken word. How do you negotiate the interplay between speech and instrumental sound in your work? Is there an intended theatrical aspect at play?*

SSS: All live music is theater music. My music is the music of speech - a talking music. I hope the audience responds with the question: "Do you really mean it?"

My answer is always ... "Yes!"