

Contemporary Players Artist Chats 2020-21

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Eric Dudley: This is *Artist Chats* with The San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. I'm Eric Dudley, Artistic Director and for this episode we're joined by pianist Allegra Chapman who will be giving the premiere of a new work for solo piano, *unravel* by Josiah Catalann on our upcoming *at The Crossroads* series concert. Allegra, thank you so much for joining us.

Allegra Chapman: My pleasure, it's so great to be here.

Dudley: It's great to have you playing with us again. You've been a member of this ensemble at several points in the past four for previous performances, so welcome back! And this is kind of an exciting assignment this time, right? Josiah is the winner of our annual *SF Search* for scores and was offered the commission to write a new work for any solo instrument. Josiah chose piano and what I would love to hear from you, and our audience as well, is what happens in that situation when you are performer, you're giving a brand-new score for the first time, it's yours to interpret in the in the premiere version, what are the things that are going through your head and then how are you preparing for that particular experience?

Chapman: Yeah, well it's one of my favorite things in the whole world to be given a brand-new score. It's really such a free—it feels like being given so much freedom and especially getting to work with the composer on it, is just a really special experience as a musician. So what I always like to do and what I did with this piece is to do a sort of crash and burn run through when I first get it. Usually I take a look through it and then I just do the best that I can to sort of play through it and when I did that with this piece of it was really clear to be right away that it's a wonderful piece that has so many varied elements to it and just so much to really dig your teeth into as a performer. And yeah after doing that I usually go in with a more fine-tooth comb and start to tease apart the different sections and really get a feel for what the piece is about thematically and maybe on a more metaphorical level.

Dudley: Yeah, so now that you've kind of been deep into that process, what are you taking away from it on that level, you know, what are you feeling on the metaphoric level? And I know you've spoken to Josiah as well.

Chapman: Yeah, so I was really lucky to do a workshop session with him as part of this project a couple of weeks ago and that was very informative and just really, really helpful. My first initial, kind of, guess about the meaning of this piece, when I saw the title, *unravel* and I thought a lot of different elements of it and it all led me to think that, it was may be referring to a kind of psychological unraveling that reflected a lot of our experience right now going through this extremely difficult time in the pandemic. **(Dudley: Sure)** So, and it was really interesting to hear from Josiah in our workshop that he was actually thinking of it a little bit more in terms of unraveling of a fabric or it tightly knit object and that he said it wasn't overtly political but definitely influenced kind of inevitably by our times. So that definitely changed the way I was approaching it. I had initially been approaching it more like an overtly emotional attitude and I started looking at it a little bit more as abstract but still emotional, but really getting into all of the details of what he'd written and that's been really great to go through that process.

Dudley: Yeah, for sure, and that was a really enjoyable session, we were all kind of in on it, it was you, Josiah as composer, me as Artistic Director and then Michael Gilbertson who's also a composer himself and one of our board members. So something we always try to do with this particular project is have a chance for the artists to interface and kind of get into it on that level, but I know that you and Josiah have also just been in touch, yourselves, in the interim period also. So I'm sort of wondering, so what, what has come after that, after

we had that sort of more formalized session, what has been the ongoing interaction between you and how is it going and how has it shaped the piece and how it's going into performance?

Chapman: Yeah, well I've been trying out a lot of different, I guess, options from what we explored in our working session. And actually Josiah and I haven't had that much back and forth yet, it's been, I haven't had all that many more questions from after that working session but, now I have sort of have several different options for how I'm considering playing different sections of this piece, and so I'm going to send him those and see what his feedback is and I may do a little bit of mixing and matching for the actual final recording next week.

Dudley: Sure, yeah. What is the most challenging aspect in your view?

Chapman: Um, that's a good question, there's... I think probably the most challenging aspect is creating a sense of a throughline in the opening section which is really the first half of the piece and I think that it's probably what innovative elements of the piece actually that Josiah starts it at the very very top of the piano and with a single line, so there is no counterpoint, or at least, I guess there is counterpoint, but it's not really overt counterpoint, and there is, you're only using one hand most of the time so it's a very kind of idiosyncratic approach to the piano that I think is fascinating and yields really great results. But—

Dudley: —Yeah, that was my impression on seeing the score too, that it very much picks a particular texture right which is that you say that is just one line and running fast notes right and just sticks with it and sticks with it for an extended period of time, right?

Chapman: Exactly, yeah and it gradually works its way down the keyboard and starts to build emotionally and with dynamics, so creating that really, drawing the listener in and drawing out that process, is what I've found the most challenging in working on it.

Dudley: Yeah, wonderful. What do you think is the most adventurous aspect of the piece? What's the thing that strikes you as most, kind of, new or fresh or interesting?

Chapman: Probably a similar answer, actually. Just the approach to the landscape of the piano. That it kind of looks at each side of the piano, you know, each element of the piano individually. So starting at the very top and the range of the piano and being up there for a while and then starting to move down and starting to introduce accents and different types of articulation that the piano is capable of and then it really gets into the bass and starts using the pedals in some very interesting ways including requiring *sostenuto* pedal and just allowing the piano to resonate in a different way. And then the whole second section uses the piano in a very, it's quite Romantic in a way actually. So, I think that in a funny way, it's, when you look at the score it doesn't use a lot of extended techniques or unusual techniques, it's really just using the piano acoustically as an instrument and, but, it looks at it in a kind of an unusual, an unusual approach to just the standard piano technique.

Dudley: Right, in the kind of—the unconventionality of it is, is the way in which it treats you know only certain areas and, and registers of the piano at a given time. (**Chapman:** Exactly, yeah) and then kind of finds a way of arriving at something wholly different at the end than how it began (**Chapman:** Yeah, exactly) Yeah, it's a really cool piece and we're very much looking forward to hearing your first rendition of it so, thank you for being with us and we look forward to the performance.

Chapman: Thank you, I'm looking forward to it too.