

Contemporary Players Artist Chats

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Eric Dudley: This is *Artist Chats* with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players I'm Artistic Director, Eric Dudley and in this episode I'm joined by composer Josiah Catalan who is the winner of this year's annual *SF Search for Scores* commissioning program and Josiah, thank you so much for being with us.

Josiah Catalan: Thank you for having me, it's such a pleasure.

Dudley: Yes of course and we're thrilled that you are our *SF Search* winner this year and it's a bit of a different competition this year than it has been in the past because we've kind of redesigned the program to be a straight-up commission. You submitted your work along with a number of other really highly qualified applicants, so congratulations for that, and the call was to actually write a piece for solo instrument, essentially having the choice of all of our roster players and you chose piano, so we want to know why, what is it about piano that most inspired you for this particular project?

Catalan: So I've always wanted to write a solo piano piece but I guess maybe time, resources haven't really been on my side up to this point and when I won this competition and I saw that piano was one of the instruments on the list I said, "maybe now is a better time than any to kind of take this endeavor on," you know, luckily I have such a great player like Allegra to work with and I'm very excited to write a piece, my very first piece for solo piano.

Dudley: Fantastic, yeah, so you've mentioned Allegra, you've been working with her very closely. What has that relationship been like? I know we had our actual official working session on the piece a few weeks back which is just part of the program that we do but I know you guys have been in touch just separately as well so, what, what has that project kind of opened you up to and what have you, maybe, you know, kind of decided differently about the piece as you've been involved with that kind of interaction?

Catalan: It's been great so, one thing that I'm very thankful for this competition and also this program is the fact that I get to work closely along with the performer and you know sometimes with a composers you don't get that opportunity, maybe you write a piece for someone or your piece gets played and you get one rehearsal, a little input and then it's a concert but, this time you know I've been lucky to get close contact with Allegra and to be able to collaborate with her, and I say collaborate because you know she's the one working on the piece and I'm the one writing, writing for her and you know, I like to work closely with performers in trying to adjust a piece, I don't like the kind of just be completely in control I think sometimes performing artists have great insight that they can add to a piece as well, so Allegra has done that and so much more in just helping me kind of makes micro adjustments or bigger adjustments as well in terms

of the pacing of the piece; how fast things should be played or interpreted. And then also just kind of opening up my own perception to how things can be interpreted, which I really love, you know, I might be thinking of my musical idea one way but a performer can re-interpret it their own way and I think that's, you know, a special collaboration to have between a musician, or the performer and the composer.

Dudley: Absolutely. I can recall that in, in the working session and we spent quite a while kind of talking about just the opening of the piece and the fact that it has essentially just like running sixteenth notes, you know for, for you know for staves and staves and pages on end and we talked quite a lot about the feel of that and the tempo and stuff like that, I'm wondering if, I'm wondering where you come down now having had that conversation and kind of thinking of that, that kind of opening of the piece and you and your concept, your concept behind it.

Catalan: Yeah, it said it's definitely changed a lot because you know as a composer when you're working behind the manuscript paper everything so conceptual or theoretical and when you finally get to sit down and hear the music being performed live for you it definitely changes what you might have been thinking and thinking about those tempi adjustments I think, you know, and then actually also hearing them live really helped me solidify my idea of what I wanted for that piece and I think it was very helpful for Allegra and also for you and Michael [Gilbertson] to kind of bring those points up and you know what's really important for my process so far to be able to get the completed project that will be heard by the audience.

Dudley: Sure. Yeah. So talk to us about the title in your words, you know talk to us about *unravel* and, and what it is that you're trying to bring across in this particular piece.

Catalan: So when I was composing the piece, *unravel* I kind of had in mind this fabric or object or structure that was kind of tightly wound but, you know, through its density it was starting to kind of come apart and being pulled apart to the point where after everything has fully unraveled what are you left with? – kind of like this long string that seems endless and can go on and on forever and you will probably see that you know within the form of the piece. In the beginning the first-half seems to kind of dance with those sixteenth notes and in its construction it just seems very tense and seems to kind of be pulled apart over time to the point where when you enter in the second half it's kind of this long, meditative, unending string of eighth notes but at a very slow tempo. And also with this piece I wouldn't say that it is overtly political but I couldn't help but the influence by some of these, you know, external and internal factors that we have been living in with COVID-19, you know, at the time when I was writing this piece with a lot of police brutality and injustices and also with the frailty of our democracy that was being challenged at that time and then also you know at this moment trying to rebuild that.

Dudley: Absolutely, it's been an incredible time for us all to live through so one can't help but have a lot of that tied up in sort of anything that we happen to be creating at the moment right now right? (**Catalan:** Exactly) Yeah. Allegra mentioned, when we talked, how you also take a very kind of registral approach to writing for the instrument, that it you know spends quite some time of the highest registral extreme of the piano and then eventually, you know, and through maybe a process of unraveling find its way down the keyboard into the lowest stretches and then spend significant time there. How much of that was a kind of organic, just how you wanted to write, or did you actually kind of assign yourself that kind of limitation in approaching it? I'm just curious.

Catalan: So, with a piano, I mean, you have kind of a really big range of notes and timbres to choose from so I have kind of taken some of those techniques from my teachers' suggestions in the past and from what they like to do, but also other composers, you know, such as [György] Ligeti as well, but for me it was kind of a good starting point the kind of exploit those two extreme registers, think about how I could construct a piece around that in the beginning starting around the highest register and then trying to find a way to navigate towards the lowest register even though, to not give it all the way, I tried to kind of take turns away from that at certain points to maybe defy a little bit of expectation. But yeah, using register on the piano, you know, is a great way to kind of exploit a lot of the timbral possibilities and contrast that the piano can offer.

Dudley: Yeah, I would have to say, as a pianist myself, you know, and I'd imagine Allegra would say the same thing, if this is, as you say, your first official solo piano work, you actually seem quite at home writing for the instrument. It seems like a very natural fit. So we're looking forward to it. I know Allegra is looking forward to it and I want to thank you for being with us to share some thoughts today.

Catalan: Thank you so much and thank you all for opportunity and I look very much forward to hearing this and thank you so much to the SF Contemporary Players, I've always been a big fan of the organization and I've been many concerts and it's such a pleasure to be here to be able to write.