

Program info:

Performer Bio:

Like the mythological figure from which it draws its name, the half piano/half percussion **icarus Quartet** dares to fly towards the sun, aspiring to new heights of artistry. Following their Carnegie Hall debut, composer Paul Lansky simply remarked, “This is music making of the highest order.” The Wall Street Journal hailed icarus Quartet’s 2022 album, *BIG THINGS*, as “a beautifully immersive recording...an impressive calling card.”

Winner of the 2019 Chamber Music Yellow Springs Competition, icarus Quartet has given new life to old masterpieces as well as the future of their instrumentation. The quartet was chosen as Chamber Music Northwest’s 2020 Protégé Project Ensemble and was subsequently the first ensemble to hold the Klinger ElectroAcoustic Residency at Bowling Green State University. Past engagements include appearances at the Kennedy Center’s REACH, the Vienna Summer Music Festival, the Horowitz Piano Series, the Queens New Music Festival, the Adalman Chamber Series, and at Princeton University for a Lansky tribute concert held in honor of the emeritus professor’s 75th birthday.

Fostering the development of new works through commissioning and collaborating lies at the core of the group’s mission, inspiring partnerships with titans of the classical contemporary field, established artists of electronic and indie music scenes, as well as gifted student composers through their annual “iQ Tests” program. Recent and upcoming collaborators include Amy Beth Kirsten, Nick Zammuto, Viet Cuong, Michael Laurello, Martin Bresnick, and Jennifer Higdon as well as 2023-24 iQ Test Scholars Kian Ravaei and Che Buford. The ensemble’s work often extends beyond the realm of music; *Wilderness Suite*, an ongoing intermedia project combining icarus Quartet with the forces of composer Ruby Fulton, geographer Teresa Cavazos-Cohn, and eight independent video artists, examines the unique anti-development of the 2.4 million-acre Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness site through still imagery, data, film, recorded interviews, natural sound samples, and live music.

Passionate about educating and engaging with the next generation of musicians, icarus Quartet thrives in school and university settings. They have given classes on chamber music and composition seminars on writing for their instruments at institutions including the Peabody Conservatory, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Bridgeport University, the University of Florida, the University of Northern Iowa, Florida State University, Lebanon Valley College, Yale College, Wright State University, and the

University of Idaho's Lionel Hampton School of Music, in addition to presentations for grade school and Pre-K students.

The icarus musicians are all celebrated soloists in their own rights, and together they have found a special chemistry and inimitable joy playing chamber music. They are dedicated to the discovery, creation, and performance of new music, but what distinguishes their approach to contemporary music is a strong training and background in the classical genre. icarus Quartet is committed to performing new works with a studied and convincing interpretation that mirrors the validity of works with performance practices developed over centuries.

Composer Bios:

Béla Bartók

Béla Bartók was born in the Hungarian town of Nagyszentmiklós (now Sînnicolau Mare in Romania) in March 1881, and received his first instruction in music from his mother, a very capable pianist; his father, the headmaster of a local school, was also musical. After his family moved to Pressburg (now Bratislava in Slovakia) in 1894, he took lessons from László Erkel, son of Ferenc Erkel, Hungary's first important operatic composer, and in 1899 he became a student at the Royal Academy of Music in Budapest, graduating in 1903. His teachers there were János Koessler, a friend of Brahms, for composition and István Thoman for piano. Bartók, who had given his first public concert at the age of eleven, now began to establish a reputation as a fine pianist that spread well beyond Hungary's borders, and he was soon drawn into teaching: in 1907 he replaced Thoman as professor of piano in the Academy.

Béla Bartók's earliest compositions offer a blend of late Romanticism and nationalist elements, formed under the influences of Wagner, Brahms, Liszt and Strauss, and resulting in works such as *Kossuth*, an expansive symphonic poem written when he was 23. Around 1905 his friend and fellow-composer Zoltán Kodály directed his attention to Hungarian folk music and, coupled with his discovery of the music of Debussy, Bartók's musical language changed dramatically: it acquired greater focus and purpose – though initially it remained very rich, as his opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (1911) and ballet *The Wooden Prince* (1917) demonstrate. But as he absorbed more and more of the spirit of Hungarian folk songs and dances, his own music grew tighter, more concentrated, chromatic and dissonant – and although a sense of key is sometimes lost in individual passages, Bartók never espoused atonality as a compositional technique.

His interest in folk music was not merely passive: Bartók was an assiduous ethnomusicologist, his first systematic collecting trips in Hungary being undertaken

with Kodály, and in 1906 they published a volume of the songs they had collected. Thereafter Bartók's involvement grew deeper and his scope wider, encompassing a number of ethnic traditions both near at hand and further afield: Transylvanian, Romanian, North African, and others.

In the 1920s and '30s Bartók's international fame spread, and he toured widely, both as pianist (usually in his own works) and as a respected composer. Works like the *Dance Suite* for orchestra (1923), the *Cantata profana* (1934) and the *Divertimento* for strings (1939), commissioned by Paul Sacher, maintained his high profile; indeed, he earned some notoriety when the Nazis banned his ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin* (1918–19) because of its sexually explicit plot. He continued to teach at the Academy of Music until his resignation in 1934, devoting much of his free time thereafter to his ethnomusicological research.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, and despite his deep attachment to his homeland, life in Hungary became intolerable and Bartók and his second wife, Ditta Pásztory, emigrated to the United States. Here his material conditions worsened considerably, despite initial promise: although he obtained a post at Columbia University and was able to pursue his folk-music studies, his concert engagements became very much rarer, and he received few commissions. Koussevitzky's request for a *Concerto for Orchestra* (1943) was therefore particularly important, bringing him much-needed income. Bartók's health was now failing, but he was nonetheless able virtually to complete his Third Piano Concerto and sketch out a Viola Concerto before his death from polycythemia (a form of leukemia) in September 1945.

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Witold Lutosławski

Witold Lutosławski was indisputably one of the major composers of the twentieth century. Born in Warsaw in 1913, he showed prodigious musical and intellectual talent from an early age. His composition studies in Warsaw ended at a politically difficult time for Poland so his plans for further study in Paris were replaced by a period which included military training, imprisonment by the Germans and escape back to Warsaw, where he and his compatriot Andrzej Panufnik played in cafes their own compositions and transcriptions. After the war, the Stalinist regime banned his first symphony (1941–47) as 'formalist', but he continued to compose and in 1958 his *Musique Funèbre*, in memory of Bartok, established his international reputation. His own personal aleatoric technique whereby the performers have freedom within certain controlled parameters was first demonstrated in his *Jeux Venitiens* (1961) and is to be found in almost all the

later music Over the years, Witold Lutosławski was frequently inspired by particular ensembles and artists including the London Sinfonietta, Sir Peter Pears, Heinz and Ursula Holliger, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Mstislav Rostropovich and Anne-Sophie Mutter. His Symphony No. 4 was commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra and received its world premiere in February 1993 under the baton of the composer. A powerful work, it reflected his increasing concern with expansive melody. Among many international prizes awarded to this most modest man were the UNESCO Prize (1959,1968), the French order of Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres (1982), Grawemeyer Award (1985), Royal Philharmonic Society Gold Medal (1986), in the last year of his life, the Swedish Polar Music Prize and the Inamori Foundation Prize, Kyoto, for his outstanding contribution to contemporary European music, and, posthumously, the International Music Award for best large-scale composition for the fourth symphony. Lutosławski's contribution to the musical world was enormous and his loss in February 1994, at the age of 81, will continue to be deeply felt.

– Chester Music

Amy Beth Kirsten

Amy Beth Kirsten, “...one of America’s most innovative and visionary composers,” (BBC Music Magazine, March 2019) is known primarily for her multi-year, multimedia theatrical collaborations. She has cast herself in roles as varied as composer, poet, filmmaker, vocalist, and director. Ms. Kirsten has been recognized with awards and fellowships from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2020), John S. Guggenheim Foundation (2010) and the Rockefeller Foundation (2009) and has created works for her own ensemble HOWL, musicians of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the New World Symphony, Peak Performances, the multi-Grammy-winning eighth blackbird, among many others. An original story written by Ms. Kirsten and Timothy Leopold (trumpet) is the catalyst for her current project, *Jacob in Chains*, an evening-length work for Alarm Will Sound. *Jacob* is a present-day Christmas ghost story inspired by the character Jacob Marley, from Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. She was appointed to the composition faculty at the Juilliard School where she will maintain a private studio and teach a two- semester course called “Theatre Etudes.” She teaches at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, PA and is Director of The Artist Residency at Longy School of Music of Bard College in Cambridge, MA. www.amybethkirsten.com

Steve Reich

Pulitzer Prize-winning composer **Steve Reich** has been called "America’s greatest living composer" (The Village VOICE), "...the most original musical thinker of our time" (The New Yorker), and "...among the great composers of the century" (New York Times).

His music has been influential to composers and mainstream musicians all over the world. He is a leading pioneer of Minimalism, having in his youth broken away from the "establishment" that was serialism. His music is known for steady pulse, repetition, and a fascination with canons; it combines rigorous structures with propulsive rhythms and seductive instrumental color. It also embraces harmonies of non-Western and American vernacular music (especially jazz). His studies have included the Gamelan, African drumming (at the University of Ghana), and traditional forms of chanting the Hebrew scriptures.

Different Trains and Music for 18 Musicians have each earned him GRAMMY awards, and his "documentary video opera" works—The Cave and Three Tales, done in collaboration with video artist Beryl Korot—have pushed the boundaries of the operatic medium. Over the years his music has significantly grown both in expanded harmonies and instrumentation, resulting in a Pulitzer Prize for his 2007 composition, Double Sextet.

Reich's music has been performed by major orchestras and ensembles around the world, including the New York and Los Angeles philharmonics; London, San Francisco, Boston, and BBC symphony orchestras; London Sinfonietta; Kronos Quartet; Ensemble Modern; Ensemble Intercontemporain; Bang on a Can All-Stars; and eighth blackbird. Several noted choreographers have created dances to his music, such as Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Jirí Kylián, Jerome Robbins, Wayne McGregor, and Christopher Wheeldon.

“There's just a handful of living composers who can legitimately claim to have altered the direction of musical history and Steve Reich is one of them.” —The Guardian (London)

Repertoire Notes:

Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion

Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion is one of his most acclaimed masterpieces and stands as a seminal work in the 20th-century classical music repertoire. Written in 1937, the piece was premiered with Bartók and his wife playing the two piano parts. Later Bartók rewrote the work as a concerto for two pianos and orchestra, but as it is most often played in its original form, the work is generally considered a chamber piece. Bartók called it a "sonata" because he did not know whether the percussion part would require two or three players and thus circumvented the word "quartet." He later found that two percussionists were sufficient but kept the title nonetheless.

The piece's instrumentation is quite unusual and caused Bartók much trepidation in how it would be performed and received. He had a fascination with percussion that came partly from Stravinsky and partly from Varèse, but what influenced him most were the percussive timbres and colors of the Far East and Africa. As for the piano, Bartók had an intimate relationship to the instrument, being a teacher, performer, and composer of it. In his two piano concerti written prior to the sonata, he experimented with the percussive nature of the piano by occasionally matching it with the percussion section of the orchestra. In this sonata, the piano's percussiveness is exploited to its fullest. Bartók chose to have two pianos instead of one in order to take advantage of antiphonal possibilities between them. He may have also been thinking of the prospect of performing the piece with his wife.

The first movement opens with an ominous, circular, seven-note theme that gradually gains momentum until a dramatic arrival at the allegro section, where the two pianos shout in rhythmic unison. From there the movement, whose length takes up half the entire piece, is a series of climaxes within extended sonata form. In the midst, a rising sixth motive appears like a horn call and is present throughout the rest of the movement, including as the subject of a fugato at the end.

The second movement is an example of Bartók's signature "Night music," also heard in such pieces as his third piano concerto and his concerto for orchestra. In Night music, instruments simulate the sounds of nature at night, which may include anything from evoking a nocturnal aesthetic to portraying actual nighttime noises. This second movement opens with a sturdy rhythm from the percussion that sets the mood for a spacious, dark melody from the pianos. A second section introduces nocturnal creatures through short quintuplet figures that rap over bell-like chords. The movement is ternary form, though when the opening section returns it sounds like a dream sequence by way of the rippling scales and tremolos rolling around it. The return also brings with it the percussion's steady, square beat.

To contrast, the music of the last movement evokes the brightest of sunshine. The xylophone first introduces a folk-like melody that is more diatonic and linear than the chromatic and circuitous first movement theme. The movement is full of humor, irony, and energy. At the end, a steady, slowly fading snare drum ostinato sounds as if a marching band drummer is walking away, and a surprising, delightful C major chord in the upper registers of the pianos gives the piece finality with a smile.

– Laura Usiskin

Variations on a Theme by Paganini

As good luck would have it, Witold Lutosławski did not spend World War II in a German prison camp, even though his status as a minor officer in the Polish Army would have normally assured it. Instead, when Poland was invaded (Soviets from the east and Nazis from every other direction) and he was initially captured, he managed an escape on foot to his home in Warsaw 400 kilometers away. Although this left him without an official identity for the rest of the war, he managed to make ends meet teaming up with local cabaret performers and playing in small clubs. Larger music venues in Nazi-occupied Warsaw were more carefully monitored.

Making the best of an otherwise intolerable situation, another pianist and composer destined to be a giant of Polish music after the war, Andrzej Panufnik (1914-1991), formed a piano duo with Lutosławski. The two composers performed in a handful of popular and famous nightclubs for the next few years, with Lutosławski arranging over 200 pieces for them.

Finally, in anticipation of the momentous and devastating 1944 Warsaw Uprising (which led to the Nazis systematically demolishing 85 percent of the city and executing several hundreds of thousands of people), both Lutosławski and Panufnik wisely fled to less populated areas, taking with them only their most essential possessions. Among the few music scores that Lutosławski managed to carry out to safety (all others now presumed destroyed), only one was from the 200 arrangements for his piano duo: *Variations on a Theme by Paganini* (1941).

Part humorous parody and part furious display of virtuosity, this theme and eleven variations, with an added twelfth variation and finale, pokes fun at the fact that even a nightclub audience will probably recognize the catchy tune from the 24th Caprice by Niccolò Paganini (1782-1840). An abrupt tempo change in variation six proves to be an embellishment compared to the original, although this also reflects that over the centuries countless different versions of this Caprice have been created.

Further humor derives from exploiting that the original Caprice serves the primary purpose of showcasing a catalogue of effects only playable on a violin. The pianists nonetheless mimic at least symbolically pizzicato, harmonics, double stops, and other effects proceeding moment to moment through each of the original variations, polychords, and other dissonant anachronisms ironically compensating for the faux instrumental character.

— Gregg Wager

little things lost:

"While writing this piece, I was reflecting on how much my life has changed over the last few years. The piece pays homage to those little things that have been lost, transformed, and rediscovered."

—Amy Beth Kirsten

Quartet:

"Quartet, when mentioned in the context of concert music, is generally assumed to mean string quartet. In my case, the quartet that has played a central role in many of my pieces (besides the string quartet) is that of two pianos and two percussion. It appears like that or in expanded form with more pianos or more percussion in *The Desert Music*, *Sextet*, *Three Movements*, *The Four Sections*, *The Cave*, *Dance Patterns*, *Three Tales*, *You Are (Variations)*, *Variations for Vibes*, *Pianos and Strings*, *Daniel Variations*, *Double Sextet*, and *Radio Rewrite*. In *Quartet*, there is just this group alone: two vibes and two pianos.

The piece is one of the more complex I have composed. It frequently changes key and often breaks off continuity to pause or take up new material. Though the parts are not unduly difficult, it calls for a high level of ensemble virtuosity.

The form is one familiar throughout history: fast, slow, fast, played without pause. The slow movement introduces harmonies not usually found in my music.

The piece is dedicated to Colin Currie, a percussionist who has broken the mold by maintaining his solo career with orchestras and recitals and also, quite amazingly, by founding the Colin Currie Group which plays whatever ensemble music he believes in. I salute him and hope others will take note.

Quartet was co-commissioned by Southbank Centre, Carnegie Hall, The Juilliard School, Cité de la musique, and Kölner Philharmonie / KölnMusik, and is approximately 17 minutes in duration."

—Steve Reich