

Threaded Dances

*a solo violin recital and art exhibit based on the idea of dance
refracted through the forms of music, poetry, and painting,
and reconnected in the space of the performance*

Michiko Theurer, violin
and paintings

J.S. Bach, Partita No. 2 in D minor (1720)
Allemanda

Eugene Ysaÿe, Sonata No. 3 for solo violin (“*Ballade*”) (1923)

Bach, Partita No. 2
Sarabanda

Nicholas Cline, “Threaded Dances” (2013) (*world premiere*)

Bach, Partita No. 2
Ciaconna

Thursday, May 2, 2013 at 7:30 p.m.

Blue Studio Gallery, Bloomington

About the program

Dance and music are related more closely than most other art forms, since rhythm and melodic gesture – whether heard or simply felt by the dancer – form the backbone of any dance. But it is not a one-way street, with dance merely responding to the impetus of music. In this program, I want to explore the ways in which different compositions—musical and visual— abstract dance into their own respective languages while still retaining the clear imprint of their origins. Both Bach and Ysaÿe draw heavily from the language and traditions of dance, each refining and developing a particular aspect of dance and turning it into something that could only be expressed through the language of music. The paintings on display, which seek to capture the form and gesture of dance in an unmoving medium, are intended as a link back to the visual world of dance. My presentation of these musical and visual compositions is intended to suggest a multifaceted reflection of the elements essential to the idea of dance.

Bach’s Partita as a meditation on dance forms

Bach’s Partitas for solo violin are organized in the form of Baroque dance suites, but their irregularity, complexity, and the sheer immensity of scale of some movements (for instance, the *Ciaconna*, with which I will be concluding this program) would make it impractical, if not impossible, to stage according to the conventional forms of the corresponding dances. They stretch the limits of what is possible for a violinist, and turn the dance forms into something that is uniquely the realm of solo instrumental expression. Bach turns the regular, expected rhythmic forms of the

traditional dance into a flexible medium for the spinning out of musical ideas-- a wonderful musical effect that is less desirable for the casual dancer who is trying to figure out when to put the right foot down for the next dance pattern.

Yet that alone, or any other musical bending of the form, would not be enough to make the partitas undanceable. And in fact, many dancers have and will continue to create dances based on the solo Sonatas and Partitas. The difference is that Bach does not set out to create a danceable piece of music- he takes the dance forms and internalizes them in a musical meditation on what it means to dance. The *allemanda*, for example, is a simple walking dance used, one might imagine, for the grand entrance of the dancers in a ball. In Bach's *Allemanda*, this entrance becomes a metaphor for the entry into a musical space the likes of which are perhaps unparalleled, certainly in solo music. It is the grand entrance into a universe that turns in ever closer circles around a simple and powerful musical idea, a bass line that begins on D and falls to A. This idea is embedded in each of the movements, becoming increasingly apparent with each successive dance, until it reveals itself as the unmistakable and immensely powerful heart of the *Ciaconna*.

Ysaÿe's "Ballade" as a poetic narration of gesture

If Bach's partita begins with the formal structure of dance and turns it into an internal meditation on gestural motion, Ysaÿe's Sonata No. 3, subtitled "*Ballade*," takes the internal gestures at the basis of dance structure and turns them into a poetic musical narrative. The kernels of rhythm that are essential to any dance form-- the distinctive rhythms that make a polonaise different from

a waltz, for example—are the basic vocabulary in his ballad. The title "*Ballade*," especially in its Anglicized form of ballad, evokes a type of narrative poetry that seems quite distant from dance. But in fact, the word "Ballade" comes from the same root as "ballet" and *ballare* (Italian for dance), and, especially in the French tradition, was associated with "song to be danced to." So in a way, the *Ballade* or ballad is a poetic form that was originally based in the idea of dance but grew to be associated with a lyrical narrative form of poetry. Ysaÿe's "*Ballade*" takes this full circle and spins a musical narrative out of the subject of dance gestures.

The sonata has a clear narrative arc, beginning with a recitative-style introduction that takes the place of the poet's invocation of the muse and call to the listener to hear the following tale, and then setting the scene for the dramatic action that follows. But it also has a physical and gestural immediacy that shares more than its basic rhythms with the idea of dance. Ysaÿe was a great violin virtuoso, and the writing is as much a display of the performer's physicality as it is of the composer's ideas. Thus, the sonata mixes dance and narrative on both the deepest levels (form and vocabulary) and the most superficial – which is not to say the least important, but merely that closest to the surface of its presentation.

Threaded Dances: a conversation between compositions and composers

Ysaÿe's sonatas for solo violin were based heavily on his experience playing and studying Bach's Sonatas and Partitas, and in the "*Ballade*" one can hear numerous allusions to Bach's D minor partita. For instance, the double-stop Ds with which he transitions between the introductory section and the ensuing wild narrative is

exactly the same sonority with which Bach opens his *Allemanda*. The language, too, is based heavily on Bach's manner of writing or implying polyphonic lines for a single voice, although the vocabulary is updated to reflect the capabilities and conventions of the modern violin as practiced by Ysaÿe. Despite the difference of eras, the compositions are linked by common threads that go beyond their shared derivations from and abstractions of the idea of dance. I chose to interweave the movements of the Bach with the other pieces in my program in order to highlight this conversation, and also to frame Nicholas Cline's wonderful new composition, "Threaded Dances," which reflects many of the concepts explored in the Bach and Ysaÿe as well as in my own paintings.

I had selected the title "Threaded Dances" for my program before I was in touch with Nicholas about writing the piece, and he decided to adopt the title for his composition. "Threaded Dances" is a quote from a poem by W.H. Auden that I recalled when planning the program, and it seemed apt on a number of levels. The poem itself ("As I walked out one evening...") is somewhere between a ballad and a lyric meditation, and its internal dialog creates a layering of voices and levels of time that reminded me of the contrapuntal and structural forms in Bach's and Ysaÿe's compositions. It is on the surface rather light verse, even leaning toward the side of doggerel, with its singsong rhythms and simple rhyme scheme (abcb for each four-line stanza). But hidden within this apparently naïve structure, within the repetitive patterns of its dance, there is a sense of the immeasurability of time, the uncontainable font of life and death, all that is indescribable and vast—a sense more suited to the language of, say, pure music or of

epic narrative, than that of patterned dances and nursery-rhyme rhythms:

The glacier knocks in the cupboard
The desert sighs in the bed
And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

The structure of Nicholas Cline's piece echoes the multilayered effect of Auden's poem, and is inspired by Cline's previous experiences collaborating with modern dancers and exploring the ways in which they constructed choreography based on what he described as a thread of gestures rather than a succession of bars. During the process of his composition, I sent him visual sketches and paintings I was working on for the accompanying exhibit, and he sent me musical sketches of his ideas. The finished piece is a dialog on many levels, including an extensive central cadenza that I wrote in response to his composition, and draws from our verbal, musical, and visual interaction as well as the pervasive influence of Bach and Ysaÿe.

The paintings: Moments of form

If each of the pieces on this program takes elements of dance and abstracts them into forms quintessentially musical, the paintings I have created for the accompanying exhibit are meant to create a physical framework through which these musical gestures can once more enter the visual realm of dance. Each painting is a solidification of a performance, a trace of the act and gestures that went into its creation. I have focused not on creating an illusion of finished surfaces, but rather on exposing the rhythms and skeletal

sketch-structures that went into the painting, so that the paintings, while they are unchanging in their physical form, can provide an inroad into their gestural beginnings. Through the intertwined threads of dance abstracted into the meditative language of Bach, the poetic ballad of Ysaÿe, the multilayered gestures of Nicholas Cline's new composition, and the paintings and sketches I have created for the exhibit, I hope to project the motion and impulse at the heart of dance into the space of this gallery, where it may serve as an impetus to recreate an experience of dance in the interplay between still image and moving sound.

—*Michi*

About the artists

Violinist and visual artist **Michiko Theurer** views her art as an opportunity to share the experience of a moment in time through the creation of a musical or visual space. As the artistic partner for the Four Seasons Chamber Music Festival, she creates an annual series of paintings that are featured onstage and in publicity materials for the festival.

A winner of the 2011 Paul Rolland Memorial Violin Competition and the Raleigh Symphony Orchestra concerto competition, she has recorded Toru Takemitsu's *Rocking Mirror Daybreak* for violin duo with violinist Sarah Briggs. The recording, together with a gallery of original paintings that visualize Takemitsu's compositional methods, will be released on the multimedia CD/DVD of *ARCHITECT* by Navona Records. The paintings were featured at a recent performance by the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra.

She has collaborated with composer and librettist Jenny

Kallick in creating the multimedia film version of *ARCHITECT*, an opera with music by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Lewis Spratlan. The film, which has been shown at the Kimbell Art Museum and the 2012 Architecture and Design Film Festivals in Chicago and New York, interweaves her original photography, videography, and watercolors in an exploration of the creative process through the life and work of architect Louis Kahn.

In October 2012, she was invited to present her research on Beethoven's sketches for his string quartet in A minor, Op. 132, at the New Beethoven Research Conference in New Orleans. Her paper will be published by the Journal of Musicological Research.

A recipient of the Schupf Scholarship at Amherst College, she graduated in 2011 with majors in English and Music. She is currently pursuing a Master's degree in violin performance at Indiana University with Simin Ganatra. Her principal violin teachers have included Mark Steinberg, Philipp Naegele, Bayla Keyes, and Ara Gregorian.

Nicholas Cline is a composer of acoustic and electroacoustic music. His compositions have been performed in the US and Europe and his collaborative film projects have been screened at prestigious festivals around the world. He was featured on the 2012 SEAMUS electroacoustic miniatures recording series: Re-Caged. Other musical pursuits include building experimental instruments, transcribing Calypso songs, and playing the mandolin. He previously studied at Columbia College Chicago and is currently pursuing an MM in composition at Indiana University.