

## ***From the River flow the Stars: composer Brian Buch in interview BY COLIN CLARKE***

The occasion for this interview is the release of a full disc of music by Brian Buch on the MSR label. Buch has an individual, uncompromising voice. His music is frequently of great beauty, rarefied and almost teasing, its meaning seeming to be just out of reach, as if an exploration of the cosmic must perforce entail the esoteric, the hidden. Yet influences and inspirations are openly revealed and discussed below. Buch's imagination is seemingly limitless, his frame of reference wide. Read on.

*CC: Thanks for agreeing to answer this set of questions! Could you perhaps introduce yourself to the reader by explaining how you came to music and to composition? And an overview of your route to where you are now, including your principal influences and teachers? (for the latter also, see the next question)*

**BB:** Thanks for the interview! I am a composer and pianist from Westboro, MA. I started playing piano when I was four. As a kid, I can't say I always liked to practice but I do remember being infatuated with improvising and composing and it has been this draw to create and build something in music that has guided me towards where I am and want to go. My love for improvising pushed me to study jazz, and I began studying with Dick Odgren, a local jazz legend in the Worcester area, for about ten years. I became seriously interested in composing when I discovered 21st century music in high school—specifically the works of Shostakovich, Bartók, Messiaen, and Ligeti. Noticing my interests in composition and theory, Faina Kofman, my classical piano teacher at the time, recommended me to study with the great composer and teacher Alla Cohen. My relationship with Ms. Cohen was the most influential of my career—I studied with her for twelve years and now consider her a close friend and mentor. I received my B.M. in composition from Indiana University (2007) where I studied with Don Freund, Sven-David Sandström, and P.Q. Phan, and received my D.M.A. in composition from B.U. (2011) where I studied with Sam Headrick and Richard Cornell. While I still play jazz quite regularly, my main interests and the music I find the most expressive and effective for communicating my ideas lies in the classical idiom.

*I'm interested in your time with Alla Elana Cohen. Having reviewed her Lillies of Bells disc, and been fascinated by her music, it's interesting to encounter yours: what would you say you learned from her? I hear a tightness of organisation in your music, for example, and a discipline that resonates with her work?*

Alla was my primary teacher and greatly expanded my views as a composer and musician but perhaps what resonated most with me was her teachings regarding musical development—maybe this is what you referred to as “tightness of organisation”. To me, her most important lessons stressed the significance and purpose of every note and that every musical idea—horizontal and vertical—should be a product or extrapolation from an earlier idea. This type of musical architecture, a limitless language derived from a grammar of limitations, is what I find the most compelling and essential approach to composition.

*Also your website refers to Cohen's teaching a system to develop perfect pitch. I've not come across such a thing before: what does the training entail?*

This course was created and taught by Alla for many years at New England Conservatory's School of Continuing Education, and she handed it off to me a few years ago. The course is a unique approach to auditory perception. Unlike most traditional courses in ear-training, we study each pitch in isolation, listening to the deeper layers and movements of each pitch. The course is designed to start with only four pitches (C, E, G, B) one octave at a time and the gaps between notes are gradually filled in until all twelve notes can correctly be identified.

*You refer to “disorder within cohesion” in your notes for “Acanthus Leaves No. 6” and that this idea is important to you: could you explain how you set about achieving this, and whether you consider this as an integral part of your music generally?*

I believe strongly that when composing atonal music it is important to create boundaries and rules for the way you treat thematic material. The goal of these rules is to create a characteristic sound, something that will define a specific personality of the piece. *Acanthus Leaves* is a collection of pieces that push to the extreme what I allow myself to do within this framework. A sense of disorder within cohesion can be created through the bending of these rules. The first four measures in the first movement of *Acanthus Leaves No.6* sets up this chaotic harmony in a couple of different ways. The opening frantic 16th notes in the second violin and viola contrast with the expansively fluid eighth note phrase of the first violin that follows. Cohesion exists in the simple mathematical relationship between the two rhythms, but the discord lies in the way the rhythm is phrased (six 16th notes are grouped into two three-note figures, rather than the simple duple-grouping of 16th notes that would occur from eighth note subdivision). The pitch/melodic content of the first violin is cohesive and discordant as leaps of ninths appear concurrently with chromatic stepwise motion (expansive ninths together with compressed seconds). On the one hand, ninths are closely related to seconds as they are the same interval only separated by an octave, but on the other hand, the separate registers create a sense of a multi-voice phrase and disjointed melodic concavity. This is the application of this concept on the micro scale, but through the development of these ideas it exists on the larger scale as well. My goal in all pieces in *Acanthus Leaves* is to create unrelenting exhilaration, an energy close to insanity, from the dissonant friction created from my thematic material and the rules to which they adhere.

*Both “Acanthus Leaves” and “Life and Opinions” are inspired by E. T. A. Hofmann, specifically Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr. What was the appeal of that literary work for you? And does it extend to Hofmann’s writings in general?*

E.T.A Hofmann’s persona and output is fascinating. He was, among other things, an accomplished author, music critic, composer, and artist—living a life navigated by his immeasurably creative psyche. I love just about all of his literary works but find particularly fascinating his reviews on Beethoven (specifically the Fifth<sup>h</sup> Symphony), the short story *Tobias Martin, the Master Cooper, and His Men*, and the novel *Life and Opinions of Tomcat Murr*. His reviews on music are particularly interesting to me because it shows how his mind extrapolates and hears music. His insight is another creative medium, almost as if it is a developed theme—in a different sense—from the source material. A favourite excerpt of mine from his review of Beethoven’s Fifth:

“Thus Beethoven’s instrumental music opens to us the realm of the monstrous and immeasurable. Glowing rays shoot through the deep night of this realm, and we sense giant shadows surging to and fro, closing in on us until they destroy us, but not the pain of unending longing in which every desire that has risen quickly in joyful tones sinks and expires. Only with this pain of love, hope, joy-which consumes but does not destroy, which would burst asunder our breasts with a mightily impassioned chord-we live on, enchanted seers of the ghostly world!”

*Life and Opinions of Tomcat Murr* is a unique story. It is a story of a cat named Murr living in the studio of composer Johannes Kreisler. The idea behind the story is that Murr writes his own biography on pages found in Kreisler’s studio. The pages he wrote on were taken from a book about Johannes Kreisler. When the book was published, the biography of Murr and story about Kreisler were intertwined! The book reads as two independent stories that randomly begin and end. As the stories progress they merge together and form a

fascinating story from the perspective of the cat and the genius composer. Both the work itself and foundational idea behind I find inspiring. My collection of pieces under the name of *Life and Opinions* treats thematic material similar to the subject material of Hofmann's *Book*, and *Acanthus Leaves*, as I mentioned earlier, is based off of a book Murr writes about his most creative and wild thoughts.

*Elsewhere you say that your intent is to explore "the unattainable elements in language" (the booklet notes for the Music Masters disc that features your piece Beneath the Mountains, Beneath the Clouds). How does this relate to your pieces, both those that are literary inspired in one way or another, or otherwise?*

I view composing as an opportunity to communicate the ineffable. As I spoke about before, the thematic systems I implement are to establish a language and what I strive for is to write stories for this subject material. This is not a unique quality of my music but most of the time it is impossible to "translate" the story into words, or explain a piece without talking about the structuring of thematic material. If I use a literary source for inspiration it is more or less a method of inspiration. I never use any external source material as a platform to build off.

*I certainly hear wonderful concision in Life and Opinions No. 7, a set of five movements each of which explores contrasting sets of ideas (elation/despair/vigor/lethargy etc). Was Webern ever an influence on you? Obviously not directly in your harmonic language, but in terms of expressive what you have to express?*

Another important aspect of my style and approach to composition is concision and economy of form and thematic material. In my music I find it extremely important to say exactly what needs to be said without saying anything more. This gives a heightened significance of thematic material and depth of expression. Webern and Berg had a big influence on me when I was first learning how to compose. Webern's brevity and economy of thematic material in all his music, especially the op. 9 *Bagatelles*, was a large influence on this aspect of my writing. While I have great reverence for his music, his harmonic language was never something that really spoke to me. I have always felt there to be something about the formulaic rules of serialism and twelve-tone system that hinders the harmonic expressiveness.

*It is a Japanese poem inspires the first piece we hear, "From the River flow the Stars"; could you expand on the poem and, indeed, the set of poetry it comes from? The theme of this work is enlightenment out of loss and salvation in solitude; musically, the Bergian sigh of the opening seems to invite in an interpretation of Romantic nostalgia, while elsewhere the economy of writing recalls Stravinsky (to me, at least). What was the appeal of the Japanese set of poetry for you? In fact, what is about Orientalist modes of expression that inspired the piece?*

*From the River flow the Stars* is collection of pieces all inspired by ancient Japanese poetry. The sixth piece in this collection is the title track of the disc. The poem of inspiration for this piece is from the *Kokin Wakashū*:

I dwell nowadays  
Among foot-wearying hills,  
And there is no time  
When the sleeves of my garments,  
Black-dyed, are not wet with tears.

I find inspiration from poetry and the harmonious link that exists between the two art forms (as well as some prose —most works of Thomas Mann). In a way, the imagery and rhythmic cadence in poetry is a type of music and music in turn can also have this poetic

pulse. I never try to emulate this in the literal sense, but often try to find ways of writing that adheres to the same ideas of poetic composition. The themes and layering of ideas in *From the River flow the Stars No. 6* pay rhythmic and harmonic tribute to the imagery and pulse of this poem. Another theme I find important in my music is isolation and solitude. In the literal sense, I have to be alone when I compose, but in the metaphysical sense, the act of composing is to listen and hear what doesn't exist—a revelation from silence or salvation in solitude. The link between music and poem here is present in composition and cadence as well as the melancholic character and thematic presentation.

I used aspects of both the hirajoshi and pentatonic scales to construct foundational harmonies and melodies for this piece. The main intervals of these scales are seconds and thirds and the most defining characteristic of these pieces is the shaping of those intervals via the minor second. I use the minor second as a way of “whittling” perfect fourths into major and minor thirds. This is first presented in the opening theme of the first movement and continues in the themes that follow. This concept was first conceived by studying the construction and colors of the pentatonic and hirajoshi scale.

*Rather than a literary inspiration, “Landscapes No. 1” refers to visual elements, in particular the art of Mikalojus Konstantinas Ciurlionis. The paintings (Sparks, Mists and Creation of the World V) are fabulous works of art, almost Impressionistic and with a phenomenal use of color. Your work could also boast the same attributes: color (in terms of string timbre); but certainly in Sparks I hear more loneliness than I experience from the painting. Could you perhaps expand on your relationship to Ciurlionis, perhaps adding a few lines of background about him, and what you find inspirational about his art?*

Mikalojus Ciurlionis was an early twentieth century Lithuanian painter and composer. He is most known for his paintings but also composed around 400 works of music. His paintings pioneered the European abstract art movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and like Hoffmann, I find his persona and voice very unique and inspiring. Particularly interesting to me is his curiously esoteric and mystical subject material—a fascinating blend of solitary themes and ethereal conception. His unique visions coincide with an intrigue in the unknown and inexplicable that I try to express in my compositions. Prior to composing I often see a visual representation of a theme or section in my head. Sometimes I try to draw these images and other times I try to extrapolate music from works of art. Each movement of *Landscapes No. 1* is my depiction of the corresponding paintings.

*Finally on the disc, “Maze of Infinite Forms No. 1”, inspired by Tagore. You ask that the music is played in a “romantic and intense style”; and you create a densely complex mat of material (a “maze” as you call it) —intense is certainly right; and the piece comprises two slow movements (Larghetto con dolore and Adagio con calore). How does this complexity relate to Tagore?*

My goal in this piece was to echo the language of the great Indian writer, composer, and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore. I find his writing exquisitely lucid yet profoundly deep and went about composing this piece reflective of that style. The pieces have very simple elements, such as the formal layouts (the first movement composed in a rondo form) and quasi-tonal harmonies (in both movements), but a complex musical fabric is created by juggling these simplistic motives and structures throughout each respective movement. The appearances of these motives float freely amongst differing sections which are allusions to a maze and homage to Tagore's unique writings and philosophic ideal.

*The whole disc features spectacular performances by the Daedalus Quartet, a group that sounds perfectly at home in your music. Did you have a relationship with the quartet prior to this disc?*

I had never worked with the Daedalus Quartet before but I spent quite a bit of time listening to them play and was particularly moved by the intensity and subtlety of their

sound. My music demands a wide range of dynamics and emotions and I needed a group that could sound as gripping in the simplest and lightest as in the heaviest and thunderous moments.

*You have a clear and distinctive voice. I'm quite surprised there are only several discs with your music on them; what are the plans for the future in this regard (recordings)? Also, in which directions do you see your own music going, moving forwards?*

My upcoming plans include recording music already composed for an album of piano trios with Yevgeny Kutik and Sebastian Baverstam and to finish up a collection of chamber orchestra works to record later this year or early next year. Self-promotion and PR have never been my strong suits, so gaining exposure through performances and recordings is something I am trying to stay busy with! Thank you for your insightful and thoughtful questions about my music. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about these pieces and share them with lovers of music.

**BUCH *From the River flow the Stars. Acanthus Leaves No. 2. Life and Opinions No. 7. Landscapes No. 1. Maze of Infinite Forms No. 1*** • Daedalus Str Qt (Min-Young Kim, Matilda Kaul, vns; Jessica Thompson, va; Thomas Kraines, vc)  
• MSR 1681 (54:44)

This was my first experience of the music of Brian Buch, whose favoured method of composing in collections is showcased here in some extraordinarily effective string quartet music. For example, *From the River flow the Stars* combined three pieces whose overall idea is to “discover enlightenment from loss and salvation in solitude.” The harmonic intensity of this collection’s first piece, an Andante, recalls Berg to me but also Bartók, while the sighing lines of the central Lento cantabile put the emphasis on *Affekt*. The spare voice of the final Allegro energico is reminiscent of Stravinsky’s works in this medium. Through all of this is Buch’s own pithy voice; underpinning it is a mind of great clarity and acuity.

Inspired by E. T. A. Hoffman, *Acanthus Leaves No. 6* contrasts disorder and cohesion, keeping motivic development specific to each instrument and register (see above for more on this). The expressive level remains constant after *From the River flow the Stars*. The Daedalus Quartet here if anything shows even greater discipline in its performance (the recording is close and deliberately dry so that detail registers).

“Dialog” is the keyword for *Life and Opinions No. 7*. To have a dialog, one needs contrasting ideas, and that is exactly what we hear. One of the classic defining qualities of a string quartet is that of civilised conversation between four participants; Buch explores this idea, but in incredibly rich ways. The performances are magnificent; the central Adagio luminoso exudes what I can only call a sort of curiosity for the cosmos; the opening Largaments is shot through with light. This collection comprises five slow movements, although the fourth, Moderato con bravura, has plenty of activity.

The Ciurlionis link to *Landscapes No. 1* is explored above; these three movements are Buch’s responses to three paintings. Melodic lines have an aching quality about them; yet the visceral “Creation of the World V” takes us to a hyper-charged space of unflagging energy.

Personally, I share Buch’s enthusiasm for Tagore, whose poetry inspired *Maze of Infinite Forms No. 1*. The simplicity and power of Buch’s utterance mirrors that of the great Tagore. Both movements are slow (Larghetto con dolore and Adagio con calore) and incredibly expressive. The perfect way to close the disc, one might argue.

All works are heard here in world premiere recordings. The Daedalus Quartet’s triumph here is to convey all of the excitement of the exploration of the new; something that we, as listeners, are privileged to experience, too. The performances speak of complete understanding of Buch’s scores. I do hope to encounter more of his music.

