



BReAKING BOUNDARIES

Back in 1964, a 15-year-old boy started to sketch. Nothing fancy, just the rudiments of a musical composition. That began the odyssey. “You can’t make a living as a composer in America,” explains Dennis Báthory-Kitsz, the Vermont resident whose music will be featured in the Frontier Saxophone Quartet’s concert in Plattsburgh on October 27. “So, wisely, I guess, I never expected to and became proficient at other things.”

Like driving a truck, repairing televisions and diving headfirst into a graphic design job, ultimately becoming a senior designer at the New Jersey State Museum. Like working as a typist. Personal computers came along, and Báthory-Kitsz immersed himself in that world, too, learning programming and electronic design and running his own computer company for seven years. Prosaic writing was always there for him, too, authoring reports on topics from hiking to technology—once interviewing a young man

The Frontier Quartet performs works by Dennis Báthory-Kitsz and David Gunn.

By Benjamin Pomerance

named Bill Gates about copyright issues—to Vermont’s country stores. Somehow, he squeezed in some spare moments to teach multiple subjects, a vocation which, in his words, “cracks the grit off of calcifying brain cells.”

“I find time through the desperation of life, I guess,” Báthory-Kitsz says. “I want to learn more languages. (He already speaks English and French, and “field-specific” Dutch, Portuguese, Italian and German). I want to write more books. (He’s already authored or co-authored several). There’s always so much to experience that I can’t believe it when I hear people who say they’re bored. ‘Give me your time,’ I wish I could ask them.”

Yet there has always been time to write music. Currently, his catalog encompasses more than 1,000 compositions, everything from a three-act opera to orchestral works to chamber pieces. It includes music played by computers, a boundary that Báthory-Kitsz has pushed since 1969, long before electronic writing became in vogue. Which isn’t surprising, because border bending has been his way of life. The quickest glance at his output reveals this freedom: a duet for tuba and tape recording; a trio for piccolo, small clarinet, and contrabassoon; a quintet for three Theremins (an early electronic instrument designed by a Russian physicist), video, and playback. Even his more conventional orchestrations are laced with rhythmic combinations arguably unlike anything ever written before.

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At first, it was music for a limited audience. For about 20 years, only one ensemble—his own—performed his compositions. “I got some notice in New York,” Báthory-Kitsz remembers, “but moved to Vermont, which was almost compositional death.” Then, in the 1980s, the outside world suddenly began paying attention. “Today,” he says, “almost every piece I write is asked for by performers, and my music is heard around the world. That sounds awfully casual, doesn’t it? Work hard, and success comes. That’s ridiculous. Working hard matters, being really good matters, and luck matters.”

Being stubborn matters, too. No matter what the circumstances have been, there are certain things that Báthory-Kitsz won’t do. Entering his compositions in a contest—“the award roulette wheel,” he calls it—is first on that list of sins. “[Bela] Bartok once said that competitions are for horses, not composers,” he states, “and I agree.”

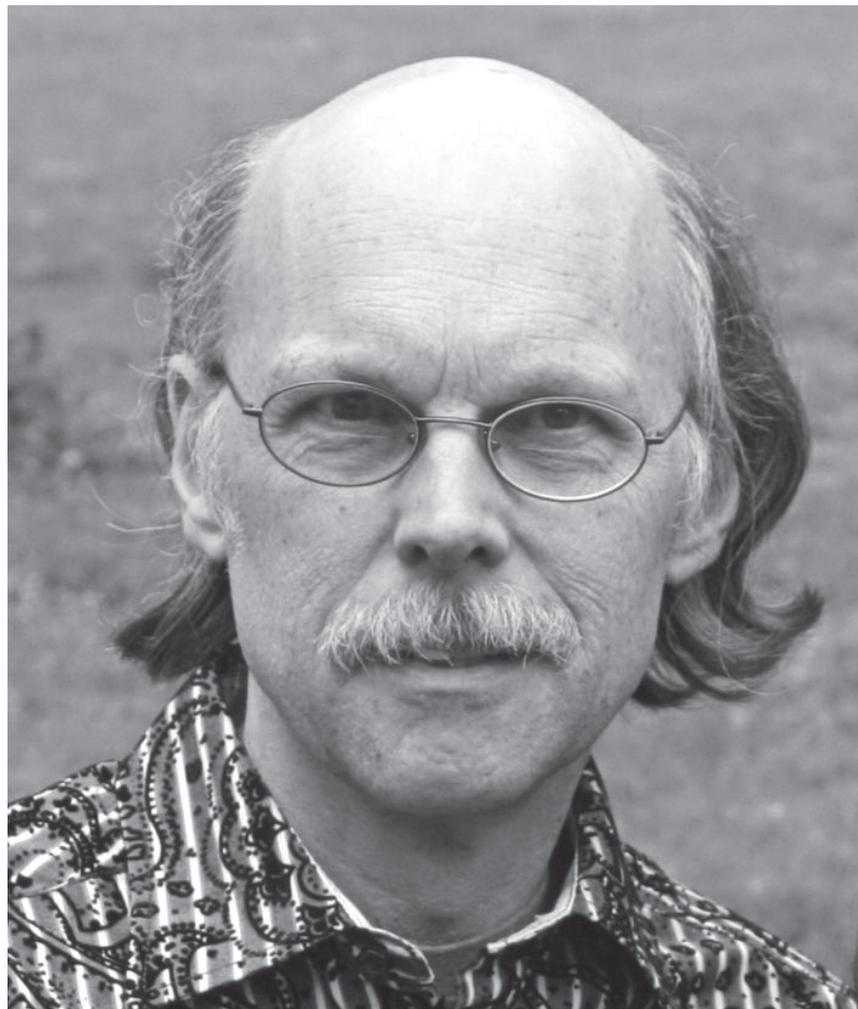
He even has a name for his unfettered ways now: “Nonpop.” “We think of ‘pop’ as music whose primary purpose is entertainment,” the composer explains. “It might be artful, but it draws from the familiar and its mission is to entertain. We think of ‘nonpop’ as music whose primary purpose is art. It might be entertaining, but it pushes the borders of the familiar and its mission is to enrich our hearts and minds.”

And those are the words that make musician Daniel Gordon salivate. Ten years ago, when Gordon founded the Frontier Saxophone Quartet, the SUNY Plattsburgh music professor did so with the hope of playing precisely this type of music. “When we began this quartet, we chose the name ‘Frontier’ for two reasons,” Gordon says. “The first referred to international cooperation, because our members (Montrealer Gary Scavone and North Country dwellers Gordon, Todd Pray, and Linda Sullivan) reside in two countries. But the second reason referred to the fact that we wanted to do things that were on the musical frontier.”

It was this frontier mentality that led Gordon to Báthory-Kitsz in the first place. Two years ago, when the Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble premiered the composer’s chamber opera “Erzsébet,” Gordon played in the orchestra for each performance. The opera itself focused on a grisly subject: a medieval Hungarian countess who murdered 612 women, allegedly bathing in the blood of her victims. In an impressive feat, though, Báthory-Kitsz — who had researched this noblewoman since 1983—turned the opera into more than just a bloodbath. Instead, his representation of the “Blood Countess” was surprisingly compassionate, creating “a portrait of her as a sympathetic character with breaks of dreadfulness.”

To Gordon, however, the key feature was not the storyline, but the orchestration. “The saxophone had a prominent role throughout the entire opera,” he recalls. “So naturally, when I met this composer, we started talking saxophone. I told him that I have an active saxophone quartet, and that if he would write a piece for us, we would play the premiere of it. Well, one day, this message from [Báthory-Kitsz] showed up in my inbox, and it had the score of this new saxophone quartet with a message: ‘Here’s what I promised you.’”

Gordon didn’t know it at the time of his offer, but Báthory-Kitsz had long contemplated writing a piece for saxophone ensemble. The Plattsburgh saxophonist’s commission provided the stimulus to finally do so. “The sax ensemble has flexibility, dynamic range, and a great deal of freedom that many instrumentalists aren’t offered or comfortable with,” Báthory-Kitsz explains. “They can swoop and drive, slide and color their sounds, and articulate the notes much like string players can. They have a marvelous family range, from the chewy baritone through the crying soprano. They call for emotional words when describing their sound.”



Above: Composer David Gunn.

Opposite: Dennis Báthory-Kitsz. Photo courtesy of Dennis Báthory-Kitsz.

In his first-ever saxophone quartet—titled “Evil Pony”—Báthory-Kitsz utilizes all of these elements, creating what Gordon calls “a really kicking piece.” Some of that force, according to Báthory-Kitsz, arose from the events that inspired the title: a chase by the composer to capture one of his wife’s constantly escaping ponies. “When I came back, the intensity of the music grew a little,” he explains, “and I named it for that little evil Dartmoor animal.”

Yet Báthory-Kitsz is not the only “nonpop” composer featured in the quartet’s upcoming concert. One year after playing in the pit for Erzsébet, Gordon formed a second connection by performing with the Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble: David Gunn, another Green Mountain State resident and one of Báthory-Kitsz’s frequent musical collaborators. “We started talking saxophone, and the same thing happened,” Gordon says. “I told him that I had a saxophone quartet, and he sent me a piece—a trio—that we could play.”

Originally from New Jersey, Gunn attended college at Ohio State, ultimately moving to Vermont in 1990. Two threads run through his music: a love of melody and a devout fascination with groan-eliciting puns. The jokes emerge in his titles: “ContraDiction” (for contrabassoon),

“A Tangoed Web,” “Bassooner or Later.” An orchestral work performed at Carnegie Hall bears the label of “Urban Renewaltz.” Yet the music itself is not goofy. “Nope,” he states when asked whether a humorous title signifies a humorous piece. “I simply like word play.”

Back in his university days, Gunn’s music tended to be atonal and aimed at astonishment. One work used dead birds

‘No, no—we don’t play that kind of music at Syracuse.’ So now that I have my own quartet, we’re doing it.” The sheer openness of the music, he continues, is actually what drew him to this piece. “It’s a real piece of Americana,” he explains. “One movement reminds me of Gilligan’s Island. You’ll walk away whistling it.”

Also on the program is Everett Gates’s “Declamation and Dance,” the first work



and diluted tear gas to represent the Hudson River of the early 1970s, and ended with someone tossing a cream pie at the pianist. Over time, though, his creations evolved into a more melodious, optimistic mood. His Trio Incognito, which three of the Frontier Saxophone Quartet members will perform, falls into this latter category. “It’s very melodic, contrapuntal among the various voices,” Gordon says. “And it’s very accessible.”

For more than a decade, Gunn and Báthory-Kitsz ran a radio show on “nonpop” composers, calling it “Kalvos & Damian’s New Music Bazaar.” In 2001, they co-hosted the Ought-One Festival in downtown Montpelier, Vt., a 40-concert event that they anointed “The Woodstock of Nonpop.” Yet for all of their ardent promotion of nonpop creativity, both Gunn and Báthory-Kitsz freely admit that this form of music does not exist in a vacuum. In fact, according to Báthory-Kitsz, both “pop” and “nonpop” actually overlap heavily, with each noticeably containing elements of the other.

Thus, neither composer minds their music being played alongside Jack Marshall’s “The Goldrush Suite,” a piece sitting squarely within the “pop” category. Famous for composing the theme to “The Munsters” and multiple film scores, Marshall was a Hollywood favorite in the 1950s and ‘60s. Yet his works, while commercial, were also well written, enough so that Marshall was nominated for a Grammy in 1965 and became a favored son at Capitol Records.

For Gordon, “The Goldrush Suite” has long been a project in progress. “I got to know this work as a student at Syracuse University,” he says. “I used to beg Ronald Caravan, my teacher, to play it. But he said,

that the Frontier Saxophone Quartet ever played together. And the afternoon ends with a nod to a man who could be seen as the grandfather of nonpop: John Cage, one of America’s most controversial composers in his day. In this piece, a movement from Cage’s “Living Room Music,” the saxophonists all put down their instruments. Then, together, they speak Gertrude Stein’s poem “The World Is Round” in various rhythmic patterns, augmented by whistling and hissing.

“It’s a remarkable piece,” Gordon says. “When you deal with the human voice, you have to think about the natural accentuations of speech. You think about how it falls into a certain pattern. Cage was very conscious of that. The way he plays around with the words in that poem is remarkable.”

Even more remarkable, though, is how Cage—once considered the “bad boy” of classical music—has lost his utter shock value. Today, many composers write in musical languages that were unknown not so long ago. “The whole vocabulary has shifted for composers in the past half century,” Báthory-Kitsz states. “We can think in terms of new sounds, new spatial relationships, new movement of sound, new kinds of forms that bear no relationship to sonatas and symphonies of the past.” In some ways, the newness of it all seems scary. But for these composers, and for the performers willing to take a chance on their work, it’s a means of existence. Such is life on the frontier.

The Frontier Saxophone Quartet will perform on October 27 at 2 p.m. in SUNY Plattsburgh’s Krinovitz Recital Hall. For more information, call (518) 564-2283 or visit www.plattsburgh.edu/music.



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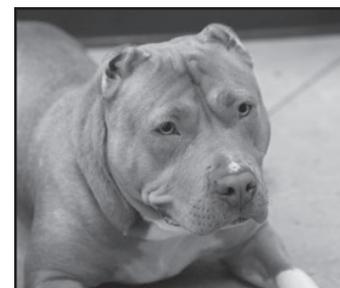
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