

# MERWIN SIU violin

## PRESS QUOTES

### **North American premiere of Fazil Say's 1001 Nights in the Harem**

...Still, anyone who came to hear the Orff got maybe the best musical bonus of this season — and certainly of the evening — a chance to witness the North American premiere of Fazil Say's emotive, complex, and compelling violin concerto, "1001 Nights in the Harem."

Brought to life by principal second violinist Merwin Siu, with absolutely superb support from the orchestra, this 30-minute composition created the most artistic heat of the night.

Say, a Turkish pianist and composer, wrought an exotic yet musically solid work that, in four movements, traverses as many styles, colors, and historic references as the Meander, Turkey's most famed river.

Siu, with total aplomb and remarkable artistic vision, brought the piece fully to life, imbuing it with the respect it deserves and the excitement that reached out to every single listener. He pulled many surprising sounds and effects from his instrument, yet never lost the big picture that was this wonderful piece of music.

American musical history was made Friday night with this performance. It's not to be missed.

Sally Vallongo, The Toledo Blade

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### **Max Richter's Four Seasons Recomposed**

Sunday's Toledo Symphony Orchestra concert ended with applause. First a standing ovation for the orchestra, and then cheers from the musicians on stage for those in the audience.

They were present — as were those on Friday and Saturday nights — for [the return of the Toledo Symphony](#) after last season was cut short by the pandemic. State regulations limit the number of listeners in the Peristyle to 225, distanced in pairs and quartets throughout the venue.

That last concert in March, as principal second violinist and artistic administrator Merwin Siu told the audience, seemed both an end and a beginning. It was the first time the concert was livestreamed so ticket holders and others, some across the globe, could watch a live Toledo Symphony concert. ...

The orchestra is "recomposing its season," Siu said.

So, what more fitting way to open that season than with a recomposition of a beloved classic, Antonio Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," reimagined by British-German composer Max Richter?

First, though, the orchestra served some Vivaldi straight up. Concerto for Four Violins introduced the concert's four soloists – Kirk Toth, Téa Prokes, Siu and Gyusun Han.

As they traded phrases the distinctive tone of each was evident. The interplay was crisp, yet conversational. The tone of the small orchestra was transparent, and seemed more so as they were spread across the Peristyle stage.

While in previous times the musicians would be shoulder to shoulder, now the ensemble, each musician wearing a face covering, stretched out to fill the footprint of a Mahler-sized orchestra. The images projected on the screens above the stage, and into homes, transcends that distance, capturing telling details, slowly focusing in for a close up, and sweeping back to capture the entire ensemble.

The transparency of sound served the orchestra well on the main attraction, "Four Seasons Recomposed." Though Richter had a heavy hand when carving out what of Vivaldi's musical material he wanted to use, his work retains joy and bounce of the original.

...Winter is taken at a gallop by Siu with icy chords answering his increasingly dizzying line. The ethereal melody in the second movement sounds like an echo of the original.

But just because this and other melodies are not quite what the listener remembers does not mean they aren't beautiful. And the same is true for the concert experience.

Even if everyone is masked and keeping their distance we are still sharing the experience of music being brought to life as we listen and watch.

David Dupont, BG Independent News, 9.14.2020

### **Paul Schoenfield's Café Music**

...Between the bookends was a benchmark work by a 21st-century counterpart to Beethoven: Paul Schoenfield, a keyboard whiz and award-winning composer.

Hard to believe it was a TSO premiere, for Schoenfield's popular Cafe Music has become a programming and recording staple around the world. A deconstructionist amalgam of traditional musical styles brilliantly reconfigured, it was performed with astonishing skill and elan by violinist Merwin Siu, cellist Amy Chang, and pianist Michael Boyd.

Sally Vallongo, The Toledo Blade

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### **Astor Piazzolla Four Seasons in Buenos Aires**

...The musical season changes came wonderfully alive, with Concertmaster Kirk Toth and principal second violin Merwin Siu trading solo spots, playing Vivaldi one time, Piazzolla another, also conducting an elite group of strings plus harpsichordist Valrie Kantorski.

One of the most intriguing elements was that each soloist remained true to his style, offering, in the contrast, even more excitement.

Toth, a tried-and-true master of his instrument, went for tradition, restraint, a collegial approach. Siu, the strings' showman, who had a big hand in planning this program, let it rip. He ornamented Vivaldi's slow middle movements, then tore breakneck through the prestos and allegros, seeming to challenge his fellow players to keep up.

The good news is, they always did.

Sally Vallongo, The Toledo Blade

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### **Karl Amadeus Hartmann's Concerto funebre**

...Still, Orff wasn't the only German represented on this program. Principal second violinist Merwin Siu soloed in the symphony premiere of Karl Amadeus Hartmann's transcendent Concerto Funebre.

Hartmann, another Munich native and contemporary of Orff, created this hauntingly beautiful four-part work for violin and string orchestra in the opening months of WWII.

Organized as a dialogue, the work sets choral-like accompaniment by the orchestra against the solo violin's somber themes.

Siu imbued his line with rich tonality and played with restrained emotion, the better to maintain balance with the orchestra. How very contemporary Hartmann's thick, enhanced chords sounded, and how bold the composer was in shifting swiftly but smoothly from swaths of chords to the restless solo line.

Sally Vallongo, The Toledo Blade

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### **Lou Harrison Centennial Celebration**

The Toledo Museum of Art and the Toledo Symphony Orchestra, in conjunction with Bowling Green State University, will celebrate the centenary year of Lou Harrison with a music marathon from noon until 10 p.m. on Aug. 12. Harrison (1917-2003) – a composer, environmentalist and gay icon – began his own musical revolution more than 50 years ago, and is considered the godfather of the influential world music movement, particularly its popularity

in the West. His more than 300 compositions written for symphony orchestra, ballet, small chamber ensembles and soloists incorporate western, eastern and custom-made instruments.

“We welcome opportunities to host fascinating, innovative performances for our visitors, and this year’s music marathon celebrating Lou Harrison is no exception,” said TMA Programs Manager Scott Boberg. The schedule includes chamber music, a documentary film about Harrison and a demonstration of gamelan, the traditional Indonesian ensemble of mostly percussive instruments used widely in Harrison’s compositions. The marathon culminates with a Peristyle concert at 7:30 p.m. featuring Grammy Award-winning Third Coast Percussion performing two concertos: The Concerto for Organ with Percussion Orchestra featuring Grammy Award-winning soloist Paul Jacobs, and the Concerto for Violin and Percussion Orchestra with soloist Todd Reynolds.

Harrison is best known for challenging the traditional music establishment with his explorations of new tonalities and propulsive rhythms and his ground-breaking use of percussion. His contemporaries and colleagues included composers John Cage, Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson and Leonard Bernstein; Living Theater founder Judith Malina; and choreographer Merce Cunningham. Beyond his myriad musical accomplishments, Harrison was also recognized and received multiple awards as a political activist.

Merwin Siu, artistic administrator of the Toledo Symphony Orchestra and co-organizer of the music marathon, was introduced to Harrison’s music as he became familiar with the concerto for violin and percussion orchestra. “As we assembled an orchestra of tuned flower pots, brake coils, multiple wind chimes, and a double bass – played as a percussion instrument with metal beaters! – it seemed it would be a hugely cacophonous experience. It turned out to be anything but,” Siu said. “Harrison’s music takes a great rhythmic groove, a beautiful lyric gift and a kaleidoscopic sense of instrument color to create a truly unique sound that owes as much to the Eastern musical tradition as to the West. His music is infectious, and a blast to perform.”

Kurt Doles is composer and director of MidAmerican Center for Contemporary Music at Bowling Green State University and will lead the demonstration of gamelan for this special event. “Lou Harrison is one of the main reasons the various forms of Indonesian gamelan ensemble are known in the United States. His enthusiasm and spirit helped spread the awareness and love of Indonesian music in all its forms across North America,” he said. “He is an important, if often unsung, linchpin in American musical life.”

David Dupont, BG Independent News

### **Bach Around the Clock – 24 Hour Marathon**

As the sun creeps over the horizon on the morning of Aug. 13, a solo cello seated near Jaime Plensa’s sculpture Silent Music II outside the Toledo Museum of Art Glass Pavilion will begin a paean to greet the morning light.

The music, Johann Sebastian Bach's *Suite for Cello No. 1*, will launch a 24-hour marathon to celebrate both the art of Plensa and music of Bach.

Scott Boberg, manager of programs and audience engagement at TMA, and Merwin Siu, artistic administrator and principal second violin of the Toledo Symphony, have been collaborating for months on this unique event, dubbed Bach Around the Clock.

The genesis, according to Boberg, grew out of last summer's *Play Time* exhibit at the museum. Museum officials wanted to create an extended artistic experience, much like *Play*, where the audience can move beyond being mere watchers to becoming active participants.

Last summer, Boberg and Siu created the Shostakovich String Quartet marathon, where over the course of 9½ hours, all 15 of the composer's pieces were presented. Of the 200-plus attendees, 30 actually completed the entire artistic race. It was just a short hop from there to "what would happen if we did an entire 24-hour marathon?" The result is the upcoming Bach event.

Why Bach? The answer is simple according to Siu: "Plensa, the subject of the special exhibit at the museum this summer, is constantly probing the link between sculpture and music. In his sculpture *The Heart of Trees*, several composers are mentioned by name. Of those, the one with the most diverse catalogue of works for exploration is J.S. Bach."

..."Besides," noted Siu, "playing Bach aligns you correctly. It's cleansing, and it's just right."

Wayne Anthony, *The Toledo Blade*

### **Appearance in Disney's "The Avengers"**

*Toledo Symphony members snare screen time in 'The Avengers'*

A casting coordinator for *The Avengers* needed a string quartet for a pivotal scene to be filmed in Cleveland. A Google search brought her to [zinquartet.com](http://zinquartet.com). She liked what she saw on the musicians' site and so did the film's director, Joss Whedon.

And that's how Toledo Symphony members Merwin Siu, Jennifer Burns, Tim Zeithamel, and Renee Goubeaux managed to score 30 seconds of screen time in the nearly 2 1/2-hour-long blockbuster.

The musicians appear as a string quartet at a museum party crashed by the film's main villain, the evil god Loki. It was the first film acting gig for the Toledoans, though their roles weren't that much of a departure from real life. Siu plays violin, Zeithamel and Burns play viola (she plays violin in the movie), and Goubeaux plays cello.

Their brief appearance took 15 hours to film, from 3 p.m. to 6 a.m. in one day.

"It was a huge scene with a lot of people," Mr. Siu said. "There was a lot of cat herding between each take."

Many movies cast actors to play musicians, but with the actual musicians on set, Whedon had them play Schubert's String Quartet in A Minor as well as play along to a prerecorded version.

"It was definitely a piece he had chosen to emit a certain mood," Mr. Siu said. "It was neat that he had spent some time thinking about the music."

Seeing himself in 3-D on an IMAX screen during the film's opening weekend left him suitably impressed.

"To see your own face on that size of a screen in 3-D is pretty surreal," Mr. Siu said. "With so many story lines going and so many scenes going on, you never really know if you're going to make it. It was a rewarding process to make it and even more rewarding to see myself on the screen."

Kirk Baird, The Toledo Blade