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News

Recording release date: March 10, 2023

John Bruce Yeh Shares ‘Chicago Clarinet Classics’ March 10 on Cedille Records

Chicago Symphony Orchestra clarinetist curates album of intimate treasures by past and present Windy City composers

John Bruce Yeh, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s internationally admired and long-serving assistant principal clarinet and solo E-flat clarinet, features intimate works by noteworthy Windy City composers of the past and present on his newest Cedille Records album, *Chicago Clarinet Classics*, available March 10, 2023.

The album, which Yeh conceived, researched, and assembled during the pandemic with the label’s encouragement, offers world-premiere recordings of Leo Sowerby’s *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, H 240a*, Shulamit Ran’s *Spirit for Solo Clarinet (in Memory of Laura Flax)*, Teresa Reilly’s *The Forgiveness Train* for two clarinets, and Stacy Garrop’s *Phoenix Rising* for Solo Clarinet.

Alexander Tcherepnin’s *Sonata in one movement for clarinet and piano* opens the program, which concludes with his former student Robert Muczynski’s *Time Pieces for Clarinet and Piano, Op. 43*, the only widely known work on the album, even among clarinetists (Cedille Records CDR 90000 218).

Yeh’s collaborators are pianist Patrick Godon, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s principal keyboardist and a longtime friend and professional colleague, and composer and freelance clarinetist Reilly, Yeh’s spouse, who has performed alongside him at CSO concerts, in recital, and on recordings.

In addition to Reilly, the other two living composers — Garrop and Ran — were present at the recording sessions to provide feedback to the performers and the production team.

“It was totally a labor of love,” Yeh says in a Cedille Classical Chicago Podcast interview with album producer James Ginsburg, the label’s founder and president. “I couldn’t be more delighted how this turned out.”

Yeh hopes listeners will share his delight in discovering these mid-and-late-20th-century works and recent pieces representing “a wonderful variety of different styles.”

The album, he says, underscores his conviction that Chicago has long been “a really, really incredible place for musicians and music to thrive.”

The complete interview streams at (URL TO COME).

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Project sparked by Sowerby sonata

The album's centerpiece, Leo Sowerby's witty, inventive, large-scale 1938 Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, H 240a, was the "spark" that launched the project, according to Yeh. He says he first became aware of the Sonata while exploring Sowerby's vast catalog after learning the composer's Wind Quintet for a May 2021 "CSO Sessions" online chamber concert for CSO.tv.

"The textures are reminiscent of Brahms, but the harmony is certainly not, and the melodic impulses are different," Yeh says in the podcast interview. "We really found this work to be full of treasures. I'm astonished it hasn't been recorded until now."

Yeh sought to determine if "there might be other really good pieces for clarinet and piano written by Chicago composers or composers that have close connection with Chicago." *Chicago Clarinet Classics* is the result.

Ran, a former CSO composer-in-residence whom Yeh has known for four decades, wrote her tender, heartfelt *Spirit for Solo Clarinet* as a tribute to her late friend, New York clarinetist Laura Flax, whom Yeh knew and admired. He describes the piece, written in 2017, as mostly "ebullient and upbeat and passionate. That was the sort of musician Laura was."

Reilly's clarinet duet, *The Forgiveness Train*, is an insistently rhythmic, pandemic-fueled dreamscape about personal peril — an imagined train derailment — amid the natural beauty of a forest. She wrote the three-movement work in 2020 while she, Yeh, and their daughter were ensconced for the year at their vacation retreat in the woods of southwest Michigan during the lockdown. A major inspiration was the bird-song they heard throughout their sojourn, which figures prominently in the aleatoric inner movement.

The work's inclusion on *Chicago Clarinet Classics* marks Reilly's recording debut as a composer.

Yeh and Garrop have been friends for many years and were once faculty colleagues at Roosevelt University's Chicago College of Performing Arts. Her dramatic *Phoenix Rising*, originally composed for soprano saxophone in 2016, depicts, in two movements, the fiery death and triumphant rebirth of the brilliantly colored Phoenix bird of Greek and Egyptian legend. Yeh says the 2017 clarinet version is "a challenge to bring off," requiring extended techniques to evoke the sights and sounds of the story, e.g., bent tones to create the sound of the dying Phoenix moaning atop the flaming embers and fluttering effects to represent wings flapping.

"The story completely guides my performance," Yeh says.

Russian-born composer-pianist Tcherépnin wrote his vivacious single-movement Sonata for clarinet and piano in Paris, presumably around 1939. He and his family emigrated to the U.S. in 1948 and settled in Chicago in 1950, where he taught at DePaul University. He was a significant musical presence in the city, relocating to New York in 1964.

Yeh writes in the liner notes that the Sonata "employs some of the hybrid scalar patterns found in many of his subsequent works."

One of Tcherepnin's students at DePaul was Muczynski, a Chicago-born Polish American, whose 1983 *Time Pieces* for Clarinet and Piano shares a somewhat similar sound world with his teacher's Sonata.

Although *Time Pieces* has become omnipresent in recitals, Yeh says it's difficult to do it justice. Muczynski himself wrote of the work, "Technically and musically there is quite a lot going in this four-movement suite" with its "energetic, syncopated rhythms, long and sustained melodic lines, cadenzas for solo clarinet, tongue-in-cheek humor, and an overall 'up' feeling."

Chicago 'lions' of composition

The cover of *Chicago Clarinet Classics* features one of the massive, signature bronze lions that have guarded the Michigan Avenue entrance to the Art Institute of Chicago (across the street from Symphony Center, the CSO's home) since the 1890s.

Cedille's Ginsburg says, "It's an apt image for a project representing some of the lions — and lionesses — among Chicago's classical composers."

Recording Team and Venue

Chicago Clarinet Classics was recorded by the Grammy Award-winning team of producer Ginsburg and engineer Bill Maylone February 7–8 and March 18, 2022, at the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago.

John Bruce Yeh on Cedille Records

Chicago Clarinet Classics is Yeh's fourth Cedille Records album as featured soloist and his eighth overall.

His previous release on the label was the Grammy-nominated *Liquid Melancholy — Clarinet Music of James M Stephenson*, featuring works of the prolific contemporary Chicago composer. *The Clarinet* proclaimed, "Yeh's performances deserve special mention for his exquisite interpretations. Yeh demonstrates exceptional facility, an even, beautiful sound throughout the registers of the instrument, and a dynamic range that retains focus and resonance from the softest whisper to the loudest outbursts." *Audiophile Audition* declared it "a whopping stunner of an album," adding, "John Bruce Yeh proves the marvel here, surely as talented as any clarinet player in the world today."

His Cedille discography as headliner also includes *Clarinet Chamber Music by Hindemith* and *Clarinet Sonatas by Blackwood and Reger*.

Yeh is director and cofounder of Chicago Pro Musica, which received the 1986 Grammy Award as Best New Classical Artist for an album on Reference Recordings. The chamber ensemble, which includes several of Yeh's CSO colleagues, went on to record *Early Chamber Music of Elliott Carter* for Cedille. ClassicsToday.com wrote, "Their precision and familiarity with the music allows them to play these pieces as classics—and that's exactly what they are."

The longest-serving clarinetist in Chicago Symphony Orchestra history, Yeh joined the CSO in 1977, at age 19, as solo bass clarinet by invitation of conductor Sir Georg Solti. Two years later, he was named assistant principal and E-flat clarinet, the positions he holds today. He has performed as guest

principal clarinet of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Seoul Philharmonic, and Guangzhou Symphony and as guest bass clarinet of the Mariinsky Orchestra and Hong Kong Philharmonic.

Cedille Records

Launched in November 1989 by James Ginsburg, Grammy Award-winning Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE) is dedicated to showcasing and promoting the most noteworthy classical artists in and from the Chicago area. The label's catalog of more than 200 front-line albums brims with attractive, off-the-beaten-path repertoire from the Baroque era to the present day. Works from the classical canon, when they do appear, are usually heard in particularly imaginative pairings.

Cedille has recorded more than 180 Chicago artists and ensembles, with over 80 making their professional recording debuts on the label. Its catalog includes the world premieres of more than 400 classical compositions.

Cedille recordings are available on CD, as MP3 and hi-resolution FLAC downloads, and on all major streaming platforms.

An independent nonprofit enterprise, Cedille Records is the label of Cedille Chicago, NFP. Sales of physical CDs and digital downloads and streams cover only a small percentage of the label's costs. Tax-deductible donations from individual music-lovers and grants from charitable organizations account for most of its revenue.

Cedille's headquarters are at 4311 N. Ravenswood Ave., Suite 202, Chicago, IL 60613; call 773-989-2515; email: info@cedillerecords.org. Website: www.cedillerecords.org

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Chicago Clarinet Classics
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 218)

John Bruce Yeh, clarinet,
with Patrick Godon, piano,
and Teresa Reilly, clarinet

Alexander Tcherepnin: Sonata in one movement
for clarinet and piano (5:04)
Stacy Garrop: *Phoenix Rising* for Solo Clarinet† (10:49)
Leo Sowerby: Sonata for Clarinet and Piano, H240a* (26:32)
Shulamit Ran: *Spirit for Solo Clarinet (in memory
of Laura Flax)** (5:45)
Teresa Reilly: *The Forgiveness Train* for two clarinets* (11:28)
Robert Muczynski: *Time Pieces* for Clarinet
and Piano, Op. 43 (16:35)

*World Premiere Recording

†Premiere Recording of version for clarinet