



Art of Opportunity

BY Paul Brady

After some serendipitous beginnings, a forward-thinking string quartet and a composer/accordionist with deep jazz cred are collaborating on new repertoire for their hybrid ensemble.

Lake Michigan's South Shore is dotted with steel mills and meat-packing plants, railyards and highways—their paths all leading to Chicago. That quick-and-easy thoroughfare along the country's rust belt made it convenient for composer/accordionist Julien Labro to travel to Chicago from Detroit for years of gigs before settling in Toronto. Often invited to perform with internationally known Chicago musicians, such as the Brazilian guitarist Paulinho Garcia, or the Polish jazz vocalist Grazyna Auguscik, Labro logged the hours in Chicago; and the city's limelit jazz scene helped establish the French-born reed-blower as this country's A-list star of the often misunderstood instrument.

Chicago and Detroit—which became home to millions of Central and Eastern European immigrants and their

descendants—fostered accordion communities in the 20th century; and the jazz scene in the two cities bred countless collaborations among the music's greatest practitioners—accordionists included.

But now there's a new kind of accordion collaboration to report on, and it involves Labro and the Chicago-based Spektral Quartet—the young group that commissioned composers like David Lang, Augusta Read Thomas, jazz musicians George Lewis and Greg Ward, and about forty others, to write a series of 35-second string quartet spots (called Mobile Miniatures) to be released as cell-phone alerts, alarms, and ring tones.

To the Spektrals, founded in 2010 and now in residence at the University of Chicago, collaborating with an accordionist began as just another gig—in this case



Watch Julien Labro and the Spektrals
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a 2012 festival at Northwestern University dedicated to the accordion and curated by Labro. As for the idea of a string quartet enhanced by Labro on accordion, that was the result of calculated thinking by an experienced producer, Richard Van Kleeck. Van Kleeck spent years of his career presenting artists together for the first time on Northwestern University's stages, perhaps most famously the debut Chicago-area concert of Bela Fleck and the Flecktones. A simple YouTube search, corroborated by just a little further investigation, was all it took for Van Kleeck to find an accordion sage to actualize his vision of a festival dedicated to the instrument.

And it was Van Kleeck who hand-sold the local Chicago Spektral Quartet to Labro, in response to Labro's request to perform with strings as a part of the 2012 accordion festival called The Big Squeeze, held at Northwestern.

"To me, Spektral and Labro seemed like a perfect musical fit: both are technically strong, musically adventurous and excellent collaborators," says Van Kleeck. After studying the Spektral's recordings, Labro knew the ensemble could handle anything he put in front of them. He constructed a technically challenging arrangement of Piazzolla's "Milonga Loca" for bandoneón (on which Labro doubles) and string quartet.

"I flew in, we had one rehearsal in the morning the day of the concert, and another one in the afternoon, but we were ready to go after the first one," Labro says. "They were so good." And according to both Labro and the quartet members, the musical chemistry between the two units was instantaneous.

Afterward, all involved understood that their association would last beyond the single concert. The musicians stayed in touch and began discussing more repertoire and future performance possibilities. Less than two years later, the Spektrals share with Labro a new recording, *From This Point Forward* (Azica). The material that surfaced on the disc was a different story from the initial collaboration, which had resulted from a major university series' deep pockets and resources.

This time, Labro was focused on birthing new works by living composers for the ensemble of accordion (or bandoneón and accordina) and strings.

On the new CD are works by composers selected by Labro to demonstrate that there are South American and Latin composers beyond Brazil's Villa-Lobos and Argentina's Piazzolla, though both of these major figures are also represented.

For the new work, Labro simply cold-contacted composers whose music he admired to inquire about permission to record it. Two Argentine composers, Diego Schissi and Fernando Otero, were not only enthusiastic about the project, they also offered to arrange their compositions, "Liquido 5" and "De Ahora En Mas" ("From This Point Forward") respectively, for the new group's instrumentation. The other works that make up the album are by the Brazilian multi-instrumentalist Hermeto Pascoal; the Argentine jazz artist Dino

Saluzzi; the late-Romantic 20th-century Paraguayan composer Agustín Barrios; and Ernesto Grenet (Cuba). All are arranged by Labro, who holds a master's degree in composition from Wayne State University. (Now 34, Labro arrived in Detroit as a 17-year-old to study with then-professor of accordion at Wayne State, Peter Soave.)

For years, Labro had been recording various projects with Azica Records, including an album of music by Piazzolla for bandoneón, guitar, and orchestra that featured classical guitarist Jason Vieaux and the Boston-based chamber orchestra A Far Cry. When he received the green light from the label to record with Spektral, the rehearsals began. The album includes mostly through-composed material, but also jazz improvisation from Labro and another featured guest artist, the Puerto Rican-born jazz alto saxophonist Miguel Zenón, whose composition "El Club De La Serpiente," also appears on the recording, arranged by Labro.

"I had arranged the work by Miguel Zenón for the recording anyway and coincidentally was just checking out his tour schedule, and noticed that he would be in Chicago performing at the Jazz Showcase the exact same week we would be recording in town," Labro told me over the phone. "What are the odds?" Another cold-email, and Zenón—a 2008 MacArthur "genius" fellow—was in the studio with Spektral and Labro on the Saturday afternoon of the recording session in Chicago, in September of 2013.

For the quartet, the opportunity to record with Zenón and to rehearse this heavily groove-based, rhythmically complex, through-

continued on page 50

The Spektral Quartet, l to r: Austin Wulliman, violin; Doyle Armbrust, viola; Clara Lyon, violin; Russell Rolén, cello



scores of the String Quartets. The first two questions involve this marking, “^.” Now, if you have a score of all six or any of the Bartók quartets, open it. I can guarantee that no matter what page you open, you won’t be far from an important use of this “^” marking. I have heard rehearsals in which it is encouraged to be interpreted as a strong, aggressive accent. Given the thousands of these marks in the quartets, if you take them as aggressive, you have set an aggressive overall tone. Yet Székely maintained that this symbol is not a dynamic accent but a purely agogic accent, an emphasis created by pulling the time in order to make the feature “come out.” Wow! If you see a marking that is usually taken as a signal to hit a note very aggressively, and then you are told by a truly close musical collaborator of Bartók’s that it is not a hard attack but one that stretches time, the whole sound is affected!

(By the way, I personally feel that this accent involves time *and* dynamic; but to read its fundamental meaning as having to do with time reinforces Frigyesi’s questioning of common practice.)

When Eugene Lehner coached us on Bartók, he sang the phrases in his unforgettably touching way and told the half-joking story that he felt personally responsible for Bartók

providing an easier “ossia” for the octaves in the Marcia! Székely took us into the world of his hand-crafted parts, in which he had re-spelled so many of Bartók’s chords, taking the same pitches and redistributing them for better sonority. He clarified that as long as the pitches were not different, Bartók was happy to benefit from Székely’s more intimate knowledge of string instruments. (Remember also that Bartók had great admiration for Székely as a composer.)

I also had a chance to spend time with Sandor Vegh; and when I first was getting to know the Bartók Quartets, I sought out the Vegh Quartet’s recordings of these works. At the time I wasn’t sure why I was so fascinated by the Vegh recordings; but I have come to understand it a little better now, and Ms. Frigyesi’s “How Barbaric” essay provides a lot of insight on the subject.

There is much to say about every chapter in this collection; but instead of reading more of my writing, just dive into this stimulating book. Taking you deeply into the relation between Beethoven’s and Bartók’s music and then going forward from Bartók’s time, the book provides great insight into the delicate way composers such as Ligeti and Kurtág had to process Bartók’s immense influence. I was grateful for the complex

insights about Ligeti’s second string quartet. The Borromeo Quartet played this work for Ligeti. He worked hard with us, but said, “In this time [it was 1991], I can’t identify with this music.” At the presentation we made together, he preferred to elaborate on the Schubert movement we played (the G-major quartet, D. 887, movement 1). The Biró-Krebs book helped me understand the complex thinking that underlay Ligeti’s remark, and how his statement really couldn’t be taken at face value.

Yet another book I want to recommend is *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources*, by the tremendous Bartók scholar László Somfai. The Biró-Krebs collection contains innumerable references to this work—and it is well worth investing the time to read it.

Biró and Krebs’s *The String Quartets of Béla Bartók*, the Kenneson book on Székely, the Somfai book: these are just the start of a huge list of resources that can make our music-making so much richer. Let’s make the most of them. The Bartók Quartets deserve it!

Nicholas Kitchen is the founding first violinist of the Borromeo Quartet.

New Work, *continued from page 25*

composed Latin music with Labro has shaped the way they now approach most repertoire.

“It’s been a massive learning process for us that, really, Julien has guided us through,” says the Spektral’s violist, Doyle Armbrust. “It’s given us an incredible appreciation for that style of playing, jazz or dance music like tango.” Being a Chicago-bred string quartet has its advantages when having to approach both a strict classical discipline and that of jazz on the same project. “As a freelancer in Chicago,” Armbrust adds, “you’re still just as

likely to end up playing in a section for a Stevie Wonder concert at the United Center as you are playing Handel’s *Messiah*.”

Chicago is almost unique, in that it is still an inland North American city of opportunity, where an artist can begin to grow an international reputation far from the jazz or classical capitals of New York, London, and Berlin. Today, it’s rare that a jazz artist would have a week-long engagement in any city outside of New York, making possible a day-time recording session with an accordionist

and local string quartet. *From This Point Forward* is an example of artist-to-artist collaboration achieved through the simplest of terms, proving that sometimes when it comes to creating music with admirable people who may seem light-years away in distance or fame, the easiest way is to just ask.

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