

The Crossroads Project

A scientist calls upon a composer, a quartet of chamber musicians, and two visual artists to bring home his message on ecological sustainability.

BY Daniel Stephen Johnson

“It’s one thing to actually know something,” says violinist Rebecca McFaul, “and it’s another thing to actually *live* as if you know it.”

The Crossroads Project, a new lecture/recital on ecological sustainability created by physicist Rob Davies, is designed to bridge that gap between the comprehension of a fact and the understanding of a truth. Toward that aim, Davies has enlisted the talents of the Fry Street Quartet—McFaul and Robert Waters on violin, violist Bradley Ottesen, and cellist Anne Francis Bayless—composer Laura Kaminsky, plus a handful of artists working in other media.

Davies, McFaul’s colleague at Utah State University, spearheaded the project after having discovered through his own concert-going experiences the potential of music to connect abstract and rational thinking to an immediate emotional response. During his postdoctoral studies at Oxford, says McFaul, Davies discovered that the regular chamber music recitals in a chapel there “unlocked his thinking. He would have the puzzles of the day going through his head, and music just unlocked his thought processes.”

When he began to feel that his presentations on the dangers of global climate change weren’t having an impact on his audience, he again thought of music. After all, McFaul says, “This is a medium that moves people.”

“Art has the ability to transform everyday life,” Kaminsky explains, “so the fact of something and the artistic expression of that same

thing both penetrate us, but they do it in different ways and have different outcomes. So to understand something intellectually and to understand something emotionally/spiritually—if you can achieve both—then you have complete understanding, and that’s something art can give us.”

Her piece for Fry Street, *Rising Tide*, was not a part of the Crossroads Project as originally conceived—instead, an earlier version of the program interspersed the sections of Davies’s lecture with excerpts from Haydn’s Quartet Op. 76, No. 4 (“Sunrise”), Shostakovich’s String Quartet no. 7, and Janáček’s Quartet no. 1. But the project’s creative team quickly realized that they needed to commission something that would speak directly to the issues at hand. They decided to replace the Shostakovich with a new string quartet, and Laura Kaminsky’s phone rang.

“It was a match made in heaven,” she says, “just a meeting of the minds—political, social, and artistic minds.”

The Crossroads team knew, Kaminsky points out, “that I had a sense of urgency and awareness around issues related to the environment, and that I was an avid composer of string quartet music.”

The quartet itself is in four movements, each tied to one of the four main parts of Davies’s lecture: “H₂O” obviously represents water, the chemical that is the basis of all life on earth; “Bios” suggests the global biosphere and within it, the genesis and balance of all ecosystems; “Forage” exam-



Fry Street Quartet: l-r, Robert Waters, violin; Bradley Ottesen, viola; Anne Francis Bayless, cello; and Rebecca McFaul, violin.

ines the food supply; and finally, “Societas” suggests humankind’s place in the ecosystem and our unique potential to upset or possibly restore the balance of nature.

“To me the first movement—water—it sounds like there’s something ancient about it,” says McFaul, “and fundamental.”

This is very much what the composer had in mind, explains Kaminsky. “When I knew that they wanted the first section to be about water—I don’t know why I had this response, but I’ve traveled and worked in many parts of the world, and because those experiences are not your daily norms, they stay with me very deeply.”

And so, when she decided to create “something that would seem very ancient,” she turned to the “Sharakan” tradition of medieval Armenian chant that she’d learned about on her travels in Europe—“ancient, old-world, deep soul music,” she calls it. “I kept having this image in my mind of Lake Sevan, which is the main body of water in this landlocked country.” Now, says Kaminsky, “most people who’ve heard it have said to me, ‘That feels like very old, spiritual music,’” without being precisely able to pinpoint the musical reference.

In “Bios,” McFaul says, “there are a lot of odd rhythms—it sounds like life assem-

bling, where it comes together and where it repels,” and she and Kaminsky point out that the nature of the string quartet, an ensemble made up of four equal voices, offers a sort of built-in metaphor for the balance of an ecosystem.

“I totally agree with Rebecca, talking about the interplay and the interdependence and the support mechanisms of the string quartet being a metaphor for an ecosystem,” says Kaminsky. “I think the power of the string quartet, for me, is, it’s four individuals that have to find a balance so that they function as one—so that their range is the full range of the human voice, but it’s four people making that, so that they have to give and take at the same time. They’re completely dependent on each other, but every piece has to be independent, so it really is a thriving ecosystem.”

McFaul describes the narrative arc of the last two movements, in which the presence of humanity makes itself more evident, as somewhat more ambivalent. “‘Forage,’ the food movement,” she says, gives a formal progression “which kind of begins in this... sort of playful way, and concludes in this sort of mechanized frightening way” that represents to her, for instance, “the combines of agribusiness.”

And “‘Societas’ is maybe the hardest to sort of find an understanding of. The opening...is beautiful, kind of reverent, in a way—kind of sad—and the fast parts of the movement are a little bit like society, like us making our way, not really trying to support or complement each other. But then she brings it back to this sort of chorale at the finish,” something “hopeful,” says McFaul, “coming back to the better part of what humanity is capable of.”


While Kaminsky’s string quartet stands on its own as a concert work, without Davies’s lectures or the visual components, McFaul argues that the Crossroads Project as a whole “may be a sextet: it’s a performance for scientist/lecturer, projections and string quartet.” In addition to visuals that document concretely the issues raised by the lecture, such as Garth Lenz’s beautiful and disturbing photographs of ecological disaster, a sequence of abstract images by Kaminsky’s wife—the painter Rebecca Allan—“works beautifully,” McFaul argues, “as a kind of transition” from the abstract, emotional world of the music to the concrete, rational world of Davies’s words.

“Finding the right collaborators,” says Kaminsky, “who realize [Davies’s] vision and make it hold together is amazing, and that is the experience I had with the Fry Street Quartet and Rob Davies and Rebecca and Garth.”

“It really is great,” she adds, “that a scientist would think that the best way he could make a case for the science that he’s dedicated his life to is through music and art. That’s really powerful.”

The Crossroads Project will appear in four New York City-area venues in February.

Writer Daniel Stephen Johnson blogs for WQXR-FM.

 **Watch “The Crossroads Project” at www.chamber-music.org/extras**