

SONIC ALCHEMY

YuEun Kim | Mina Gajić | Coleman Itzkoff

1] Balta Ainava (White Scenery) <i>Pēteris Vasks (b. 1946)</i>	[8:27]
2] Fratres <i>Arvo Pärt (b. 1935)</i>	[11:38]
3] Fantasia in D minor, K. 397 <i>Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)</i>	[6:00]
4] Mozart-Adagio (after Sonata K. 280) <i>Arvo Pärt</i>	[6:33]
5] Fantasia in C minor, K. 475 <i>W. A. Mozart</i>	[12:13]
6] Castillo Interior (Interior Castle) <i>Pēteris Vasks</i>	[13:07]
7] Spiegel im Spiegel <i>Arvo Pärt</i>	[10:24]
Total Time:	[68:27]

How do we even measure time?

It is sometimes said that time is as old as humankind, but of course it isn't. It's just something we created out of a need for... what exactly? Earliest known evidence suggests we were measuring time already 5000 years ago. That way we could create predictability, for example concerning planting and harvesting. From there on we could more easily schedule and organize, which then helped us building a more sustainable life. When we had found a mutual understanding of what we would call time then other systems could be developed, kind of like a third-party software. Music notation works as a fine example.

Today our life is synchronized "to the beat." Not only is every single footstep kept track of by our telephones or every breath by our smart wrist watches - even our thoughts are as good as monitored as we scroll casually through advertisements on social media. Without us even realizing, the idea of time and synchronicity is apparently encrypted so deep in our consciousness that the thought of viewing the world without it is beyond our comprehension. That doesn't change the fact that time as we understand it has not always been the same. Our ideas on time have changed throughout the centuries

and will most probably continue to do so. The works on *Sonic Alchemy* are of composers who offer a new perspective on how we can perceive time, each in their own way.

The passing of time is inherent in *White Scenery* by Pēteris Vasks, a part of *The Seasons for piano*. The score is written *senza misura*, meaning he does not write a tempo into the score but instructs the performer to play “very sweetly and softly.” The notation is simple, merely noteheads on paper only separated by short stops where Vasks indicates how many seconds each of them should last. This way of notating is reminiscent of old music, since the beginning of music notation, before the invention of fixed meter, the text being sung used to dictate the flow of the music. The flow of time wasn’t fixed by the meter but by the words, acoustics, and the act of listening. Although Vasks is referring to the snowy landscape, perhaps of his beautiful homeland Latvia, it is also tempting to see *White Scenery* as a blank page, *tabula rasa*, a space for us to just be, rid of time and meaning.

Another composer deeply immersed in the idea of listening and time is Arvo Pärt. Contrary to the previously mentioned work by Vasks, Pärt writes the music in a fixed tempo and notates every detail clearly. His compositional method, which has been written about extensively, is based on a fixed relation



between two voices. One is the melody and the other his distinct version of countervoice consisting only of one of the three notes that make up the fundamental triad. But for music that is so mathematically constructed, how can it sound so spiritual and pure?

Pärt himself has compared his method to how we perceive the subjective and objective worlds. One represents our thoughts and feelings, doings, and mistakes, the other the

unchangeable, the things in life that we cannot control like God, death, and love. It is perhaps in this space between those worlds where the fundamentals of our existence lie, and time stands still. Are these two voices perhaps what the title of the piece *Fratres* – Latin for brothers – refers to? Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel* is on the other hand ignited by the phenomenon that occurs when two mirrors are placed in front of each other and they reflect each other *ad infinitum*. But its title also refers to one of the cornerstones of Western composition techniques; the visual mirroring of notes, something you can find in music throughout the centuries. Again, the measurable and the unmeasurable balance each other out.

Appropriately, Pärt's *Mozart Adagio* is the album's centerpiece. The original composition is from Sonata in F Major, K. 280, by then a young and playful Mozart. Pärt approaches it cautiously, as if in the presence of a higher being. He carefully crafts Mozart's composition with his own unique style and in his distinct manner creates a spiritual connection between the 18th and 20th century.

A lot has been written about the Soviet authority that Pärt and Vasks lived under and that marked their lives. Less attention has been paid to the Baltic States of Estonia and Latvia and their unique nature, long-term history, and culture.

When travelling around the Baltic countryside, the feeling of timelessness is all around. It's as if modernity, at least in the sense Western people perceive it, never reached there. The forests seem to preserve something ancient, a pre-historic DNA of the nations, and the people have some kind of spiritual relationship with it. When they go to the forest it is not just about picking berries or mushrooms, or hiking, it is to get in touch with the roots, figuratively speaking. It is similar to other people going to church and feeling the connection simultaneously with the fellowship and with eternity. It might have to do with the fact that Christianity enforced by Teutonic crusaders was never fully adopted by those nations that their sacredness uses other channels. Vasks' *Castillo Interior* probably deals with more internal matters, but it still does bring up images of Baltic landscapes. You can envision the fields with smoke rising from the farmhouse chimneys, juniper trees by limestone beaches, pine tree forests, oldness...

Although the works of Pärt and Vasks on Sonic Alchemy are instrumental, the influence of singing cannot be understated when talking about their works. Choir tradition is at the core of the Estonian and Latvian self-identity and both countries have an enormous collection of folk songs that set the scene for a big part of their modern music life. Folk music differs greatly from the Western classical heritage, mainly in the sense that

it was never composed, as we would consider *composing* today. It has just always existed, like the trees in the forest. One verse grows out of the other and there seems to be no beginning or end. Arvo Pärt is undoubtedly a creator with an ancient soul but his focus does not reach for folk heritage. Unlike Vasks who uses the Latvian folk songs as an inspiration for his compositions, Pärt seeks inspiration in early polyphonic music. In both cases though, it is like they are trying to reach as far back as they can, closer to the earliest source, to find the purest essence.

Despite the roughly 200 years that separate Mozart from Vasks and Pärt, there are elements that connect them. Similarly to Pärt and Vasks who needed to find a way to deal with the oppressive rule of the Soviet Union, Mozart also made a well-known declaration of independence. He left the archbishop in Salzburg and the financial security that followed and embarked on a path of what we would call freelance composing today. All of them needed to get away from an authority that demanded something much more primitive than they were willing to provide. Their youthful playfulness, sheer joy of creating and giving combined with clarity and depth of thought was stronger than the cage around them.

When I asked Mina Gajic about the ambition behind *Sonic*

Alchemy she mentioned the transformation and fluidity of life, represented by the seasons in nature, and in mankind the way people connect through religion and spirituality. In that way we can look towards *Mozart-Adagio* and see how it “converts” to a trio while remaining true to itself at the same time. Pärt’s *Spiegel im Spiegel* is like mirror reflections in water, movement and stillness appearing simultaneously. Vasks’ *Castillo Interior* echoes the same thoughts but this time they seem to refer to something internal. Maybe we can trace these ideas to Mozart when he threw a stone into the pond just to see the waves?

Mozart, Pärt and Vasks all share a deep sense of clarity that crystalizes in music that comforts and elevates your spirit. And that, for me, may be the highest possible form of any art creation.

- Páll Ragnar Pálsson

Páll Ragnar Pálsson (b. 1977) is an Icelandic composer and has collaborated with Sono Luminus on numerous recordings, most notably Atonement (2020) where Caput Ensemble and Tui Hirv, who is Páll's spouse, performed his chamber works. Also, his cello concerto Quake was on the Grammy nominated Concurrence (2019) performed by Saeunn Thorsteinsdóttir and ISO. Páll Ragnar studied composition in Estonia 2007-2013 and since then collaborates with Estonian musicians on multiple levels.

Y U E U N K I M

Award-winning South Korean violinist YuEun Gemma Kim concertizes internationally as soloist and chamber music collaborator in a wide variety of repertoire on modern and baroque period instruments. She moved to the United States in 2013 to attend University of Southern California, where she studied with Midori Goto. In 2022 YuEun was named Artist-in-Residence with Musica Angelica Baroque Orchestra and Concertmaster of The Chamber Orchestra at St. Matthew's, Los Angeles. Recent performances include collaborations with American Bach Soloists, Boulder Bach Festival, Voices of Music, and Blue Hill Bach. She was a top prize winner at Boulder International Chamber Music Competition Art of Duo, a semi-finalist at the Qingdao International Violin Competition in China and at the Michael Hill International Violin Competition in New Zealand, and recently received the Jeffrey Thomas Award from American Bach Soloists.

YuEun is a core member of the self-conducted chamber orchestra Delirium Musicum. During the pandemic, Delirium Musicum created MusiKaravan, which took YuEun and Artistic Director Etienne Gara on the road in a vintage Volkswagen bus to perform socially-distanced concerts for farm workers, winemakers, random passersby, and even the occasional ostrich. MusiKaravan won the Audience Choice Award of the San Francisco Classical Voice for "Best Streaming Series." She can be heard on Delirium

Musicum's recent debut album, "Seasons."

YuEun is also a founding member of "Yu & I," a duo with guitarist Ines Thomé. Together, they won the Beverly Hills National Auditions, and recently recorded their debut album, "A Journey with Yu & I," featuring folk-inspired music from around the world.

As concerto soloist, YuEun has performed with symphony orchestras across North America and Asia. Embracing audiences worldwide during the pandemic, her Chopin Nocturne video on YouTube has been viewed more than 14 million times thus far.



MINA GAJIĆ

Mina Gajić has garnered an international reputation for insightful and dynamic performances of a vast and ever-evolving repertoire including many new works by living composers, concertos and recitals performed on historic Romantic Era pianos, and collaborations on harpsichord and fortepiano. She started her education and music career in Yugoslavia and subsequently performed as concerto soloist and recitalist in Italy, France, the Czech Republic, Serbia, Montenegro, China, Bolivia, and across the United States. As duo partner with violinist Zachary Carrettin, she has appeared on four continents, focusing on a diverse repertoire spanning the centuries and various styles—on historic period pianos in addition to modern concert instruments, and including new works composed for the duo.

Notable performances have included critically-acclaimed period instrument renditions of works by Chopin, Brahms, Britten, Ives, Berg, Antheil, and Bartók. Her doctoral dissertation and subsequent research on the work of Yugoslav composer Josip Slavenski connect Balkan folkloric traditions and approaches to twentieth century music between the two World Wars.

Her performances of Brahms and Schumann (Érard piano, 1895) can be heard on the audio book *Escapement*, by award-winning author Kristen Wolf. Additionally, Gajić and Carrettin's recording of Schubert sonatas

on historical instruments (Érard piano, 1835), *Boundless*, was released in 2020 and became a Top 10 on Billboard Charts "Traditional Classical" the following month. Her recording of *Balkan Dances & Tango Nuevo*, *Confluence* was released in 2022 on the Sono Luminus label. She performs as harpsichord concerto soloist on the 2023 Boulder Bach Festival album, also on Sono Luminus.



Gajić holds degrees from the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Shepherd School of Music at Rice University, and holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Colorado-Boulder.

Gajić is the founder and Artistic Director of Boulder International Chamber Music Competition—Art of Duo. Former faculty at Sam Houston State University, in 2019 she became Artistic and Executive Director of Boulder Bach Festival.

COLEMAN ITZKOFF

Cellist and performer Coleman Itzkoff stands at the intersection of baroque/classical/ new music, contemporary dance, and experimental theater. Whether premiering works by living composers and performing baroque music on historical instruments in the same concert, delivering enigmatic monologues in a piece of avant-garde dance theater (as well as dancing in said piece), composing, arranging, and recording music for the Amazon film 'Le Bal des Folles,' or simply playing a piece of solo Bach for hospital patients in the time of COVID, Coleman continues to push the boundaries of what it means to be a musician of the 21st century, bringing his diverse range of interests and shape-shifting presence to every room and stage he occupies.

Hailed by Alex Ross in the New Yorker for his "flawless technique and keen musicality," Coleman has performed in the great halls and festivals of America and abroad. As a soloist, he has had the privilege of being the featured soloist with many great orchestras, including recent appearances with the Houston, San Diego, and Cincinnati Symphonies. As a recitalist, he is allowed to express his eclectic taste and inventive programming, and is constantly experimenting with the form and format of a solo concert, playing with unique lighting, unconventional spaces, and often with an accompaniment of dance or text.

Collaboration is the heart of Coleman's art making. To that end, he is a dedicated member of several ensembles, including the early music ensembles Ruckus and Twelfth Night, and is a founding member of AMOC, the American Modern Opera Company. Coleman holds a Bachelor of Music degree from Rice University, a Master of Music degree from University of Southern California, and an Artist Diploma from The Juilliard School.



All three artists can be heard on Boulder Bach Festival's album, released by Sono Luminus in 2022.





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