

LETTING TIME
CIRCLE
THROUGH US

KEERIL MAKAN

EITHER/OR



KEERIL MAKAN composed his longest instrumental work to date, *Letting Time Circle Through Us*, on commission for the New York City–based ensemble Either/Or, with whose musicians Makan has worked intimately over the course of many years and on several projects. Such a relationship not only fosters a sense of shared language, regardless of the evident variety of that language in Makan’s case; it creates a sense of reciprocal trust that encourages risk-taking on the part of the composer and individual engagement and personality on the part of each performer. The larger trajectory of Makan’s musical explorations has not been a linear one, so this close collaboration was invaluable in arriving at the final recorded realization of the project.

Makan’s individual compositional approach has been guided by various influences, but none is apparently ascendant: Makan’s pursuit of his evolving aesthetic has been both intense and hermetic. He grew up in New Jersey, where he studied oboe and violin and began composing in high school before earning degrees in music at Oberlin and the University of California, Berkeley. In addition to his familiarity with and training in the Western classical and contemporary traditions, the sound of Indian classical music has been part of his experience from an early age due to his father’s heritage. Although he never studied Indian music formally, he acknowledges its implicit effect on his own work.

Many of Makan’s pieces grow out of focused paradigms, single ideas tested almost obsessively and in great detail in musical contexts—that is, the resulting pieces need to work on a musical level rather than being just

proof of concept. Like many composers, he is preoccupied by big-picture concerns centered on time, repetition and transformation, simplicity or complexity of musical materials, timbre, resonance, and so on. Questioning established assumptions about everything from the capabilities and limits of musical instruments and performers to the fundamental expressive possibilities of musical form, Makan’s approach is deeply empirical, often growing out of experiment and improvisation. In composing his 2007 27-minute percussion work *Resonance Alloy*, for example, he acquired the necessary percussion instruments—two drums, cymbals, tam-tam, and a variety of beaters—and exhaustively worked out the sonic narrative and logistics before committing it to paper. (*Resonance Alloy* was written for Either/Or co-director David Shively.) He similarly explored the technique of harmonics on electric guitar for his concerto *Dream Lightly*, and the effect of resonances of particular pitches and harmonies for the piano piece *Afterglow* is the result of hours spent with a particular piano at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where Makan is a professor of music.

These experiment-driven works naturally inform Makan’s more wide-ranging endeavors, the traces of this research remaining evident within the new contexts. The most extensive of these to date is his opera *Persona*, based on the film and screenplay by the great Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. The particulars of writing for voice in a dramatic context nearly invariably require new perspectives on writing for instruments, and in this case the original and revised versions of the opera—2012 and 2015 respectively—bookended the composition and

premiere of his concert work *Letting Time Circle Through Us*. Either/Or, notably, was the ensemble for both projects. Given the emotional complexity and intensity of *Persona*, it's not surprising that its musical aspects are strongly characterized and varied, but the economy of means and pointed emotional affect that Makan had developed in his earlier works stood him in good stead, enabling the emotional content of long scenic arcs to be illustrated with austere precision. The opera, too, embraces a range that encompasses the space between the sonic poles of such exuberantly crunchy, noise-friendly works as *Resonance Alloy* and the string quartet *The Noise Between Thoughts* on the one hand and the harmonically open, strongly pitch-oriented, resonant palettes of *Washed by Fire* and *Letting Time Circle Through Us* on the other.

Between these extremes there are many points of correspondence among works: Wholly tonal, harmonious gestures can just as well be used in unexpectedly insistent or incongruous contexts, just as unpitched timbres, dissonance, and alternative tunings can be the basis of ravishing soundscapes. A near-constant in Makan's work is his use of the power of expectation and disruption via the establishment, continuation, variation, and interruption of musical cycles, whatever their content. Repetition and recurrence, periodicity—whether of rhythm or of complete musical fragments—change things, are capable of completely upending the listener's expectation of the syntax and flow of an idea, and thus of its expressive significance within a piece. Related to this are parallels between musical periodicity and the cycles we experience in

life—sunrise/sunset, the phases of the moon, the seasons, and others, including perhaps more personal patterns—that are reflected explicitly in Indian and Indonesian musical traditions.

These patterns or recurrence are acknowledged, at least obliquely, in *Letting Time Circle Through Us*, Makan's most direct and extended engagement with cyclic structures and periodicity. Composed mostly in 2013, it was premiered in April 2014 by Either/Or at Killian Hall at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Its scope, some 45–50 minutes, was agreed upon in negotiations for the commission and represented a deliberate challenge, a stretch, for the composer/ensemble collaboration. In that respect, it complemented the collaborative efforts already in progress with *Persona*, encouraging Makan to reconsider the long narrative spans of the opera in light of the requirements of a purely instrumental concert piece. Their goals and means being different, the two pieces sound very different from one another: *Persona* is Makan's most materially complex work, and *Letting Time Circle Through Us* is, on the surface of it, positively ascetic. Both are culminations of aesthetic and technical concerns that occupied the composer for several years and through a number of works, and as such reflect, or at least parallel, a phase change in his own life. During the time he was composing these pieces, an old friend, a creative person in her own right, re-entered his life, bringing her two lovely children; she and Makan thereafter bought a house, married, and had a daughter together. Their reconnection may be a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence, but the revitalization of an earlier

relationship under very different circumstances reverberates vigorously in the musical space of *Letting Time Circle Through Us*.

Makan's own brief description of his piece provides a jumping-off point for a closer look: "The friction between two contrasting types of music creates the emotional journey of *Letting Time Circle Through Us*. From the foundation of a single note, stable music emerges that repeats throughout the piece. Between these repetitions, singular, novel musical events occur which contrast with the initial stability. Over time, these singular events darken, while the repetitions of the opening music strain to move past the stressful interruptions. Eventually the desire for a return to stability merges with the reality of continual change, and the tension of the piece dissipates."

From this description, one gets the correct sense that *Letting Time* has some structural similarities to rondo form, which is an entirely useful reference as far as it goes. (Rondo or rondeau form was common in the finales of Classical-era concertos, including nearly all of Mozart's mature piano concertos. The basic structure features a recurring "A" section interleaved with contrasting material, i.e., ABACADA. In practice there are any number of variants and alterations.)

Severely limited, nearly static harmonic areas, at times anchored by drones, are the bases for the processes of expansion, accumulation, and growth and shadings of acoustic resonance. Makan carefully chose the instruments of his ensemble, combining a variety of ringing, bell-like timbres with the indefinitely sustainable violin and cello. A focused, unique acoustic identity is maintained for each instrument. Both violin

and cello are bowed throughout, without any pizzicato, and with small variations of bowing technique limited and localized. Crotales alternate between metal and hard plastic mallets, both sounding very bright but subtly different; glockenspiel is played with similar hard mallets. Cymbalom (classical hammer dulcimer), played with light traditional beaters, and the steel-string acoustic guitar, plucked with fingers or a pick, provide uniquely articulated "wiry" timbres, but electromagnetic eBows are also used, vibrating the metal strings without a sharp attack. Identical musical gestures placed in different instruments in direct juxtaposition, e.g. piano followed by cymbalom, amplify otherwise relatively small timbral differences. In addition, the constraints of articulation and consistency of instrumental identity allow for clearly stratified layers of patterns and opposing rhythmic profiles.

The three-minute-plus modified drone, mostly on the pitch A, for solo violin and enriched by cymbalom and guitar using eBows, places us inside the broad time-scale of the piece. The first episode grows out of this—the piano's discretely struck open fourth initially a shock—the passage develops via accumulation without losing its identity: sustained open fourth in the piano, or secondarily that fourth followed by a major third dyad. The open fourth is sometimes echoed by the cymbalom or guitar, with crotales other small figures factoring in. The affect is broad, open, almost majestic. The continual expansion of the passage ultimately includes a long, evolving descant for violin. Upon the first break in this music, it's almost startling to realize that ten minutes have passed.

This material is so clear, and the intervening sections so contrasting, that very little is needed to re-establish its presence later in the piece, where it acts as a marker introducing the extension and development of the music of the second episode. The first instance of this new material centers on a mosaic of struck octaves on the pitch B in crotales, cimbalom, and guitar; over the course of the piece this music is developed, extended, intensified. Interleaved are episodes of widely varied character and instrumental focus, among them accompanied duos for violin and cello and for cimbalom and guitar, as well as a stylistically surprising, subdued, almost songlike passage with rich piano chords. The extremes of intensity and divergences of character culminate in an emotional crest and subside in a long, coda-like resolution that restores the transparent and essential resonance from which the piece emerged.

—Robert Kirzinger

Robert Kirzinger is a composer and writer living in Boston, where he is on the staff of the Boston Symphony Orchestra as an annotator, editor, and pre-concert speaker.

Recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Luciano Berio Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, **Keeril Makan** (b. 1972) has also received awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Howard Foundation, the Fromm Foundation, Meet the Composer, the Aaron Copland House, the Utah Arts Festival, the Fulbright Program, and ASCAP. His work has been commissioned by the Bang on a Can All Stars, American Composers Orchestra, Harvard Musical Association, Pacifica Quartet, and Carnegie Hall, among others. Ensembles that have performed his work

include the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Scharoun Ensemble Berlin, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, the New Juilliard Ensemble, the Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, and the Boston Chamber Music Society. His CDs, *In Sound* (Tzadik), *Target* (Starkland), and *Afterglow* (Mode) include performances by the Kronos Quartet, Either/Or, and the International Contemporary Ensemble. *Persona*, his opera, commissioned by Beth Morrison Projects and National Sawdust, is an adaptation of Ingmar Bergman's classic film, with a libretto by Jay Scheib. It has been produced at National Sawdust, the Gardner Museum, and the Los Angeles Opera.

Makan was raised in New Jersey by parents of South African Indian and Russian Jewish descent. After training as a violinist, he received degrees in composition and religion from Oberlin and completed his Ph.D. in composition at the University of California–Berkeley, with additional studies in Helsinki and Paris. He makes his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he is the Michael (1949) and Sonja Koerner Music Composition Professor at MIT. For more information, visit www.keerilmakan.com.

Winner of the 2015 CMA/ASCAP Award for Adventuresome Programming, **Either/Or** is a flexible chamber ensemble based in New York City that presents chamber music informed equally by American Experimentalism and European avant-garde practice, with special emphases on artists outside the institutional mainstream and on works exploring nontraditional ensemble formations. Directors Richard Carrick and David Shively draw on a broader collective of seventeen regular soloists and guests to realize the

unique requirements of each project. Since its founding in 2004, Either/Or has premiered more than 150 works, toured throughout the United States and Europe, and recorded for labels such as Edition Modern, Mode, New Focus, New World, Starkland, and Sterling Classics.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Afterglow. Mode Records 257.

Gather. Included on *Timetable Percussion*. Carrier Records 2009.

In Sound. Tzadik TZ 8053.

Target. Starkland 217.

Voice Within Voice. Included on *American Voices*. Innova 675.

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Engineer: Joel Gordon

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