

Classical Music Notes Theremin Feast

by Jan Jezioro



Burchfield Penney event features the rare theremin cello

A Musical Feast, the resident musical ensemble of the Burchfield Penney Art Center, opens its new season in the Peter and Elizabeth Tower Auditorium, on Sunday, November 14, at 2pm. The concert includes a rare performance of works on the theremin cello, and is the final presentation in the museum's free, four-day long RendezBlue festival of diverse events and exhibitions.

Just after World War I, Léon Theremin, a young Russian physicist, invented the theremin, one of the first electronic instruments. The original, space-controlled theremin is played without physical contact from the performer. Two separate metal antennas sense the position of the player's hands, with one hand controlling oscillators for frequency, and the other hand controlling oscillators for amplitude, or volume, allowing the musician to play the instrument without touching it. The instrument, which produces a uniquely eerie sound, enjoyed a vogue during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, popularized by a number of touring performers. Hollywood was quick to realize the potential of the theremin and some of the best composers of film music started using it in their scores: Miklos Rosza in *Spellbound* and *Lost Weekend*, and Bernard Hermann in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, among others. The effectiveness of the theremin in creating an otherworldly sound in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* led to its continuing use in countless science fiction films and television shows.

The popularity of the original theremin encouraged the inventor to come up with several variations on the instrument, one of them being the finger-board theremin, also known as the theremin cello which uses a stick-like control that protrudes from the side of the instrument for volume and articulation. The most impressive example of a work calling for the use of the theremin cello is Edgar Varèse's searing masterpiece, *Ecuatorial*. Amazingly enough, after its 1934 premiere the work had never been performed using the specified theremin cellos until 2002, when a re-creation of the original performance of *Ecuatorial*, based on the research of Olivia Mathis, a musicologist and scholar of both Varese and Theremin, took place at UB's Slee Hall.

Since all functional examples of the theremin cello had long disappeared, electronics expert Floyd Engels used back-engineering in 2000 to duplicate the instrument by a process of deduction; he based the design on a non-functional vintage theremin cello that had been found in a private collection by author and musicologist Albert Glinsky. Engels' recreation of the theremin cello used in that performance of *Ecuatorial* helped make the event one of the most memorable performances at UB in the past decade. Jonathan Golove, associate professor of music at UB, was one of the two cellists performing on the newly resurrected theremin cello at the UB performance. Golove has since performed *Ecuatorial* using a theremin cello in Amsterdam, Paris, and London and most recently in New York City at the Lincoln Center Festival last July.

"As a modern player of both acoustic and electric cello, I was intrigued by the challenge," Golove says. "And as an admirer of Varese's music, delighted that I would have the possibility to play a soloist role in a great work by this master who wrote so infrequently for strings."

Golove continues, "I came to feel that the significance of the theremin cello far exceeds the few, rather impressive uses to which it was put during the inventor's time in New York. Rather more important, from my point of view, is the fact that the instrument represents the first attempt to harness the human potential to shape and manipulate electronic sound by means of the technical apparatus of the modern player of bowed string instruments, a technique which had centuries of development behind it, but was still bound up with instruments created in a

pre-technological age. Consider that virtually every other pioneer of electronic instruments, with the notable exception of the inventors of the electric guitar, worked with the keyboard model, for several decades after Theremin's departure from New York. That is to say, in most of the electronic instruments built until the 1970s, sounds are controlled by means of a keyboard player's technique, in many cases, not even a highly refined version of that technique. But why limit the control mechanisms to the keyboard?"

Accompanied by Claudia Hoca on piano, Golove will perform a pair of works on the theremin cello, based on arrangements by Clara Rockmore, the most successful early pioneer performer on the original space-controlled theremin: Rachmaninoff's popular Vocalise, and the much-loved Hebrew Melody, by Joseph Achron, a work that gained worldwide popularity in its transcription for violin by Jascha Heifitz. Golove will also perform Debussy's transcendent 1915 *Cello Sonata* on acoustic cello, with Hoca as pianist, while UB faculty members Barry Crawford, flute, and Alison D'Amato, piano, perform the 1917 *Sonata in A Major* by French composer Philippe Gaubert (1879-1941). Violinist Charles Haupt, founder and artistic director of A Musical Feast, will join Golove and Hoca for a performance of *Café Music*, by the American composer Paul Schoenfield (b. 1947), one of the most popular contemporary chamber works for piano trio, and a favorite of classical music radio listeners across the country.

Admission to the event is free, but seating is limited; to reserve a seat call 878-6011. For more information visit: www.amusicalfeast.com or www.burchfieldpenney.org.

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