

NEW MUSICAL GEOGRAPHIES

Christopher Adler, khaen
Faculty Recital

Tuesday, March 1, 2011, 7:30 p.m.
Black Box Theatre, Camino Hall

Lai Sootsanaen

traditional improvisation

angel music *2007*

Sidney Marquez Boquiren

the wind blows inside *1997*

Christopher Adler

Triangulation *2008*

Christopher Burns

Lao Duang Dauk Mai (auk sum Lao Phaen)

Thai classical

with special guests

Supena Insee Adler, jakhe (zither)

Erica Jones, thone-rammana (drums)

— brief pause —

The Maltese Plaza in Fog *2010 world premiere*

David Loeb

Ulrikke *2006 world premiere of khaen version*

Matthew Welch

ii. urlar — iii. siubhal

patterns in wide space *2011 world premiere*

Jeff Herriott

Lai Yai Lam Pheun

traditional improvisation

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The *khaen* (pronounced “can” and sometimes also transliterated as ‘khene’) is a bamboo free-reed mouth organ and relative of the Chinese *sheng* and Japanese *sho*, and ancestor to the well-known free-reed instruments of the West, including the accordion and harmonica. It is considered by the Lao people, who live in lowland Laos and Northeast Thailand, to be the predominant traditional musical instrument and a symbol of Lao identity. It is also played by some of the upland and minority ethnic groups in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Building upon an interest in Southeast Asian musical traditions and experience as a pipe organist, I began working with the *khaen* in 1994 and grew fluent in its musical traditions through research and study in Northeast Thailand.

The traditional role of the *khaen* is to provide an improvised accompaniment to a solo singer, and solo performance emulates this accompaniment but with greater freedom. Each genre of improvisation reflects characteristic modes, drones, melodic patterns, and rhythms, filtered through each player’s individual style. **Lai Sootsanaen** and **Lai Yai Lam Pheun** are two such genres. This traditional practice of improvisation is less widely practiced today as folk music has been established within school curricula and standardized around fixed melody compositions and popular songs.

For a brief period in the late nineteenth century, the Lao *khaen* became fashionable within Thai aristocratic circles. During this time, the *khaen* was included in Thai court ensembles for the performance of entertainment music, especially repertoire considered to be in a ‘Lao accent’ or inspired by Lao musical style. **Lao Duang Dauk Mai** is one such composition, which I present here with members of the Ostrich Ensemble in a recreation of this archaic palace fashion.

From 1996 to 2002 I composed a series of solo and ensemble pieces for *khaen*, combining traditional instrumental techniques and musical structures with Western compositional practices, polyphony, and my own techniques—**the wind blows inside** was the second of these. In this work, the traditional structure of drone and melody is expanded into a polyphony of drones, melodic voices and harmonic layers—a compositional and technical challenge on an instrument which plays only the fifteen pitches of a two-octave minor scale. The work begins with a stretched out version of a winding melody from the *Lom Phat Phrao* (“the wind blows through the coconut trees”) genre of traditional improvisation.

In 2003, composer **David Loeb** proposed writing a *khaen* piece for me. He is on the faculty of Mannes College in New York, and has extensive experience writing for Japanese instruments and early Western instruments, such as viols. He wrote *Kawagiri*, followed later by a masterful solo, *Karin*, and an ensemble work *Three Friends of Winter*, all of which I have performed and recorded. The success of this collaboration inspired me to create New Musical Geographies, an ongoing project to promote the *khaen* as a concert instrument that has grown to include sixteen works by six composers. For this inaugural solo recital, I asked David to compose a new work for *khaen* trio that would use three instruments at different pitch levels, allowing for harmonies and chromaticism not possible on one instrument alone. For performance, I have prerecorded two of the parts. His contribution, **The Maltese Plaza in Fog**, is conceived as a concerto with the solo role constantly shifting between the parts. The work was inspired by wistful paintings of Czech Impressionist painter Jakub Schikaneder.

Two other composers represented on tonight’s program have drawn upon cross-cultural experience in creating new works for *khaen*. Filipino composer **Sidney Marquez Boquiren** writes experimental sacred music that combines Cage-inspired indeterminacy, Southeast Asian ritual practice and modern Catholicism. He is currently on the faculty of Adelphi University in New York. His composition, **angel music**, combines the drone-and-melody structure of traditional *khaen* music with a minimalist procedure of phase-shifting repetition. Melodic patterns of different lengths are established in each hand and allowed to repeat, moving in and out of alignment. **Matthew Welch** is a kindred spirit of mine in New York. He is a virtuoso performer on the Scottish Highland bagpipe—another free-reed instrument—and an experienced player of Balinese *gamelan*. His own work as a composer draws upon his perception of deep musical resonance between these two distant cultures, aspects of which are shared by the *khaen* tradition as well, such as drone and sequential melodic variation. His composition, **Ulrikke**, is an original *piobaireachd*, the most highly developed form of bagpipe composition, which makes use of Balinese melodic modes.

I approached composer **Christopher Burns** about composing for *khaen* after I performed his complexist solo piano piece *Windwork*. He is a laptop improviser, composer and computer music researcher on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He writes that his music “explores simultaneity and multiplicity: textures and materials are layered one on top of another, creating a dense and energetic polyphony”. I felt that commissioning him to write for *khaen* would challenge him to apply his technique to an instrument with very severe

limitations (in terms of pitch range and dynamic capabilities), and also bring to the modern *khaen* repertoire a new level of technical complexity. **Triangulation** offers polyphonic tangles, often involving collections of three pitches, and abrupt juxtapositions of playing techniques including sharply attacked chords, tremolo, and fluttertongue. Christopher points out the numerological confluence of threes that arise with this piece: it is the third work with such significance (after *Triptych* and *Trifold*), the geographical triangulation of California, Wisconsin, and Thailand, and the musical triangulation of textural polyphonies which, he writes, are gradually “revealed to be aspects of a single phenomenon.”

The newest piece on the program is **patterns in wide space**, by Jeff Herriott, who is a composer on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. I met Jeff through performing his music at the soundON Festival of Modern Music in La Jolla. His recent music includes a significant amount of flexibility for the performer in realizing the details within a given compositional structure. This flexibility resonates with the constrained improvisation of the *khaen* tradition and with my own earlier compositions for the instrument. In his work, he often employs technology to facilitate the investigation of subtle variations in timbre, pitch, pacing and other musical parameters. His is the first composition for *khaen* and electronics; the electronic part consisting entirely of transformed samples of *khaen* tones which I provided for him.

Christopher Adler is a composer, performer and improviser living in San Diego, California. His music draws upon sixteen years of research into the traditional musics of Thailand and Laos and a background in mathematics. He is internationally recognized as a foremost performer of new and traditional music for the *khaen*, a free-reed mouth organ from Laos and Northeast Thailand. As pianist and composer-in-residence with NOISE and co-founder of the soundON Festival of Modern Music he has promoted the works of emerging composers, and as an improviser on piano and as a conductor he has performed with many of the West coast’s finest improvisers.

Christopher Adler’s compositions encompass cross-culturally hybrid forms drawn from contemporary concert music and traditional musics of Thailand and Laos, the application of mathematics to composition, and the integration of improvisation into structured composition. His works have been performed at Carnegie Hall, Chicago Symphony Center, Tanglewood, Merkin Hall, Sumida Triphony Hall in Tokyo and at new music festivals and universities worldwide by ensembles including the Silk Road Ensemble, red fish blue fish, Ensemble ACJW, Ensemble 64.8, the nief-norf ensemble, the Van Buren String Quartet, the Pangaea Quartet, pulsoptional, NOISE and the Seattle Creative Orchestra. His 2009 composition *Pines Long Slept in Sunshine* was commissioned by an international consortium of ten percussion ensembles led by the University of Kentucky. His compositions have been released on the 2008 CD *Ecstatic Volutions in a Neon Haze* (Innova) and the 2004 CD *Epilogue for a Dark Day* (Tzadik), and have been broadcast and webcast internationally on WGBH’s Art of the States, WNYC and BBC-3.

Christopher Adler is the world’s leading innovator in contemporary concert music for the *khaen*. He has performed his own compositions and traditional repertoire at Carnegie Hall, the Bang on a Can Marathon, Music at the Anthology, the Cultural Center of Chicago, the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, and at many other universities in the U.S., Thailand and Singapore.

As a soloist and as pianist with the San Diego New Music resident ensemble, NOISE, he has appeared at the International Festival of Chihuahua, the University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University, the University of California at Santa Cruz, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the University of California at San Diego, and the California Institute of the Arts. He has recorded compositions by Derek Keller (Tzadik) and Nathan Hubbard (Circumvention/Accretions), and by Stuart Saunders Smith, Christopher Burns and Juan Campoverde Q. for forthcoming releases. In 2007, he co-founded the soundON Festival of Modern Music, presented annually in La Jolla, California, and he is one of the only pianists in the world performing Tom Johnson’s *Chord Catalogue*. His piano improvisations may be heard on *Mineralia* (pfMENTUM) and *Pleistocene*, by the Alan Lechusza/ Christopher Adler Duo, and on *Transcontinental*, by the Christopher Adler Trio (Nine Winds), and his improvisations on *khaen* have been released by Artship Recordings and Accretions.

Christopher Adler is currently an Associate Professor at the University of San Diego where he teaches composition, sound art, theory, twentieth-century music, and world music. He received Ph.D. and Master’s degrees in composition from Duke University and Bachelor’s degrees in music composition and mathematics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He studied composition with Scott Lindroth, Stephen Jaffe, Sidney Corbett, Evan Ziporyn, Thai music with Panya Roongruang, and pipe organ with James David Christie and Haig Mardirosian.

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Epilogue for a Dark Day

compositions by Christopher Adler

including khaen solos *the wind blows inside*, *Epilogue for a Dark Day*, and trio *Three Lai*
Tzadik Records



A Forest of Verses

compositions by David Loeb

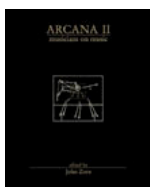
includes khaen solo *Karin: A Forest of Verses*, and *Three Friends of Winter* for khaen and chamber ensemble / Vienna Modern Masters



The Silent Waterfall

compositions by David Loeb

includes khaen solo *Kawagiri: Rivermist in Summer*
Vienna Modern Masters



"Reflections on Cross-Cultural Composition"

by Christopher Adler

in *Arcana II: Musicians on Music*, edited by John Zorn

This book also includes an article by composer Matthew Welch on his compositions

"Khaen: the bamboo free-reed mouth organ of Laos and Northeast Thailand: Notes for Composers"

by Christopher Adler

available for free download on www.christopheradler.com

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More contemporary music in San Diego:

March 3: New Musical Geographies, Palomar College

April 5: Delenda Est Carthago, San Diego State University

June 16-18: soundON Festival of Modern Music, The Athenaeum Music&Arts Library, La Jolla

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New Musical Geographies continues:

March 3: Palomar College

March 12: Adelphi University

March 13: Flushnik Studios, Brooklyn

April 4: CalArts

April 14: University of Wisconsin Whitewater

April 16: Marcus Center, Milwaukee