

The background of the image is an abstract composition. It features a large, crinkled fabric in shades of green, blue, and purple that dominates the center. To the left, there are vertical stripes of red and orange. In the bottom right corner, a colorful geometric sculpture made of wooden beams in red, yellow, and green is visible. The overall lighting is soft, creating a dreamlike atmosphere.

BROOKS

**THE MEMORY
PALACE**



BROOKS

THE MEMORY PALACE

1. THE MEMORY PALACE

Greg Lee, Spencer Lee – Stein-o-caster

Michael Patrick Coyle – piano

Arlen Hlusko – cello

Mark Stewart – electric guitar

David Cossin – percussion

2. SANTUARIO

Mark Stewart – double-neck electric guitar

3. TIME GARDEN

Greg Lee, Spencer Lee, Maura Bosch – Stein-o-caster

David Cossin – percussion

Franz Hackl – trumpet



Jeffrey Brooks and the Healing Power of Counterpoint

The music of Jeffrey Brooks sneaks up on you. You think he has set you up for quasi-minimalist loops. Then you find yourself absorbed in a web of slowly shifting sonorities; you may suddenly discover yourself weeping without knowing quite why. Although he passes through exquisite harmonies, he does just that: passes through. For it is that contrapuntal web that finally matters.

The word “counterpoint” usually conjures up the near-superhuman feats of fugal acrobatics in the works of J.S. Bach. But imitative counterpoint, in which each voice mimics the others, counts as only a subset of the ways in which melodic lines might interact with one another, even in Bach’s music. At a more basic level, counterpoint involves the pushing and pulling between voices, a choreography of sonic bodies that move forward together only by virtue of their mutual support and friction.

Harmonies occur as moments of confluence, and analysts spend much effort labeling them. But harmonies exist only as momentary simultaneities, bereft of the contexts that give rise to them. To identify a chord as a chord, we have to arrest the flow of time.

In his music, Brooks invites us to think about our relationships with temporality: an ongoing stream that may continue serenely only to encounter unforeseen eruptions of hilarity

or unanticipated trauma. David Hume pointed out long ago that we expect the sun to rise each morning only because it always has done so, and our ability to function in the world presupposes that conditions will be the same tomorrow as they were yesterday and today. But things don't work that way. A sudden invasion can catapult international relations into chaos, a car crash may upend the lives of all concerned. Brooks composed the works on this album while suffering from serious health issues, and I am writing these notes as a cancer survivor with only one leg. We are both acutely aware of how time can throw a monkey wrench into the best-laid of plans. And yet (to quote Elizabeth Warren) we persist. Because that is all we can do; the alternative is silence.

But that brings me back to counterpoint: the life-giving process of bouncing ideas back and forth, creating something that only the confluence of energies can produce. The Beatles sang of getting by with a little help from your friends. Brooks's sonic webs simulate the social conditions that make the unexpected tolerable.

Brooks wrote *Santuario* in 2020 for his long-time collaborator, the brilliant Mark Stewart. Scored for double-neck guitar, this composition demands the full range of sound combinations available to that instrument, plus those Stewart can invent on the spot. If you watch the video of his performance, you can see him crack himself up several times as he responds to Brooks's score.^[1] Yet for all the raucous, metal-tinged gestures of the piece, it also offers another, very different kind of resonance. The title refers to a shrine in New Mexico, Santuario de Chimayó, to which over 300,000 pilgrims travel each year in search of healing. In their conversation following Stewart's performance, David Lang, Julia Wolfe, Michael Gordon, and Brooks speak of how Stewart induces a kind of trance state.

How does a solo guitar (albeit, one with two necks) produce a contrapuntal web? Stewart begins by laying out a short ostinato figure, capturing it, and having it play back throughout the duration of the piece. Over that he layers lines that work in polyrhythmic tandem with each other and, finally, a series of slow-moving melodic fragments. Each of these components contributes its own energies: the ostinato burbling endlessly underneath, the inner voices cross-cutting their syncopations, the tune buoyed up effortlessly on top. To enter into this piece is to immerse oneself in a sonic jacuzzi — or, better, something like the mysterious healing forces of Santuario de Chimayó.

Of course, this solo piece depends upon the Stratocaster technology invented for the electric guitar, which has given rise to the pyrotechnics and vocal sustain of rock-based genres since the 1950s. A guitarist himself, Brooks knows the capabilities of the instrument and its myriad electronic accessories. If guitarists used to envy the singing and polyphonic qualities of the piano, these advances allowed the guitar to supplant the keyboard as the characteristic sound of an era. But what if the piano fought back?

In the other two tracks on this album, Brooks explores what he calls a Stein-o-caster. Together with electronics engineer Greg Lee, he developed a way of applying pick-up devices to the grand piano. Whereas Mark Stewart can sustain a pitch indefinitely on his guitar, a sound on the piano quickly decays, even with the pedal that allowed it to simulate orchestras and opera stars during its heyday. But with a system of weights on the keyboard (the equivalent of the guitarist's finger on the string) and electronic pick-up, the Steinway becomes a different animal. Most ingenious is the activating agent: a performer who strokes the strings with a paint brush, thereby

creating an ethereal sonority, though amplified, sustained, and transformed through electronic manipulation.

The track now titled *Time Garden* premiered at Bang on a Can's annual festival at MASS MoCA in July, 2022, with the name "Art of Fugue." Sitting at the piano, as if about to play Rachmaninoff, Brooks places the weights on the selected keys while Spencer Lee brushes furiously inside the instrument and Greg Lee processes the resulting sounds. I recommend watching at least part of the video in order to get some sense of how the sounds are produced.^[2] But the brushing and placing of weights can detract from the effect of Brooks's time garden. I experience the piece in radically different ways depending on whether I watch or only listen.

First we hear a shimmering tone, then other voices join in. I call them voices because a pitch that has been buried in the mix will suddenly move to another tone, signaling its individuality. This new tone becomes a point of identification to the ear until another moves, thereby drawing the attention to itself. Between those moments of action, we remain suspended in that shimmering sonority waiting for the next voice to emerge. At times, the collection of pitches becomes fraught, as if the intersecting lines cannot find a path to resolution. Then, about halfway through, the sound mass begins to exhale deeply, offering comfort and hope.

But most extraordinary (especially given the homogeneity of the piano's sound world), an off-stage trumpet joins in toward the end. It takes a while to disambiguate the sonorities, for the trumpet enters on a pitch sustained by the Stein-o-caster, their sounds blending eerily for a few moments. The trajectory toward transcendence initiated in the previous section now continues its peaceful ascent. Cultural tradition would link

the trumpet and its affect here with the Day of Resurrection. No Mahlerian bombast needed: we simply feel our spirits evaporate and rise until Brooks plays sleigh bells to announce the conclusion.

The success of the Stein-o-caster's debut led to the development of a more expanded work, *Memory Palace*, premiered at MASS MoCA in 2023.^[3] Now Brooks brings together electric guitar with the Stein-o-caster inspired by that technology, and the shimmering quality that dominated *Time Garden* appears here as well. But he also includes cello, percussion, and electric guitar, which sometimes enforces the rhythm section, sometimes sings along with the cello. Having made its case as a solo instrument, the Stein-o-caster now occupies a role in a complex ensemble.

The Stein-o-caster leads off with a bright open sonority. Whereas *Time Garden* unfolded in mostly unmeasured durations, Brooks marks time in *Memory Palace* with the marimba and Glockenspiel, suggesting different temporalities: perhaps the clock time of the present moment occurring simultaneously with the endless corridors of memory. The cello disrupts both time lines with its occasional two-note motive, something like the nagging fragment of something nearly forgotten. As the piece proceeds, the cello gradually develops from that fragment into a full-blown aria, joined with the electric guitar in support or in duet. Enhancing the passion of those melodic lines, the drum set enters, and for a while the music pulsates with rhythmic energy.

But, of course, this is only a reconstituted memory, and it begins to come apart. The pianist suddenly plays an unprocessed low note, and the shimmering stops. The cello strives to continue, with a faltering rhythm section. With a

dissonant tritone, the cello collapses; the percussionist marks that collapse with a hammer blow to conclude the daydream.

In these three compositions, Brooks makes important strides forward in technology, first pushing the limits of the electric guitar, then transferring some of that instrument's devices to the piano. But for all his experimentation with sound resources, we listen to Brooks's music for what he can teach us about our experiences with time: time remembered, time endured, time anticipated. As mortal creatures, we live our lives within that contrapuntal web in which these all intersect. Jeffrey Brooks invites us to contemplate those always-moving, transformative intersections.

— Susan McClary, Cleveland 2024

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^[1] Brooks, *Santuario (for Solo Electric Guitar)*, Mark Stewart, guitar. Commissioned by Jane Stewart and Bang on a Can. Performance at Mertz muzik, Berlin 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhmeyzBVj9Y>.

^[2] Brooks, *The Art of Fugue* for Stein-o-caster and Off-Stage Trumpet. Commissioned by Susan McClary and Bang on a Can. Performance at MASS MoCA, July 2022: Allison Damon, trumpet; Greg Lee and Spencer Lee, Stein-o-caster electronics. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Av2Kqm7Dcrw>

^[3] Brooks, *Memory Palace*. Performance at MASS MoCA, July 28, 2023: Arlen Hluska, cello; Mark Stewart, electric guitar; Ethan Strickland, drums and vibraphone; David Cossin, glockenspiel; Michael Patrick Coyle, Stein-o-caster, piano; Greg Lee and Spencer Lee, Stein-o-caster electronics. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkNeCkFDucM>



Produced and recorded by **David Cossin**

The Stein-o-caster was recorded by **Reid Kruger** at Waterbury Music + Sound

Editing and mixing by **David Cossin**

Mastering by **Rob Friedman** at littlelife studio, NYC

Jeffrey Brooks' music is published by Salient Music (ASCAP).

The Memory Palace was commissioned by Serena Lourie and Alan Baker.

Santuario was commissioned by **Jane Stewart** in honor of **Dick Stewart** for Bang on a Can's online marathon.

Time Garden (previously titled ***The Art of Fugue***) was commissioned by **Dr. Susan McClary** for the Bang on a Can Summer Festival.

Keyboard weights were provided by **Mike Rafferty** at SynthRISE (synth-rise.com)

Bang on a Can thanks: Alan Baker and Serena Lourie, Herb Leventer, Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, Aaron Kernis, Andrew Scholberg, David Blevins, David Briggs, David Hess, Felix Jay Lockman, Joe Potempa, Linda Hoeschler, In Honor of Louis Andriessen, Martin Bresnick, Mathew Rosenblum, Michael Daugherty, Mike Ethen, Mark Mellinger, Pamela Bucholz, In Honor of Robert Black, Sally Groves, Stacey Coleman, Stephen Elfstrand, Susan McClary, William Dexheimer Pharris, and Anonymous.

Executive producers: Michael Gordon, David Lang, Kenny Savelson and Julia Wolfe

Cantaloupe Club Producers Circle: Patricia & Martin Angerman, Eric Scott Klein, Paul Leger, Ken Nielsen, Ola Torstensson

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UPC/EAN: 713746320621