


as i write this

songs and solos of
aaron helgeson



Modney
Eric Umble
Sharon Harms
Donald Berman
Karina Kontorovitch
Ryan Townsend Strand





Aaron Helgeson (b. 1982)

Once a While in Time

- 1 Once... (1:59)
- 2 ...a while... (2:37)
- 3 ...in time (4:54)

Ryan Townsend Strand, tenor
Karina Kontorovitch, piano

- 4 **Hardanger Transcriptions: Sven i Sy' Garde*** (2:59)
Modney, violin

- 5 **Through Glimpses of Unknowing** (10:18)
Donald Berman, piano

- 6 **Hardanger Transcriptions: Thomasklukkud'n på Filefjell*** (2:57)
Modney, violin

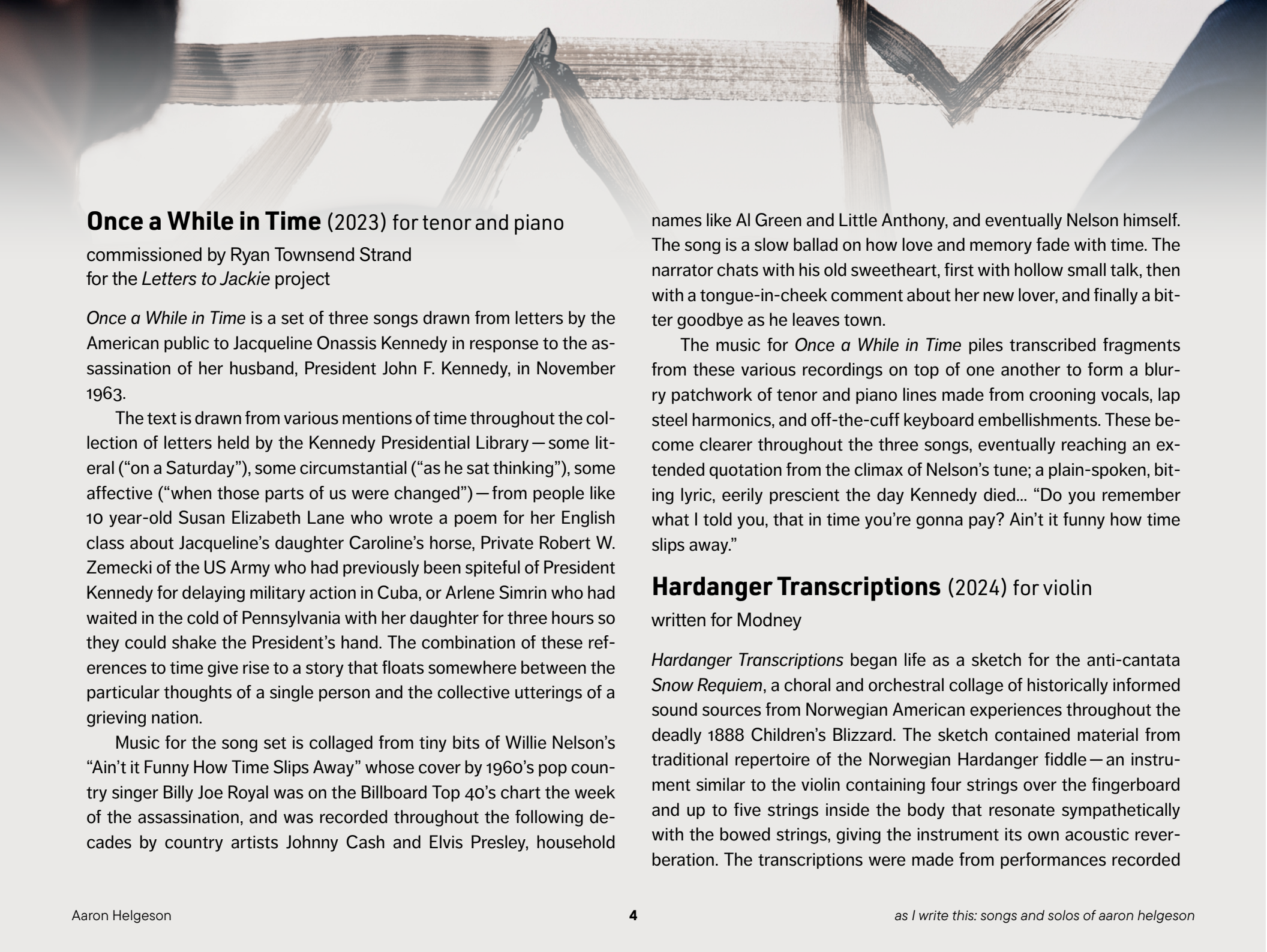
- 7 **A Place Toward Other Places** (10:44)
Eric Umble, clarinet

- 8 **Hardanger Transcriptions: Den Store Salmen*** (1:20)
Modney, violin

- 9 **A Long While** (14:31)
Sharon Harms, soprano • Donald Berman, piano

Total: 52:19

**Traditional Norwegian, transcribed by Aaron Helgeson, after Torleiv Bolstad*



Once a While in Time (2023) for tenor and piano

commissioned by Ryan Townsend Strand
for the *Letters to Jackie* project

Once a While in Time is a set of three songs drawn from letters by the American public to Jacqueline Onassis Kennedy in response to the assassination of her husband, President John F. Kennedy, in November 1963.

The text is drawn from various mentions of time throughout the collection of letters held by the Kennedy Presidential Library — some literal (“on a Saturday”), some circumstantial (“as he sat thinking”), some affective (“when those parts of us were changed”) — from people like 10 year-old Susan Elizabeth Lane who wrote a poem for her English class about Jacqueline’s daughter Caroline’s horse, Private Robert W. Zemecki of the US Army who had previously been spiteful of President Kennedy for delaying military action in Cuba, or Arlene Simrin who had waited in the cold of Pennsylvania with her daughter for three hours so they could shake the President’s hand. The combination of these references to time give rise to a story that floats somewhere between the particular thoughts of a single person and the collective utterings of a grieving nation.

Music for the song set is collaged from tiny bits of Willie Nelson’s “Ain’t it Funny How Time Slips Away” whose cover by 1960’s pop country singer Billy Joe Royal was on the Billboard Top 40’s chart the week of the assassination, and was recorded throughout the following decades by country artists Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley, household

names like Al Green and Little Anthony, and eventually Nelson himself. The song is a slow ballad on how love and memory fade with time. The narrator chats with his old sweetheart, first with hollow small talk, then with a tongue-in-cheek comment about her new lover, and finally a bitter goodbye as he leaves town.

The music for *Once a While in Time* piles transcribed fragments from these various recordings on top of one another to form a blurry patchwork of tenor and piano lines made from crooning vocals, lap steel harmonics, and off-the-cuff keyboard embellishments. These become clearer throughout the three songs, eventually reaching an extended quotation from the climax of Nelson’s tune; a plain-spoken, biting lyric, eerily prescient the day Kennedy died... “Do you remember what I told you, that in time you’re gonna pay? Ain’t it funny how time slips away.”

Hardanger Transcriptions (2024) for violin

written for Modney

Hardanger Transcriptions began life as a sketch for the anti-cantata *Snow Requiem*, a choral and orchestral collage of historically informed sound sources from Norwegian American experiences throughout the deadly 1888 Children’s Blizzard. The sketch contained material from traditional repertoire of the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle — an instrument similar to the violin containing four strings over the fingerboard and up to five strings inside the body that resonate sympathetically with the bowed strings, giving the instrument its own acoustic reverberation. The transcriptions were made from performances recorded

in 1977 by fiddler Torleiv Bolstad near the end of his life, endeavoring to notate his playing as exactly as possible...down to every microscopic ornament.

One peculiar aspect of Bolstad's playing (and Hardanger fiddling more generally) is his stomping along in a strange hiccupping meter, seemingly disconnected from the fiddle part. The rhythmic notation of *Hardanger Transcriptions* tries to preserve this tension by simultaneously subdividing the melody and meter differently. For instance, the rhythm in the second and fourth sections of *Sven i Sy' Garde* (Sven of the South Lands) is written with an even triple feel, while the time signature instead matches Bolstad's stomp of two short beats and another long one, requiring the player to temporally fit a symmetrical peg into an asymmetrical hole.

Fragments of the *Svein i Sy' Garde* transcription ended up in the solo violin part for *Snow Requiem*. Aside from that it was left alone, until 2024 when mononymic violinist Modney discovered it and made it part of a solo violin program. Connecting with his early training as a virtuosic folk fiddler, Modney asked for two more transcriptions to create a set of three songs that includes *Svein i Sy' Garde*, *Thomasklukkud'n på Filefjell* (Jolly Ol' Thomas from Filefjell), and *Den Store Salmen* (The Great Song), each with a different tuning that brightens or darkens the echoing sound of the Hardanger tunes.

Through Glimpses of Unknowing (2012) for piano commissioned by Brendan Nguyen

Through Glimpses of Unknowing owes its existence to artist Chiharu Shiota's gallery installation *In Silence*, a burnt piano and audience seating surrounded by dense swarms of black slashes built by running a single piece of long thread back and forth across the room hundreds of times. Like *In Silence*, the process of making *Through Glimpses of Unknowing* starts with destroying a piano, in this case Claude Debussy's. Individual trills and tremolos from Debussy's solo Preludes (particularly "Ce qu'a vu le Vent d'Ouest," "La danse de Puck," and "Feux d'Artifice") are cut up, stretched, warped, transposed, re-arranged, and repeated. In layering these remnants on top of one another, the music creates massively resonant clouds whose chromaticism briefly gives way to flickers of harmony before returning to rumbling ambiguity, interrupted only by ripples made by doubling and offsetting Debussy's arpeggios. The result? An explosive expression built from historical impressions...of wind, of dance, and of fire.



A Place Toward Other Places (2012) for clarinet

commissioned by Richard Hawkins

A Place Toward Other Places was written during an extended period of weekly trips between the city of San Francisco and the parks land on the Northern peninsula of the San Francisco Bay. Places like Point Reyes National Seashore and Muir Woods served as the site for gathering aural experiences — through audio recording and handwritten musical transcription — that corresponded with similar sounds of the city. These pairings of sonic twins were combined into materials for the clarinet. For instance, the dyad that begins the piece combines the memory of a fog horn heard from my apartment at night with an unknown wild animal hidden somewhere in the forest of Muir Woods. The clarinet serves as a nexus where the city and the untouched terrain of the parks meet. It is an abstraction of sonic characteristics common to both.

Beyond its connection to the Northern California coast, the “place” and “other places” of the title may equally refer to the work’s echos of modality (G Phrygian in the opening, Ab Mixolydian at the close), the chords and trills emanating from the complex interior of the clarinet, or the private sonic landscapes these sounds give rise to. Like tonal harmonies, each sound has a particular role — the pair of alternating chords of the piece’s initial moments, the high trills and harmonics, the low tremolos. Some have the energy or dynamic shape to initiate a phrase, while some provide closure. Some interrupt, some prolong, and some allow movement to other harmonic and gestural constellations.

At the same time, these sounds connect to our everyday objects: a siren off in the distance, a bird call on the seashore, an undulating machine, a religious ritual, the wind blowing through tall grass. Our recognition of one allows us to indulge in the discovery of another, yielding a delicate and fragile dance between the familiar and the uncharted.

A Long While (2014) for soprano and piano

commissioned by Sharon Harms
for the Resonant Bodies Festival

A Long While is freely assembled from the 583 words spoken by Hermione in William Shakespeare’s final stage work, *The Winter’s Tale*. The lyrics and music were written in tandem — drawing from a reservoir of vocal, verbal, and melodic fragments whose cadence and harmony are all closely intertwined — allowing for a spontaneous approach to text setting that still retains traces of the original verse. The result is a kind of Schwanengesang for a centuries-old woman that never lived. An unusual character in an unusual play, Hermione is sentenced to death by her husband for an adultery she didn’t commit, only to come back to life after sixteen years. Much has been made of her revival (was it by magic or some other more rational means) but what about her experience over those long years? What happens to her thoughts? Her feelings? How do they transform over time? What if her solitude lasted into the present? Would her memories linger? Or would she be left in a continuously fading present? An eternal now? What is this long expanse of waiting?

Once a While in Time

words by Aaron Helgeson

based on letters to Jacqueline Onassis Kennedy and Willie Nelson's "Ain't it Funny How Time Slips Away"

I. Once...

once
a moment
1963
an hour
two days later
January 25th
yet
one hundred years ago
on a Saturday
as time went by
3 o'clock that night
as I write this
now
just now
now

II. ...a while...

as we waited
as we were older
as you appeared
as he sat thinking
as I came out the door
as I was reading that night
as you walked behind
as I visit my family
as they carried him
as we watched for more than three
hours
as I was looking

III. ...in time

Do you remember?

Do you know,
when I was one day old,
when you arrived,
when those parts of us were
changed?

Do you remember
when you could stay up as long as
you wanted,
when we tried to make this world a
better place
to be?

Do you remember
when we went,
when we saw him,

when he thought about the terrible
decision he
had to make,
when he spoke without showing
any anger at
the baby girl tugging him?

Do you remember
when I got home from school,
when we were sitting at the table,
when they were running,
when the news came,
when I heard it was true?

"Do you remember when I told you
that in time you're gonna pay?
Ain't it funny how time slips away?"

A Long While

words by Aaron Helgeson, based on The Winter's Tale by William Shakespeare

When will I wake again,
when will I want,
when will I never and be all away,
will I be merry,
when will I wait,
will I better and be more,
will I ever,
when will I weep?

And will I dream,
and believe,
and be on my way,
will I be someone,
and will I drown my sleep,
and be all,
when will I burn,

will I go now (all a while),
will I be gone,
will I be only,
will I be gone?
I'll be gone.

And I'll be there,
and I'll owe my other,
and I'll be else,
I'll behold any,
and I wouldn't know,
and I'll be my body,
and I'll upon,
I will be only,
I'll own the world,
I'll undo the world,

and I wouldn't know why,
and I couldn't know,
and I wouldn't know why.

Why?

Why away,
why away all,
why away,
why away all any,
why away,
all along,
all our,
why away all,
why away,
all along,

all our,
all away,
all our,
why away all any,
why away,
all along,
all our,
all away?



Composer **Aaron Helgeson** (b. 1982) uses transcription, adaptation, and collage to mix contemporary sounds with historical sources like wax cylinders, medieval psalms, and unfinished manuscripts.

Described as “eerily beautiful” (Cleveland Classical) and “virtuoso display of engaging drama” (New York Times), Helgeson’s music has received awards and grants from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Fromm Music Foundation, Aaron Copland Fund, New Music USA, Barlow Endowment, ASCAP, and American Composers Forum.

In 2016 he received an Ohio Arts Council Award for his *Snow Requiem*, an “anti-cantata” based on author David Laskin’s book *The Children’s Blizzard* about the Homestead-era snowstorm of the same name combining original transcriptions of Norwegian-American immigrant folk music with sonifications of weather data using orchestral tone clusters, wordless vocal chorales, and percussive noise.

His choral cycle *The Book of Never* for Grammy Award winning chorus The Crossing collages ancient hymns from the Novgorod Codex (a medieval book of Kyivan Rus psalm chant overwritten hundreds of times with heretical sermons by an excommunicated Pagan missionary) with contemporary texts by writers in various states of exile.

Other recent projects include *Poems of Sheer Nothingness* commissioned by soprano Susan Narucki using fragmented realizations of ancient Occitan troubadour poems, *Calls of Close and Away* for Imani Winds on 19th-century French hunting calls and 20th-century American military signals, and *Echoes of Always* for Ensemble Dal Niente assembled from scraps of Baroque opera overtures and bits of Helgeson’s own previous music.

Helgeson serves as Associate Professor of Composition and Music Theory at Montclair State University’s Cali School of Music, previously serving as department chair of composition and music theory at the Longy School of Music of Bard College. He also taught as Assistant Professor of Composition at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, with visiting appointments at the Hartt School of Performing Arts, University of Chicago, New York University, and the University of California Washington Center. He holds degrees in music and theater from the University of California San Diego (Ph.D., M.A.) and Oberlin College (B.Mus., B.A.).

aaronhelgeson.com

Tenor **Ryan Townsend Strand** is praised for his “beautiful vocalism” (San Francisco Chronicle) and “expressive poise” (Chicago Classical Review). Known for his storytelling across oratorio, opera, and ensemble repertoire, he has appeared as a soloist in many of Bach’s cantatas and performed widely in both staged and concert works. Recent credits include his Ravinia Festival debut in a featured solo recital entitled *Letters To Jackie*. Operatic credits include roles with Lyric Opera of Chicago, Haymarket Opera Company, Chicago Opera Theater, and Northwestern Opera Theater, with performances in works by Monteverdi, Handel, Adamo, Gordon, and Glass, among others. He made his professional operatic debut in Haymarket’s *Gli equivoci nel sembiante*. A versatile ensemble artist, Strand sings regularly with Music of the Baroque, the Chicago Symphony Chorus, Bella Voce, the Grant Park Festival Chorus, and has been seen with the Grammy Award-winning ensemble The Crossing under Donald Nally. He is a founding member and executive director of Constellation Men’s Ensemble, a Chicago-based tenor/bass vocal group dedicated to distinct performances in unique spaces, engaging with the next generation of singers through education, and expanding the repertoire for tenor/bass ensemble music through the commissioning of new works. He lives in Chicago with his husband P.J. and their calico cat Charlie.

Karina Kontorovitch was born in St. Petersburg, Russia. At the age of five, she started attending the Music School for Gifted Children, where she continued to study piano with Olga Manukyan until the family immigrated to the US in 1991. Ms. Kontorovitch has taught at the Music Arts School in Highland Park and has been on the faculty of the Merit School of Music in Chicago from 2001-2017. She was on the Voice Faculty as a Coach/Accompanist for the National High School Music Institute at Northwestern University from 2005 until 2010. Since 2001, she’s been serving as a collaborative pianist, vocal coach and Russian diction coach at Northwestern University’s Bienen School of Music,

where she collaborates with Voice and Opera Department students across all studios, preparing and accompanying recitals and other performances, co-teaching Russian Repertoire and Oratorio classes. Ms. Kontorovitch is a member of the Chicago Piano Vocal Score Ensemble and Tresillo, whose performances have taken her from Chattanooga to Buenos Aires. She’s very active as a collaborative pianist throughout the Chicago area. She was on the coaching staff of the Castleton Music Festival in Virginia where she worked with the festival’s founder, the late Maestro Lorin Maazel. As a soloist, Ms. Kontorovitch was heard with the Waukegan Symphony Orchestra under Maestro Stephen Blackwelder in a performance of Mozart’s A Major Piano Concerto, K 488.

Modney is a composer and violinist working at the nexus of composition, improvisation, and interpretation. A “new-music luminary” (The New York Times) hailed as “one of today’s most intrepid experimentalists” (Bandcamp Daily), Modney is a foremost interpreter of adventurous contemporary music, and has cultivated a holistic artistic practice as a composer, solo improviser, bandleader, writer, and collaborator. A highly detailed relationship to sound production on the violin is foundational to Modney’s creative practice, with a particular interest in complex timbres, Just Intonation, and in exploring the perceptual space between improvisation and notation. Modney has released three albums as a composer-performer: *Ascending Primes* (Pyroclastic Records, 2024), *Near To Each* (Carrier Records, 2022), and *Engage* (New Focus Recordings, 2018). Modney has received awards from The Shifting Foundation and Millay Arts. Modney is the violinist and Executive Director of the Wet Ink Ensemble, and a member of the International Contemporary Ensemble.

A multidimensional pianist, pedagogue, and scholar, **Donald Berman** has won tremendous acclaim for his “stupendous abilities, both athletic and intellectual” (*Boston Sunday Globe*) and performances hailed as “stunning, adventurous, and substantive” (*New York Times*). With an emphasis on presenting American music of the 20th and 21st centuries, Berman’s inventive recital programs have been featured on the biggest stages for contemporary music across North America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. An enthusiastic commissioner of new music, he has added more than 200 works to the contemporary canon — many of which he performs alongside classical repertoires to provoke new and fascinating revelations and connections across periods and styles. Berman’s body of work as a recording artist demonstrates his engagement with the music of our time. His albums have included numerous world-premiere recordings and illuminating performances of previously unknown works of 20th-century American composers, including Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, Elliott Carter, and Roger Sessions. As a concerto soloist and chamber musician, Berman’s discography includes collaborations with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, soprano Susan Narucki, and the Borromeo Quartet. A former fellow of the Harvard Radcliffe Institute, Berman currently serves as Chair of Keyboard Studies at Longy School of Music of Bard College and leads Tufts University’s New Music Ensemble. He is also the General Editor of three volumes of Ives’s *Shorter Works for Piano* and President and Treasurer of the Charles Ives Society.

Eric Umble is a Brooklyn-based clarinetist and DJ, praised for “nuanced and coloristic playing” (*The Clarinet*). They remain active as a performer and advocate for new music, having performed with the New York Philharmonic, International Contemporary Ensemble, and Lucerne Festival Academy and Alumni Orchestras. Eric has performed around the world including appearances in Seoul, Hong Kong, Havana, Mexico City, Berlin, Paris, Hamburg, and Köln, among others. Eric holds

Bachelors and Masters degrees from the Manhattan School of Music. He studied with Stephanie Zelnick, David Krakauer, and Anthony McGill. As a DJ and promoter, Eric is the founder, lead producer, and curator of the *FACETIME* and *QUALITY TIME* parties, cultivating uplifting and inclusive nightlife events that help build a thriving electronic music community in New York City. He explores the intersections of multiple musical genres in his sets to create Techno-forward sonic worlds that evoke queerness, modernity, and urban life while striving to articulate our shared contemporary culture in today’s world. He has DJ’ed at BASEMENT, Nowadays, Mansions, Detroit’s Orange Room, and Philadelphia’s VOID, among others.

Sharon Harms is a versatile soprano known for her radiant tone and deep commitment to contemporary music. She has become a vital interpreter of new vocal works, collaborating closely with composers and ensembles across the U.S. and abroad. The work featured on this album was written for Sharon and premiered with pianist Katherine Dowling at the 2014 Resonant Bodies Festival in Brooklyn, NY. Her collaboration with Aaron Helgeson reflects a shared artistic language grounded in subtlety, complexity, and emotional honesty. She has performed with the International Contemporary Ensemble, Talea Ensemble, Ensemble Recherche, Momenta Quartet, Lyris Quartet, the Juilliard Center for Creative Technology, and the Met Orchestra Chamber Ensemble, and appeared at Tanglewood, Carnegie Hall, the American Academy in Rome, and the Mozarteum. Her recordings include *It Happens Like This* by Charles Wuorinen, Jesse Jones’ *Ephemera*, Gabriela Ortiz’s *Aroma Foliado*, and Charles Ives *Songs and Solos* with pianist Jacob Greenberg. In addition to performing, Sharon is a dedicated mentor and educator, working with programs such as New Music on the Point and the Composer’s Conference at Avaloch Farm. This recording is part of her ongoing exploration of what the voice can say — and how quietly, fiercely, or unexpectedly it might say it.

Once a While in Time recorded May 5, 2024 by Ryan Townsend Strand and Karina Kontorovitch
at Montclair State University

Hardanger Transcriptions recorded July 11, 2024 by Modney at Montclair State University

Through Glimpses of Unknowing recorded January 14, 2025 by Donald Berman
at Yamaha Artist Studios, New York

A Place Toward Other Places recorded June 3, 2024 by Eric Umble at Columbia University

A Long While recorded September 2, 2024 by Sharon Harms and Donald Berman
at Montclair State University

Producers: Aaron Helgeson & Murat Çolak

Engineer: Murat Çolak

Program Notes: Aaron Helgeson

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Hardanger Transcriptions transcribed by Aaron Helgeson from performances by Torleiv Bolstad.

All other works written and published by Aaron Helgeson (ASCAP), © 2012-2024.

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