



# AMERICAN CLASSICS

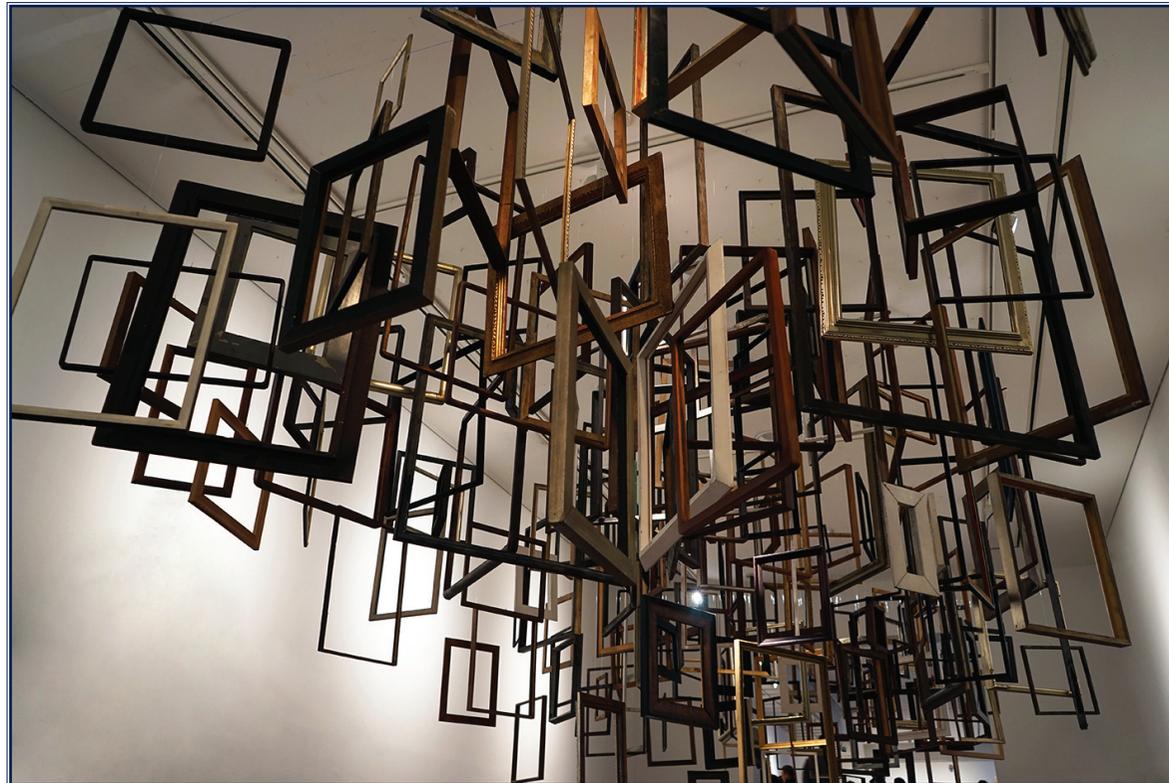


## DEREK BERMEL

### Intonations

#### Music for Clarinet and Strings

Derek Bermel, Clarinet • Christopher Otto, Violin  
Wiek Hijmans, Electric guitar • JACK Quartet



Derek  
**BERMEL**  
(b. 1967)

## Intonations

<b>Intonations (2016)</b>	<b>18:49</b>
1 I. Harmonica	5:28
2 II. Hymn/Homily	6:54
3 III. Hustle	6:20
<b>4 Ritornello (2011) (version for electric guitar and string quartet)</b>	<b>12:33</b>
<b>5 Thracian Sketches (2003)</b>	<b>7:12</b>
<b>Violin Etudes (2009–16)</b>	<b>13:13</b>
6 No. 1. Twenty Questions	1:27
7 No. 2. Gravity	2:43
8 No. 3. Figure and Ground	2:53
9 No. 4. Multiverse/Sketch	3:28
10 No. 5. Chôros	2:29
<b>A Short History of the Universe (as related by Nima Arkani-Hamed) (2013)</b>	<b>16:52</b>
11 I. Multiverse	5:07
12 II. Heart of Space	6:53
13 III. Twistor Scattering	4:46

Recorded: 23 May 2011 5, 31 January 2013 4, 15 October 2013 11–13, 18 April 2017 1–3  
and 27 July 2020 6–10 at Westchester Studios, New York, USA

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## Derek Bermel (b. 1967)

### Intonations

In the music of Derek Bermel, familiar oppositions – between classical and vernacular, comic and serious, visceral and cerebral – start to break down. In *Intonations* (2016) for string quartet, a series of ragged chords, like the sound of someone blowing idly on a harmonica, is taken apart, reassembled, and woven into a web of dazzlingly ornate counterpoint. In *A Short History of the Universe (as related by Nima Arkani-Hamed)* (2013), a raucous, jazzy glissando becomes the unlikely basis of a meditation on cosmology and the nature of time. The music on this album is full of such moments of strange alchemy, in which seemingly antithetical qualities merge and transform each other unpredictably.

These pieces draw on Bermel's kaleidoscopically varied background as both composer and performer: studies under the great French modernist Henri Dutilleux, the Dutch avant-gardist Louis Andriessen, and the American ragtime revivalist William Bolcom; travels to learn Thracian folk music in Bulgaria, the Lobi xylophone in Ghana, and the caxixi in Brazil; and collaborations with musicians ranging from Wynton Marsalis and Stephen Sondheim to the rapper Yasiin Bey (Mos Def). The breadth of these interests has earned Bermel a reputation for eclecticism, but the label doesn't capture the deeply personal sensibility running through all his music, one marked by sly theatricality, deadpan humor, and restless intellectual curiosity. It's this final quality that both impels Bermel's stylistic exploration, and gives the resulting music its unity. Unsurprisingly, then, the pieces on this album are as wide-ranging intellectually as musically, their inspirations extending from theater (*Ritornello*), to gestalt psychology (*Figure and Ground*), to theoretical physics.

This last forms the basis of *A Short History*, written during Bermel's four-year tenure as artist-in-residence at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study, and inspired by the lectures of the physicist Nima Arkani-Hamed. Commissioned by the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts for the JACK Quartet with Bermel on clarinet, *A Short History* is a musical gloss on Arkani-Hamed's depiction of gravity and time.

As with much of Bermel's music, this imposing edifice is built from unassuming materials. It begins with an elemental glissando, like the smear that opens Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. This comic gesture, saturating the piece almost from beginning to end, has a serious purpose: perpetually sliding toward a note it never quite reaches, it evokes a world of gravitational fields rather than discrete objects. Throughout the piece, this glissando expands and contracts. Happening at different speeds, both successively and simultaneously, it suggests an experience of time at both minute and cosmic scales. Yet the contrasts it creates are emotional as much as intellectual. At first louche and comical, the glissando, when stretched out, becomes strange and abstract. Then, stretched still further to form the slowly shifting harmonies of the second movement, it takes on a startling pathos, before contracting in the final movement to a fleeting, lighthearted ornament.

*A Short History* is one of three works on this album featuring the formidable JACK Quartet, an ensemble known for its mastery of arcane instrumental techniques and alternate tuning systems. These skills are on extravagant display in *Intonations*, commissioned by the 92nd Street Y for the New York Philharmonic Biennial. From the outset – those opening harmonica chords, one pure and the other luminously detuned – Bermel uses JACK's intonational flexibility to pen a virtuoso love letter to the American vernacular. In the first movement, the harmonica music interlocks with a swinging, speech-like motif, as both ideas are taken apart, reconfigured, and spun into an intricate contrapuntal tapestry. Out of tune notes, which proliferate menacingly in this movement, return transfigured in the next, lending a plangent, bluesy inflection to its solemn hymn. Finally, in the third movement, they explode into a raunchy, off-kilter dance, mingling with a wild array of plunks, scratches and hoots drawn from JACK's arsenal of extended techniques. Toward the end, the harmonica riff returns, interweaving with the jagged dance music before the piece comes to a grinding close.

The work's circular form – like the array of mirror techniques in *A Short History*, in which melodies or whole sections reappear flipped upside down – recalls Béla Bartók, whose relationship to Hungarian folk music also serves as a model for Bermel's engagement with jazz and the blues. In *Intonations*, these traditions are treated not as exotic colorations to be grafted onto classical music, but equal partners with it, fused together to form an indissoluble hybrid style.

A similar hybridity characterizes *Ritornello* (2011), commissioned by the Albany Symphony Orchestra. Performed here by the JACK Quartet and guitarist Wiek Hijmans, *Ritornello* melds the influence of prog rock – in particular the icy virtuosity of King Crimson guitarists Robert Fripp and Adrian Belew – with the forms and textures of the Baroque concerto grosso. The combination is less incongruous than it might seem. The word “baroque” was originally an insult, meant to contrast the gaudy facades and *trompe-l’oeil* ceilings of 16th-century cathedrals with the noble simplicity of their Renaissance predecessors. The term carries overtones of ornamental extravagance and over-the-top theatrical artifice, all of which link Baroque music with the mannered complexity of prog acts like King Crimson.

No form captures this theatricality better than the concerto grosso, which juxtaposes a group of nimble soloists (the concertino) with a larger ensemble, more cumbersome and forceful (the ripieno). The result is a dramatic chiaroscuro, starkly contrasting power and agility, simplicity and complexity. In *Ritornello*, Hijmans and the JACK Quartet assume the roles of both concertino and ripieno groups, alternating between two distinct textures. The first is a rhythmically ambiguous solo line, initially pure then growing dirtier and more distorted, which simultaneously evokes Vivaldi and the trancelike guitar patterning of King Crimson’s *Three of a Perfect Pair*. The second is a series of furious unison outbursts in the strings, their incisive rhythms recalling the French overtures of Lully and Handel, set against an increasingly wild guitar improvisation culminating in an anarchic cadenza. The two textures are juxtaposed, brought into increasingly violent opposition, then finally superimposed, before gradually dying away.

Composers often use solo music as a laboratory in which to work out and adapt new techniques. The *Violin Etudes* (2009–16) and *Thracian Sketches* (2003) for clarinet, while complete in their own right, also anticipate ideas explored at greater length in the ensemble pieces. *Thracian Sketches*, with its playful ornamentation and lurching rhythmic unpredictability, is a systematic study of the Bulgarian folk style later employed in the finale of *A Short History*. Here, however, the “natural” techniques of folk music are mapped onto the supremely artificial whole tone scale, familiar from Debussy, in which an absence of half steps creates a sense of floating harmonic disorientation. The form too is distinctly un-folk-like, tracing an inexorable progression from slow to fast, simple to complex, the clarinet’s depths to its stratospheric heights.

Two of the etudes also anticipate *A Short History – Multiverse/Sketch* literally, and *Gravity* more abstractly. *Gravity* hovers obsessively around a single note, the violin’s low G sharp, perpetually returning to it, as if falling back into the gravitational well of some celestial object. Commissioned for Jennifer Koh by Justus and Elizabeth Schlichting, *Twenty Questions*, with its succession of increasingly urgent rising questions and falling responses, glances sideways to the speech-like melodies of *Intonations*, composed around the same time. Only *Chôros* and *Figure and Ground* have no clear parallels among the other works recorded here. *Chôros*, commissioned by Kathy Henschel via Meet the Composer (now New Music USA) for Midori and Vladimir Repin, evokes the Brazilian popular style of the same name, with its loose limbed, loping athleticism. In *Figure and Ground*, two pizzicato melodies exchange places in our perception, one crystallizing and moving into the foreground as the other is gradually disassembled and recedes into the background. Like *Thracian Sketches*, these *Etudes* offer a glimpse into Bermeil’s working process, exhibiting his formal imagination in its purest, most stripped-down form.

**Nathan Shields**

## Wiek Hijmans

Photo: Fèr van der Reijken



Wiek Hijmans (b. 1967, Netherlands) has dedicated his life's work to integrating the electric guitar into the realm of classical music. He was the first electric guitarist to study in the classical guitar department of the Manhattan School of Music, for which he received the Andrés Segovia Award. He has travelled Europe, North America, Russia and the Far East performing recitals that feature contemporary music, and as a soloist with orchestras and chamber ensembles he has reached many audiences. His albums have received critical acclaim, and many composers, including Derek Bermel, Christian Wolff and Tristan Murail, have written for him. He has given masterclasses, directed guitar festivals and written a comprehensive instrumentation guide for the electric guitar. As a composer, Wiek has written for many settings, including 150 guitar solo pieces as musical reactions to each of the Psalms.

[wiekhijmans.wixsite.com/firste-attempt](http://wiekhijmans.wixsite.com/firste-attempt)

## JACK Quartet



Photo: Kevin Condon

From left to right: Derek Bermel and the JACK Quartet  
(Austin Wulliman, Christopher Otto, Jay Campbell, John Pickford Richards)

The widely celebrated JACK Quartet has maintained an unwavering commitment to its mission of performing and commissioning new works, giving voice to underheard composers, and cultivating an ever-greater sense of openness toward contemporary classical music. It is the quartet in residence at the Mannes School of Music, and hosts the JACK Frontiers Festival, a multi-faceted festival of contemporary music for string quartet. The members of the quartet also regularly teach at New Music On the Point and the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, as well as at the University of Iowa String Quartet Residency Program and the Lucerne Festival Academy, of which they are all alumni. The quartet was nominated for a GRAMMY Award in 2022 for John Luther Adams' *Lines Made by Walking* (Cold Blue Music) and for *Alkaline* from the concept album *Imaginist* (Panoramic Recordings) with the Le Boeuf Brothers in 2018.

[www.jackquartet.com](http://www.jackquartet.com)

## Derek Bermel



Composer/clarinetist Derek Bermel has appeared as a soloist alongside Wynton Marsalis in his sprawling *Migration Series* for jazz band and orchestra, and performed his clarinet concerto *Voices* with dozens of orchestras worldwide, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. The founding clarinetist of Music from Copland House, Bermel's chamber music appearances also include the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, festivals across the Americas, Europe, and Asia, and with the Borromeo, Pacifica, and JACK quartets. As both clarinetist and composer, he has collaborated with musicians from an eclectic musical landscape, from jazz luminaries Paquito D'Rivera and Luciana Souza, to virtuoso violinist Midori, and hip-hop legend Yasiin Bey (Mos Def), to composer/conductors John Adams and Tan Dun. Bermel has twice been nominated for GRAMMY Awards – for Best Contemporary Classical Composition for *Migrations* (Naxos 8.559871), and Best Instrumental Soloist Performance (with Orchestra) for *Voices* (BMOP/sound). He is currently artistic director of the American Composers Orchestra, and his many honors include the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts, Rome Prize, American Academy of Arts and Letters, Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellowships.

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**Derek Bermel, Clarinet** **5 11-13**  
**Christopher Otto, Violin** **6-10**  
**Wiek Hijmans, Electric guitar** **4**

**JACK Quartet**

**Christopher Otto** **1-4 11-13**,  
**Austin Wulliman** **1-3**,  
**Ari Streisfeld** **4 11-13**, **Violin**  
**John Pickford Richards, Viola**  
**1-4 11-13**  
**Jay Campbell** **1-3**,  
**Kevin McFarland** **4 11-13**, **Cello**

A detailed track list and full recording details can be found inside the booklet.

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**AMERICAN CLASSICS**

Twice GRAMMY-nominated composer and performer Derek Bermel studied with Henri Dutilleux, Dutch avant-gardist Louis Andriessen, and ragtime revivalist William Bolcom. In his music, seemingly antithetical qualities – classical and vernacular, comic and serious – merge and transform each other unpredictably, their inspiration ranging from theatre (*Ritornello*), to gestalt psychology (*Figure and Ground*), to meditations on cosmology (*A Short History of the Universe*). *Thracian Sketches* explores and reimagines Bulgarian folk music, while the *Violin Etudes* distill Bermel's intellectual creativity into its purest form.

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Playing  
Time:  
**69:04**