

Interview with Marshall McGuire

Jury member in the category Piano Trio

Interviewer: Jennifer Ronyak, Senior Scientist at *Institute 14: Aesthetics of Music*

JR: Marshall McGuire, thank you for being here and for serving on the jury in the piano trio section. You come to this jury primarily as a harpist – not normally a member of a piano trio. That being the case, what qualities are you looking for in a piano trio?

MM: That's a good question. There are two things I'm really interested in in this competition. One of them is the balance between Schubert and modern music, which is a very defining part of this competition. I bring many questions about that – how that balance can be achieved. The other thing I always look for, is the engagement side of the performance. I recognize that this is a competition, and that there is a certain framework that goes with that, but nevertheless, I think the key to musical expression has to come from a performance element, whatever it might be: it can be joy, it can be earnestness, it can be solemn, it can be free. But I want to get a sense of who the performers are.

JR: Yes. It is interesting that you mention the idea of getting a sense of who the performers are. How do you feel that the engagement with the particular repertoire of this competition – either the Schubert, or a number of the other pieces that have been chosen – provide a vehicle for that?

MM: I think with Schubert it has been very interesting, because all of the trios we've heard have had a diverse spread of views about how Schubert should be played. There is obviously a tradition of playing Schubert in Austria. But the trios that I've been most impressed with have given a convincing argument for their point of view.

JR: Yes.

MM: It is a complex thing bringing your own personality, but it is ultimately all you've got on the stage. You can't be like another group; you can't second guess what the jury wants to hear because we are eight individuals. In fact, in this competition in the first round we don't compare notes. We have our own separate views. It is only later on that we start comparing notes about things. So we are really responding to the individual personality of the group. And that means you need to be strong and authentic.

JR: You mentioned that competition is different than concert performance. I think that we'd all agree. I come from a background in performance earlier, and I know a little bit of that feeling "if only there were no juries in my life." What do you think, positively or negatively, are some of the effects of the competition?

MM: It has been really interesting that the competition has inspired them to learn a lot of new repertoire, or to speed up the process of what they have been doing. So in that sense

it has been really good. I hope everyone takes away something positive out of the competition experience. I know that some may not, but I think that essentially they do. It has all of the appearance of being a public performance space. You perform for a public and there is an audience in every session, and that is great. But how you get over the fact that there is a group of people sitting at a table writing about you is a challenge.

JR: Exactly. You mentioned already that one thing that is a signature of this competition is the pairing of modern music with Schubert. You've also dedicated some of your own career to performing new music. In what ways do you think this modern music aspect is particularly important for a competition like this one?

MM: Yes, it's interesting. I think having it up front and center is a very bold statement. And for some, perhaps, in string quartet and in piano trio, more than perhaps in the song recitals, it encourages them to stretch themselves a little bit in terms of repertoire. I know that modern music in this case goes back a hundred years – some of the repertoire. For some of them it will be a chance to dip their toes in and find what they like. And I know, as does anyone who plays contemporary music, you can't like all contemporary music. There are certain strands, or certain styles, or certain techniques, there are certain composers, that you'll be drawn to. But you have to go through a process of elimination in many ways – play lots and lots of new repertoire. Then you will find the music that speaks to you – the music that you are able to best deliver.

JR: Great. For the second round of the piano trio competition, there was also a composition competition. We heard Jungjik Kim's "Stück 2", which was compulsory for the trios. I also understand that there was a prize given to a trio for the best performance of that piece, which I actually had a chance to hear. What did you find most interesting about that piece and how it was interpreted?

MM: The piece itself involves a huge amount of effects. Most of the piano playing is either inside the piano or effected by manipulating the inside of the piano. And I think that for some that was quite challenging. I enjoyed the effects; I thought musically the piece conveyed its ideas very well. There are two parts of working with complex scores like that. One is the architecture – trying to work out where your start, how you get all of your bits in the right place, how do you not drop your coin into the piano. Then of course there is the musical side. And getting those two aligned is the key. It is always a challenge.

JR: That's wonderful. As far as the prize-winning group, what was so successful about their performance?

MM: Again, I think it was that they got the architecture of the music together. It was a performance where I remember sitting back, listening, with confidence. It was a confident performance. An accurate – that's good too!

JR: Those two things often go together. We were speaking before we turned the recording on about earlier music, even, than we've seen in this competition. You're also

involved in an early music ensemble. Do you think that the experience of playing early music, say even sixteenth-century music, inflects your work with more recent music? Or, in general, that there is a particular transfer from one into the other?

MM: The more I explore the new and the old, they are completely linked. There is a freedom, first of all, an element of improvisation in the seventeenth-century music that I play. It's continuo, so you get a bass note, and there you go, off you go, and you work with all the other partners in the continuo band. But it is also the colors of the baroque instruments. For me there is so much more color that I can get out of a Baroque triple harp, than I can out of a modern concert harp that's designed for a different sort of purpose. Now, on the modern harp I can be more creative in the sense of using it as a percussion instrument. And the extended techniques on the modern harp are great. And with these I can challenge some of the stereotypes about the harp, too.

JR: Interesting.

MM: There is also the sense, with old music, of seeing a piece that may not have been played for a hundred years, or three hundred years. There is so much Baroque music, so much Renaissance music that disappeared because everybody was creating new music. So there is a sense of discovery in both areas which I find exhilarating.

JR: Yes, the situation is inspiring. Moving back now to the topic of chamber music performance more broadly, what do you feel have been some important trends in chamber music writing in recent years?

MM: I've been lucky for the last thirty years to play with the ELISION ensemble, and that was really formed when we were all at college: composers and performers creating an outlet for performance. And over that time it has been a continual, integrated relationship between composers and performers across generations now, which is terrifying! Composers and instrumentalists working together to create a sound is a productive combination. They are influenced by your technique, by your sensibility, and you in turn are inspired by their creativity and their imagination. Many great works that we play now are from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and they were written for specific performers with a specific talent. So in many ways we are continuing that tradition. I guess by playing music by dead composers, you don't have that opportunity, because you just take it off the shelf and you play it. Whereas I think with contemporary chamber music, there is a great opportunity to have something created on you, and for you, that has your voice and that may go on in another hundred years to become a classic. Then you're the one the composer wrote that work for.

JR: Yes.

MM: I often say this to audiences too when we are looking for support for compositions. I say, "You know, you could have your name on the score" – for one hundred years! Like the Brandenburgs, or the Esterhazys, you know. This is your chance at immortality. But, yes, there is that sense of that integrated approach to creating something special, that

can't happen in any other time, at any other place, or with any other composer as well. And that's exciting over the years. You look back at a long history of works, and it's very rewarding.

JR: That's really interesting to think about it in that way – say, not just the longevity of an ensemble, whether with original or changing membership, but also these relationships with composers. You also mentioned audiences and support for commissioning of chamber works or that sort of thing. What do you feel is most important these days in terms of audience engagement? What have you found to be particularly successful? Or is it perhaps not such a big deal as some make it out to be?

MM: I think it's a huge deal. I think it is the key to doing everything, because if your audience is not engaged, then we're playing to an empty room. The key thing for me that I have observed is that in a world where everything is available, it's bringing it back to the intimate and the personal. So the engagement of the audience with a performer before, during, or after a performance, is key. And we know that all groups are not good at introducing their works from the stage; some are uncomfortable with it. But you can always meet your audience after the show and say "Thanks for coming." And audiences will always tell you what they think, too. Mostly they'll tell you if they really hated it. Or if they really loved it! If they're lukewarm they might just go quietly. But that chance to engage with them is really important, because they then get to know your personality a bit more.

JR: I see.

MM: One of the most successful times I've had with new music has been when I've introduced a composer. It was at the Sydney Opera House, actually, where I said "We are going to present a new work by this composer, and he lives in this suburb." And someone in the audience whispered "Oh, we live there!" So suddenly they connected to the composer, and after the performance, they had a discussion: "Really loved your music by the way, tell me more..." They had a way in to the conversation. Whereas before they came to the concert, there was no way in, so opening sometimes those doors to conversation and understanding the human side, the personal side, the intimate side of the relationship, I think is the key now.

JR: Your work as a musician has involved some work with unusual locations, also, as a way of thinking through space and engagement. Could you tell us about one of these projects, and how it was received?

MM: I'll tell you about the best one first. It was on a beach in the Great Barrier Reef on an Island, called Orpheus Island, which sounds perfect for a harp player, you know. And the journey took two hours from the mainland, and the audience and the performers were there with the harp on the beach, and I played with some other musicians. The audience was sitting in the water, because it was a hot day, and then the sun disappeared behind the next-door island. It was just stars, and it was water lapping, and it was music, and it was sand. It was exquisite.

JR: Yes, I imagine so.

MM: The other one, a couple of years ago, it was a project done in Tasmania. And it was done in people's sheds, at some farms, working farms where people would either have animals or would shear sheep or have machinery, and some of the sheds were still being used, others were derelict. But we had a process of working with the families that lived on the farms, to talk about their life on the farms, and what these sheds meant, and their life – with or without music – but it was more about their experiences in life. And we played concerts in the sheds. Each shed was obviously very different, each performance was very different, but people would travel across the Northern part of Tasmania to hear these performances in the sheds. So again it encouraged a dialogue with the farmers, with the community. Now, if we had advertised a concert with the same repertoire, with the same performers, in the town nearby, no one would come. But because it was an experience, it was the relevance of it or greater relevance, it also enhanced the experience, I think, for everyone involved.

JR: That sounds especially meaningful. There is one more round of the competition. If you could even say this in advance, what will you be looking for in a winning trio?

MM: What I'm looking for is a confidence of musical personality, of technical accomplishment, with something to say, and someone also who I could see engaging with the audiences that I know. This is a point that's been made during the week. I think every venue has a different audience, audiences aren't the same, different ensembles will appear to different audiences, and I think that there is an ensemble in the final, probably two, that would appeal to an audience in Australia¹. I'm looking for confidence and an authenticity about performance. That's what it is. I want to learn who they are at the end of the show.

JR: It is very interesting that you also think of it in terms of a collective audience experience.

MM: Yes, so that's what I'm looking for. And may the best trio win!

JR: Thank you very much.

¹ Trio Marvin, 2nd prize winner at the FS&MM 2018, won the 1st and overall Grand Prize at the Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition in July 2018.