

IN DARKNESS AND LIGHT **SARAH ROTHENBERG, piano**

TUE 7:30 PM
 MAY 10

The Menil Collection

Sarah Rothenberg, piano
 Vijay Iyer, guest composer



Vijay Iyer (b. 1971)

For My Father (2021)

(world premiere; DACAMERA commission)

Prelude: Orison ("In Prayer")

Fugue: Upastuti ("In Praise")

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 32 in C Minor, Op. 111 (1821-22)

Maestoso–Allegro con brio ed appassionato

Arietta. Adagio molto semplice e cantabile

INTERMISSION

Morton Feldman (1926-1987)

Palais de Mari (1986)

This program evolved out of the music that sustained me during the many months of social isolation we all experienced between March 2020 and April 2021. It was a period of questions without answers, of time suspended. A period without live performance. In one of my first “home delivery” emails to the widespread DACAMERA community in that strange spring of sudden lockdown, I wrote of the feeling that the barlines of our days had been removed. Time was without measure. Our usual life narratives seemed to have lost coherence, as our lives lost movement. Time did not stop, it never does; instead, time moved through us as we stood still.

Two piano works took on new meaning for me during this period: Beethoven’s last piano sonata, Op. 111, a transcendent work which the great German author Thomas Mann described as “a farewell to the sonata,” and Morton Feldman’s final piano piece, *Palais de Mari*, a contemplative and poetic piece of fragile beauty. Each of these works became a place of refuge, a place to focus my internal life which was alternately turbulent, anxious, introspective, inert, at a time when outer life showed little movement at all.

A piece of music defines the time in which it lasts, and each of these two works uniquely defines a duration of just under thirty minutes. I started playing Feldman’s *Palais de Mari* in March 2020, finding that it spoke deeply to my own state: rather than moving forward in time, one hovers suspended in the questioning phrases that float upward, creating a temporary present of sound. A few weeks later, the work became a private memorial to a dear friend. I played *Palais de Mari* in my living room and streamed it from my iPhone in memory of the remarkable art historian, curator, and ground-breaking writer on race, Maurice Berger, who died in the first wave of COVID-19 in New York. Here, in Feldman’s music, beauty and inner peace exist without answers. *Palais de Mari* summons a liminal space, in-between existences larger than ourselves; time without end.

Six months later, as COVID-19 raged on through America, I created a film in the ancient galleries of the Menil Collection, playing Feldman’s work surrounded by objects that were thousands of years old, dating back to the time and place of the ruined palace in Mesopotamia that gave its name, Palais de Mari, to Feldman’s work. I called the film *The Departing Landscape*. The secret to listening to this music lies in a comment the composer made: “The attack of sound is not its character. Actually, what we hear is the attack and not the sound. Decay, however, this departing landscape, this expresses where the sound exists in our hearing—leaving us rather than coming toward us.” Astute advice for listening to all music.

Ludwig van Beethoven’s last piano sonata, Op. 111, a masterpiece of extremes, is divided into two movements. The first movement, in C Minor, consists of two connected sections: an intensely dramatic introduction, its dotted rhythms creating an angst-filled riff on the stately baroque

French overture style; and the turbulent *Allegro* “with spirit and passion” which follows. The main motif of the *Allegro*, which erupts out of a rumbling tremolo, is developed contrapuntally, like a fugue: but tempos veer from fast to slow, without a consistent pulse; dynamics shift on a dime, and the wide registers of the piano are utilized in themes that stretch from one end of the keyboard to the other. Throughout the movement, tense diminished 7th chords recur—a disturbingly unstable harmony that appear from the very start of the *maestoso* introduction. Jagged edges, nervousness, unpredictability. Fury and passion dissolve suddenly into moments of tenderness, only for the storm to return. There is no settling down. The entire movement seems to tremble with the underlying rumble of anxiety, an inner restlessness which dies away in a *pianissimo* coda which has not yet found peace. In May 2020, amid social unrest and two months into the pandemic, I noted as I practiced the Beethoven, “I feel the anxiety differently now as it is the defining emotion of our lives today, rumbling underneath the calm and even monotony of daily life.”

Beethoven’s second movement, titled *Arietta*, is a transcendent extended theme and variations. From the opening, songful aria, we are immersed in the sublime consonant tonality of a purely diatonic, non-chromatic C Major—a soothing contrast to the gnarly harmonies of the first movement which hover in our memory. This movement is a prayer, simple and heartfelt. The variations, following a traditional baroque technique of doubling the rhythmic speed of each variation within a constant pulse, explode in a surprisingly jazzy syncopated outburst. And from this point on Beethoven moves into uncharted territory; the theme increasingly abstracted, time suspended. The voyage is an inward voyage, deeper and deeper, further from the outward shape of the theme and often wandering, seemingly lost and even on the edge of sanity. *Forte* trills appear, a bold fragment of the theme seems to ground us in an arrival, only to disappear. For long stretches the music paradoxically wanders in place, a kind of suspended nowhere. After having been gone for so long as to seem forgotten, miraculously, as when one turns the corner in a dream and finds oneself home, the theme reappears, expansively filled out by arpeggio accompaniment, gaining strength and confidence, blooming into ecstatic fullness. We rise to the highest register of the keyboard, and then hang by a thread, suspended on one trill until, surrounded by celestial shimmering sounds, the theme again appears, gentle, tender...and then wanders off, seemingly lost forever in the heavenly heights, only to descend to earth briefly in the last three bars. This stupendous work closes with one of the most modest final measures in all of Beethoven. For the writer Thomas Mann, “a farewell to the sonata.”

Juxtaposing this Beethoven sonata with Feldman’s last work is certainly unusual, and probably risky. I’m not sure it’s been done before. But for me, the uncharted paths

that Beethoven leads us on in his Op. 111 find a strange continuity in the contemplation and suspended time of Morton Feldman. I wanted to share this private musical dialogue. And at the same time, I realized that this musical reflection on a unique period needed the additional voice of a composer of today, who had lived through it all with us.

I turned to the brilliant jazz pianist and composer Vijay Iyer, whose work often defies genre and reflects his own deeply thoughtful perspectives, asking him to write a piece to open this recital. And so yet another juxtaposition would be created: Beethoven's Sonata No. 32 in C Minor, composed in 1821–22, would be preceded by a work written exactly 200 years later, in 2021.

Iyer writes eloquently above about his piece and its deeply personal meaning, which neither of us knew it would take on when we first met to discuss his writing a new work

for me. The two movements of *For My Father*, structured classically as a prelude and fugue, open a subtle dialogue with the Beethoven. In Beethoven's work, the first movement has fugal elements, and the second movement is songful with variations. In Iyer's *For My Father* we find the song and variations first: *Orison* ("In Prayer.") Iyer's second movement, *Upastuti* ("In Praise"), brings us a deeply ruminative fugue, the form organically arrived at through contemplative development, meeting a climax with jagged rhythms recalling Beethoven's wildly syncopated variation. There are other discreet connections across 200 years. I am grateful to Vijay for this beautiful work, and feel privileged to share it with you for the first time tonight.

—Sarah Rothenberg

FOR MY FATHER

2021 | world premiere | DACAMERA commission

In memoriam Y. Raghunathan (1933-2021)

My father, Y. "Raghu" Raghunathan, came from India to the U.S. in 1963, followed soon after by my mother Sita. Dad enjoyed a substantial career as a pharmaceutical chemist, but he drew satisfaction from a simple life among family and friends, never allowing professional demands to overshadow his devotion to loved ones. Modest, compassionate, and ardently egalitarian, he was careful not to take anything too seriously, especially himself. He embraced his own ordinariness because it connected him to everyone else; it made him no better or worse than his neighbor, no more or less deserving of friendship or kindness than any of his fellow human beings. He showed us how to live with dignity, compassion, grace, and boundless love. His last piece of advice to me: "Go slow."

Several weeks after his passing, I happened upon a recording of Shostakovich's *24 Preludes and Fugues*, opus 87. I couldn't understand why at the time, but the sixteenth prelude and fugue took hold of me and would not let go. I completely immersed myself in that piece for ten days, until it became a mystical conduit for something else: in this semi-trance state I produced a prelude and fugue of my own, in prayer (*orison*) and in praise (*upastuti*). It shadows Shostakovich's form, but it somehow expresses my father's unhurried, loving spirit. I've come to believe that he sent me this piece as a blessing. I hope you feel his presence in it as I do.

—Vijay Iyer



Described by *The New York Times* as a “social conscience, multimedia collaborator, system builder, rhapsodist, historical thinker and multicultural gateway,” Vijay Iyer has carved out a unique path as an influential, prolific, shape-shifting presence in twenty-first-century music. A composer and pianist active across multiple musical communities, Iyer has created a consistently innovative, emotionally resonant body of work over the last twenty-five years, earning him a place as one of the leading music-makers of his generation.

He received a MacArthur Fellowship, a Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, a United States Artist Fellowship, a Grammy nomination, the Alpert Award in the Arts, and two German “Echo” awards, and was voted *Downbeat* Magazine’s Jazz Artist of the Year four times in the last decade. He has been praised by *Pitchfork* as “one of the best in the world at what

he does,” by the *Los Angeles Weekly* as “a boundless and deeply important young star,” and by Minnesota Public Radio as “an American treasure.”

Iyer’s musical language is grounded in the rhythmic traditions of South Asia and West Africa, the African American creative music movement of the 60s and 70s, and the lineage of composer-pianists from Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk to Alice Coltrane and Geri Allen. He has released twenty-four albums of his music, most recently *UnEasy* (ECM Records, 2021), a trio session with drummer Tyshawn Sorey and bassist Linda May Han Oh; *The Transitory Poems* (ECM, 2019), a live duo recording with pianist Craig Taborn; *Far From Over* (ECM, 2017) with the award-winning Vijay Iyer Sextet; and *A Cosmic Rhythm with Each Stroke* (ECM, 2016) a suite of duets with visionary composer-trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith.

Iyer is an active composer for classical ensembles and soloists. His works have been commissioned and premiered by Brentano String Quartet, Imani Winds, Bang on a Can All-Stars, The Silk Road Ensemble, International Contemporary Ensemble, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, LAPhil Group for New Music, American Composers Orchestra, So Percussion, Boston Lyric Opera, and virtuosi Jennifer Koh, Matt Haimowitz, Claire Chase, Shai Wosner, Inbal Segev, and Mishka Rushdie Momen, among others. He recently served as composer-in-residence at London’s Wigmore Hall, music director of the Ojai Music Festival, and artist-in-residence at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, and has been featured in Miller Theatre’s Composer Portraits and Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center’s Composers in Focus series.