

MUSIC ACCORD

CLARICE ASSAD

Clash (2021)

Program Notes

HAPPY LITTLE COLLISIONS

"I'll play it first, and tell you what it is later." — Miles Davis

What ferried you through the disenchantments of lockdown? For me it was, at age 42, playing make-believe with other grown men. Well, that and The Great British Baking Show, if I'm being honest. Our weekly Dungeons & Dragons-esque game quickly led to an obsession with the accompanying artwork, which led me to begging one such artist to perform the ultimate heresy by painting a wizardly scene on the back of my newly-commissioned 5-string violin.

Boy, this program note went sideways quickly.

The point I am circling by over-sharing my pandemic proclivities is this: without risk, art will atrophy. The program that you are about to experience, featuring the superlative Takács Quartet and the dauntless bandoneón virtuoso Julien Labro...the thing is...no one actually knew what it would sound like until the tickets were already purchased and the programs printed. This is quite profound, when you really consider it. We perhaps tend to think of western classical music concerts at this level as thoroughly-vetted, polished objects during which the greatest uncertainty is, say, whether or not an untended cell phone gets frisky.

What if a concert is not a culmination, but an experiment? What if it could give you the same nervy thrill as watching literally any gymnast eschew rationality by mounting a balance beam? Would knowing that the performers could be just as surprised at the outcome as you make this feel more like a shared experience than a one-way transmission? I'm not suggesting that most or even many concerts are safe, pre-determined events. After all, inherent to all live performance is the possibility for an encounter with the unexpected. For instance, an encounter between a Wendy and a wall during a production of Peter Pan...

[insert video here for online version] https://youtu.be/1_kx3byv8ow?t=77

So, how did this particular constellation of pieces before you — this fetching confluence of sonic flavors — first come into orbit? Borrowing from the immortal sagacity of Bob Ross, some of it can be chalked up to "happy little accidents." Allow me to illustrate with an excerpt from a recent conversation I had with your bandoneón soloist this evening, recounting his being approached by Music Accord to commission new works for his instrument and string quartet:

Julien: So the consortium came back and asked me if I had a particular string quartet in mind, and I told them, 'Not really. Let's just go with whoever is first on your list.'

Doyle: And you end up paired with one of the greatest string quartets in the known universe?

Julien: Yeah. It was pretty sick.

Pretty, pretty sick, indeed. With a veritable dream team assembled and determined that the project propel this combination of instruments beyond the realm of concert hall tango (as popularized by Astor Piazzolla and the Kronos Quartet some 30 years ago), Julien turned to names already inhabiting his phone's contact list. Enamored of the wondrous music of composer/performer Clarice Assad — in fact, already in process on another commission with her on the West Coast — he followed her affirmative response with a call to composer/performer Bryce Dessner. The two had initially met when Bryce invited Julien to guest on his soundtrack to the 2019 film, *The Two Popes*, and a mutual admiration society was formed.

All previous skylarking on my part notwithstanding, here is the crux of the matter, friends. The flirtations with, and solicitations of, *The Unexpected* referenced above is, in the context of this show, not about wardrobe malfunctions or fickle pyrotechnics. It's about a deliberate choice to palm a handful of multi-hued Mentos (for our purposes: Assad, Dessner, Bach, Saluzzi, Ravel, and Labro) and funnel them into a 2-liter bottle of Coke (this concert), knowing full well that the result will be meteoric and magnificent. The crux of the crux is that in the case of both of Music Accord's commissions, Julien insisted the composers write the pieces they wanted to write, rather than confining them to a theme or prompt. You're about to witness what's been consuming and inspiring these artists at this particular moment in time.

Is the same part of your brain that lights up for Arvo Pärt starting to flicker as you wind through the hypnotic revolutions of *Circles*? After the show, ask Bryce if he's a fan and throw me under the bus without mercy if his answer is anything short of, "Fratres for life."

Regarding *Clash*, Clarice shared with me that 2020/2021 — or as she put it, "A turbulent period brought on by a world health crisis, social distancing, the collapse of the economy, riots, and political turmoil" — provided the combustibles that fueled her writing. Do moments in this score resemble human speech to your ears...specifically not of the friendly variety? In what proximity are your shoulders to your ears at the conclusion of this one?

Julien was also fascinated with human interaction for his *Astoración* in which he conjures up a dialogue between his instrument and a historic interview with bandoneón grandmaster Astor Piazzolla. Allow yourself to go on a scavenger hunt, seeking out the inventive ways in which Julien interacts with the cadence and melodic contours of Piazzolla's voice. You might also take the opportunity of *Meditation No. 1* to ponder the sublime or, if you're in a mood, contemplate the saintly journey of the bandoneón from budget church organ to brothel superstar.

The two pieces that I expect may surprise you most memorably, though, are the two most familiar to classical concert halls. How will J.S. Bach's near-ubiquitous *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* transform when emboldened by the sometimes defiant, at times ambrosial, timbres of the bandoneón in this work? Even more provocatively, doesn't the Ravel sound as though it just enjoyed a particularly successful Queer Eye makeover? Not an improvement, to be clear, but an alluring re-contextualization, say, on the order of a dapper beard trim or the addition of some truly daring accent pillows. Takács has something to say to you, something profound, with their stirring interpretation of this iconic work. What I'd like to suggest is that you also listen intently for what these pieces are saying to one another.

I'm quite jealous of you, about to supervise all these compositional first dates. I can almost hear the din of anticipatory butterflies from here. What a brilliant collision of creativity and world-class playing you've treated yourself to today. I leave you with a salient provocation from composer John Cage, a collision himself between brilliance and, well, sometimes being just kind of a tool, but in this case exclusively the former:

Clash

Composer: Clarice Assad

Instrumentation: string quartet and bandoneon

Premiering Artists: Julien LaBro, bandoneon
The Takacs String Quartet: Edward
Dusinberre Violin / Harumi Rhodes Violin /
Richard O'Neill Viola / Andrés Fejér Cello

Duration: 12"

[Publisher Contact](#)

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Takacs Quartet

<https://www.takacsquartet.com/contact>

Julien LaBro

<https://julienlabro.com/contact-julien-labro/>



"The act of listening is in fact an act of composing."

I can't wait to hear what you come up with.

– Doyle Armbrust

About Music Accord

Comprised of top classical music presenting organizations throughout the United States, Music Accord is a consortium that commission new works in the chamber music, instrumental recital and song genres. The Consortiums goal is to create a significant number of new works and to ensure presentation of these works in venues throughout this country and, if the occasion arises, internationally. Music Accord awards commissions principally to performers who are US citizens or reside in the US and assists these performers in selecting composers who are United States citizens or who reside in the United States.



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