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CMSA Mandolin Journal



DMO & KMGO Blossom in Springtime Concert

by Miles Kusik and Jackie Zito

On May 19 – 20 the Dayton Mandolin Orchestra travelled to Kalamazoo to perform in a joint concert with the Kalamazoo Mandolin & Guitar Orchestra. This year marks the third time that these orchestras have combined forces. The concert featured the premiere of *Kalamazoo Suite* composed by DMO mandolinist and composer James Kellaris. In addition to the premiere of *Kalamazoo Suite*, Kellaris also won the 2012 San Francisco Mandolin Orchestra composition competition with his piece titled *Chrysopylae Reflections* (see interview on page 10).

Every piece on the program was either written or arranged for these orchestras. The DMO opened the program with Telemann's *Concerto in E minor* featuring DMO mandolinist Deb Spencer on recorder and Rob Turner on Baroque flute, arranged by DMO conductor James Johnston. They followed this with *Passamezzo Antico*, also arranged by Johnston. The KMGO took the stage next and performed John Goodin's *Pleasant Peninsula*, a piece the KMGO commissioned in 2011. *Pleasant Peninsula* is a three-movement suite with each piece named after a different city in Michigan. The first movement *Petoskey, Crooked Lake, 1960* reflects Goodin's childhood memories of summer vacations in Northern Michigan. The second movement *Kalamazoo, Parsons Street, 1927* pays homage to Goodin's Gibson mandolin built in Kalamazoo in 1927 with a piece that represents the transition from parlor music to swing music that happened in the '20's. The third movement *Grand Rapids, Fountain Street, 1973* is based on Goodin's time spent teaching in Grand Rapids

and evokes early '70's folk-rock.

Next, both orchestras combined to perform Kalamazoo composer Victor Garcia's *Passages Through Mexico*, a piece that the KMGO commissioned in 2008. The combined orchestras then premiered *Kalamazoo Suite* - a work in three movements commissioned by the KMGO. The first movement *The Children May Safely Play* was inspired by the iconic sculpture in Kalamazoo's Bronson Park by the same name. It is a musical representation of children pretending to fly. The second movement *Leonhard's Dream* is based on mathematician Leonhard Euler's mathematical constant "e". The third movement *Echoes from Parsons Street* represents the repetitive mechanized sounds in early 20th century bustling industrial operations that would have been heard in facilities such as Gibson's Parsons Street operation. The *Kalamazoo Suite* was very well received by the audience at the Kalamazoo Valley Museum. This was followed by another Kellaris opus, the light-hearted "Kalamazoo Swag" (2009) that was inspired by his first visit to Kalamazoo in 2008. Swag is a musical pun meaning swung ragtime. The program closed with the hometown favorite "I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo" (Glenn Miller Big Band 1942, arrangement Kellaris). This is one of the KMGO's favorite program closers and featured the stellar vocals of KMGO mandolinist and tenor Ron Cleveland.

The KMGO looks forward to continuing the mandolin orchestra exchange by visiting the DMO soon.



From left to right: Victor Garcia, Miles Kusik, James Kellaris, James Johnston photo by: George Kuttner

An Interview with Composer James Kellaris

by Miles Kusik



James Kellaris

Miles Kusik: James, let me begin by congratulating you on winning the San Francisco Mandolin Orchestra's New Music Competition. Could you describe the basic requirements for the competition?

James Kellaris: Thank you – I feel honored. The call for scores invited works that are “*memorable, enjoyable for the average audience, but with sufficient depth and musical sophistication to have lasting value,*” composed specifically for the SFMO, “*with the expressive capacities of our instruments in mind.*” Entries also had to be on the theme of the Golden Gate Bridge, as 2012 marks the 75th anniversary of this landmark.

MK: Could you explain the title of your new work, *Chrysopylae Reflections*, and what inspired it?

James: *Chrysopylae* is a Greek word meaning “golden gate.” The explorer John C. Frémont wrote in his memoirs “To this Gate I gave the name of *Chrysopylae*, for the same reasons that the harbor of Byzantium was called *Chrysoceras* (golden horn).” My composition is a reflection on my personal encounter with the Golden Gate Bridge, as a sleepy child in the back seat of our family car.

MK: Could you give the MJ readers a thumbnail sketch of your music background as it relates to plucked strings? How many years have you played with the Dayton Mandolin Orchestra?

James: My association with plucked string runs deep - in fact my DNA is a double string! According to family lore, I teathed on my grandfather's mandolin. I started playing mandolin around the age of 4 or 5, and began formal

study on guitar at age 9. I attended college on a classical guitar scholarship and studied music composition. After graduating, I played various plucked string instruments professionally for a number of years – everything from the mandolin in an Atlanta Opera Theatre production of Don Giovanni to a tour with the Nashville Chamber Orchestra as a (Greek) bouzouki soloist. I've been a member of the Dayton Mandolin Orchestra for the past five years and currently play the mandola.

MK: The SFMO competition received many entries, from Italy, Spain, UK, Austria, Croatia, Israel, and from all over the US. To what do you attribute the success of your composition?

James: All composers combine effort and talent to create new music. What distinguishes my approach, I believe, is the crazy stuff I do to develop empathy with a theme before attempting to compose.

In the case of the SFMO competition, the theme was the Golden Gate Bridge. To prepare to compose, I filled my senses with sights, sounds, and smells to recall the bridge. I studied satellite images, photos, and watched videos of cars driving across the bridge, noting the sound of tires crossing expansion joints and the interplay of light and shadow. I smelled sourdough bread with my eyes closed, to evoke pre-verbal memories, and savored a piece of Ghirardelli chocolate. I visited seafood shops in landlocked Cincinnati to smell vestigial remnants of the ocean, and sought out fog in the hills of nearby Northern Kentucky. I read extensively about the history of the bridge and meditated on the poems of Joseph Strauss, the bridge's designer/builder.

Finally, in the twilight between wakefulness and sleep, I reflected deeply on my own personal connection to the bridge, recalling my first encounter with the bridge as a sleepy child in the back seat of our family car. That is when I recalled how the light flickered through the vertical stringers and railings; and, in a synesthetic fog, the rhythmic pulsations became music. In retrospect, I believe the composition turned out well because I invested 90% of my effort in developing empathy for the subject, 10% in “composing.”

MK: Does the fact that you are a proficient performer on guitar and mandolin restrict your compositional concepts or expand them when writing for mandolin orchestra.

James: In general, familiarity with an instrument is an asset. I like to write parts that fall naturally under the fingers, because that tends to produce better performances. However, I avoid pitching everything in mandolin-friendly keys and making excessive use of open strings. The

An Interview with Composer James Kellaris

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constraints imposed by an instrument's features evoke psychological reactance on my part – constraints make me want to push back harder, creatively.

MK: How important do you think these competitions are in fostering new works for plucked string ensembles?

James: On a scale of one to ten? Eleven! Musical composition is a time-consuming endeavor. Time is scarce, incentives important. A competition is a particularly efficient means of fostering new music, because it is less costly than individual commissions and produces multiple pieces.

MK: I think that commissioning and presenting new works is much more commonplace for Japanese and European mandolin orchestras than for American orchestras. Is it important for American orchestras to also help create new literature for mandolin orchestras?

James: Well, if they don't do it, it probably won't happen! We cannot count on public funding for plucked string orchestras. Academic composers are unlikely, even under tenure pressure, to write for plucked strings if such ensembles do not exist at their academic institutions. Amateur composers may write for the love of the craft, which is all good; but to build a literature I believe we need professional involvement as well. Hence it is really up to the orchestras to provide incentives to composers to give a voice to our own time and place.

MK: Let's go to the dark side for a moment. What do you believe to be impediments to the creation of new music for plucked strings?

James: Frankly, erosion of respect for intellectual property, violation of copyrights and performance rights are major impediments to the creation of new music, as these undermine composers' efforts. It is nearly impossible to make a living as a composer in this country, in part because work product gets photocopied, passed around electronically, and performed without regard for ownership. People who would never dream of taking something from a store without paying for it will reproduce work under copyright and distribute it without realizing that this a form of theft, which victimizes composers, and hurts the arts in the long-run.

MK: Is it important for orchestras to hold an ASCAP/BMI license? Would that help composers?

James: This is a complicated question. It could help composers who are ASCAP/BMI members, but only if the orchestra performs at venues that qualify for collection of fees. High schools and churches, for example, are exempt.

A more fundamental way of helping contemporary composers is simply to *purchase* the music you perform, whether directly from the composer or from an authorized publisher, and avoid bootleg, borrowed, or illegally obtained copies. Share public domain music with other orchestras (assuming the edition is not under copyright), but never share the work of a living composer without consulting him/her. Owning a legitimately obtained copy of a work does not give an orchestra the right to distribute free copies to other parties. This creates a huge problem for composers.

MK: It can still be a challenge even in the age of the Internet to obtain legitimate copies of scores and parts from foreign publishers. Can you see any demand for an American publisher, dedicated to small run "art music" publishing for mandolin orchestras and other plucked string ensembles?

James: Potentially, such a publisher could be very beneficial for orchestras and composers, assuming that the publisher would screen for quality and perform useful middleman functions, such as promotion (e.g., web site, booth at CMSA), distribution, and collection of fees on behalf of composers. Channel intermediaries take their cut, but in return they create contact efficiencies and give producers access to more customers. Publishers allow composers to allocate more time to composing, less time to marketing. Additionally, a specialty house could offer one-stop shopping for artistic directors seeking new music. A publisher with a good reputation, quality catalog, sophisticated, well-developed, multi-lingual web site, promotional skill, visibility and market presence, clear niche positioning, offering editing services for composers (e.g., extracting parts from scores), and fair prices/compensation would be great! A publisher that tells composers "send me anything and if I sell it I'll give you some of the money" is a bum deal. I suspect this is why the current trend favors self-publishing.

MK: On a more positive note, I find that our audiences are increasingly receptive to hearing new music. In fact the Kalamazoo Mandolin and Guitar Orchestra combined forces with the Dayton Mandolin Orchestra on May 20th to present the premiere of your **Kalamazoo Suite**. It was very strongly received here. What has your general experience been regarding audiences and new music?

James: Audiences seem generally delighted to learn that music for plucked string orchestras is still being written in our own time. It is amazing how versatile plucked string ensembles are and how well suited they are to contemporary music. Moreover, it can be a matter of local or regional pride for audiences when "one of us" produces something of beauty in a contemporary voice.

An Interview with Composer James Kellaris

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MK: What do you think mandolin orchestras have to do to establish a permanent place in the American musical landscape?

James: First, I think mandolin orchestras must take responsibility for their own fate. We cannot depend on public funding until plucked string orchestras become more ubiquitous and popular, and the economy improves. We could go extinct waiting for that to happen. Secondly, it seems apodictic that mandolin orchestras should invest in educational outreach and cultivate the next generation of players. Thirdly, I believe that developing a contemporary repertoire is absolutely essential to making mandolin orchestras relevant. Historic revival and preservation are worthy goals; but, to claim a permanent place in the American musical landscape, mandolin orchestras must be willing to explore new music.

MK: This may be a bit off topic but what do you think draws most people to play in a mandolin orchestra?

James: Off topic, but an important question! I could speculate, but would rather conduct an empirical study of mandolin and plucked string orchestra members. The

reason this question is so important is that understanding motivations – particularly latent motivations - is key to developing recruitment strategies that resonate with prospective new musicians and retention strategies for those already hooked. If we ask the question directly, we get manifest motives, such as “I like to play the mandolin.” However, if we ask indirect, third-party questions, such as “why do you think *other people* are drawn to play in mandolin orchestras?” we can begin to uncover latent motivations. Continuity with the past, need for affiliation, relaxation, challenge, self-expression... personally, I’m in it for the fabulous mandolin babes!

MK: Should other groups want to perform your music, are any of your works published?

James: My catalog of works includes several items for mandolin orchestras: *Chrysopylae Reflections* (~6 min.), *Kalamazoo Suite* (3 movements, ~ 15 min), not to be confused with my period piece, the *Kalamazoo Swag* (4:40 min), and *Roads to Kalamata* (suite of Greek genre pieces, ~ 10min), as well as arrangements of Greek, Italian, French, Russian, and traditional Christmas pieces. All are self-published. No web site (yet), but samples can be found on YouTube and SoundCloud. Inquiries can be addressed to James.Kellaris@gmail.com

CMSA Fiscal Year End Financial Report

by Vicki Chouinard, CMSA Treasurer

CMSA began the fiscal year (July 1, 2011) with \$55,000 (U.S.) on hand. We ended the year on June 30, 2012, with \$68,000. CMSA accounting is done on a cash basis, just as your household accounts. The year’s “cash-in” was just over \$42,000, while “cash-out” was just under \$29,000.

The increase in our bank balance can be attributed to several factors:

- The 2011 convention in Baltimore was very well attended. Income from the convention exceeded expenditures by about \$4,400.
- Our membership income was up 24% with several members investing in life memberships. We currently have about 350 CMSA members.
- Printing and postage costs for the Mandolin Journal have been reduced by an additional 15% this year (thanks to the work of Jackie Zito, the Mandolin Journal editor!).

- The CMSA Board of Directors included \$3,000 in the budget for grants in support of classical mandolin. No grant applications were received, so this money was not distributed.
- Finally, there were some payment timing quirks related to convention hotel deposits. These quirks resulted in some expenses being paid in the 2010-2011 fiscal year rather than the 2011-2012 fiscal year.

The organization’s financial underpinnings are sound, and I look forward to a successful new year. If you wish to see the complete accounting detail, please contact me directly.

Respectfully submitted, Vicki Chouinard,
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