

Karim Al-Zand

# Chamber Music VOLUME 2

THE ART OF CONVERSATION



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#### THE COMPOSER



The music of Canadian-American composer *Karim Al-Zand* (b.1970) is wide-ranging, from settings of classical Arabic poetry to scores for dance and pieces for young audiences. His works explore connections between music and other arts, and draw inspiration from diverse sources such as 19th century graphic art, fables of the world, folksong and jazz. The themes of many of his pieces speak to his middle-eastern heritage as well. Al-Zand's music has enjoyed success in the US, Canada and abroad and he is the recipient of several national awards, including the Sackler Composition Prize, the ArtSong Prize, the Louisville Orchestra Competition Prize and the "Arts and Letters Award in Music" from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He holds degrees from Harvard and McGill Universities and is currently on the faculty of the Shepherd School of Music (Rice University) in Houston. Al-Zand is also a founding member of Musiqa (musiqahouston.org), Houston's premiere contemporary music

group, which presents concerts featuring new and classic repertoire of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

More information about Al-Zand can be found at his website: www.alzand.com

#### THE MUSIC

The four movements that make up *Imaginary Scenes* are inspired by diverse and somewhat whimsical literary sources. The title of the first scene is taken from a short and poignant verse by English poet and novelist D. H. Lawrence (1885–1969).

The wind, the rascal, knocked at my door, and I said:
My love is come!
But oh, wind, what a knave thou art
To make sport of me when the days of my heart
Are drearisome,
And wearisome

Scèna amorosa was inspired by an intriguing letter published in the Musical Gazette of Milan on October 18, 1846:

"Looking for variety in the programs I executed at court, one evening...I improvised a sonata entitled 'Scèna amorosa,' the 4th string representing the man (Adonis) and the treble string the woman (Venus). This was the beginning of my habit of playing on one string." —Niccolò Paganini.



J. J. Grandville: from Un Autre Monde: Paris, 1844

The work of renowned illustrator J. J. Grandville (1803–1847) includes many fantastical and bizarre images that can be seen as early precursors to the Surrealist movement in art. In his collection *Un Autre Monde*, a series of engravings depicts an "apocalyptic" ballet: dancing crabs, mice, grasshoppers and scarab beetles; a ballerina gradually transformed into a *chaise longue*; and a pair of eerily smilling marionettes whose joints are made of springs.

An episode from my folktale setting *Parizade and the Singing Tree* provided the musical and dramatic impetus for the last movement. In one scene, the young adventurer encounters an old man sleeping at the side of the road. The narrator relates: "as Parizade approached, the dervish awoke from his recent slumber and began excitedly to beckon her toward him." *Imaginary Scenes* was written for Sergiu Luca and Brian Connelly, who presented the work's premiere on October 5, 2005.

The theme in *Variations* for viola and piano is a melody from Béla Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*. The first tune heard in the *Intermezzo* of that work is a lilting, folk-like melody that alternates

measures of four and five beats. Bartók's melody is remarkable in that it has very little harmonic motion and quite limited pitch material, occasionally repeating a pattern of only three or four notes. Consequently, the five variations of the piece are, in a sense, "metric variations," since they focus on exploring contrasting rhythmic patterns, layered between the parts.

Capriccios for solo violin were composed over several years. They were prompted by requests for short recital pieces from students of Kenneth Goldsmith, my colleague at the Shepherd School of Music. Ken is a passionate champion of new music and his many students have continued that advocacy for contemporary compositions. Capriccio No. 1 was written for Matthew Detrick; No. 2 for Kristi Helberg; No. 3 for Stephanie Nussbaum and No. 4 for Tema Watstein. In addition to reflecting the virtuoso tradition of the capriccio, the pieces here and there make musical references to the quintessential exemplars of the genre, Paganini's 24 Capriccios, Op. 1.

Four Fables draws its inspiration from animal apologues by authors from near and far. The Grasshopper and the Ant is a classic fable traditionally ascribed to the Greek slave Aesop (ca. 620–560 BC). In keeping with the antics of the two protagonists, the piece is an acrobatic dance.

In the winter, the Ants were sustained with food they had stored in the summer. The Grasshopper however, was hungry. He asked an Ant for help, promising to repay the favor when the weather was warmer. The Ant asked what he had done in the summer.

"In the summer I sang and entertained the walkers," replied the Grasshopper.

"You sang in summer?" said the Ant, surprised, "Well, then in winter you can dance!"



The Owl and the Echo, by eighteenthcentury French fabulist Jean-Baptist Perrin, explains the nocturnal habits of the owl and its solitary call. Perrin's many fables were known in the US primarily through a French-language primer published in 1846. The second movement is a melancholy and atmospheric canon.

An Owl, puffed up with pride and vanity, sings his doleful song at midnight from the hollow of an old oak.

"For what is this silence which reigns in the forest, if not to favor my melody? Surely the groves are charmed by my voice; and when I sing, all nature listens."

An Echo immediately repeats: "All nature listens."

"The Nightingale," continued the Owl "has taken my right; his warbling is musical, it is true; but mine is much more sweet."

The Echo replies again: "Is much more sweet."

Encouraged by the phantom voice, the Owl, at the rising of the sun, mingled his doleful cries with the harmony of the other birds: but disgusted with his noise, they all chased him away. They continue to pursue the Owl wherever he appears, so that he avoids the daylight and only entertains himself under cover of darkness.

The Russian writer Ivan Kyrlov (1769–1844) was celebrated for the whimsical political satire in his fables, the most frequent target of which was the Russian imperial family. *The Lion, the Fox and the Fish* is said to

parody a local governor's response to Alexander I, after the Emperor had expressed concern over the rioting populace. This movement is a dance, a sort of sizzling scherzo.

The Lion appointed the Fox governor of the water. While ruling on the shore, the Fox angled after fish, intent on eating his constituents. The poor fish were placed in a hot pan over a roaring fire. Seeing their end close at hand, the fish began to fling themselves about frantically in an attempt to escape. The Lion, hearing rumors of the Fox's abuse of power, came to investigate.

"What is going on here?" he demanded, motioning toward the springing fish.

"These are carp, inhabitants of the waters," answered the Fox, "We have all come together to congratulate you, our good king, on your arrival." (All the time the fish were leaping about in the pan.)

"But tell me," asked the Lion, "why do the carp fling themselves about so?"

"O wise Lion." replied the Fox. "they are dancing for iov at seeing you!"

The fame of American author Ambrose Bierce (1842–1914) rested in large part on his withering wit, as manifested in his acerbic *Devil's Dictionary*. (He defines a fiddle as "an instrument to tickle human ears by friction of a horse's tail on the entrails of a cat.") *The Man and the Fish-Horn* is similarly sardonic, as it pokes fun at the fable genre and, in particular, at Aesoo's many stories of fisherman. The last movement is a lively fanfare.

A Truthful Man, finding a musical instrument in the road, asked the name of it and was told that it was a Fish-Horn. The next time he went fishing he set his nets and blew the fish-horn all day to charm the fish into them, but at nightfall there was not only no fish in the nets, but none along that part of the coast. Meeting a friend while on his way home he was asked what luck he had.

"Well." said the Truthful Man. "the weather is not right for fishing, but it's a red-letter day for music."

From its earliest origins, the string quartet has been regarded as the perfect medium for dynamic and refined musical interaction, often likened to a lively "conversation" among companions. *The Art of Conversation* uses this analogy to present the quartet in seven different musical conversations. Listeners will quickly identify the sort of group interaction being featured in each movement: the first has the instruments cooperating, the second is a monologue for the first violin, the third features two distinct duos, and so on. The piece functions as a work both for regular concerts and for "outreach" programs, designed to introduce audiences to aspects of chamber music-making. The individual movements are introduced to the audience informally, or through short spoken dialogues performed by the quartet, which alternate with the seven movements of the piece. Each dialogue parallels the type of musical "discourse" featured in the subsequent movement. *The Art of Conversation* was commissioned by the Laguna Beach Music Festival and written for the Enső String Quartet.

#### THE PERFORMERS

Pianist *Tali Morgulis* has appeared in the U.S. and internationally with major orchestras, as a soloist, and as a chamber musician. She can be heard in recordings of works by Rachmaninov, Janacek, Shostakovich and Lutoslawski. She is on the faculty of the Moores School of Music, University of Houston. (tali.morgulis.net)

Critically acclaimed violinist *Yung-Hsiang Wang* has earned accolades as both a versatile performing musician and a scholar. He has a diverse range of repertoire, from early music to contemporary compositions. He has performed widely in the US and abroad and is a founding member of Trio Solari. (wangmusic.com)

Violist with the Medici String Quartet, *Ivo-Jan van der Werff* has played on more than 40 recordings, including a complete Beethoven String Quartet cycle and viola works by Max Reger and Arnold Bax. He is on the faculty of the Shepherd School of Music, Rice University. (ivo-janvanderwerff.com)

Pianist *Brian Connelly's* performances span an unusually broad range of historical and modern repertoires. He is widely respected as a scholar and performer of historical instruments, and an active proponent of contemporary music. He is on the faculty of the Shepherd School of Music, Rice University.

A native of Hong Kong, *Eric Siu* is an experienced and versatile violinist who is equally at home with traditional and contemporary repertoire. He has toured the United States, Europe, Asia, and South America as a solo and chamber musician, and holds degrees from The Juilliard School and Rice University.

A compelling exponent of music from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries, flutist *Michelle Cheramy* enjoys a diverse performing career that embraces solo and collaborative work. She is an artist recognized for the beauty of her sound, and her interpretive skills in a wide range of repertoire. She is on the faculty of Memorial University in Newfoundland, Canada.

A native of Chiba, Japan, clarinetist *Maiko Sasaki* has delighted audiences on both sides of the Pacific. She has contributed her talents to an ever-widening variety of musical projects including solo, collaborative and orchestral endeavors. In addition to the standard repertoire, she is an active exponent of contemporary music and a performer of period instruments. (maikosasaki.com)

Pianist *Kana Mimaki* has performed in major cities and venues all over the world, including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and Kennedy Center. Among her many accolades as a soloist, she was awarded the gold medal from the International Russian Music Competition and the Kapo-Barwick Memorial prize from the William Kapell International Piano Competition. (kanamimaki.com)

With its 2010 Grammy nomination, the *Enso String Quartet* solidified its place as one of the country's most exciting young ensembles. The quartet has claimed honors at the Banff International String Quartet Competition, the Concert Artists Guild International Competition, and the Fischoff National Chamber Music Competition. They are equally at home with the standard repertoire and contemporary music and are represented by recent recordings of Pleyel and Ginastera quartets. (ensoquartet.com)

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Karim Al-Zand won an Arts and Letters Award in Music in 2011 from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. This has made possible, in part, the recording of *The Art of Conversation*.

Recording, Editing, Mastering: Todd Hulslander, Play and Record Productions Capriccios and Imaginary Scenes recorded February 5th, 2011 and May 6th, 2012 at KUHF Radio studios; Houston TX Four Fables and Variations recorded January 7th, 2007 and December 12th, 2011 in Duncan Recital Hall, Rice University; Houston TX The Art of Conversation recorded October 27th, 2011, Zilkha Hall, Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, Houston, Texas

All works are available direct from the composer: Karim Al-Zand Music (ASCAP).

CONVERSATION

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	Imaginary Scenes (2005)	17:57
	The wind, the rascal	5:55
2	Scèna amorosa	4:46
3	Mechanical marionettes	3:27
4	Whirling dervish	3:49
	Yung-Hsiang Wang, violin	
	Tali Morgulis, piano	
5	Variations on a theme of Bartók (2002)	8:07
	lvo-Jan van der Werff, viola	
	Brian Connelly, piano	
	Capriccios (2002–2011)	10:23
6	As quickly as possible; energetic	2:27
7	Relaxed; playfully loping (Sarabande)	3:59
8	Quickly; bouncing, carefree	1:55
9	Swiftly; intense-Extremely quickly; agitato	2:02
	Eric Siu, violin	

	Four Fables (2003)	12:34
10	The Grasshopper and the Ant	3:01
-11	The Owl and the Echo	3:42
12	The Lion, the Fox and the Fish	1:20
13	The Man and the Fish-Horn	4:33

Kana Mimaki, piano

THE ALL OF CONVERSALION	
seven dialogues for string quartet (2007)	13:48
Discursus 1 Colloquy	1:17
Discursus 2 Monologue	1:19

Michelle Cheramy, flute | Maiko Sasaki, clarinet

16 Discursus 3 Dialogues 1:47 Discursus 4 Non Sequitur 2:54 18 Discursus 5 Recitative

19 Discursus 6 Cross Talk 1.40 2:24

20 Discursus 7 Fugue **Ensō String Quartet** 

Maureen Nelson. John Marcus, violin

Melissa Reardon, viola | Richard Belcher, cello

Total Time = 62:53

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