



An Interview with Kevin Kastning

Kevin Kastning is the new artist at onclassical.com: guitarist, composer and instruments inventor, he is obtaining large consensus in America for his innovative music and recordings. His four last publications (2006-2009) have been recently included in our catalog: these albums are artistically relevant, curious, and impeccable at a sound level. The art of Kevin Kastning and of musicians Szabo and Siegfried, who flanked him, is innovative, courageous, hypnotic. We directly speak with the artist in a long interview that Alessandro Simonetto, founder of OnClassical, prepared for the OC blog.

A.S. Your music is a sort of improvisation that becomes composition in the act of performing it. We know this is a very original style of composition and performance at the same time. What are the influences of your artistic language? How do your thoughts and your own musical artistic processes impact these compositions?

K.K. Wow, that is a good question. I don't know if I could list all my artistic influences, as I am sure there are some which are there, but unconscious and unknown to me. A few composers that come to mind are Bartok, Elliott Carter, Gesualdo, Tallis, Beethoven's middle and late period string quartets, Ockeghem, the second Viennese school, Schnittke, Shostakovich, Bach, Byrd, Josquin, Praetorius, and even going back as far as Machaut. Bartok's string quartets had a deep and tremendously profound impact on me; both artistically and even spiritually. I also suspect that I have been impacted by artists from the French post-impressionist and the abstract expressionist periods; as well as authors such as Joyce, Proust, and Eliot. Sometimes I think I have a tendency to

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translate the visual into the audible.

I find that when I'm involved in observing and really taking in a painting, that I will start to hear things; I look at a Jackson Pollock work and I can hear a lot of sound in that. Architecture can be an influence as well; I am a fan of Frank Gehry, and can hear sound when I look at some of his designs. I have thought of how the architectural concept behind flying buttresses of the Gothic period can translate into compositional form, or become a structural element of a piece. I also find that I am pretty heavily influenced by nature: landscapes; the seeming randomness of things like leaf veining and bird song and avian sounds. Lately I see things like cloud formations, forest growth patterns, river meanders, and certainly snow and snow patterns and wonder how I could translate that directly to score paper. I think that an artist's varied influences and impacting exposures become internally aggregated and sort of transmogrify into a new and unique amalgam; this becomes that artist's voice.

A.S. The collaboration with other musicians such as Siegfried and Sandor Szabo: how do you discover to have the same "frequencies" / feeling for working at the same project?

K.K. As for the works with Siegfried, he and I began working together in the early 1990s; our album "Binary Forms" was recorded in 1992. In this case, Siegfried knew we were operating on the same artistic frequency. I didn't; he brought it to my attention and asked if we could record together. At first I said no, but I'm glad he pressed me to do it, otherwise it never would have happened. He was right, by the way.

I'll use Sandor as a more detailed example; I hope he won't mind! I met him a few years ago; before we met, I knew who he was, and he had found my music and researched it a bit prior to initially contacting me. We conversed quite a lot and listened to each other's music. I had a strong sense, both conscious and subconscious, that he and I would artistically fit together like two puzzle pieces. And we did, in fact, on not only an artistic level, but also on a spiritual and deeply inner level, which of course translated to and became evident in the works we jointly create. We just knew that we were operating on, to use your rather accurate term, the same frequency.

Sandor stated the same thing to me, but an interesting difference is that he knew it long before I did! It's tough to verbalize or explain; it is as if we'd known each other artistically long before we actually met. In fact, I've never met anyone with whom I have so much in common artistically. The work he and I do together is the most natural process in which I've ever been involved. I know he and I will be working together for a very long time.

I've been asked by other artists to collaborate or record with them, but it's really rare that I feel an artistic connection or affinity. There are a couple of other artists with whom I'm either working or with whom I'm going to be recording, though.

A.S. The guitars you, Kevin and the other musicians, play: how do you choose them? Do you personally build them? How and why?

K.K. As for the instruments I play, I initially select them based on their voice and tonal response. I will select a specific instrument for a certain composition or recording based on the requirements of that composition. For several years, I have been internally hearing (and still do) compositions which involved ranges and registers of instruments, specifically of the guitar family, which were not extant. I'm fortunate to be an artist endorser for Santa Cruz Guitars; we have a wonderful working relationship. After we'd established that relationship, I approached them with some instrument design ideas I had which extended the range of the guitar, and asked if they were interested in building them for me. To my surprise, they were not only agreeable, but very excited to do this. The first instrument I designed, and by designed I mean the register and range and tunings, was the DKK, which is an extended baritone guitar; it is tuned to F#, which is one whole step above a bass, and a seventh lower than guitar. For this extended range to be possible, a much longer scale length is required; this in turn requires a very different playing technique. I used the DKK in the studio on an upcoming album with Sandor wherein I had it in bass (E) tuning, and it sounded amazing; just really full and rich. With a lower-pitched instrument, far more string harmonics are available. When using the extended baritones, many of my chord voicings and harmonic structures involve artificial string harmonics; this just is not possible on a standard concert-pitch guitar. From the DKK came the DKK-12, which is a 12-string version

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of it, also in F# tuning.

I have devised many of my own intervallic tunings for the DKK-12, and I first used these on the album *Parallel Crossings*. On that album, for some pieces I used concert F# tuning and on others I used my intervallic tunings. To briefly explain: in F# concert tuning on the DKK-12, the string pairs are all in octaves; for example, the first course is F# / f#. In intervallic tunings, the first course might be F# / A. In other words, each course is tuned to a different non-octavic interval. In fact, all my work on *Parabola* was recorded using entirely my own intervallic tunings; I didn't use any concert tunings whatsoever on the entire record. The intervallic tunings also provide entirely other sets of artificial harmonics; as well as the possibility of 12-note chord voicings.

The newest KK / Santa Cruz instrument is the Alto Guitar. This is a small-bodied, short-scale length 12-string which is pitched a P4 (perfect fourth) above standard guitar concert tuning; concert tuning is E; the alto is in A. It's a very unusual guitar voice; it sounds like an amalgam of harpsichord and mandolin. I will touring Europe with Sandor this year, and will be taking the alto on the tour with me. So to answer your question: I don't build them, but I did design them.

A.S. Yes, that was my intention...

K.K. And they were built to fill an artistic need: that need being the compositions for instruments which didn't exist. Now they do exist. Interestingly enough, Sandor has a 12-string baritone which was built using the DKK-12 specifications; once he heard mine, he had to have one! He uses this instrument rather virtuosically on *Resonance* and *Parallel Crossings*. We have an album in the can which will be released in 2010 wherein we are both using different intervallic tunings on 12-string baritones. The harmonic densities and soundscapes are just huge! There is another new instrument on which I'm working with a wonderful and gifted luthier here in the US named Dan Roberts; it will have a wider range even than the DKK-12. Again, this instrument is conceived out of a need for an even wider ranging instrument for new compositions and their required tunings on which I'm working. The intervallic tunings are born out of a similar process: I have these pieces, or I'm hearing

compositions involving harmonic structures that I can't achieve. Unless I re-invent something; first the instrument, and then that instrument's tuning scenarios.

A.S. When I was teen I improvised at the piano with closed eyes, looking for the best sound for my invention: I defined the music that came out: blind music. Do you think we could define your own language in the same way?

K.K. Hmm.. I don't know, but that's another good question. I come from a discipline of composing; I've composed over 200 pieces; various string quartets, piano sonatas, trios; mostly chamber works. So even though I'm improvising with Sandor, for example, those improvisations are coming from a place of formal composition. Form is always a consideration, even where there is what might be perceived as a lack of form. I did an album in 2004 with Siegfried entitled *Bichromial*, and on that album, we focused on a concept I defined as open form compositions: these were improvised pieces with no repeating sections or motifs. The form was not cyclic in any way, but purely linear. So even in the absence of form, there is form. At least in my mind.

A.S. What are the technical equipment used to record (I mean microphones, preamps, and more ...). What is your attitude/mood before and during the recording session?

K.K. I am very, very finicky about and demanding of recording equipment. The albums have been recorded using mics by Gefell and Neumann into Millennia preamps. The Millennias are the cleanest and purest preamps I've ever used. The Gefell mics are so incredibly detailed that I think they can almost hear your thoughts! Lately I've been using some microphones from Peluso; I really like those very much and am excited about them. I have them in the studio, and am already at work on the next couple of albums, and the Peluso mics are being used on those, as well as the Gefells. The Peluso mics are really wonderful. They render the image in such a manner that they provide a wider soundscape, which is difficult to do and something for which I've been searching. My recording chain is very pure and direct: microphone to preamp to recorder. In both the recording and the mixing process, no EQ, compression, or limiting is ever used. The only outboard gear used in the mixing

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and mastering process other than the mixing desk and mastering recorder is the Bricasti M7 reverb unit. This is like having Boston Symphony Hall right in the studio; it's inexplicably beautiful and pure. Every album from Resonance on has been mixed with the M7; in fact, Resonance was the first album ever mixed with the M7. I've been really fortunate to work with companies like Bricasti and Peluso, too. For the past year or so, I've been using the Enhanced Audio M600 microphone mounting system. It really adds a measure of clarity, depth, and detail. In fact, "Parabola" was recorded using the M600 on the mics.

As for the mood before and during the recording sessions, I suppose I would say it's relaxed and natural. Sandor and I have recorded four complete albums together, and parts of two more. The feeling in the studio is highly energized; yet very placid and calm. I think he and I both have about the exact same artistic temperament and approach; no stress, no nervousness; we just allow the music to speak through us. I know that may sound a little odd, but I don't how to explain it other than that. For me, the recording process is very natural. It's a part of the creative process which tends to be more concrete than others. Strangely enough, as much as I find this process to be a natural one, after a day in the recording studio, I am just so wiped out that I can barely speak. The albums I've done with Sandor were each recorded in just one day; while that's a pretty fast recording pace, it can leave you rather drained at the end of that long day!

A.S. The musical language from Scalar Fields to the new album, Parabola, through (via) Resonance and Parallel Crossings, is constantly evolving. Do you think to bring this moving language versus forms of electronic or maybe microtonal music, for example, using the computer to modulate the sounds during the performance or tuning the guitars with strange temperaments?

K.K. I've never been very interested in electronic music, though I have listened to it; I find much of John Cage's work interesting. Real acoustic instruments speak to me very directly and entirely spiritually; I think we will never fully explore their capabilities. Microtonal music I do find interesting; for example, Ezra Sims and the quarter-tone work of Charles Ives especially. The various tunings I've created are like extra paint colors on an artist's palette; they're

not a an end unto themselves, but a means to an end. I think my (for lack of a better term) research into scordatura has been one catalyst for growth and forward momentum, though not the only one. Since you mentioned the three released albums I've done with Sandor, I'll answer based on those. I'm not interested in repeating something I've already done; each new composition or new album will always be different from what preceded it. Not as a prerequisite exactly, but as far as I can tell, this is just part of my artistic process. At any given moment, I'm working on two or three new albums in the studio, and usually around 10 or so new non-guitar compositions; pieces for string quartet, for example. There is a new album with Siegfried which is complete; it will be released later this year or early next year. It's very different than anything we've done; yet it's still us, and in my opinion, it's the finest and most evolved work he and I have done together. And I'm working on a solo album using my various guitar voices; specifically the DKK-12 and the alto together, and also an album of medieval works. With so many new pieces to complete, and so many new ones beginning all the time as others finish, there's just no time to repeat something I've already done. So I think that what you're describing as hearing the music constantly evolving is maybe just a part of this forward-moving process or momentum. I know Sandor feels the same. I think this is not something unique to he and I; I suspect this is a normal developmental element of a healthy artistic trajectory.

Van Gogh once said something to the effect that "a true artist is one who is always seeking, but never finding." I think the evolvment you're hearing in my music is just part of an organic process. And by the way, thank you for saying so.