



# SFCM

SAN FRANCISCO CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC

## David Garner, *composition* Faculty Artist Series

Friday, November 19, 2021, 7:30 PM

Barbro Osher Recital Hall

with

**Dale Tsang, *piano***

and special guests, **The Del Sol Quartet**

Three Etudes (1992)

I. Labyrinth

II. Traveling Light

III. Dodecahedron

David Garner

(b. 1954)

Dale Tsang, *piano*

Four Bagatelles (2015–2021) [World Premiere]  
(on themes from *Mary Pleasant at Land's End*)

D. Garner

1. Bagatelle a la Fugato

2. Bagatelle (on the Duet “If Eyes”)

3. Bagatelle a la Ostinato

4. Bagatelle (on the Trio “Got Us All Wrapped Up”)

Dale Tsang, *piano*

Three Caprices in Memory of KP (2020–21) [World Premiere] D. Garner

I. Spider Music

II. Hop-Frog

III. Rocknrolla

Dale Tsang, *piano*

**-Intermission-**

Piano Quintet (2020) [World Premiere]

D. Garner

I. Expressively

II. Lively

III. Tenebrous

IV. Fast and Energetic

**The Del Sol Quartet**

Sam Weiser, Benjamin Kreith, *violins*

Charlton Lee, *viola*

Kathryn Bates, *cello*

Dale Tsang, *piano*

*Cameras, recording equipment, food and drink are not permitted in Conservatory performance halls.  
Please turn off all cell phones and other electronic equipment before the performance begins.*

# Artist Profiles

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Fascinated by the feedback loop between social change, technology, and artistic innovation, the San Francisco-based **Del Sol Quartet** is a leading force in 21st-century chamber music. They believe that live music can, and should, happen anywhere – whether introducing Ben Johnston’s microtonal *Americana* at the Library of Congress or in a canyon cave, taking Aeryn Santillan’s gun-violence memorial to the streets of the Mission District, or collaborating with Huang Ruo and the anonymous Chinese poets who carved their words into the walls of the Angel Island Immigration Station.

Since 1992, Del Sol has commissioned or premiered thousands of works by composers including Terry Riley, Gabriela Lena Frank, Tania León, Frederic Rzewski, Vijay Iyer, Mason Bates, Michael Harrison, Huang Ruo, Pamela Z, Chinary Ung, Chen Yi, Erberk Eryilmaz, Theresa Wong, Reza Vali, and Kui Dong. The quartet regularly works with composers through workshops, universities, as well as Del Sol commissioning and incubator programs. They especially value their ongoing relationship with the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music in Boonville, CA.

Del Sol’s eleventh album of Huang Ruo’s quartet meditation “A Dust in Time” released October 15, 2021, as a coloring book album. Their previous album “Kooch-e Khamân” (February 2021) features 7 new works by young Iranian composers and charted #5 on Billboard. In 2021-2022, Del Sol continues its Joy Project, performing outdoor pop-ups around the Bay Area of music written to inspire joy. They also are producing two large projects: “The Angel Island Project,” an immigration-themed oratorio by Chinese American composer Huang Ruo, and “Between Worlds of Sound,” a collaboration with North Indian musicians Alam Khan & Arjun Verma. As part of the Venice Biennale, the quartet are featured artists at the Arts Letter and Numbers Pavilion.

# Artist Profiles

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Composer **David Garner**, an alumnus and full-time faculty member of SFCM, is in his 42<sup>nd</sup> year of collegiate teaching. Described as “the greatest composer you’ve never heard of”, Garner is a composition autodidact whose works are performed regularly by such artists as soprano Lisa Delan, mezzo-soprano Catherine Cook, pianist Dale Tsang and Ensemble for These Times. He is delighted to be collaborating with the Del Sol Quartet, who have just recorded his first string quartet for 3232 Music.

Garner has won numerous awards including the 2015 American Prize for his 2<sup>nd</sup> string quartet. A co-founder of Ensemble for These Times, Garner’s vocal music can be found on several of their award-winning Centaur Records recordings as well as four Pentatone Classics CDs. He is happily married to his best friend and favorite pianist Dale Tsang, and is routinely distracted by their two large dogs.

**Dale Tsang** earned her BM in piano performance from the University of Southern California, her MM from the University of Michigan, and her DMA from Rice University. Dale is a faculty member at Laney College, teaches an inspiring assortment of adult students, and serves as a competition adjudicator for many local and statewide piano competitions.

A winner of numerous competitions and an active solo and chamber musician, Dale frequently performs locally and in Europe and Asia. As a core member of Ensemble for These Times, she championed 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century music and collaborated in many commissions, premieres and international performances. Her collaborative work on E4TT recordings resulted in a 2016 Silver Medal and a 2018 Gold Medal from the Global Music Awards. She continues to enthusiastically disseminate the music of living composers. Dale is married to her best friend and favorite composer David Garner and is a mother to two wonderful teenagers.

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What will be the common characteristics of works of art created during the lockdowns and protracted aftermath of the Covid pandemic? The astounding imagination, tenacity and innovation of performers in the creation of new performance protocols and virtual venues cannot be lauded enough. This new world is here to stay, reaching literally millions of people with hitherto unimagined immediacy. But what will art and music historians find are commonalities in the works *created* during these years? In the music my students are currently composing, the usual themes of free-floating anxiety, grief, symbolism and nostalgia exhibited by young composers are all still present. The self-absorption brought on in large part by the pre-pandemic explosion and exploitation of social media is still there, further anchoring what I perceive to be a school of “Neo-expressionism” that has its roots back in Millennial culture. As has already been stated by others, one becomes quite enlightened by comparing the milieu that fostered the first school of artistic and musical Expressionism in the early 1900’s and the Spanish Influenza, to that of the early 2000’s and Covid. How will this all eventually be interpreted?

For my fellow composers, the latter half of 2019 through the following year seems to have been either a dry spell or highly prolific. For me it was the latter, and I do not know why. It was not because I “had more time” to compose: I was teaching full time and sticking as best I could to my usual daily schedule of living and writing. While I don’t discount the impact of the Covid-related death of acquaintances, and the horrendous days and weeks where the sun was blotted out by conflagrations brought on by climate change, upheavals in my life have never proved to affect the amount I compose. During that 18-month span, however, I composed the piano caprices and piano quintet being premiered on tonight’s program, as well a complete reorchestration of my horn concerto and a large-scale piano concerto, and several other works. That is more than I have ever written in any 3-year period.

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## Three Etudes (1992)

I often tell my students that the smaller the “box” in which one puts oneself while composing — that is, the stricter the parameters of a composition are — the greater the creative force will be to escape those bounds. I believe that is why tried and true forms such as fugue, sonata and 12-bar blues are at once immortal, infinitely varied and undeniably accessible.

An *etude* is a study designed to address a specific set of technical or musical challenges. This can be a very small box, but the etudes of Chopin, Skriabin, Debussy, Bartók, Lutoslawski, Ligeti and many others prove how beautiful and exciting the “escape” from such a small box can be.

1. ***Labyrinth*** challenges the memory. The phrase-structure is reticulated, the harmonies (which in themselves are not always consistently voiced) often resolve obliquely – or not at all, and the meter (rhythmic organization) changes rapidly and unpredictably.

2. The title of ***Traveling Light*** has a double meaning. In his later writing, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein advises us to “travel light”, i.e. to use as few words as necessary in order to communicate as clearly and concisely as possible. “Traveling Light” has one and only one parameter: That one note at a time be played in each hand alternately. In this sense a single parameter is “traveling light” indeed! The technical challenge is in maintaining the independence of each hand to carry the rhythmic stress. Whether this is with the right hand or left hand is unpredictable, and that often alternates in a different pattern than the alternation of the fingers. To the ear, however, the resulting shimmer and undulation create more literal imagery, the title’s second meaning.

3. ***Dodecahedron*** is an “octave etude” in the style of Chopin’s Etude in B Minor, Op. 25, No. 10. The technical challenge here, as with the Chopin, and other piano etudes employing this massive texture (Skriabin Op. 8 No. IX, Debussy “Pour les octaves”) is stamina, pure and simple. The title refers to the Platonic solid of 12 faces. The work is almost exclusively written in recurring patterns of 12 eighth notes, and almost exclusively with each hand playing in octaves.

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**Four Bagatelles** (on themes from *Mary Pleasant at Land's End*) (2015–2021)  
(A “bagatelle” is a short, unassuming composition, usually for piano.)

I completed my two-act opera, *Mary Pleasant at Land's End*, in 2016. It is a grand opera with an amazing libretto by Mark Hernandez, written for a full orchestra and a cast of 30. It is a historical drama based on Mary Ellen Pleasant's life in 1870's Barbary Coast San Francisco. It is the first grand opera to come out of a Conservatory setting in a century. There is no plan for a production of *Mary Pleasant at Land's End* – not only because of Covid but because of the currently fashionable reticence by production companies to back new large-scale operatic works. *There is a wonderful 2-piano musical workshop of the opera with a full cast available on YouTube. If you would like to make tax-deductible contributions either towards the engraving or ultimate production of this seminal American masterwork, InterMusicSF is my fiscal sponsor.*

I digress. There is a lot of great music in this opera, and I am very happy with all of it. Because of the extreme unlikelihood of a premiere, I think it is a good idea to “break out” some arias, ensembles, and instrumental numbers from the opera to give people a chance to hear some of the music.

1. **Bagatelle a la Fugato:** A loose transcription of a scene-change in Act II depicting the hustle and bustle of Fisherman's Wharf, originally orchestrated for strings.

2. **Bagatelle** (on the Duet “If Eyes”): A rhapsody on a love duet from Act II. The text is from a poem by K. Lynn, the first couplet of which is “If eyes are the gateway to the soul, I see the wounds of a lifetime in yours...”

3. **Bagatelle a la Ostinato:** Another free transcription of an Act I costume-change transforming a young Mary Pleasant working for the Underground Railroad into a savvy entrepreneur in her fifties.

4. **Bagatelle** (on the Trio “Got Us All Wrapped Up”): Three newspapermen are playing poker in the lobby of the Palace Hotel, c. 1870. The trio, an imitative “patter-song”, bemoans Mary Pleasant's burgeoning political clout in San Francisco. This bagatelle is an exploration of the trio's honky-tonk feel.

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## Three Caprices in Memory of KP (2020–21)

My dear friend, collaborator, and renowned pianist Kristin Pankonin – “KP” – (1960–2014), left many legacies, including the Kristin Pankonin American Art Song Award, an annual English-language art song competition for San Francisco Conservatory student composers, vocalists and collaborative pianists. The Award culminates in an annual showcase concert where the winning submission is premiered along with other American art songs performed by prestigious artists.

During her lifetime Kristin performed and recorded more of my vocal music than anyone, most of it sung by soprano Lisa Delan and recorded on Penatatone Classics CDs. From time to time, Kristin and I spoke about my composing some virtuoso solo piano caprices for her, incorporating some of the “Garnerian” textures and idioms she both loved to perform and hated to rehearse. Sadly, she passed away before the caprices were realized. Tonight is the world premiere of these three “knuckle-busters”. I’m sure Kristin would have had quite a bit to say about them – some of it under her breath while practicing them: these pieces are extremely difficult, and not for every pianist. Dale Tsang is the perfect choice to premiere and ultimately record these works.

1. ***Spider-music***. An obvious take on a tarantella, this caprice is written using six different sets of eight notes – six “spiders”, as it were. They scurry all over the keyboard, in places diverging to the very top and bottom keys of the piano. The middle, slow section mutates the spiders’ pitch content into six “webs”, as static and suspended as the “spiders” are frenetic and agile.

2. ***Hop-Frog***. This caprice is titled after the eponymous hero of the Edgar Allan Poe short story, published in 1849. There are several aspects to the structure of this work. First, the stop-and-start, spastic passages evoke the cruel practical jokes that the king in the story visits upon the deformed jester Hop-Frog and his lover, Trippetta. The ragtime sections, where each hand plays in a different key, recall the story’s macabre masquerade and its eventual murderous finale. Finally, near the end, there are strains of a popular song of the Hungarian Revolution (“Klapka induló”). The Revolutions of 1848 (the “Springtime of Nations”)

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were still fresh in the zeitgeist of the story's year of publication, and "Hop-Frog" is regarded as allegorical of the downtrodden triumphing over their oppressors. Further, the brief Stravinsky references (the polychords from "Petrushka" and from "Dance of the Adolescents") within a later "practical joke" passage, are nods to other characters who carry that same concept of the oppressed. Not that any of this is meant to be heard as such, mind you: simply that it all is part of the architecture used to build the caprice.

3. **Rocknrolla.** *Rocknrolla* is a British slang term for someone who wants it all – money, fame, notoriety, you-name-it. It is obviously derivative of "Rock 'n' Roll". This caprice is an unabashed homage to my roots as a Fusion rocker and "metal-head". Both main themes are "poly-metric", i.e. superimpositions of two different patterns of stress. The primary theme pits a solid four-four backbeat against a Prog Rock ("Progressive Rock") five-beat pattern in the bass. The secondary theme places common twelve-beat feels on top of a seven-plus-five West African bass.

## Piano Quintet (2020)

Speaking for myself, if there is one thing that preparing program notes proves, it is my ignorance of my own music. My students are no doubt tired of hearing me say that the performers know much, much more about the music they compose than the composers themselves do, and of course that is true for me as well. There is a profound difference between the "Platonic ideal" of the composition in the composer's mind and that of the performers' experience of "living inside the work". In all honesty it should be Dale Tsang and Del Sol Quartet writing about the quintet: I'm probably not qualified.

This Piano Quintet might well prove to be a solid example of "composing during Covid": The work seems a bit claustrophobic overall, with its single, symmetrical 6-note scale used in some form for all four movements. I feel there's a sense of confusion and uncertainty as well.

Vast stretches of the outer movements are "dronal" and not "tonal" – that is, melodies tend to be florid, while the key centers supporting them are static. "Dronality" is usually associated with "non-Western" idiom,

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and admittedly the hybrid scale on which the first and last movements are based adds to that perception. The first movement proceeds slowly: It is at first sort of a series of “solos”, each of which give one of the five instruments the spotlight in turn. The second theme, introduced in the left hand of the piano, increases the movement’s momentum and reappears in its full form in the finale movement.

The second movement, somewhat ingenuously marked “Lively”, contains a rather sardonic, Shostakovich-like imitative march, complete with intentionally harsh accents. The “trio” (if this movement can be called a scherzo) is in answer to Bartók’s challenge to compose a folk-melody indistinguishable from an indigenous one.

“Tenebrous” (“shadowed”, “obscured”, “partially hidden”): A walk through a dark, confusing landscape supporting sad and solitary melodies. The main theme is an inversion of one of the two accompaniment figures in the first movement. Crashing polychords and other strained textures serve as unwelcome surprises in an otherwise dreary journey.

The last movement—the finale--presents the DNA of the first movement through entirely different filters. Where the first movement was concerned with soloistic gestures, the last movement is concerned with cooperation and rapidly exchanged ideas within the whole ensemble. Here there is a proper fugato, in contrast to the somewhat overwrought canon in the march of the second movement. There is much more investigation of the hybrid scale of the first movement, with several pitches being selected as if to test their ability to hold the scale to different centers. The coda seems to land on the “right” tonal center, only to have it upended and proven “wrong” in the final measures, shading the entire work with an uncertainty born of its year of creation.

# Acknowledgements

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**Dale Tsang**, for her inimitable artistry, eagle eye for score corrections and preternatural patience with a difficult and often histrionic composer.

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**Jonas Wright**