

# Tonal Language

*Music of Michael Dickerson*

March 25, 7:30 p.m., UAA Recital Hall

## PROGRAM

### *Expression Suite* (2021)

I. Dulcet || II. Warning || III. Long Struggle || IV. Hope

Armin Abdihodžić, *guitar*

### *Andie's Suite*

Three movements without titles

Andie Tanning, *violin*

### *Alex's Suite*

Three movements without titles

Alex LoRe, *saxophone*      Andie Tanning, *violin*

Nick Petumenos, *piano*      Armin Abdihodžić, *guitar*

## PROGRAM NOTES

Within tonal music, pitches patterns form scales with reference points. The compositional act of leaving those reference points and coming back to them can feel like a journey, and the way multiple voices wind through scales together can create moments of consonance and dissonance, tension and release, which Western composers have used as a language of thoughts and emotions for quite some time.

Other composers find tonal music to be played out. They believe its vocabulary to have ballooned into unwieldy proportions and its expressive capacity to have been tested in every direction. Beginning around a hundred years ago, a handful of composers called the Second Viennese School developed a new system of pitch organization as a replacement. The system gave equal preference to all pitches, intentionally eliminating any reference point. There was, by design, no sense of departure or arrival and none of the emotional tug of tension and release in their music (at least at first).

The Second Viennese School was not the only group of composers to experiment with other ways of organizing sound. Some composers explored sparse scales built around tonal symmetries while borrowing the shapes of earlier modal melodies. Others abandoned pitch organization entirely, preferring instruments like drums and noisemakers. Still others used new technologies to compose *musique concrète* by starting with clips of recorded sound. Each had their own replacement for tonality as the organizing principle of music.

By contrast, some 20<sup>th</sup> century composers thought tonal music was far from used up. At the end of the first decade of the century, just before the leader of the Second Viennese School, Arnold Schoenberg, marked his departure from tonality with Op. 11, Mahler finished his eighth and ninth symphonies, which were decidedly tonal. Strauss completed compositions whose very titles indicate tonality in their key signatures as late as 1948—the same year in which Pierre Schaeffer began to develop *musique concrète*.

Perhaps the abandonment of tonal music by some had more to do with zeitgeist than with sound itself. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of continued industrialization and mechanization, during which two world wars raised questions about the value and dignity of human life. Nietzsche's famous 19<sup>th</sup> century claim "God is dead" was followed up in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by state atheism, leaving a large hole where absolute truth and objective

beauty once stood. If tonal music had been developed by cultures interested in absolute truth and objective beauty, perhaps atonal music represented a turning away from a value-laden worldview entirely.

The trouble with much of the atonal music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that it's wildly unpopular. It is as though most audiences prefer tonal music for the very reason that some composers rejected tonality—it is human and evocative in its ambition, whereas much atonal music intentionally avoids the moments and meanings many audiences hold most dear. It seems that most listeners cannot stomach art does not value human perspectives and instead prefers that which satisfies our need for connection.

What then could be the point of the present concert, which introduces yet another new system of tonality? Treat it like an anachronism—a passing shot at some composers who considered themselves ahead of their time, but a shot which recognizes the need for new forms of expression. Atonal composers may have been right that the world is no longer what it was before the industrial revolution, global warfare, and state atheism; it may be harder now than ever to reconcile cherished notions of truth, beauty, and goodness with facts found through observation and experimentation; but it is useless to give up on a value-laden world and strike out on one's own into rigid isolation. We need one another to enjoy and make sense of life, and the best way to connect with someone is to speak their language.

### **Armin's Suite**

This suite was written for Armin Abdihodžić and explores of four different musical forms. Movement I, *Dulcet*, is reminiscent of a classical-romantic air. Movement II, *Warning*, is like a prog rock song. Movement III, *Long Struggle*, borrows from blues forms. Movement IV, *Hope*, is roughly a theme and variations. Each form has stylistic associations that are imitated through extended technique and through harmonic sound-alikes within the composer's tonal system.

The title *Dulcet* is a direct description of the overall feeling of the movement. The triplets and slow-moving melody that take over just after an open, airy introduction are sweet and soothing, almost to the point of being a lullaby. A segmented melody in two voices provides enough reprieve from the constant triplets to make a return feel welcome. The melody and texture are left hanging and the listener left feeling adrift.

*Warning* begins with what feels like a tone shift. The clash of notes sharpened in some octaves but not others feels uneasy, like a bad omen. The repetition of thick chords with a single, pronounced syncopation in each phrase adds to the trepidation. A disjunct sequence of technically demanding passages ends with slow-moving chords that lead back into the opening gesture. Out of context, the final chord would sound like a simple major triad, but in context it seems like a false sense of hope.

In the third movement, a vocal melody grounded in spirituals and the blues drives *Long Struggle* from start to finish. It is a groan made understandable by percussion on the body of the guitar, a reference to the stomping and clapping that often accompany spirituals and early blues. In time, the stomping and clapping subside to give the guitarist room for new explorations, and the elaboration of the opening melody is like a preacher explaining a simple message with reference to many details, or like a blues guitarist taking a free solo. However, the groan returns almost unaltered at the end of the movement.

After *Warning* and *Long Struggle*, *Hope* is offered as an invitation. Although the movement seems to have two tonal centers by the end of the first section, both are contained within the broader scales of this concert. In fact, all of the diversity of this movement and of the prior movements is contained within the single scale of each. The return of the opening gestures in all movements, including this final movement, is a choice to focus on one important message, one emotion, after recognizing myriad related ideas and possibilities.

### **Andie's Suite**

This suite was written for Andie Tanning and uses melody to explore this a new tonal language. Each of the three movements evokes a different mood by spending time in different regions of that tonal system and by bringing melodies to a close in different ways. *Andie's Suite* is abstract in that there are no words included to compare the sounds of the suite with extramusical ideas or objects—the suite must be understood on its own terms or associated with the listener's own ideas and experiences.

Movement I features contrasting sections—fast then slow, linear then leaping, singable then violin-istic. Although the violin is a primarily melody instrument, the opening gesture of this suite is better understood harmonically, and some moments that are primarily melodic also feature a second voice that takes turns with the first. This occurs most poignantly at the end of the movement, where contiguous notes are separated by more than two octaves.

Movement II is a playful reprieve between movements I and III. The violin opens with an incomplete gesture, then answers itself with another. After another round of call and answer, the conversation is left hanging until a third melody adds its own personality to the mix and rounds off the opening remarks. This third voice only prompts the first two melodies to take up their chatter in a new register, and the movement is carried out lightly until the individuality of voices is lost in agreement.

Movement III is severe. Its darker modes, faster tempi, and dramatic dynamics ask the listener to be serious. Drawn out melodies expose the precise shape of this concert's tonal system, and insistent melodic gestures move through tonal terrain whose irregularities create a sense of instability until the very last notes of the piece.

### **Alex's Suite**

This suite was written to give Alex LoRe room to improvise within the composer's new tonal system. From a certain point of view, it is a test of both the improviser and of the tonal system, because an improviser must understand the system from within, and the value of the system itself lies in the mind of not only audiences, but also other composers and performers. In that sense, this suite is the culmination of the concert, because sharing ideas with one another and relinquishing control over how they are expressed is how we come to understand one another.

Movement I is characterized by asymmetry and by the throatiness of alto saxophone's low range. In form, this movement is relatively conventional: the primary melody or 'head' is played, then the soloist improvises over the original tonal structure. However, the original melody does not return at the end, and the tonal structure is altered to provide a better support for the soloist.

Movement II is more modular than Movement I. The soloist opens the movement with an unadorned, unaccompanied version of the primary melody in four-four time. As soon as the melody is complete, the entry of triplets in the piano marks off a new texture. The melody is reinterpreted in three-four time, and the guitar adds harmonies. Then the piano once again moves the texture in a new direction. The guitar again adds harmonies as the soloist begins to improvise. Then the piano moves in a third direction with a new rhythmic pattern as the soloist continues to improvise, but this time it is the guitar that marks the end of the section and leaves spaces for the saxophone to play unaccompanied. The sax's free solo circles back to the opening melody in triple meter to close the movement.

Of the three movements, the third is both the most squared off and the least conventional in form. The opening melody comes in four chunks and is repeated once before leaving the soloists to freely explore the tonal system the composer has established. The piano and guitar continue to provide new harmonies and melodic counterpoints in what seems like a through-composed movement until the opening section returns. However, the soloist continues to improvise over the opening section even to the very last measure.

≈