

PHAROS QUARTET



Jennifer Bill Amy McGlothlin
Emily Cox Zach Schwartz

Special Guest Ensemble

Improbable Beasts

Thomas Carroll, Celine Ferro, Gary Gorczyca, Diane Heffner, Bill Kirkley
Katherine Matasy, Jonathan Russell, Walter Yee

7:00 p.m.
March 26, 2022
Marsh Chapel
Boston, MA

Pharos Quartet

Howler Back

Zack Browning (b. 1953)

Quartet in F Major
I. Allegro moderato

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
trans. Emily Cox

Improbable Beasts

*Prelude/Chant **

Jonathan Russell (b. 1979)

Hear My Prayer O Lord

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

*Funky Groove Vortex **

Jonathan Russell

Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child

African-American spiritual
arr. Jonathan Russell

Dido's Lament

Henry Purcell

Prometheus
VII

Marc Mellits (b. 1966)
arr. Jonathan Russell

Pharos Quartet and Improbable Beasts

Plyve Kacha

Ukrainian Folk Song
arr. J. Bill

Pharos Quartet

*Mending Time **

Martin Bresnick (b. 1946)

- I. Two Can Pass
- II. The Gaps I Mean
- III. The Wall Between Us (Is Where We Meet)
- IV. Moves in Darkness and The Shade of Trees

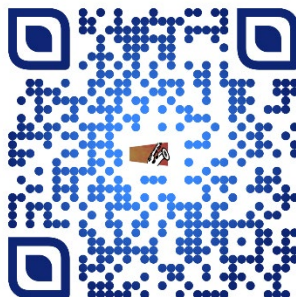
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Mike Mower (b. 1958)

*world premiere

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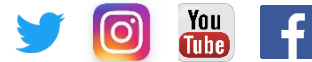


Based in Boston, the **Pharos Quartet** is a stirring musical collaborative formed by four New England saxophonists. Emerging from their unique combination of ideas, styles, and expressions – Pharos brings the sound of the saxophone quartet to a new apex. With a vivid repertoire, balanced between notable pioneers as well as visionaries of tomorrow, Pharos maintains a steady appetite for today's most demanding saxophone quartet literature. Its members bring together their own international performance experience and fuse it into a distinct chamber music event.

Pharos, the great lighthouse of antiquity and often considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World was built by the Ptolemaics in c.280 BC in the port city of Alexandria on the coast of Egypt. This great beacon of light that stood for around 1,000 years inspires the quartet to be a guiding light in chamber music performance of the 21st century.



Please visit www.pharosquartet.com and follow us on social media



Improbable Beasts is a Boston-based professional bass clarinet ensemble dedicated to bringing the deeply expressive power of multiple bass clarinets before a broad audience. Our repertoire ranges from Renaissance choral music to brand-new compositions to klezmer tunes and holiday songs. Our mission is to share the deep resonances, soaring lyricism, and propulsive grooves of bass clarinet ensemble music with as many people as we can.

The members of Improbable Beasts are some of the most sought-after clarinetists in the Boston area, regularly appearing with groups such as the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Boston Pops Orchestra, Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, Boston Lyric Opera, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, and numerous regional orchestras, new music groups, and chamber ensembles.

Improbable Beasts is fiscally sponsored by Fractured Atlas. To make a tax-deductible donation, please visit: https://fundraising.fracturedatlas.org/improbable-beasts/general_support



Plyve Kacha

“Plyve Kacha” or “Plyve Kacha Po Tysyni” translates literally to “the duckling swims”. A duck crossing waters is a symbol of death and going to the other side. The song is a beautiful lament that speaks to the dangers and price of war. But, the lyrics are a dialogue between a mother and a son going off to war, according to the BBC’s Irena Taranyuk. She translates two of the most moving lines of the song this way:

“My dear mother, what will happen to me if I die in a foreign land?”

“Well, my dearest, you will be buried by other people.”

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<https://www.projecthope.org/crisis-in-ukraine-how-to-help/03/2022/>



Pharos Quartet PROGRAM NOTES

Zack Browning is a composer whose music is described as “way-cool in attitude...speed-demon music” (*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*) and “propulsive, giddy, rocking... a rush of cyclic riffs and fractured meters” (*The New York Times*). *The Irish Times* proclaimed he is “bringing together the procedures of high musical art with the taste of popular culture”. His solo album *Banjaxed* on Capstone Records has been called “the aural equivalent of the pinball machine. Imagine sassy, brilliant bumpers with each slam of the ball sending a glitter of lights and mechanical twitters through your chest.” (*American Record Guide*). His recent solo albums *Soul Doctrine*, *Secret Pulse*, and *Venus Notorious* are available on Innova Recordings. Browning is an Associate Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois and director of the Salvatore Martirano Memorial Composition Award.

Howler Back was commissioned by the PRISM Quartet for their twentieth-anniversary concert and is a sonic salute to the ensemble’s dedication to and promotion of contemporary music.

Maurice Ravel, (born March 7, 1875, Ciboure, France—died Dec. 28, 1937, Paris), French composer. At age 14 he was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire. Completing his piano studies, he returned to study composition with Gabriel Fauré, writing the important piano piece *Jeux d'eau* (completed 1901) and a string quartet. In the next decade, he produced some of his best-known music, including *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (1899), the String Quartet (1903), and the Sonatine for piano (1905). His great ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912) was commissioned by the impresario Sergey Diaghilev. Other works include the opera *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (1925), the suite *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1917), and the orchestral works *La Valse* (1920) and *Boléro* (1928). Careful and precise, Ravel possessed great gifts as an orchestrator, and his works are universally admired for their superb craftsmanship; he has remained the most widely popular of all French composers.

Even though Ravel worked on his sole string **quartet in F major** from late 1902 to April 1903, while he was still a student at the Paris Conservatoire, it is far from a student work. The piece integrates the several styles that he had incorporated into his own musical vocabulary. A major influence was Debussy, particularly Debussy’s Quartet in G Minor, with its Impressionist quality and fascinating tone colors. At the same time, the clear and transparent textures, impelling logic, and tight control of the basic organization bear testimony to Ravel’s strong neoclassical proclivity and admiration for Mozart. Finally, some of the strange and unfamiliar tonal effects reflect an interest in the exotic music of East Asia.

Martin Bresnick’s compositions, from opera, chamber, and symphonic music to film scores and computer music, are performed throughout the world. Bresnick delights in reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable, bringing together repetitive gestures derived from minimalism with a harmonic palette that encompasses both highly chromatic sounds and more open, consonant harmonies and a raw power reminiscent of rock. At times his musical ideas spring from hardscrabble sources, often with a very real political import. But his compositions never descend into agitprop; one gains their meaning by the way the music itself unfolds, and always on its own terms.

Martin Bresnick speaking about his work **Mending Time**.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJvVw-gZV4>

Mike Mower originally studied classical flute at the Royal Academy of Music, London, and was later awarded the ARAM (Associate of the Royal Academy of Music). He has since been involved in many different styles of music. Mike also plays the saxophone and clarinet and leads “Itchy Fingers”, the world-famous jazz saxophone quartet. “Itchy Fingers” has performed at major festivals and concert halls in over 40 countries since 1985 and has won many international music awards.

He has performed or recorded as a session musician with jazz and rock bands, with artists such as Gil Evans, Tina Turner, Flora Purim & Airtó Moreira, Paul Weller, Björk, and Ryuchi Sakamoto. He has also played in west-end shows, jazz gigs, and with classical ensembles. As a composer and arranger, Mike has been commissioned to write works for the BBC Big Band and Radio Orchestra, NDR Radio Big Band, the Stockholm Jazz Orchestra, for Airtó Moreira and Flora Purim, and for numerous wind ensembles throughout Europe.

Improbable Beasts PROGRAM NOTES

Prelude / Chant

The original version of this piece was a contemplative solo melody. I originally composed it in 2006 or 2007 to use as a prelude for a church service when I was working as the music director at First Congregational Church, San Francisco. Over the years, I drew on it from time to time to play in church services or other settings where some contemplative music was called for. I created this version for 8 bass clarinets by first recording the melody on bass clarinet, and then recording myself improvising various drones, echoes, and countermelodies against it. Through a process of iterative trial-and-error, I gradually crafted the arrangement you'll hear tonight.

Hear My Prayer, O Lord

Composed in 1682, this short 8-part choral work must be one of the most emotionally concentrated musical works ever created. In under three minutes, it progresses from a simple, chant-like melody of just two pitches, to a searingly dissonant, heartbreakingly pleading, 8-part contrapuntal texture spanning the entire range of the human voice. The text, the first line of Psalm 102, is simple yet poignant: "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my crying come unto thee." Purcell wrings every possible emotional coloring out of this text, from contemplative to resigned to pleading to despairing. It is as daring with its use of dissonance as any composer would be before the 20th century. Like much choral music, it translates surprisingly effectively to bass clarinets. The range of the bass clarinet is about the same as that of the human voice, and the clarity of its timbre makes the dissonances and resolutions in a work like this all the more audible and poignant.

Funky Groove Vortex

The seed of this composition comes from music I was writing for a dance production in 2019 with the San Francisco-based choreographers Janice Garrett and Charles Moulton, who have been dear friends and frequent collaborators for the past 13 years. One of the dance numbers was called "Vortex" and the music I had created for it was a relentlessly driving perpetual-motion flurry of fast notes. I was at a rehearsal with the dancers and Janice asked if we could explore a version of "vortex" that was a bit less relentless and had a "funkier groove." So I used the pitch material of the original "vortex" music, but improvised a "funky groove" feel with it at the piano – and recorded the whole process in case anything useful came of it. This "funky groove" version did not end up making it into the dance show (actually, the original "vortex" music didn't either!) but I liked it. In fall 2021 I decided to explore using it as the basis for an Improbable Beasts piece. The "funky groove" material turned out to be perfectly suited to bass clarinet ensemble, and Funky Groove Vortex grew gradually and organically as I worked to have sections of it ready for our bi-weekly rehearsals.

Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child

As with most Spirituals, little is known about the origins of *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*. It first became widely known to the general public when it was performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the 1870s, but its origins surely long predate that. The most usual rendering of the text is "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, A long ways from home. True believer. A long ways from home" with variations on subsequent verses ("Sometimes I feel like I'm almost gone" etc.). The literal meaning of the text would seem to refer to the common, heart-breaking practice of breaking apart enslaved families, sending children off to plantations far away from their parents. Additional, more metaphorical meanings are also possible. However one interprets the text, the meaning of the musical melody itself is unmistakable: mournful, sorrowful, with only the slightest ray of hope coming with the "true believer" line, seeming to imply that belief in the ultimate mercy of God may one distant day bring relief. While many other Spirituals also have themes of hope or joy, and even carefully encoded instructions on how to escape slavery, *Motherless Child*, in both its text and musical content, seems to be fundamentally a song of lamentation and sorrow. For this bass clarinet ensemble version, I listened and read widely, seeking to understand the full context and meaning of the song. There is an enormous range of recorded versions by jazz singers, opera singers, choirs, and pop and rock singers. My arrangement was influenced by a combination of many versions, but draws most heavily on the direct, deeply soulful version sung by Odetta at her 1960 Carnegie Hall concert. (Odetta was one of the central musical figures of the civil rights movement, with a profound influence on artists from Harry Belafonte to Bob Dylan.)

Dido's Lament

A very different "lament," this aria comes at the end of Purcell's opera "Dido and Aeneas" (composed 1688) when Dido, queen of Carthage, is left by her lover Aeneas and, in her sorrow, decides to kill herself. The text is "When I am laid in earth, May my wrongs create no trouble in thy breast; Remember me, but ah! forget my fate." It is one of the more famous examples of the "ground bass" technique, where a repeating bass line provides the structural grounding of a work, with variations above. The descending bass line in particular has long been associated with "lament" in music from a wide range of time periods and genres, from Bach and Purcell to the Beatles and Radiohead. For reasons that I can't fully explain, Purcell's music seems especially well-suited to bass clarinet arrangements and also seems to sit surprisingly comfortably amidst our mostly more contemporary repertoire.

Prometheus, mvt. VII

This is another work that I first encountered in the context of a dance production with Janice Garrett and Charles Moulton. Marc Mellits' music, with its joyfully driving grooves and bubbling textures, is extremely well-suited to choreographic settings, and we have drawn on it frequently for our dance productions. This work was originally a string quartet, but for the dance show I added two bass clarinets, piano, and percussion (the live ensemble that we had for the show). Later, Jeff Anderle, clarinet professor at San Francisco Conservatory and my partner in the bass clarinet duo Sqwonk, asked if I would arrange the piece for clarinet choir (with Marc's blessing, of course) for his clarinet studio to play. From there, it was not too much of a stretch to re-work it for bass clarinets only, the version you hear tonight.

Improbable Beasts program notes by Jonathan Russell

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