

Artist Series

Naomi Niskala, Piano

Thursday, October 25, 2018 at 8pm
Lagerquist Concert Hall, Mary Baker Russell Music Center

Pacific Lutheran University
School of Arts and Communication / Department of Music presents

Artist Series

Naomi Niskala, Piano

Thursday, October 25, 2018 at 8pm
Lagerquist Concert Hall, Mary Baker Russell Music Center

Welcome to Lagerquist Concert Hall.

Please disable the audible signal on all watches, pagers and cellular phones for the duration of the concert.
Use of cameras, recording equipment and all digital devices is not permitted in the concert hall.

PROGRAM

Sechs kleine Klavierstücke, op. 19 Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

Leicht, zart

Langsam

Sehr langsame

Rasch, aber leicht

Etwas rasch

Sehr langsam

V mlhách (In the Mists) Leos Janáček (1854-1928)

Andante

Molto adagio

Andantino

Presto

Recollections Robert Helps (1928-2001)

In Memoriam

Interlude

Epilogue

INTERMISSION

Five Preludes Vivian Fine (1913-2000)

Allegro

Adagio calmato

Allegretto, un poco rubato

Allegro moderato, ben articolato

Allegro brillante, ben ritmico

Shall We Dance Robert Helps

Sonata No. 1 Roger Sessions (1896-1985)

Andante—Allegro

Andante—Poco meno mosso—Andante

Molto vivace

Program Notes

From **Arnold Schoenberg's** often-quoted 1909 letter to Ferruccio Busoni, "My goal: complete liberation from form and symbols, cohesion and logic. Away with motivic work! Away with harmony as the cement of my architecture! Harmony is expression and nothing more. Away with pathos! Away with 24 pound protracted scores! My music must be short. Lean! In two notes, not built, but "expressed." Schoenberg wrote the first five of his *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke, op. 19* in a mere day - February 19, 1911. The last movement was written on June 17th, shortly after the death of Gustav Mahler. Atonal, but written before Schoenberg developed his twelve-tone compositional language, each miniature, expressionist movement is a highly condensed composition – all of what one finds communicated by a lengthy composition is presented in mere seconds and minutes.

Czech composer **Leos Janáček's** three major solo piano works were all composed between the years 1900 and 1912: *On an Overgrown Path* (1900, 1908, and 1911), the *Sonata I.X.1905* (1905), and the cycle *In the Mists* (1912). Originally intending to have a career as a concert pianist, Janáček seems to have turned back to the piano during this very dark and despairing time in his life – a repeated lack of recognition from the city of Prague, and the death of his second child, Olga. All written in heavily-flatted keys, the movements all float back and forth between different meters and tempi, rhapsodic and improvisatory interludes and stillness, conflicting emotions. As Hungarian pianist Andras Schiff noted, there is nothing worse than the death of a child, and here Janáček exists in two places of time – the beautiful memories of the past, and the pain and anger of the present.

American composer and pianist **Robert Helps**, born in New Jersey, began studying with Roger Sessions (composition) and Abby Whiteside (pianist) as a young teenager. A leading pianist in the New York City new music scene starting from the late 1940s, Helps performed and recorded all three piano sonatas and *From My Diary* by Roger Sessions, in addition to works of Milton Babbitt, Vivian Fine, his own works, and mainstream and lesser-known works by Chopin, Godowsky, Fauré, and Ireland, among others. A frequent collaborator with soprano Bethany Beardslee, Helps' own compositions – whether tonal or atonal – show the influence of Romantic and Impressionist pianistic styles, with high importance placed on lyrical line, color, and form and structure. In his own words:

Among my piano compositions, *Recollections* has always held a very special space for me. It was one of those pieces that tumbled out rather than "got written." In an era of high dissonance, the 1959 *Recollections* unplanned "reversion" to impressionism, and, as it has turned out, its "forward" look at elements of "minimalism" was surprising, both then and now. Needless to say the impressions of composers interest composers. The first composer who saw the piece was Milton Babbitt. He spent a long speechless time in my presence looking at the first movement, a rhythmically "miniamalist" movement, as surprised by its "direction" as I was. There followed a wonderful verbal analysis and critique of the movement that I wish I had on tape..."

The composition [*Shall We Dance*] is quite romantic. It is based on a remembrance of romantic pieces I heard my mother play when I was a child. Although there are no direct quotations from these pieces, there is almost a quote from a salon piano waltz popular at the turn of the century: *Valse* by Mischa Levitzki (1921) that I first heard when I was age four. The work is serious, but sensual. The relatively long (for me) single movement, about twelve minutes, developed slowly, carefully, and hopefully, organically. From the start this piece insisted on being a sort of generic 3/4-time dance movement, more waltz-like than anything else, with notable interruptions. *Shall We Dance* harkens back to a previous age with its reminiscences of the waltz, the dance form itself, with hints of a former, more traditional harmonic language. There is a lot of textural, filigree piano writing, reminiscent perhaps of works like Ravel's *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*, and sonically of passages in Chopin (i.e., *Nocturnes*, *Berceuse*). It is also an elegy to the pedal, that fabulous resource that only pianists have – the lack of which makes even the wonderful orchestral transcriptions by Ravel of his own piano music fade when compared to the original.

American composer and pianist **Vivian Fine**, born in Chicago, also studied composition and piano with Roger Sessions and Abby Whiteside in New York City. Although fifteen years senior to Helps, the two overlapped in their studies with Whiteside. One of the most sought-after new music pianists of the 1930s, Fine premiered works by Copland, Ives, and Cowell. Fine's early compositions were highly atonal, with no reference to twelve-tone (as Henry Cowell wrote, "When I first met Vivian Fine she was a Chicago girl of seventeen, writing in the grimmest of dissonant styles"), followed by a period of a more diatonic style of writing from 1937 to 1944, and then a return to atonality. Fine considered these *Five Preludes*, written between late 1939 and 1941 (and not in the final order that she compiled them), as among her finest

piano pieces. Each of these short preludes develops one or two ideas, flirting in and out of tonal glimpses, all ending with a diatonic triad.

Born in New York City, **Roger Sessions** spent much of his childhood in western Massachusetts. He entered Harvard University at age fourteen and graduated four years later; during this time Sessions became the editor of the Harvard Musical Review. Following Harvard, Sessions studied with Horatio Parker and Ernst Bloch at Yale University before moving to Europe, where he stayed for eight years until the Nazi takeover of Germany led him home in 1933. During his time in Europe, Sessions wrote his *Piano Sonata No. 1*, first symphony, and a good part of his violin concerto. A work still grounded in tonality (his only sonata with a key signature) and highly structured, the movements are played attacca, without interruption. In six parts but essentially a three-movement sonata, the Andante introduction that opens the piece is actually the second movement; this introduction is interrupted by the Allegro first movement. Centered around C Minor, the syncopated rhythms of the Allegro movement show the influence of the incorporation of jazz into classical music that was popular in the 1920s and 1930s. The B Minor middle movement is reminiscent of Romantic period keyboard writing; while the final movement, centered around D-sharp Minor, returns to syncopated rhythms layered with running toccata-like passage work.

About the Performer

Pianist **Naomi Niskala** has appeared as soloist and chamber musician in Europe, North America, Russia, Israel, Thailand, and Japan, and her performances have been broadcast on BBC Radio, Deutschlandradio, RTV Germany, and NPR's *Performance Today*. Her competition awards include first prize at the Kingsville International Isabel Scionti Solo Piano Competition and a top prize at the International Stravinsky Awards Competition in Illinois, and she spent two summers each at the Tanglewood Music Center and the Ravinia Festival's Steans Institute. Upon invitation from Zarin Mehta and the Ravinia Festival, she performed as chamber musician in Israel, Turkey, and Greece. Niskala has performed regularly with *Spectrum Concerts Berlin*, one of Germany's leading chamber organizations, and is a founding member of the piano trio *Trio Kisosen*. Recent performance highlights include the San Francisco Symphony Chamber Series at Davies Symphony Hall, soloist with the St. Petersburg Chamber Philharmonic of Russia, and solo and chamber performances with *Spectrum Concerts Berlin* in the Philharmonie Kammermusiksaal of Berlin, Carnegie's Weill Hall, and in Thailand and Kosovo. Her release of the only complete recordings of American composer Robert Helps' solo piano works on two discs with Albany Records in 2007 was met with high acclaim, and the first volume was declared one of the ten "2007 Best of the Year" discs by *ClassicsToday*. She has also since recorded piano chamber works of Robert Helps and Ursula Mamlok with *Spectrum Concerts Berlin* for two discs on Naxos, as well as the world premiere of Mamlok's 2015 quintet "Breezes" for Bridge Records. Niskala is featured in the 2013 German rbb television documentary entitled *Sehnsucht Musik* (*Searching for Music*) alongside *Spectrum Concerts Berlin* Artistic Director/cellist Frank Dodge, violinist Alexander Sitkovetsky, and clarinetist Lars Wouters van den Oudenweijer, documenting the difficult conditions for young musicians in a music school located in Prizren, Kosovo. This season Niskala will be performing as soloist and chamber musician in New York, Pennsylvania, Florida, Hawaii, Washington, Colorado, and Japan.

Born to Japanese/Finnish-American parents, Niskala began studying piano at the age of three. She was raised in Rochester, New York and later Tokyo, Japan. Niskala holds degrees from the Yale School of Music, Stony Brook University and the New England Conservatory of Music, and also attended Tufts University. She received her Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees in Piano Performance with Gilbert Kalish at Stony Brook, and an Artist Diploma with Claude Frank at the Yale School of Music. Other teachers include the late pianists Patricia Zander and Maria Luisa Faini, as well as chamber music studies with pianists Leon Fleisher, Menahem Pressler, and Peter Serkin, and violinists Louis Krasner and Eugene Lehner. Niskala has taught on the faculties of Wesleyan University (Connecticut), the University of South Florida's School of Music, and the University of North Dakota. She is currently Associate Professor of Music at Susquehanna University, where she teaches piano and theory, and leads a summer chamber music exchange program to Japan.



School of Arts +
Communication

