

# NEW YORK MUSIC DAILY

## Playful and Pensively Picturesque Themes with the Knights at the Naumburg Bandshell in Central Park

Last night at the Naumburg Bandshell was the second performance of the summer by irrepressible, shapeshifting orchestra the [Knights](#). It wasn't as deviously thematic as their first night here last month, where they paired Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata with Janacek's String Quartet No. 1, "Kreutzer Sonata." In a more general sense, yesterday evening's theme was pastiches, both musical and visual.

The group opened with the world premiere of a collaboration between several of their members, Keeping On, whose genesis dates back a few years to when they were messing around with a famous Beethoven riff during practice.

Fast forward to the 2020 lockdown: conductor Colin Jacobsen pondered what John Adams might have done with it, then emailed his sketch to members of the orchestra – which disgraced Governor Andrew Cuomo had infamously put on ice – and asked for their contributions. Several sent theirs back; horn player Mike Atkinson wove them together into a contiguous whole. The famous, fateful riff eventually revealed itself midway through; otherwise, it was a characteristically entertaining little work, from its insistent, minimalist intro to a series of briskly crescendoing phrases making their way around the orchestra, Carl Nielsen style, then bells from the percussion section and hip-hop-influenced vocal harmonies from violinist Christina Courtin and flutist Alex Sopp! An insider orchestral joke that translates to general audiences, who would have thought?

Violin soloist [Lara St. John](#) then joined them for the New York premiere of [Avner Dorman](#)'s Violin Concerto No. 2, Nigunim, based on a series of traditional Jewish melodies. The opening Adagio Religioso rose from a hazy theme in the hauntingly chromatic *freygische* mode to a brief, somber stateliness, then St. John immediately slashed her way through her first cadenza. The pregnant pause afterward was a striking setup for the otherworldly drift and then the undulatingly acidic dance afterward, St. John's razorwire waltz sailing overhead.

Her fleeting, ghostly incisions flitted over a mist as the second movement got underway, the orchestra almost imperceptibly returning to the astringency and chromatic bite of the previous interlude. Their leap into a suspensefully pulsing klezmer dance was irresistibly fun; St. John led the procession back to disquieting close harmonies and strangely celestial harmonics radiating throughout the string section, up to a jaunty coda.

She and a handful of the string players then surprised the crowd by literally dancing through a lightning-fast, wryly harmonically-infused jam on a traditional klezmer dance.

After the intermission, they concluded with an insightfully picturesque take of Mendelssohn's Scottish Symphony. A Bach-like somberness pervaded the anthemic, initial andante movement, underscoring how much that rugged coastline had impacted a 20-year-old urban Jewish classical rockstar. The brief, massed stiletto passages from the brass were all the more impressive considering that this was an outdoor show, although by half past eight the temperature had dropped to a perfect mid-seventies calm.

The luscious textural contrast between the midrange brass and strings fell away for a ragged run through the goofy country dance that introduced movement two: a moment of sarcasm, maybe? Whatever the case, it worked with the crowd.

The somber lushness of the adagio third movement was inescapable: it's one thing to credit the young composer for his balance of brass, winds and strings throughout moody and occasionally portentous, martial themes, but the orchestra nailed them, one by one. The succession of Mozartean motives and punchy Germanic phrases on the way out – and deftly executed melismas from the strings – wound it up with a characteristic ebullience.

The final [Naumburg Bandshell concert](#) in Central Park this summer is on August 2 at 7:30 PM with self-conducted string ensemble the [East Coast Chamber Orchestra](#) playing works by Adolphus Hailstork, Peruvian themes arranged by Maureen Nelson and the group's arrangement of Schubert's String Quartet No. 14 in D minor, "Death and the Maiden." Take the 72nd St. entrance; get there an hour early, at least, if you want a seat.

SEE: <https://blogcritics.org/knights-lara-st-john-music-avner-dorman-felix-mendelssohn/>