

An Outstand Place to Make Art: New Music in the US state of New Mexico

By Egbert Hiller – written for *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik (New Journal for Music)*

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An enchanted landscape on the edge of the United States and a place for innovative ideas and sounds that are a result of the exchange between different cultures, this lively new music scene gets to express itself annually at the John Donald Robb Composers' Symposium in Albuquerque. Art and nature interact uniquely with one another in New Mexico. With a population of a little more than 550,000 inhabitants, Albuquerque is the largest city in the US state of New Mexico and was founded as a Spanish colony in the 18th century. There is a marked contrast between historic Old Town and modern Downtown, and the strong social divide, with many homeless people, defines the look and feel of this town, at least in some neighborhoods. Albuquerque is also the seat of the University of New Mexico's (UNM) main campus; its Department of Music in the College of Fine Arts forms a musical center for the region. Annually, the John Donald Robb Composers' Symposium, a Festival of New Music, takes place there and promotes an international exchange as well as networking opportunity with local projects and activities. It integrates itself into a diverse soundscape filled with exciting artistic personalities and an openness for new ideas, experiments, and surprises.

“The Composers' Symposium, financed in part through the John Donald Robb Musical Trust, is very important for us because Albuquerque is far from the musical centers of the United States like New York, Los Angeles, or San Francisco. Never the less, many interesting musicians live in New Mexico and we all have a lot of freedom here.”¹

Peter Gilbert, a professor of composition in the Music Department of the College of Fine Arts at UNM, co-directs, with fellow professor and composer, Karola Obermüller, the Composers' Symposium, which recently took place from February 2-5. Currently, Gilbert is also the Chair of the John Donald Robb Musical Trust; a foundation named after the composer and lay ethnomusicologist who died in 1989. German-American Eva Lipton-Ormand helps manage the Trust and its comprehensive collection of field recordings: “John Donald Robb became Dean of the College of Fine Arts in 1942 after leaving a very successful career as a Wall Street lawyer at the age of 49. Previously, he studied with Nadia Boulanger, Darius Milhaud, and Paul Hindemith, as well as playing the cello; after arriving in Albuquerque, he took up composing again. But Robb also became interested in the folk music of the region and ventured out as a lay ethnomusicologist with his recording device that he powered with his car's battery. He subsequently recorded more than

3,000 field recordings in Northern New Mexico. It was his passion and he had the feeling that the soul of the people was reflected in their music.”

Lively postcolonial debate

John Donald Robb found a fascinating terrain for his ethnomusicology studies since New Mexico is replete with Spanish-Mexican and indigenous influences that all inform one another. That is also evident in Albuquerque, where a UNM affiliate, the National Institute of Flamenco, preserves a significant Spanish cultural legacy. And the field of contemporary music is particularly touched by indigenous influences. Eva Lipton-Ormand: “You will find a lively postcolonial debate in New Mexico. There are many indigenous people here, who, on the foundation of their cultural roots, and confronted with this postcolonial debate, discover and create New Music. They bring together the traditions.”

Bringing things together without forcing them to interact is something Karola Obermüller and Peter Gilbert have also challenged themselves to do for the Composers’ Symposium. The festival annually draws a crowd and is significant for the University’s Music Department. One concert is actually dedicated to its namesake, John Donald Robb, and features works by him and other composers who have a connection to Albuquerque and New Mexico, for instance Levi Raleigh Brown, from Montana, who is completing his Master of Music at UNM and was the recipient of the Music Department’s Wilkinson Student Composition Award. His piece *God is an Alchemist* for bass trombone and organ, was premiered by Juan Saldivar and Maxine Thévenot.

Aside from the focus on world premieres as well as tending to the tradition around John Donald Robb, the Composers’ Symposium is also synonymous with the intention of looking at the bigger picture, beyond the confines of New Music, as Karola Obermüller explains with a few examples: “Some editions of the festival had a certain theme or motto such as *Music and Movement* or *Music and Architecture*. Another time, the focus was on an opera about human trafficking which was accompanied by discussion panels with sociologists and activists. We try to be open in all directions, and the international perspective is also important. Since I come from Germany, I have a network there, while Peter Gilbert has connections in the U.S., and we have colleagues from Mexico and Latin American countries, who in turn have their own contacts.”

One of these colleagues is the Mexican composer and pianist José Luis Hurtado, who, in a fascinating concert in the Center for the Arts’ concert venue, Keller Hall, that preceded the Composers’ Symposium, presented works by Argentinian and Mexican composers. During Composers’ Symposium, José Luis Hurtado was subsequently featured with one of his own works: *Umbra* (Shadow) for flute and three cracked cymbals, in which, beyond audible sound shadows,

one experiences striking clouding of the soul. *Umbra* was given its world premiere by the duo Wave Dash with flutist Camilla Hoytenga and percussionist Magdalena Meitzner. As part of Composers' Symposium, the musicians both gave master classes primarily intended for students of UNM, in addition to performing two concerts that alone included seven world premieres, demonstrating the festival's intention of reaching out internally and externally, and calling on international guests to give Albuquerque's music scene input.

Anne LeBaron, Amy Williams, and Lei Liang, three renowned artistic personalities, presented hour-long, comprehensive lectures on their music. Wave Dash performed LeBaron's American premiere of *Kamma Vipaka*, which the composer explained: "*Kamma Vipaka* is about karma and ideas that are addressed in my new opera. The protagonist is 'the woman with the tragic hair,' whose hair grows straight up. She has been disowned by her family because her hair embarrassed her father, a politician. In order to express her outsider position, I've used sounds that were recorded in outer space by NASA."

Invocation of the spirits

Peter Gilbert, Lauren Valerie Coons, and Raven Chacon, also contributed further outstanding pieces. All three have close ties to Albuquerque – and each uniquely reflects the people and the mythical landscape of New Mexico in their music. Wave Dash premiered Peter Gilbert's piece *Channeling the waters*. The composer, who moved to New Mexico ten years ago, gives water an almost magical dimension and "channeling" refers less to the act of "directing things" than to "taking up contact" or "invoking something." Actual water sounds are as present in this work as whirling log drum tones that remind one of bubbling springs. *Channeling the waters* probably reflects New Mexico's influence on Gilbert's work most clearly – not in a descriptive or tonal sense, but rather, translated subtly into an "invocation of the spirits"—like those spirits that have roamed the high desert plateau around Albuquerque in the traditions and history of the indigenous peoples who have formed the landscape and culture of this place.

Nor has Albuquerque native, composer Lauren Valerie Coons (*1988), been left untouched by this phenomenon in her development and artistic identity. In her piece *A cup of flowering water*, which was also premiered by the duo Wave Dash during the 2020 Composers' Symposium, she used specific materials she attributes to herself and her New Mexican home: "I characterize different stones, glass materials, and terracotta by moving them; the materials exist because they move – and the piece develops from there. On an abstract level, I play with these materials and their physical properties, but I also want the musicians to have experiences with each other that become visible on stage."

Performance and theater elements are essential for Lauren Valerie Coons, which can also be attributed to her connection to dance as an existential form of expression for the body, and her deep connection to nature and its archaic dimensions in New Mexico. For Coons, dance represents an inner state that corresponds with emotional intensity and meditative immersion.

A forgotten land

The works of Lauren Valerie Coons have up to now been performed almost exclusively in and around Albuquerque. In Raven Chacon's case, it is a different story; he has been branching out and establishing himself steadily throughout the U.S. for some time. Chacon was born in 1977 and, as a Diné, is a descendant of Native Americans many of whom still live on the Navajo Nation that stretches through Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico: "My family is from that region, my mother from a Navajo reservation four hours west of here, and my father lived two hours north of Albuquerque. After I was born, the family moved here. This is my home; I've lived here all my life. It was my decision and an important factor was the enormous creativity of different artists who live here. This is the place where my music makes the most sense to me, here in the Southwest. New Mexico has a very long history that is complicated by colonization and cultural blending. This is very important for the people who live here. And I think a lot of people forget we are part of the U.S. It's a sort of weird place that doesn't really belong to anything. And that's exactly what I appreciate about it; it's a forgotten land, but because of that, it's also an outstanding place from which to create and launch art."

Raven Chacon draws on many sources, however his ethnic and cultural roots in the Southwest of the U.S. form the foundation of his artistic activities. He stands out for having developed an unmistakable musical language that transcends stereotypical folkloristic connotations, that is instead headstrong and full of its own impulsivity and an insistent energy. He addresses the senses directly and simultaneously asks burning questions – about the relationship between human existence and living space, between culture and nature, between archaic impression and individual emotional development; such as in *The journey of the horizontal people* for string quartet from 2016, in which he addresses the migration of indigenous peoples of America to the Southwest of the U.S.. The piece, commissioned by the renowned Kronos Quartet, was impressively performed on the 2020 Composers' Symposium by a very young quartet derived from UNM's new music ensemble: New Music New Mexico.

What is music?

Many other musicians who influence the music scene, but whose works were not performed on this year's Composers' Symposium, call Albuquerque home. For instance, composer Patricia Repar, who directs UNM's "Arts-in-Medicine" program that provides a framework for the interdisciplinary study and application of the healing power of art and music in therapeutic settings with the critically ill. The approach is viable and transcends medical efficacy, touching on a central, fundamental element of music by circumventing the intellect and releasing emotions and influencing deep inner processes. Patricia Repar: "I find it very engaging to think about the meaning of music – about that which makes up music. What is music? We have all kinds of styles, instruments, and techniques that we use, and we write down all these things, and perform them, and call it music. But as a musician, my experience is that there is something else, a sensibility beyond the spectrum of instruments, techniques, notes, and styles. I am most interested in this essence."

New Mexico offers a perfect environment for this essence just in terms of how the overpowering natural landscape of the high desert plateau around Albuquerque leads to self-reflection. Many musicians who live and work in and around Albuquerque are directly or indirectly, consciously or subconsciously influenced by it; among them, German Falko Steinbach, who joined UNM as a professor of piano in 1999: "The archaic landscape of New Mexico represents something magnificent, expansive, and raw. I have always been fascinated by what constitutes life and lifestyle here. The desert seeks to be filled; the landscape evokes a creativity which got me to really start composing seriously in the first place. But teaching is also something I experience with great intensity here: E.g., I have a student who is Navajo and with whom I regularly travel to the Navajo Nation to teach master classes and perform. Sometimes the students bring their entire families to the master class. There can be anywhere up to 20 people sitting there, listening intently. It's a great feeling to sense what the music is eliciting in these people, also classical music, which isn't even their music."

The wide open sky

Mark Weaver, who was born in Albuquerque, has a whole different story. He also works as an architect and found music fairly late in life. He discovered his instrument, the tuba, when he was already 26: "The tuba is a crazy instrument; I couldn't stop thinking about it and started practicing right away. I wasn't very good at first, I needed a long time, but then the tuba changed my life completely. Then I started to get interested in improvised music, which I consider the greatest challenge of all. At first, I only played music from notes, which I was familiar with from high school. That's hard work too, but when I was introduced to improvised music I thought, that's

unbelievable. And it fits here, it goes perfectly with the wide open sky and its deep colors and the wonderfully clear air. I'm not sure but I think in other places they talk about other things; you go inside and make your art, but here it's all about the light and the landscape, the sky and the clouds. I think every artist responds to it here in some form or another."

Mark Weaver has become a renowned tuba player and improviser over the years, who performs in many constellations and line-ups. Rahim Alhaj came to New Mexico from Iraq. He is an internationally known *oud* player who also composes and has been living in Albuquerque for the last 20 years; ever since he had to flee war and persecution in the Middle East. He has been familiar with the time-honored Arabian lute, the *oud*, since his earliest childhood and it connects him to his native country. Alhaj chose New Mexico consciously: "I would really claim there are only two states in the U.S. that have a culture. All the other states only have a supermarket culture. Three elements define a real culture: the language, the music, and the food. The only two states in the U.S. that have such a culture are New Mexico and Louisiana. But there are two other reasons I chose New Mexico to live; first because I'm a musician and am interested in art, and I was told New Mexico is one of the best addresses in the U.S. for art and music. And the second reason was the desert, like in the Middle East, and that's why I feel so comfortable here."

Rahim Alhaj is a politically engaged artist, which is also evident on the CD release of his cycle of pieces "Letters from Iraq" for *oud* and ensemble. The hope for social changes in countries in the Middle East shines through. As a composer and performer, Alhaj is on the road a lot and returning to New Mexico has long ago become synonymous with the feeling of coming home. The journey was not quite as long for percussionist Alan Zimmerman who came to New Mexico from New York and acclimated very quickly. He particularly appreciates Albuquerque's club scene, which does not offer much in the way of earnings, but is a testament to an elevated artistic potential: "I'm interested in experimental music and improvisation. And this scene exists independently from established concert spaces such as Chatter or those at the University, it does its own thing. I've only lived in Albuquerque for four and a half years, that means I'm still pretty new here. The atmosphere is different from any place I've lived before. There's a deeply rooted experimental scene and Manny Rettinger is its grandfather; he is the link between totally different domains."

With Manny Rettinger, we come full circle with UNM, for he ran the Music Department's recording studio for more than 20 years and recorded every concert. Additionally, he was an influencer in the experimental rock music scene in Albuquerque, both as a music producer and rock musician. This scene is also a part of the New Mexico's musical landscape in which, among all the diversity and opposition, openness and transparency are writ large. The impressions Manny Rettinger has gained as the sound engineer of the UNM Music Department have influenced his own

musical ideas – and in particular, the recordings he has made at the annual Composers’ Symposium in the Center for the Arts.

The festival is also present in other places in Albuquerque. E.g. this year’s opening concert on February 2nd took place at Las Puertas, a performance venue in a former warehouse close to Albuquerque’s Downtown that welcomes music of different genres every Sunday morning for “Chatter Sunday.” “Chatter” does its name justice because in this venue, communication with and through music reaches a broad audience.

1 This quote and all others were taken from interviews the author conducted in Albuquerque in February 2020.