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## Music by uncommon women: Makrokosmos 7

Charles Rose soaks up the sights, sounds & ideas of this year's new-music festival, where women ruled.

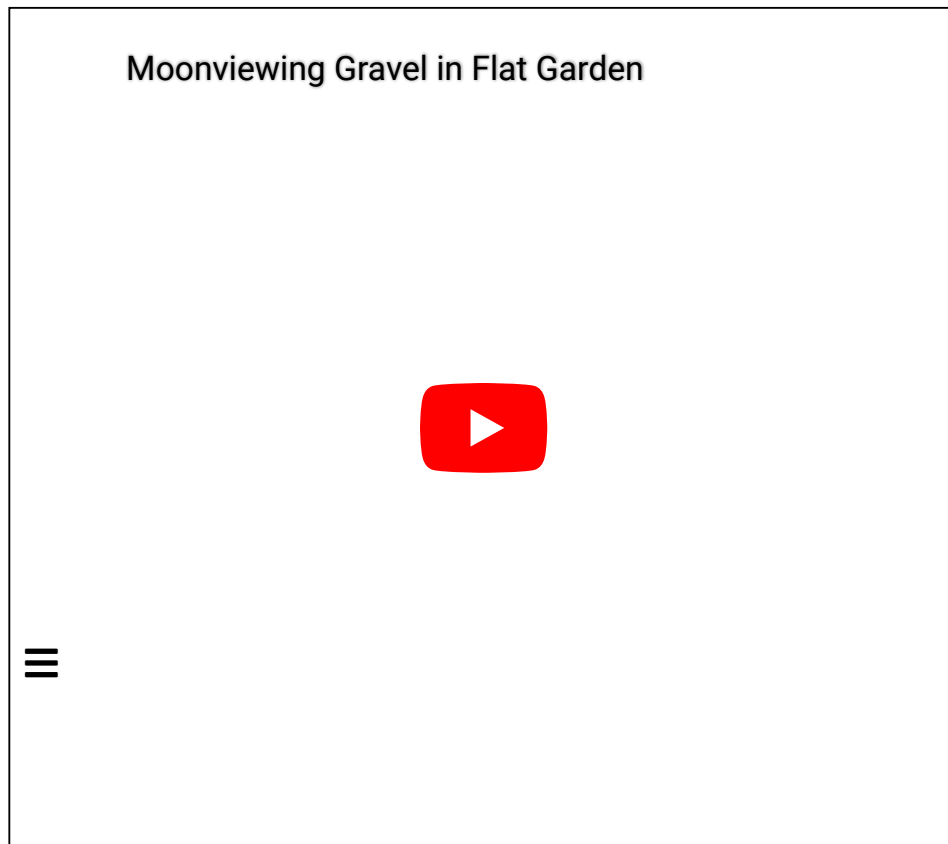
AUGUST 19, 2021 | CHARLES ROSE([HTTPS://WWW.ORARTSWATCH.ORG/AUTHOR/CHARLES-ROSE/](https://www.orartswatch.org/author/charles-rose/))  
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The Makrokosmos Project (<http://makrokosmosproject.org/>), now in its seventh year, has become a form of homecoming for Portland's contemporary music scene. People from all over—students, musicians, critics and ardent fans—come together for the intimate gathering each summer. This was also a homecoming for Stephanie Ho, one half (with Saar Ahuvia) of Makro's central piano duo: Ho's mother, grandmother and cousins were in attendance.

Makrokosmos used to make its home in the lobby of the Vestas building in the Pearl district, but this year split the proceedings into two concerts a month apart. The first took place June 24 at the loading dock of Portland Piano Company out by the airport, where train horns, traffic and a bird in the rafters who refused to leave joined in on the fun. Dry air rose from the concrete and the afternoon sun was high. Still, the impromptu vibe of the concert is something we rarely get from the more formal affairs of classical music concerts.

The second concert in July was more of a recording session. There were about fifteen of us in the gorgeous pavilion at the Japanese Gardens on a perfect summer afternoon. Behind the dual pianos and past the *shoji* we could see into the Flat Garden, where white specks of pollen were swirling

between the maples. It was a steamy ninety degrees out that afternoon, which sounds downright chilly after the stunning heat wave we just experienced. The environment was much more idyllic, to say the least, but each had their charm.



Socializing at Makrokosmos is incredibly easy. The vibrant audience, the wide cast of musicians and the wine-and-cheese *hor d'oeuvres* lend the whole affair a feeling of being at a cocktail party or mixer, one of the things that makes Makrokosmos unique. You can strike up a conversation with nearly anyone, including the performers. At the June concert my partner and I started talking with someone before realizing that we were talking to emcee/RBG-quote-reader Stephanie Cordell.

There was also the opportunity to talk to new people, or meet in person someone who previously was only a panel in Zoom or a name on an email address line. I saw local composer Kirsten Volness (<https://www.orartswatch.org/navigating-the-wave-an-interview-with-kirsten-volness/>) at the show for the first time in who knows how long, and remarked that she should be on the program as well. It was a pleasant and well-earned event after the isolation of the last year, especially so if the Delta Variant puts a damper on things for a while longer.

As with previous seasons, Ahuvia and Ho partnered with local ensembles and soloists to fill out the program, with a focus on piano music (Stephanie and Saar being pianists themselves) broken up by percussion (Portland Percussion Group) and strings (Pyxis Quartet). Makrokosmos will release

concert videos of both shows in the coming weeks, with the first released just this week. You can watch it below—and while you're at it make a donation (<http://coarts.org/makrokosmos-project/>) so they can keep the music going next year.

# Sorry

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This year's series of concerts, titled *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman*, is a tribute to the late Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Robert McBride and Stephanie Cordell read words by and about RBG in between each piece of Meredith Monk's 4-hands piano music. McBride focused on RBG's male colleagues' praises, from Stephen Colbert to Antonin Scalia; Cordell mostly stuck to Ginsburg's impassioned polemics from Supreme Court cases. To complement RBG's stature as a leading figure for women, the two programs included music from Monk and eighteen other composers, all women.

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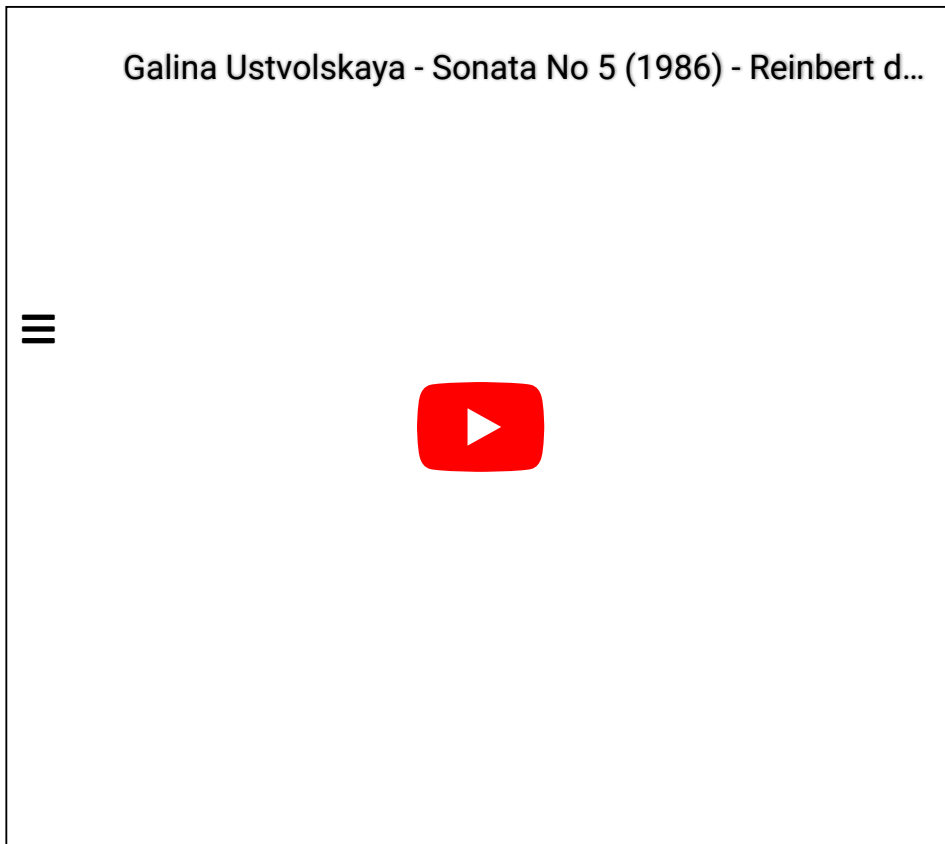


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The first concert opened with the concert series' namesake: Joan Tower's sixth *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman*, arranged for piano. Tower's *Fanfare* makes a thoughtful contrast with the Copland piece it references. While Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* is stoic and grounded, Tower's *Fanfare* is twisted, complex and winding. The open, resonant fourths of Copland mutate into something much more ambiguous.

Jeff Payne's performance of Galina Ustvolskya's fifth *Piano Sonata* was a highlight of the June concert. Ustvolskya's music can be difficult to parse (<https://www.siue.edu/~aho/musov/ust/ust.html>), as her style is unlike that of any of her contemporaries, men or women. Though she writes with a deep devotion to God, it is a strained, difficult relationship she has with the divine. Little solace is to be found in this sonata's incessant tone clusters, tense harmonies and *sforzando* quadruple-forte quarter notes blasting away in the low register. Jeff told me afterwards that he had broken one of the keys on his piano while practicing it at home (specifically Db above middle C), though happily it didn't happen on the Fazioli piano at the performance.



Ho's performance of Haruna Miyake's *Bird Shadows* was a high point of the July concert. The harmony will be familiar to most listeners, but loud tone clusters interrupt the pleasing G major melodic phrases. The music takes flight as it tries to escape the bounds of the opening music, ending with the music plopping to Earth in a pensive halt. We were also told that we may have been hearing the first performance in the US.

We also had two opportunities to listen to Chen Yi's *China West Suite*, which Stephanie and Saar described as expressing the "grandeur" of Beijing, in contrast with the folk music origins of the piece which come from Zang, Miao and Inner Mongolia ("Gada Meiren (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?>

v=nPGVq6CPZq4)"). The *Suite*'s origins as a wind ensemble piece carry over to the four-hands arrangement, where you could clearly identify light woodwind trills and heavy, wide brass fanfares.

Monica Ohuchi, in her first live performance in over a year, played two pieces by jazz virtuoso/eclectic composer Hiromi Uehara. First was an arrangement of the pop tune "Green Tea Farm ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1svy\\_vtYhY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1svy_vtYhY))," played with tenderness and delicacy. It is intriguing to hear how Japanese musicians such as Hiromi have metabolized American music, absorbing the harmonic richness of jazz into their pop idioms. Next came BQE (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuaVQXEmiJE>)—Brooklyn-Queens Expressway—a challenging, bustling piece of impressive chromatic runs and bumpy syncopated beats.



Makrokosmos 7 was also the debut of the expanded Portland Percussion Group (<https://www.portlandpercussiongroup.com/>), who have doubled the size of their *batterie* from four players to eight. New members Mari Yoshinaga, Terry Longshore (<https://www.orartswatch.org/terry-longshore-percussion-and-collaboration/>), Jonathan Brown, and Garrett Arney all had the chance to perform with some of the existing crew. I am interested to see how the expanded ensemble changes PPG's season—whether they will sometimes use a rotating cast or play larger, more complex works. For a taste, we heard them play a Carolyn Quick (<http://www.carolynquick.com/>) quartet and Caroline Shaw's *Taxidermy* outside Portland Piano Company.

Quick is the only local composer featured this year—though to be fair they rarely perform local composers, Makrokosmos being more a showcase of local performers. Quick was surprised to see that they had programmed her percussion quartet, *So She Dreamed*. It is rare to hear singing bowls in performance, creating a nice timbral variety before moving to a more typical setup of drums, marimba and vibraphone.

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The highlight of PPG's set at the Japanese Gardens was Juri Seo's *Shui*, for crotales and water, in which percussionists dip the ringing antique cymbals into water to change the pitch and add vibrato. It was the most unique piece of the program, and I thought its austerity and apparent simplicity complemented the scenery of the garden.

Juri Seo, 水 (Shuǐ, 2017)



Over the last few years, amid controversies and upturnings, there has been a surge of women composers on concert programs, gaining national attention and praise. But now, it is not simply enough to see women on programs, to hear their music alongside the men: if we really want to strive for true equality, their appearance must no longer be a novelty or a noteworthy occurrence.

One thing that struck me about the programming at this year's Makrokosmos project is that Meredith Monk's complete 4-hands works occupy the space that, in previous years, went to Crumb's *Black Angels* (season V (<https://www.orartswatch.org/makrokosmos-project-expansive-vision/>)), Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* (season IV (<https://www.orartswatch.org/makrokosmos-iv-review-screwy-spiritual-music-for-a-summer-evening/>)), Reich's *Six Pianos* (season III (<https://archive.orartswatch.org/makrokosmos-review-powered-by-percussion/>))—and, of course, the four volumes of piano music (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Makrokosmos>) which give the Project its name.

These are major artistic achievements of the twentieth century, and to see Meredith Monk in such company is encouraging. Maybe on future concert programs we will hear Lera Auerbach's complete *Preludes*, Pauline Oliveros' complete *Sonic Meditations*, or Laurie Anderson's sprawling performance art piece *United States*.

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The accumulation of women on a program like this shows that we can draw parallels and connections across generations, as we have for the male-dominated music world. Many of the most important, talented and innovative women composers are described as “idiosyncratic,” carving out their unique voices in order to be heard in the cracks between the male composers erecting their -isms and ideologies. The nineteen composers heard at the two concerts—many of whom are still alive—show a wide breadth of musical expression, styles and character.

It’s a mistake to see this as a battle for “wokeness” or representation. What matters is the music. Pop music would be a less vibrant place without Laurie Anderson (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vkfpi2H8tOE>), Björk (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGPYoomzmBQ>), Kate Bush (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fk-4lXLM34g>), PJ Harvey (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbq4G1TjKYg>), Lizzo (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4P9XUrniiK4>) or Lorde (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P103bWMdvtA>). Similarly, classical music would be a lot less vibrant without Shaw, Ustvolskaya, Quick, Monk, and all the rest. As this program demonstrates, femininity is complex ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Second\\_Sex](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Second_Sex)).

Lizzo - Rumors feat. Cardi B [Official Video]



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## Charles Rose

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Charles Rose is a composer, writer and sound engineer born and raised in Portland, Oregon. He graduated from Portland State University with a degree in Sonic Arts and Music Production in 2019. His piano trio *Tranquila* was the 2018 winner of the Chamber Music Northwest's Young Composers Competition. He releases music on BandCamp under various aliases. In addition to composing, he is a sound engineer for chamber music group FearNoMusic and is an editor of the Portland State University journal *Subito*. You can find his writing at [Continuousvariations.com](https://continuousvariations.com/) (<https://continuousvariations.com/>).

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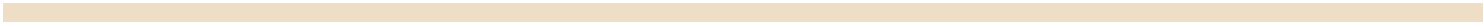
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