

## World premieres, unfamiliar works exemplify the Alias ensemble's daring season finale

By Russell Johnston

published: May 21, 2009

Nashville's Alias Chamber Ensemble bills itself as "eclectic and diverse," and the program for its upcoming season finale certainly supports that claim. Do you fancy a brand-new piece or a little-known Italian Baroque sonata? A cello quartet or marimba with winds? As with Nashville spring weather, if what's happening at the moment doesn't suit your taste, something entirely different will be along in just a few minutes.

In any case, count on discovering some music you don't already know. Part of the ensemble's mission is to bring Nashville audiences into less traveled regions of the chamber music landscape. Members of the cooperative group select the adventurous repertoire themselves, and they seem to delight at including music that's unfamiliar, whether because of newness or historical obscurity. The players were brought together, writes founder and artistic director Zeneba Bowers, by their desire for a chamber music outlet "beyond playing Pachelbel's Canon at weddings."

A case in point: Saturday's concert features the world premiere of Squaretet for four cellos, by Alias member Matt Walker. This marks the group's ninth world premiere over seven years of existence, in addition to their many Nashville premieres.

Walker himself embodies the ensemble's eclecticism. Like many of his Alias cohorts, he is also a member of the Nashville Symphony. Besides holding cello seats, however, he performs as a guitarist, bassist and singer/songwriter. The composer describes Squaretet as a "funk romp introduced by a soulful homage to Rossini" which incorporates jazz-oriented techniques developed in his solo cello pieces to suggest the sounds of guitar, bass and drums. You might even hear some cello.

Three works by women from the Baroque, Romantic and Modern eras continue the group's "Emerging Voices" series, a two-year project to highlight music of female composers spanning five centuries. All three had productive careers and achieved recognition in their lifetimes, but their relative obscurity today suggests that our culture is still emerging from the convention Virginia Woolf identified "that publicity in women is detestable."

Though recent years have seen the rise of concerts featuring the music of living female composers, Bowers says she wants the Alias series "to show that women have been composing all along, and doing it well! It's amazing how few people know that, even professional musicians." Though the series officially lasts for just one more season, her researches have uncovered a wealth of women's music, which she expects Alias to perform for years to come.

Fanny Mendelssohn is best known of the three women on Saturday's program. Despite recognition of her talent within her family's wide and sophisticated circle of friends, little of her work was published during her lifetime—apparently due to pressure from her father and brother, who seem to have encouraged her musical development while discouraging her professionally. A number of her songs were printed under her brother's name—that's Felix Mendelssohn, by the way. One of these became a favorite of Queen Victoria, who believed that Felix was the composer until he set the record straight during a trip to England. Although Fanny began to reach a wider audience and to publish under her own name in the 1840s, her life was cut short by a stroke at the age of 41. Alias will perform her String Quartet in E-flat, which remained unpublished until 1997.

Also featured is the 1693 violin sonata of Isabella Leonarda, performed on period instruments with Murray Somerville as guest organist. More than 20 Italian women published compositions from the mid-16th through 17th centuries, and Leonarda was the most productive of them, with nearly 200 published works. Her sonatas, which did not appear in a modern edition until 2001, are said to resemble those of the generation preceding her own, so her music will likely sound quite free to ears conditioned by the later Baroque of Bach and Handel.

Germaine Tailleferre is most remembered as a member of Les Six—a group of French composers, including Milhaud and Poulenc, whose alliance in the manifesto-rife 1920s was engineered largely by Jean Cocteau. Tailleferre's steady output from the end of World War II to her death in 1983 is less known and remained mostly unpublished during her lifetime. She attended the Paris Conservatory against her father's wishes, proceeding to win several prizes there, and she later became close friends with Maurice Ravel. Saturday's concert will include her 1953 harp sonata.