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## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# Pianists Who Make News

By [ANTHONY TOMMASINI](#)

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THE contemporary music scene in New York may seem like a niche within the niche of classical music. But this teeming musical world has an intensely loyal audience and its share of brilliant young stars. One is Blair McMillen, a hardy, fit 34-year-old American pianist of Irish and Scottish heritage, with the reddish hair and gregarious manner to prove it.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times  
Blair McMillen

You may not encounter Mr. McMillen playing a Beethoven concerto with the New York Philharmonic. You won't find a separate McMillen bin in the rows of CD's at Tower Records. But he appears frequently at museums, adventurous recital halls and hotbeds of new music and attracts enthusiastic audiences. Last year at the Miller Theater, for example, he presented a daunting recital of works by two Italian modernists, Luciano Berio and Giacinto Scelsi, winning high praise from the New York Times critic Allan Kozinn for his technique, authority, imagination and "irresistible energy."

Another pianist in the new-music scene, equally formidable

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Stephen Gosling will appear Sunday night at 7 in "Patrick Zimmerli's Emergence," a series of performances to be held every other week at the Triad Theater, 158 West 72nd Street, Manhattan. Information: (212) 362-2511; triadnyc.com. Admission is \$8, with a two-drink minimum.

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On Oct. 15 at 8 p.m., Mr. Gosling will share a bill with Blair McMillen in a program titled "Powerhouse Pianists" at the Tenri Cultural Institute of New York, 43A West 13th Street, Greenwich Village. Information: (212) 645-2800. Tickets: \$15; students and 60+, \$10.

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Andrea Mohin/The New York Times  
Stephen Gosling

out of a different personality than Mr. McMillen's, is the British-born [Stephen Gosling](#), who turns 35 on Monday. A lanky, serious-minded artist with a wry sense of humor, he has scant patience for the numbing routine of conventional concertizing. On his own terms, Mr. Gosling has made notable appearances as the soloist in contemporary works with Orpheus, the Orchestra of St. Luke's, the American Composers Orchestra and the Riverside Symphony.

More typical, though, is a program Mr. Gosling will present on Sunday evening at 7 at the Triad, the jazz club on West 72nd Street in Manhattan. The concert inaugurates a bimonthly series featuring the music of the composer and saxophonist Patrick Zimmerli, who "married jazz to uptown Columbia serialism," as Mr. Gosling described it recently, though these days, Mr. Zimmerli's music is looser and more tonal.

You could call Mr. McMillen and Mr. Gosling the dynamic duo of contemporary music pianists in New York. Yet they are not close friends who hang out, just good colleagues who move in the same circles. In a rare occurrence, they are sharing a recital program on Oct. 15 at the Tenri Cultural Institute, with Mr. McMillen playing the first half, and Mr. Gosling the second. Presented by a new group, the American Modern Ensemble, the program of mostly new and recent works by, among others, Chester Biscardi, Lee Hyla, Eric Moe, David Rakowski and George Tsontakis, is called "Powerhouse Pianists." And few people who have heard them would quibble with that billing for these thoroughly impressive players.

Mr. Gosling is especially excited by a group of fiery études he will play by the Chicago-based composer Mischa Zupko. A fanciful work by Annie Gosfield, inspired by baseball and titled "Brooklyn, Oct. 5, 1941" (a reference to the Mickey Owen game) requires Mr. McMillen, at one point, to roll a ball on the keys and wear a baseball glove.

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## **A Devotion Shared**

These artists share a messianic devotion to modern music, something they spoke about in separate interviews recently. "Contemporary music is the most fulfilling for me right now," Mr. McMillen said. "I thrive on working with musicians and composers - the feedback, arguing over the music, putting it together." He finds audiences for new music, however small, energized and open-minded. "I'd rather play for 30 or 40 people who are really listening intently than for 500 who could care less."

For his part, Mr. Gosling said that the mainstream repertory was being "very adequately covered" by others. "I can't imagine being happier doing anything else," he said. Besides being convinced that contemporary music is what his "brain is most suited to," he added, he also considers himself useful. "I don't like to feel perfunctory," he said. He is gratified to think that he is doing his bit to "continue the canon" by adding works to it.

But while these pianists may be driven by a mission, they have won more than their share of attention, opportunities and critical praise. And the reason is simple: new music is by definition news. And young artists who play new music compellingly make news.

One question aspiring young musicians often ask of music journalists is how they can attract the attention of a critic. My answer is to emphasize that I work for a newspaper and cover the news. Young pianists, even exceptional ones, presenting themselves in a standard program of, say, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin and Ravel, may play very beautifully. Still, such programs put critics in an awkward position, in which they are essentially compelled to compare the new performances of the standard works with the great legacy of performances from the past, which is unfair to the young artist.

But if that performer includes an intriguing new or recent work or two, then a critic has news to report. It takes the pressure off the standard works. You can write about an exciting performance of a new piece and then add: not only that, this gifted pianist gave a quite fine account of a Chopin sonata.

## **A Need to Explore**

Mr. McMillen and Mr. Gosling did not choose this path as a savvy career strategy. Both had relatively conventional musical upbringings until they were hooked by new music.

Mr. McMillen went to high school at the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan, where he listened to Stravinsky records and learned some works by Bartok, but basically studied the standard repertory. Excited by rock, jazz and rhythm and blues, he played in high school rock bands, including a wild jam band, "kind of like Phish," Mr. McMillen said.

At Oberlin College in Ohio, where he had a double major in music and history, he was recruited into a contemporary music ensemble. "A friend asked me to help out in a performance of a difficult new piece by Steven Stucky," he explained. "I said I'd give it a try." The work was a demanding score for a large ensemble with "some 10-against-7 rhythms between the right and left hands and things like that," Mr. McMillen said: "I did it, though I don't know how or why, and the conductor was very impressed."

Later, as part of graduate work at the Juilliard School, he was put through the rigors of the standard repertory. But he continued playing in contemporary music ensembles. "I try to bring the energy of exciting rock and jazz to my playing of contemporary scores," he said. "I'm really drawn to pieces that have this visceral energy."

Mr. Gosling, who attended a boarding school in Manchester, England, with a special program in music, showed an early affinity for works like Messiaen's preludes. Percussion was his secondary instrument, and he also played in rock and jazz ensembles. The closest thing he had to an epiphany about contemporary music, he said, occurred when he was 15. "I came across Tashi's recording of Messiaen's 'Quartet for the End of Time,' and that pretty much sealed the deal on exploring life outside the standard repertory," he said. He joined a contemporary music ensemble at his school, which he remembers as the first time he was required to lean in and pluck the piano strings.

Another product of Juilliard, Mr. Gosling went right through the program, the "long haul," he said, getting his bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees there. Young musicians should note that Mr. Gosling's involvement in contemporary music brought him an enviable number of performance opportunities at Juilliard, including a remarkable four appearances as a concerto soloist with school orchestras in works by Stravinsky, Schnittke, John Corigliano (whose concerto he performed with Leonard Slatkin conducting at Avery Fisher Hall) and Paul Schoenfield (whose "Four Parables for Piano and Orchestra" he subsequently performed in Europe with the Dutch Radio Philharmonic under Lukas Foss).

### **Earning Their Keep**

There is precedent for the career paths these artists are following. For example, in the late 1960's and 70's in New York, Gilbert Kalish, Paul Jacobs and Ursula Oppens first made their names as authoritative performers of contemporary music - though they played standard repertory as well - and eventually won acclaim for the full breadth of their work. (Jacobs died at 53 in 1983.)

Mr. Gosling and especially Mr. McMillen have expressed interest in expanding their careers over time into standard repertory. But

they are in no hurry. Mr. McMillen produced his own CD, called "Soundings," which offers gripping and impressive performances of Liszt, Debussy, Scriabin and Copland, as well as more recent works by Morton Gould and William Bolcom. Mr. Gosling points to a solo program he presented at Merkin Concert Hall that had several contemporary works but also some transcriptions of Bach and Brahms by Busoni. "It was Bach and Brahms with a twist," he acknowledged. For him, this represented a venture into standard fare.

Right now, though, both artists are too busy working in their chosen specialty. So how do pianists in contemporary music earn a living? Not easily.

Mr. McMillen is a member of three contemporary music ensembles: CounterInduction, the Da Capo Chamber Players and the Avian Orchestra. He also teaches piano two days a week at Bard College, which he loves, and has earned money from solo recitals and special appearances with ensembles and artists like the Brentano String Quartet, the tenor Anthony Dean Griffey and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

### **The 'Lean Years'**

In the period after graduation from Juilliard, there were some "lean years," Mr. McMillen said. His checking account contained less than \$100, and he rented a room in an apartment after an actor friend was evicted. Today his yearly income, he said, is usually in the range of \$40,000 to \$50,000. Not much, he knows. But the tradeoff is worth it. Also, for four years he has been married to Keiko Nagata, who works in finance, which has made life in a Washington Heights condo more affordable, not to mention fulfilling.

Asked about his salary, Mr. Gosling was reluctant to say. "Suddenly I'm feeling very English," he said, though he added that not many pianists in his field made much more money than Mr. McMillen. Mr. Gosling is a member of four contemporary music groups: Ensemble Sospeso, Columbia Sinfonietta, Ne(x)tworks and the New York New Music Ensemble. He gives recitals and has been part of some 30 recordings. Like Mr. McMillen, he lives in Washington Heights, though is at yet unattached. "Maybe after 20 years of music schools, I rather like being autonomous," he said.

"I know there are people with real jobs my own age earning much more," Mr. Gosling said, adding, "But I have great job satisfaction."

Mr. McMillen concurred. "There are a lot of bitter musician out there, but I'm not one of them," he said. "I'm really, really happy."

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