

JACKSON HARMEYER AT ON POINT TALK WITH CARLETTE CHRISTMAS, OCTOBER 5, 2015

On October 5, 2015, Jackson sat in with Carlette Christmas for an interview about Abendmusik Alexandria's upcoming concerts "New Frontiers" and "Classics and a Contemporary." "On Point Talk with Carlette Christmas" is one of Central Louisiana's most beloved radio programs and its shows also rebroadcast on two local television stations. With the upcoming premiere of Jackson's Suite for Solo Guitar at "Classics and a Contemporary," the conversation between Jackson and Carlette naturally gravitated towards Jackson's new piece and his work as a composer. The following is a transcription of the original interview made by Jackson in January 2016.

Carlette Christmas: Welcome back, everybody, to the O. P. T. Network. We're switching gears and talking about something very different this morning. You know we're always interested in how our city can be better and what kinds of things that we're doing in and around our city for entertainment. Well this morning we are joined by Jackson Harmeyer from the Arts Council of Central Louisiana, talking about Abendmusik Alexandria. I know a lot of people have heard about it and a lot of people, Jackson, are still trying to catch up. Welcome back, Jackson.

Jackson Harmeyer: Thank you for having me on this morning.

CC: I want you to talk about Abendmusik again and what it really is.

JH: Well, Abendmusik Alexandria is a classical music series here in Alexandria that we do once a month. It's presented by the Arts Council of Central Louisiana. It's really music for smaller ensembles... it's one, two, three musicians and they'll play classical music but it's outside of the standard repertoire. It's not those fifty pieces that you hear more regularly... it's a lot of variety, it's a lot of unfamiliar music, and a lot of music that's being composed today, both across the world and by Louisiana composers.

CC: So, not the standard repertoire... break that down so that a lay person that has no idea what that means can understand it.

JH: Well, a lot of organizations – and not just locally either – will only play music by the great composers... your Bach, your Beethoven, your Mozart, those guys... but, what we try to do with Abendmusik is reach out. We've got a composer from Shreveport who will be coming down for the October concert and one from Natchitoches as well and then also composers that you probably don't know... so, just a wider array of music than might be heard elsewhere.

CC: Talk about how Abendmusik has grown in Alexandria... what do you attribute that to?

JH: You know, I think, our success has really been because... for two things... we've put together a really quality product and also we've marketed it very well. You really have to do both of those things because you can have the best concert in the world but not tell anyone about it, so no one is there...

CC: [chuckles]

JH: Or, you could have a really quite awful product and market it as much as possible and then everybody sees how much of a disaster it is. But, I think we've found a good balance with a good product and a good marketing strategy.

CC: Well, that's definitely one way of putting it. Talk about "New Frontiers" which is going to be happening, not this Thursday, but next.

JH: "New Frontiers" is our October concert... so, it's on October 15... and at that concert we have the Three Reeds Duo from Natchitoches. It's a husband and wife team. It's saxophone and oboe. The oboe's sort of like a clarinet except it's more of a woody sound. But, what's interesting about their name is that it's only two players, but the oboe has two reeds – two mouth pieces – so they've sort of played on that and created this "Three Reeds Duo" for their name.

CC: Very interesting. And, so, talk about what the people that will come to Abendmusik on October 15 can expect to experience from the Three Reeds Duo.

JH: Like I mentioned, the Three Reeds Duo is a husband and wife team – Paul Forsyth is the saxophonist and his wife Leah Forsyth is the oboist. And, really saxophone and oboe is a strange combination... it's not something that you hear too often. So, what they've done is they've contacted composers that they know... some from Louisiana, some from across the country... and they've had these brand new pieces written for them and so it will be those





pieces – written specifically for this group – that will be played on October 15.

CC: Wow, and so for people who have come out, you guys have appetizers and aperitifs. Tell us about that.

JH: Well, we've partnered with Southern Creations which is a catering service over in Pineville and they bring appetizer plates... and this month it will be jambalaya... and also aperitifs which is just a fancy word for wine and spirits. So, really a casual setting... setup at cabaret tables... just very comfortable.

pieces or haven't had time to convey in those notes. So, it really is a great experience.

CC: Wow, so, it gives the listener an opportunity to go into the mind of what the artist, what the composer was really thinking.

JH: Yeah, and I think that's always really important. A lot of times, people don't really follow classical music and they think "oh, that's just boring" or "oh, that's just for rich people" and that's not the case at all. At some degree, you really have to understand the music, but once you get the background on the composer, it's really easy to follow the music... it's really enjoyable.

CC: Well, speaking of compositions... I know that you have just had your first piece performed. Tell us about that.

JH: Well, back in January, I wrote a piece called "Suite for Solo Guitar" for the local guitarist John De Chiaro, and this weekend... on Saturday... John played that piece for Fred Child who is the host of public radio's *Performance Today*. He is a nationally-known figure within classical music, and probably the leading radio personality for classical music... his show is broadcast on three hundred public radio stations nationwide... and so that was a really great experience – to get a chance to meet him – and, he and I were continuing to chat about the piece over Facebook yesterday as well. He was really impressed with my piece and very complimentary too. I see that as a great experience.

CC: Talk about what the composition of this piece meant to you, and then having it performed by John De Chiaro.

JH: Well, I've actually been composing for seven or eight years now... I started when I was in high school, but this was really the first piece in a while at least that I have had performed. So, John and I have been working on this piece since about January and we'll get together for lunch and he'll want to tell me that he just learned this section and is really enjoying this movement and it has been great working with a real guitarist, working with a real musician who really knows what they are doing with the music.

CC: Absolutely. Well, let's take a break here, Jackson, but when we come back we'll have more about Abendmusik Alexandria and the Arts Council of Central Louisiana. Stay On Point – we're back right after this.

[Break]

CC: Welcome back, everybody, to the O. P. T. Network. This morning we're talking about a growing phenomenon here in Alexandria – Abendmusik Alexandria. Jackson Harmeyer is the Series Director of Abendmusik Alexandria and we're talking about all of the great works and I'm always surprised every time we talk, Jackson, how well Abendmusik has grown.

JH: Yeah, we just started this series last year and this is our second season and already we've had a full house almost every concert. We had more than seventy people at the September concert, which was the first of the second season, and seventy people is a full house. So, it was packed and everyone loved it.

CC: And, so, it was so new to Alexandria and Central Louisiana... was there a little bit of apprehension on your part about if people would embrace it?

CC: Talk about how that has worked – to have the appetizers and also the libations.

JH: You know some people within our organization were a little reluctant at first... could we really make this work? It was a very crossover idea – you don't often hear classical music in that sort of setting, but it has worked great. I think, in a lot of ways, it breaks down the barriers between the musicians and the audience... because we had one lady remark, when we had the cellist in town: she's seen him for years, playing with the Rapides Symphony Orchestra and the other groups but never knew he could talk.

CC: [chuckles]

JH: So, that's not to say anything about the traditional concert format, but this, this is something different... I think people have really enjoyed these one-on-one encounters with the musicians.

CC: Absolutely, and really getting a chance to hear from them has been a real difference for a lot of people.

JH: Yeah, and these musicians are so knowledgeable... a lot of them are actually professors at Northwestern State University or at LSU in Baton Rouge so they know what they are talking about. They're really committed to this music and want to play it for the audience.

CC: So, not only is it great music, but it's a perfect opportunity to learn more.

JH: It is. And, I also write program notes for the concerts... when you arrive and look in the program booklet, you can see what I have written about, and then each of the musicians talk more about the pieces... they know things I don't even know about the

JH: Well, I think I had confidence from the beginning that people would enjoy it... I knew that I was putting together a quality product and that I'm just so dedicated to this music anyway... and I love being able to share it... my dedication and my love for this music with everyone else.

CC: Your passion shows so clear and so bright... it's wonderful to see. What do you anticipate is going to be coming up next?

JH: Next week is our "New Frontiers" concert on October 15 and so that's going to be saxophone and oboe. Then on November 5 is "Classics and a Contemporary" and that concert is pretty cool because that will actually be the world premiere of a new piece that I have written.

CC: Wow, the world premiere!

JH: Yes.

CC: How big is that for you?

JH: It's pretty cool. John De Chiaro, who this piece was written for, is a guitarist locally and has already been playing parts and segments both in Alexandria... we played it over at Menard High School a few days ago and at Coughlin-Saunders Saturday night... now he's going to be taking it to Pennsylvania in October, but the world premiere itself is going to be on November 5.

CC: Amazing! Right here in Alexandria! At the Hearn?

JH: At the Hearn Stage as part of the Abendmusik Alexandria series.

CC: Now talk about composing... you as a young man composing and really starting in high school... did you ever... is this beyond your wildest dreams, or did you hope that this would happen?

JH: You know I had hoped this would happen, but I'm really glad that it is happening... I was really worried there that I was "writing for the bottom drawer," you might say.

CC: [chuckles] Writing for the bottom drawer?

JH: That's a phrase that means writing music that no one is ever going to listen to... But, that has not been the case... I have been thrilled to have an advocate like John De Chiaro out there promoting my music. I've also had others like Paul Christopher, the cellist who had played at our September concert... he has signed up to play a piece for cello that I wrote specifically for him. It's actually been a few years since I have had any of my music performed, but there are a few people around this community who have played my music, so I think that's just great.

CC: So, when did you know, Jackson, that you sort of had the gift for composition?

JH: [chuckles] Probably after I wrote a few works... it wasn't apparent in those first few works that I wrote... I had to keep working at it... really create my own system of composing because I don't play an instrument – I do all of this by listening and, I guess, through my brainpower as well... it's all a very gradual process... but, it's not like I can just sit down and start playing something... I have to think my way through the composition.



CC: And, so, I've said this many times and in many conversations, but you're so young... where does the love for classical music and all of the sort of intricacies that sort of go along with this music come from?

JH: Well, I had started singing when I was a child... I sang for seven or eight years when I was in New Orleans... I sang with the St. Louis Cathedral Boychoir... and we actually recorded a CD and sang at Carnegie Hall and also at Disney World. It was a great experience when I was growing up to be a part of the St. Louis Cathedral Boychoir... and, I guess, through that experience I got to know a lot of the names of composers... Bach, Handel, all those composers. I came up here to Alexandria with Hurricane Katrina and I really couldn't find a choir I wanted to be a part of, but it was through my exposure to those names – the names of the composers – that I began discovering music and began listening to what the local organizations were performing and that was really where my interest in *studying* music and in *writing* music came from, rather than being a performer.

CC: And, so, where does that sort of love come from and that really expression and understanding, so that you can really articulate it through composition to others?

JH: I don't know, it's just been a gradual process... the more I study music, the more I have to write about as a composer, and the more I compose, the more I want to study music... it really goes hand-in-hand.

CC: But, just because you love music doesn't mean that you would be an automatic fit for composition?

JH: No, composition is a really tricky thing... it's like being a writer with words or a painter, but you're working with notes instead... musical notes and instruments... it's really a different experience at the same time.

CC: And, so, how did the young people at Holy Savior Menard receive your composition?

JH: Oh, they loved it. John De Chiaro played a few pieces for them last Monday... pieces by Renaissance composers and pieces that are one hundred, two hundred years old, but I think they also enjoyed having a real live composer there... I think that's something special for people.

CC: So, the first time you heard the composition, what did you think?

JH: You know, I thought that John was doing a great job with it but, even he admitted, he still had a ways to go. He has continued to practice and has just gotten better and better.

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CC: I mean, like, it had literally gained a life from your composition on paper to actually hearing it, and you thought what?

JH: At this point, it's almost separate from me too because...

CC: Really?

JH: Because John has really invested a lot of time and energy into it... has made it his own, but at the same time it's all the notes that I put on paper and he's really making them come to life... so, it's been a great opportunity...

CC: That's amazing! So, October 15 – "New Frontiers." And, then coming up in November, you've got what?

JH: November 5 is "Classics and a Contemporary" and that's the concert where my piece will be performed.

CC: Amazing! So, we really want to make sure that people come out for your composition... your first composition that is being played locally. Congratulations! And, so, tell people how they can connect with Abendmusik and how they can get their tickets.

JH: The concert next week – October 15 – is "New Frontiers" and, so, they can go to Ticket-Central.org and buy those tickets. They are ten dollars apiece and there's also a five-dollar appetizer option. It will be jambalaya from Southern Creations, and people are also welcome to call us at 318 445 7705 and they can buy their tickets that way too. Or, you can show up at the door, but the concert will be 6:00 PM on October 15, saxophone and oboe, Three Reeds Duo... that is "New Frontiers"... and, then November 5 will be "Classics and a Contemporary" where my piece will be premiered.

CC: Absolutely, and, for those people who are new to Abendmusik, what can you say to them to bring them out for their very first time?

JH: Well, I think that anybody who comes is really going to love the concert. I've seen people of all ages at these concerts and from all sorts of backgrounds too... it's not a room full of the same demographic... it's all sorts of different people and they've all enjoyed it. It's something very universal.

CC: Because, really, you would think just an older group, but really I think your youth is drawing a lot of youth to Abendmusik.

JH: Yeah, I'm always thrilled to see the young people at Abendmusik and also at any classical concert. I think it's really great that there are people my age... and younger too... I'm glad that they are exploring classical music.

CC: Absolutely, and I think that your love and your passion for it is drawing in that younger demographic... so, we can't wait to see how Abendmusik is going to grow... and what's going to happen next... lots of great things... and, I know, you've already planned for the rest of the year which we will be talking about in visiting as you come back.

JH: And, Abendmusik now has a new Facebook page, so you can check out all of the concerts there... just look it up on Facebook, "Abendmusik Alexandria."

CC: Now, not only is Jackson a composer, he's also a scholar... very smart. It's always so great to share what the young people in our community are doing to be the change that they want to see. Thank you so much, Jackson.

JH: You're welcome. Thanks for having me on the show this morning.

Jackson Harmeyer is a composer, music scholar, and advocate of music. He is a graduate of the Louisiana Scholars' College – Louisiana's designated honors college located on the campus of Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana. While there, Jackson completed an undergraduate thesis entitled "Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers." He has followed classical music around the world, attending the BachFest Leipzig in Germany, Colorado's Aspen Music Festival, and many concerts across Louisiana and Texas. Resident in Alexandria, Louisiana, Jackson works with the Arts Council of Central Louisiana as Series Director of the Abendmusik Alexandria chamber music series. He also writes the program notes for the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, blogs at MusicCentral, and continues to study other aspects of music in his spare time. His four-movement Suite for Solo Guitar, Op. 21 received its world premiere on November 5, 2015 at Abendmusik Alexandria. Learn more about Jackson and his compositions at www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.

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