

Fragile Beauty

Bill Stevens



A five movement suite for solo trumpet based on the comprehensive aesthetic system of Wabi-Sabi. An integrated approach to the ultimate nature of existence, sacred knowledge, emotional well-being, behavior and the look, sound and feel of things.

The following was part of the liner notes for my 2018 album Connections...

For those that know my story and for those who may not, in February 2005 I inexplicably woke that day not feeling the left side of my face. Unable to form an embouchure to play the trumpet I continued to attempt to work through it over the next several months. I found that I could not play the melody of a 32 bar standard tune. Finding little if no improvement I sought out assistance from a master teacher, Laurie Frink. Over the next several years to her untimely and unexpected death, she was able to supply me with the tools to regain some of what I had lost. Over a decade later, although somewhat improved, I still have no way of knowing if I will be able to produce a sound from one moment to the next. Psychologically, this has been difficult to deal with and needless to say has sapped much of my confidence as a player.

And then I found Wabi Sabi. Wabi Sabi is a Japanese aesthetic. Wabi Sabi is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent and incomplete. It is a beauty of things modest and humble, of things unconventional. In my study of Wabi Sabi, I found this to be a definition of my sound, a sort of fragile beauty. It is also an acceptance, as I transfer the teachings into musical practice, an acceptance of the moment, being right here, right now. Living in the present with no expectations. This state of mind has led me to embrace my sound and my ability to play at that given moment through a state of spirituality and emotional well being. I no longer fight myself. On this album you will hear various moments of my playing. It encompasses who I am as a person, as a musician.

Wabi Sabi has also taught me to listen for the silence, to leave space. The idea that from silence, sound enters and returns to silence. John Cage referred to it as a painter preparing their brush to move toward the canvas, to breath, exhale through the stroke and on the next inhalation, to lift off the canvass.

Sound out of silence, no expectations, in full acceptance.

I came across Wabi Sabi completely by accident one day in 2017 while looking at art books at the Union Square Barnes and Noble where I found the book Wabi Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers by Leonard Koren. I transferred many, if not all, of the concepts to the production of music as follows...

Metaphysical, the Nature of Existence - developing toward or evolving from silence

Spiritual, Sacred Knowledge - the observation of nature, beauty exists in the inconspicuous and overlooked details, beauty out of ugliness

State of Mind, Emotional Well Being - acceptance and appreciation

Moral Precepts, Behavior - focus in the moment, without expectation

Material Qualities - the look and feel, the sound or non-sound of things present

These qualities helped me to be more accepting of my playing, to be in the present moment, right here, right now in complete acceptance, not looking for internal or external expectations. This is my daily mantra, whenever I play.

Fragile Beauty is a five movement suite for solo trumpet and I believe the movement titles tell of my understanding and ownership of these principles with the instrumentation for each movement found below...

The Space Between - (for solo trumpet)

The Acceptance of Fate - (for solo extended trumpet techniques and electronics)

Closeness of Distance - (for cymbal, triangle, finger cymbals and prepared trumpet)

Time Changes, Changes Time - (for solo extended trumpet techniques)

We Will Always, Be... - (for solo trumpet)

The suite is a continuation of my study of the late period Number Pieces by John Cage; however in this piece, the soloist has complete discretion on when to play and does not use a stopwatch to pick up their entrances into the music or exit from the music as was the case in my Seasons suite (2019) based on the series of paintings, the Seasons by Cy Twombly.

Fragile Beauty incorporates melodic content based on tetrachord construction and pentatonic scales using the alteration method as taught by Ron Miller, trumpet extended techniques, electronics and a movement using "little instruments" as per the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

As I was putting the piece together it became clear that conventional music notation would not clearly bring out the emotional content that I hoped this music would convey. That led me to a study of the music of Anthony Braxton. I looked to approach this material, in the words of Anthony Braxton, "with respect to my needs as an instrumentalist, as well as a composer". It was important to me to allow improvisational/fluid musics to coexist and evolve with notated/stable musics as an affirmation of sound and silence.

I am looking for a performance that embraces spirit and risk, that's about feeling and not technique maintaining a spark of invention as per the solo improvisations of Wadada Leo Smith. In the movements with extended trumpet techniques, I have incorporated Anthony Braxton's Language Types within my compositional approach.

Finally, much of the event series music I have produced these past four years has been dedicated to people in my life who stood by me and helped me to grow as a musician and as a person. Fragile Beauty is dedicated to my theory/musicianship/composition teacher from my time at Fredonia State University, Donald Bohlen. Dr. Bohlen was an influential figure in my first two years while at Fredonia. I will always remember our conversations about composition, performing and listening to music.

Thank you.

Bill



Bill Stevens plays the trumpet and flugelhorn, is a composer and arranger and performs in New York City with many of his own ensembles. He has been a guest speaker at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo, Norway and the Australasian Jazz & Improvised Research Network in Melbourne, Australia. He has most recently served as the Assistant Principal - Administration, Supervisor of Arts Disciplines & Director of Jazz Studies at the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts.

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