

# TheaterJones

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## Catch a Breath

<http://www.theaterjones.com/ntx/reviews/20181202155333/2019-05-17/Soundings-New-Music-at-the-Nasher/Breath-Hammer>

The Nasher's Soundings season closed with a dynamic performance by clarinetist David Krakauer and pianist Kathleen Tagg.

by [Keith Mankin](#)



Kathleen Tagg and David Krakauer. Photo by Tasja Keetman.

**Dallas** — The combination of clarinet and piano is not in itself novel, but music is found in the voicing of the instrument and not in the instrumentation. The May 11 performance by the duet of **David Krakauer** on clarinet and **Kathleen Tagg** on piano and “piano orchestra” at **Soundings: New Music at the Nasher** proved this beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Both performers are consummate and acclaimed professionals on their instruments. But in this concert, a reflection of a project they call *Breath and Hammer*, they both took their instruments to extremes, finding novel sounds and voices at every twist and turn. For Mr. Krakauer, that meant extending the reach of his clarinet into dizzying high notes as well as using the instrument for toneless percussion. For Ms. Tagg, the innovation was found in every structural portion of the piano, not only playing the keys with ferocious veracity and nuance, but also beating time on the housing, hammering the strings like a dulcimer, bowing them like a cello or even plucking them like a harp. The concert combined electronic effects of sample looping and videos of the performers to become a multi-dimensional performance piece rather than a staid concert.

The music was heavily rooted in Judaica, although found ways to reach into Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, South African drums and even folksy jazz. All of the composers had personal connections to the artists and the intimacy showed in the tender attention that they gave to the emotionality of each piece. The familiarity allowed them to reflect the essential meaning of each piece while personalizing it to their unique sound. As Mr. Krakauer explained in one of his entertaining and informative explanations between pieces

(during which time Ms. Tagg rearranged the props and devices that she used to render her sounds) the concert was about “the ties that bind all of us — the exchange and honoring of ideas.” There was an intense feeling of collegiality in each of the pieces, whether they were arrangements of pre-recorded works, like accordionist Rob Curto’s *Demon Chopper*, or fantasias on a scrap of melody, such as in the compositions based on tunes from avant-garde Radical Jewish Culture composer John Zorn’s “The Book of Angels.”

The music was a mixed bag of styles and effectiveness. They opened with a homely nostalgic work by Syrian composer Kinan Azmeh, *November 22*, which explored the dichotomy of emotions of an immigrant celebrating and accepting Thanksgiving in a new homeland. The introduction to this piece had a warm jazz feel to it, combining rich treble notes from Mr. Krakauer’s clarinet with a complex and rhythmic accompaniment on Ms. Tagg’s piano. As the intensity built, the pianist displayed her full range of tricks, damping the hammers with a cloth, plucking at the high strings and using a cello bow to sound an eerie drone as the clarinet crescendoed and rose in pitch to an elaborate climax.

The next work, Zorn’s *Ebuhuel*, named for the Angel of Omnipotence picked up on the intensity of its predecessor and was savage and bombastic, with Ms. Tagg eschewing the keys almost completely for dramatic percussive effects. This piece was noisy and distracting, accompanied by rapid visual cuts in the accompanying video and was the least approachable piece in the concert. It was balanced however by a remarkable second-angel work by Zorn, *Parzial*, named for the Angel Guardian of the Seventh Hall of Heaven, which began in a patient, martial clockwork mix of the clarinet and piano/percussion before building into a wondrous apogee of power as if the angel were saying, “I’m just biding my time here, but look at me! Look at how powerful I can be.”

The next work, an arrangement of the song “Shron” by Roberto Rodriguez from his CD *El Danzon de Moises*, imagined the existence of a Cuban-Jewish musical tradition. It was fascinating for the Latin rhythms blending with the free-wheeling, eastern sonorities of Klezmer. Ms. Tagg then introduced a piece she had written, based on the Brazilian bow instrument the berimbau, which is similar to African instruments she had learned in her youth in South Africa. She again pushed the limits of her piano by stopping the long bass strings with her fingers to effect harmonics suggestive of the bows, before Mr. Krakauer joined in on a lovely and fluent melody worked around the single note of the long string.

The most effective pieces in the short concert followed. Mr. Krakauer had composed a charmingly whimsical song called “Rattlin’ Down the Road” in which he turned the tables on Ms. Tagg by using his clarinet as unvoiced wind percussion. The duo then took on their arrangement of Curto’s *forró*-based *Demon Chopper* in which Ms. Tagg pulled all stops with percussion, playing no fewer than seven distinct parts of the piano besides the keys in an effort to mimic the western African drum circles to touch on the roots of the Brazilian tune. This along with the penultimate piece, Emil Kroitor’s lilting and wistful *Moldavian Voyage*, were the most effective uses of the piano cum rhythm section effects. In the latter, the use of a sweeping harp-like strum of the upper strings gave a mystical quality which sounded at once like chimes and a balalaika, coupled with Mr. Krakauer’s most mellow and melodic playing.

The Soundings programs are meant to be challenging. The musical experiences push the envelope of familiar and cautious and with that comes some risk. The program on Saturday night was only partly successful, not from any aesthetic sense, but from the fact that the frenetic and athletic work that Ms. Tagg accomplished to achieve her percussion effects was sometimes gimmicky and distracting. It was too easy to miss the absolute virtuosity of Mr. Krakauer’s musicianship or even the skilled and nimble

musicality of Ms. Tagg's traditional piano playing (as well as her percussion skills). The video also took away from the musical quality in its digitally induced delay.

That said, when they dropped the percussion to go full-on Klezmer for the last piece, a combined composition by the two artists to the traditional Jewish wedding tune "The Geyser" (preluded by a jaw-dropping and partly improvised "Synagogue Wail" from the reed instrument), the absence of the effect was striking. For all its unsettling and distractive quality, the "piano orchestra" combination enhances the musical experience and is well worth further exploration.