

**PRISM**  
Quartet  
with  
**Sō Percussion**  
Partch

### **Blue Notes and Other Clashes** (2016)

Steven Mackey (b. 1956)

PRISM Quartet and Sō Percussion

1 **Deep Hymn** 4:24

2 **Rustic Ballad** 3:54

3 **Off Waltz** 1:58

4 **Pale Lament** 3:07

5 **Mottled March** 3:23

6 **Dappled Grooves** 2:39

7 **Dirty Branle** 2:34

8 **Prismatic Fantasy** 10:57

9 **Future Lilacs** (2016) 22:58

Ken Ueno (b. 1970)

PRISM Quartet, Partch, Derek Johnson, Stratis Minakakis

10 **Skiagrafies** (2016) 13:42

Stratis Minakakis (b. 1979)

PRISM Quartet, Partch, Stratis Minakakis

**Traces**

**Shadow Memories** (starts at 7:20)

### **PRISM Quartet**

**Timothy McAllister** soprano saxophone

**Zachary Shemon** alto saxophone, “hookah” saxophone

**Matthew Levy** tenor saxophone

**Taimur Sullivan** baritone saxophone

### **Sō Percussion**

**Eric Cha-Beach** vibraphone, gongs, tom-toms, triangle, tin cans

**Josh Quillen** steel drums, roto-tom, cowbell, vibraslap, gongs, tom-toms, marimba

**Adam Sliwinski** marimba, flexatone

**Jason Treuting** drum set, concert bass drum, singing bowl, vibraslap, crotales, melodica

### **Partch**

**Erin Barnes** diamond marimba

**Alison Bjorkedal** “Castor” canon, kithara

**Matt Cook** “Pollux” canon, kithara

**David Johnson** chromelodeon

**John Schneider** adapted viola

**Nick Terry** cloud chamber bowls

**T. J. Troy** bass marimba

### **Guest Artist (Future Lilacs)**

**Derek Johnson** adapted electric guitar

### **Conductor (Future Lilacs and Skiagrafies)**

**Stratis Minakakis**

We have developed some pretty sophisticated ways of using language to describe music. But music remains such a slippery, elusive thing that we often find ourselves approaching it sideways—through metaphor and a kind of linguistic sleight of hand. For example, we use the language of the eye to describe this language of the ear: the names of major musical movements were taken from the visual arts (Classicism, Romanticism, Impressionism, Expressionism, Minimalism). And the metaphor of color has been used, to great effect, to talk about music for centuries, at least. In fact, the ancient classical music traditions of India are built on this metaphor: the word “raga” literally means “color.”

So when the PRISM Quartet decided to commission a body of work built around the idea of musical colors, it seemed a natural next step for a group that has already created a substantial and diverse repertoire of music built around the almost infinitely variable sounds of the saxophone family. The sax has a long tradition in classical music, and rock, and even South Indian music; but its most famous players have been jazz musicians—from Coleman Hawkins to Charlie Parker to John Coltrane—whose sound was built around the so-called “blue” notes that are part of the fabric of jazz. So the members of the quartet had a deep connection with the idea of tone colors. But that wasn’t the **Color Theory** moment of genius. No, that came when PRISM decided to ask composers to write for the combination of saxophone quartet and percussion. There is no more kaleidoscopic palette in the instrumental world than in the percussion section—where over the years composers



Josh Quillen  
Photo: JR



Alison Bjorkedal  
Photo: SF

have placed such sonic oddities as bird calls, a record player, automobile parts, and the piano.

**Color Theory** paired PRISM with two percussion-based ensembles: Sō Percussion, the New York-based quartet whose definition of “percussion” is liberal enough to include teacups, twigs, and fuzz (really, check their 2006 CD *Amid The Noise*); and Partch, the California-based ensemble that plays mid-20th century instruments designed by Harry Partch, whose 42-note-to-the-octave tuning system operates with a completely different sonic palette.

Steve Mackey, writing for PRISM and Sō Percussion, went straight for music’s most familiar color metaphor with his title, *Blue Notes and Other Clashes*. Even people with synesthesia, who see colors when they hear sounds, may disagree on what tone or key center is “blue”; but everyone has *felt* blue, and almost every culture has music that sounds like the blues. (There are moments in traditional Vietnamese and Upper Egyptian folk music that could have you believing that the Mekong and Nile rivers are simply tributaries of the Mississippi.)

Mackey’s piece actually does not spend much time in a bluesy mood—it has way too much on its mind for that. But the stunning opener, “Deep Hymn,” is surely some of the most haunting music ever written around a C quarter-tone sharp. The tone colors, soprano sax and steel pans, add to the surreal texture. Each movement of the work, as Mackey notes, is “titled with an adjective that is usually used to describe color and a noun that denotes a musical form.” And each movement riffs on the idea of the “blue

note,” that note that is bent, or flattened, or somehow “wrong,” but wrong in just the right way. *Blue Notes and Other Clashes* is, to quote Mackey, about “a whole spectrum of wrongitude.”

And so we are treated to the jaunty “Rustic Ballad,” where the two quartets play nicely with each other; and the “Off Waltz,” where they definitely don’t. The rhythmic quirks that subvert this movement are analogous to the off-color remarks made by the saxes later in “Mottled March”—they clash, and they serve to keep both players and listeners on their toes. Attentive listeners will hear in the “Mottled March” the fractured echoes of Stravinsky’s “March” from *L’Histoire du Soldat*.

The glowing “Pale Lament,” the genial “Dappled Grooves,” and the crazed, flexatone-wielding “Dirty Branle” (pronounced “brawl”—which somehow seems appropriate here; the branle is a medieval French dance) are all further examples of Mackey’s ear for subtle hues, all passing by in quick succession. The final part of the suite, “Prismatic Fantasy,” is the longest movement and the one that most clearly goes on a journey. Traveling through several fields of color on its way to a rollicking conclusion, the work achieves what Mackey describes as “some sort of crippled grace, and rough beauty.”

Ken Ueno’s piece, *Future Lilacs*, pairs PRISM with Partch, which immediately changes the sonic landscape. Ueno, as an Asian-American composer, had already occupied an ambiguous place in that landscape anyway. “I have thought extensively about my participation in it,” he says, “and my relationship to the neo-colonizing legacy of the Western canon.”



Left to right:  
Taimur Sullivan,  
Jason Treuting,  
Matthew Levy  
Photo: SF



T. J. Troy  
Photo: JR

And so Ueno, a winner of the Rome Prize (very much a part of the Western classical tradition), draws inspiration from Eastern music, especially Central Asian “throat singing,” in which a vocalist sings both a fundamental note and, through the shaping of the throat and mouth, one or more of the overtones of that note.

His work also nods to the incidental “noise” that is not part of the music *per se*, but is part of the act of performing. The key clicks on a saxophone, for example, or the gentle slap of a fingertip on a guitar’s fretboard, are as much a part of Ueno’s sound world as the notes those instruments produce. In Western classical music, incorporating things like clicks and audible intakes of breath fall under the heading of “extended techniques,” but in traditions like those of Japan, they are an accepted—and expected—part of playing music. No self-respecting player of the *shakuhachi* (the bamboo flute) would dream of dampening the sound of his or her breathing while performing. (There are famous examples in Western pop too. Keith Richards and the rest of the Rolling Stones surely heard the loud squeak of his fingers sliding along the guitar strings at the beginning of “Brown Sugar,” but clearly heard nothing wrong there.)

These incidental noises color the sound of Ueno’s music in general, and *Future Lilacs* in particular. The piece begins with an electric version of Harry Partch’s adapted guitar, employing the Western electric guitarist’s favorite “noise”: distortion. By firing off a rapid stream of harmonics, the adapted guitar suggests a tonal center—and therefore a sense of harmonic stasis—even as it appears to be in constant motion; the technique is not

dissimilar from throat singing. And the sound of the plectrum striking the strings, also amplified, offers a curious rhythmic element.

The tonal center that is implied in the opening moments is then fully inhabited by the rest of the Partch instruments. PRISM, playing on instruments that move freely among keys and that can adapt to multiple tuning systems, can then play with or against that tonal center; and again here Ueno offers a “noisy” way to blur the distinction. The “hookah” sax replaces the alto saxophone’s brass neck with seven feet of rubber hose. This not only gives the instrument a different color, it also adds a kind of acoustic distortion and expanded range that allows the “hookah” sax to play in the contra-bass saxophone’s neighborhood.

*Future Lilacs* (the title is from a poem by Robert Hass, which itself calls back to Walt Whitman’s famous “When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloom’d”) plays with gradations of color, of shading, between the two ensembles. So individual voices are occasionally intertwined, and towards the end of the piece, the fitful rhythms that have built up begin to subside, leaving in their wake a series of sustained tones punctuated by a slow tolling of the cloud chamber bowls. It’s a magical conclusion that is somehow both translucent and dark-hued at once.

The PRISM/Partch collaboration is treated in a notably different way in *Skiagrafies* (Greek for Shadow Etchings) by Stratis Minakakis. Inspired by Goethe’s 1810 treatise, “Theory of Colors,” the composer writes that *Skiagrafies* “explores the reflections and refractions of the same sound object across the different timbres of the ensemble, and grows by



Nick Terry  
Photo: SF

continuously recalling and recasting distorted copies of previous material, effectively creating a veil of shadows upon shadows of the initial gesture.”

Minakakis makes no attempt to bend or shape one ensemble’s sound to fit another; instead he announces his intentions right away with a sustained, impossible-to-define chord created by the combination of baritone sax, adapted viola, and a haze of overtones from bowed cloud chamber bowls. The component parts of this thick chord should be fighting with each other—this should be “noise.” But instead it creates a sort of pan-harmonic effect that invites the listener to retune his or her ears to a sonic world where both the saxophones and the idiosyncratic Partch instruments coexist.

Once Minakakis has created this aural frame, he can begin putting paint on the canvas. Little dabs or splashes of color at first, but then increasingly long sweeping gestures take over. That opening chord, of long-held tones beating against each other, colors much of the work: when tunings clash, they are often held for unexpectedly long stretches, until they create an off-kilter harmony of their own.

Later the piece becomes more abstract—almost like a Jackson Pollock painting with smears of marimba, short splashes of kithara strings, and saxophones that sound wayward and lost in a fog of potential tunings. At the end, though, what was lost is found, as the opening drone returns and the instruments quietly reassemble, leaving us in a sonic no-man’s-land that anyone can inhabit.

**John Schaefer**



Intriguing programs of great beauty and breadth have distinguished the **PRISM Quartet** as one of America's foremost chamber ensembles. "A bold ensemble that set the standard for contemporary-classical saxophone quartets" (*The New York Times*), PRISM has performed in Carnegie Hall on the Making Music Series, in Alice Tully Hall with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and throughout Latin America, Russia, and China under the auspices of the United States Information Agency and USArtists International. PRISM has also been presented to critical acclaim as soloists with the Detroit Symphony and Cleveland Orchestra, and conducted residencies at the nation's leading conservatories, including the Curtis Institute of Music and the Oberlin Conservatory. Two-time recipients of the Chamber Music America/ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming, PRISM has commissioned over 250 works, many by internationally celebrated composers, including Pulitzer Prize-winners Julia Wolfe, William Bolcom, Jennifer Higdon, Zhou Long, and Bernard Rands, and MacArthur "Genius" Award recipients Bright Sheng and Miguel Zenón. PRISM's discography includes releases on Albany, ECM, innova, Koch, Naxos, New Dynamic, New Focus, and its own newly launched label, XAS Records. In 2016, PRISM was named by its alma mater, the University of Michigan, as the first recipient of the Christopher Kendall Award in recognition of its work in "collaboration, entrepreneurship, and community engagement."

The PRISM Quartet performs exclusively on Selmer saxophones.

[www.prismquartet.com](http://www.prismquartet.com)



Photo: SF



Photo: SF

For over a decade **Sō Percussion** has redefined the modern percussion ensemble as a flexible, omnivorous entity, pushing its voice to the forefront of American musical culture. Praised by *The New Yorker* for their “exhilarating blend of precision and anarchy, rigor and bedlam,” Sō’s career now encompasses 19 albums, a dizzying array of collaborative projects, a steady output of their own music, and educational work at Princeton University, the Bard College, and elsewhere. Sō has been featured at many of the major venues in the United States including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Walt Disney Concert Hall with the LA Phil. In addition, a recent residency at London’s Barbican Centre, as well as tours to The Netherlands, Finland, South America, Russia, and Australia have brought them international acclaim. Rooted in the belief that music is an essential facet of human life, a social bond, and an effective tool in creating agency and citizenship, Sō Percussion enthusiastically pursues a growing range of social and community outreach. Examples include their *Brooklyn Bound* presentations of younger ensembles; commitments to purchasing offsets to compensate for carbon-heavy activities such as touring travel; and at SoSI 2015, leading their students in packing 25,400 meals for the Crisis Center of Mercer County through the organization EndHungerNE.

[www.sopercussion.com](http://www.sopercussion.com)

**Partch** is the Grammy® Award winning & twice Grammy® nominated ensemble that specializes in the music & instruments of the iconoclastic American Maverick composer Harry Partch who, between 1930 and 1972, created one of the most amazing bodies of sensually alluring and emotionally powerful music of the 20th century. Partch has also expanded the repertoire for its instrumentation with commissions and premieres of compositions by James Tenney, Anne LeBaron, Victoria Bond, and Lisa Bielawa. Partch's creative work has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Copland Fund for Music. The ensemble's discography includes releases on innova and Bridge Records, including *Plectra & Percussion Dances* (Bridge), which received the Grammy® Award for Best Classical Compendium of 2014. Partch has performed for Chamber Music in Historic Sites, the LA County Museum of Art, UCLA's Partch Centennial Celebration, Sacramento's Festival of New American Music, Repertory Dance Theatre (Utah), Mills College Songlines, Gordon Getty Concerts/Getty Center, the Carlsbad Music Festival, Grand Performances, Jacaranda, April in Santa Cruz, Guadalajara's International Book Fair, San Francisco Symphony's American Mavericks, Opera Povera, and The Industry's First Take. They are the resident ensemble of MicroFest, performing yearly at the Walt Disney Concert Hall's REDCAT theatre since its creation in 2004.

[www.partch.la](http://www.partch.la)



Photo: JR

**Derek Johnson (L)** is a composer, electric guitarist, and educator active in the world of contemporary concert music. He is a founding member of the chamber ensemble BASILICA and a frequent collaborator with singer/songwriter Christian Taylor. Johnson has performed internationally with the Bang On A Can All-Stars in collaboration with guest artists Don Byron, Bill Frisell, Phillip Glass, Glenn Kotche (Wilco), Lee Ranaldo (Sonic Youth), and Steve Reich. His compositions have been performed throughout the United States and Canada by leading soloists and ensembles including the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's MusicNOW and Montreal's Nouvel Ensemble Moderne. He is an assistant professor of music theory and composition at the Ball State University School of Music.

**Steven Mackey (R)** was born in 1956 to American parents stationed in Frankfurt, Germany. He is regarded as one of the leading composers of his generation and has composed for orchestra, chamber ensembles, dance, and opera. He has received numerous awards including a Grammy in 2012. His first musical passion was playing the electric guitar in rock bands based in northern California. He blazed a trail in the 1980s and '90s by including the electric guitar and vernacular music influence in his concert music and he regularly performs his own work, including two electric guitar concertos and numerous solo and chamber works. He is also active as an improvising musician and performs with his band, Big Farm. He serves on the faculty of Princeton University. [www.stevenmackey.com](http://www.stevenmackey.com)





Photo left: JR  
Right: SF



## Biographies

25

Rome Prize and the Berlin Prize winner **Ken Ueno** (L) is a composer/vocalist/sound artist who is currently an Associate Professor at UC Berkeley. His music has been championed by Kim Kashkashian, Wendy Richman, Greg Oakes, Frances-Marie Uitti, eighth blackbird, Alarm Will Sound, the Hilliard Ensemble, and Steve Schick with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. Ueno's compositions have been performed at Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, the Muziekgebouw, Warsaw Autumn, Other Minds, and Spoleto USA. He has performed as a soloist in his vocal concerto with orchestras in New York, Boston, Warsaw, Lithuania, Thailand, North Carolina, and Pittsburgh. Ueno holds a Ph.D. from Harvard University. A monograph CD of three orchestral concertos was released on the BMOP/sound label. [kenueno.com](http://kenueno.com)

**Stratis Minakakis** (R) is a composer and conductor whose creative work engages issues of cultural memory and identity, and explores the rich possibilities engendered by the interaction between arts and sciences. A recipient of the Takefu International Composition Prize, he has collaborated with The Crossing, Arditti Quartet, and counter) induction. As a conductor, he works regularly with Boston's Notariatous, a chamber music ensemble specializing in microtonal music; EMMA, NEC's electronic/microtonal/multimedia music initiative; and Alea III, the contemporary music ensemble in residence at Boston University. He was the recipient of the Louis Krasner Award for Teaching at the New England Conservatory, where he is a member of the Composition and Music Theory Faculty. [stratiminakakis.info](http://stratiminakakis.info)



Adam Sliwinski  
Photo: SF

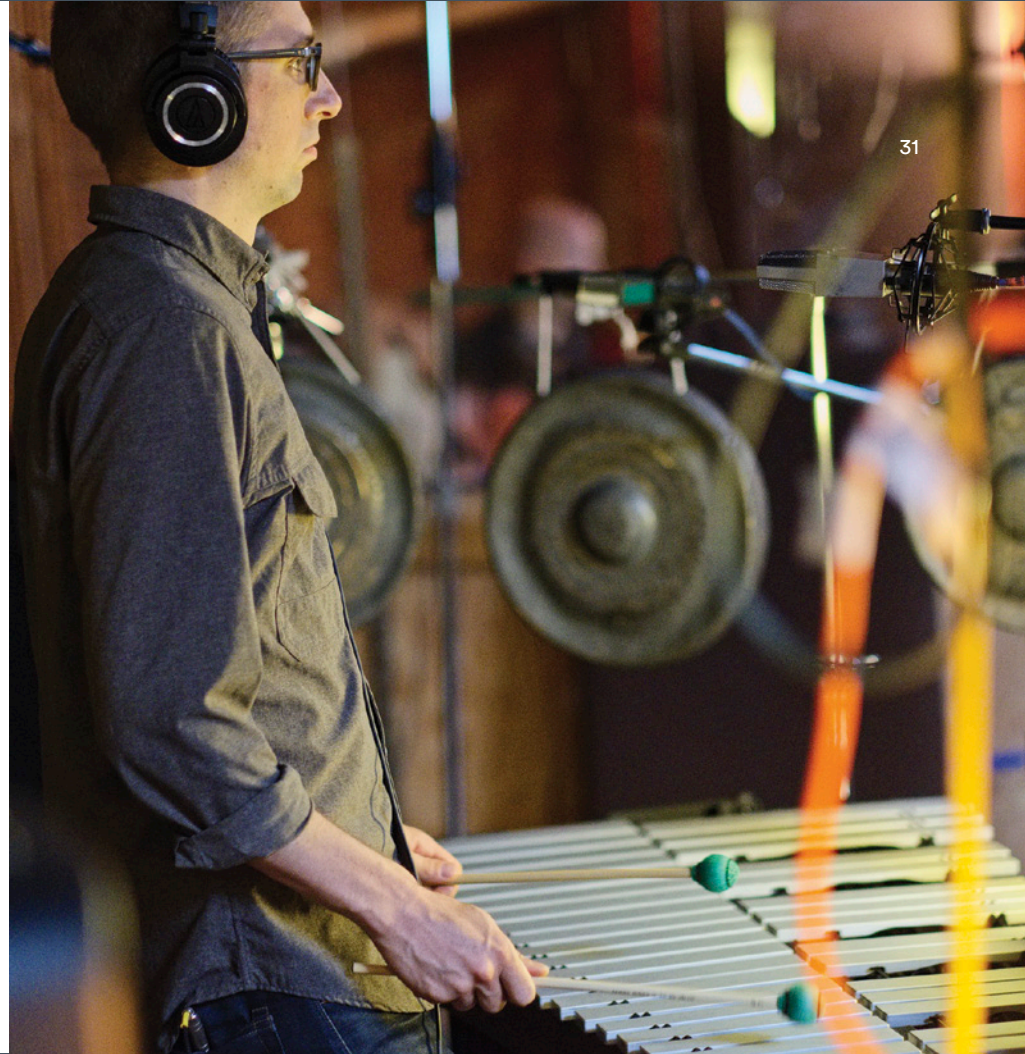


Photo: TS





Jason Treuting (L)  
Eric Cha-Beach (R)  
Photos: JR







Left to right:  
Timothy McAllister,  
Josh Quillen,  
Zachary Shemon  
Photo: SF



Photo top right: JR  
Others: SF



Matt Cook  
Photo: JR



David Johnson  
Photo: TS



John Schneider  
Photo: JR



Erin Barnes  
Photo: TS

## Credits

Executive Producer, Editing, Mixing: Matthew Levy  
Producers: PRISM Quartet; Steven Mackey, Ken Ueno, and Stratis Minakakis  
co-produced their own compositions

Session Engineer: Peter Tramo

Mastering: Katsuhiko Naito

Photography, Design, Layout: Jon Rohrer, fluxism.com (JR)

Additional Photography: Scott Friedlander (SF), Taimur Sullivan (TS)

Recorded in Philadelphia, PA at Rittenhouse Soundworks

Jim Hamilton, owner

Tracks 1–8 recorded June 6–7, 2016

Track 9–10 recorded June 12–13, 2016

## Support

Major support for this recording has been provided by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, with additional support from The Presser Foundation, the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, and New Music USA, made possible by annual program support and/or endowment gifts from Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Anonymous.

**Commissioning Acknowledgements** All works on this recording were commissioned by the PRISM Quartet with support from The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage. *Future Lilacs* was commissioned by PRISM with additional support from the MAP Fund, supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

**The Alice M. Ditson Fund**



**NEWMUSIC**  
USA

**THE PRESSER**  
**FOUNDATION**

