



short bio

Blair McMillen has established himself as one of the most versatile and sought-after pianists today. The *New York Times* has described him as “riveting,” “prodigiously accomplished and exciting,” and as one of the piano’s “brilliant stars.” McMillen leads a multifarious musical life as pianist, chamber musician, conductor, and improviser. He thrives on playing a wide variety of musical styles: from medieval keyboard manuscripts to improvisation-based music of all types; from Classical/Romantic-era piano repertoire to the music of young 21st-century composers. Known for imaginative and daring programming, McMillen has premiered hundreds of new works both as a soloist and with numerous ensembles. He constantly collaborates with composers and artists of other genres in commissioning works that stretch the boundaries of the piano and the traditional recital format.

McMillen has performed in major venues both traditional and avant-garde: from Carnegie Hall, the Moscow Conservatory, Lincoln Center, Caramoor, Miller Theatre, and the Library of Congress; to (le) Poisson Rouge, Galapagos, and the Knitting Factory. Highlights from recent seasons include the Prokofiev *Piano Concerto No. 1* at the Bard Music Festival, the Walter Piston *Concertino for Piano in Carnegie Hall*, and numerous appearances with the New York Philharmonic, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and Albany Symphony. 2014 also saw McMillen’s debut at the Gilmore International Keyboard Festival, where he performed a solo recital featuring Morton Feldman’s *Triadic Memories* right on the heels of a sold-out performance with his tour de force piano sextet, Grand Band.

Blair McMillen is pianist for the Naumburg Award-winning Da Capo Chamber Players, the American Modern Ensemble, and the six-piano Grand Band, among others. He is the co-founder and co-director of the Rite of Summer Music Festival, an alt-classical outdoor concert series. McMillen holds degrees from Oberlin College, the Juilliard School, and the Manhattan School of Music. He lives in New York City, and has served on the music faculty at Bard College and Conservatory since 2005.

press

“Mr. McMillen’s technique was outright formidable. Dazzling and virtuosic; he is at turns, all highly charged density and in the next instant, spiritually translucent and lucent, always with a sensitivity that brings illumination to the knottiest music at his fingertips.”

—John Hammel, *WNTI (NPR)*

“[Joan Tower’s] ‘Rapid,’ which was written in 1996, was fast, loud and hard-edged with tone clusters, cascading lines, syncopated rhythms, and lots of very fast scales in the piano with both hands working closely together. McMillen nailed it all and the crowd

cheered.” —Geraldine Freedman, *The Daily Gazette (Albany, NY)*

“McMillen played with complete control, meticulously observing Feldman’s tempos, meters, and dynamics, making the high notes sing and the bass resonant. The work requires tremendous concentration by the performer. McMillen was clearly up to the job.” —Zaide Pixley, *Kalamazoo Gazette*

“New music’s torchbearer...when played by the formidable Mr. McMillen, any piece sounds terrific.” —Anthony Tommasini, *New York Times*



PHOTO BY BOB LONDON

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program offerings

NO HOLDS BARRED

featuring Blair McMillen as pianist/vocalist/percussionist/improviser

Blair McMillen's "No Holds Barred" program is about exploration and liberation: musical and pianistic exploration, and being liberated from simply playing one's instrument in the "this is what every teacher I took lessons from told me to do" way.

"No Holds Barred" centers around a contemporary classic: George Crumb's extended-technique-filled, otherworldly second book of *Makrokosmos*. Jazz clarinetist Don Byron's infective, jazzy etudes incorporate quite a bit of vocalizing from the pianist, as well as some rhythmic "help" from the audience at one point. Along the way, Blair gets to play the melodica, a toy piano, and various other small percussion instruments. Blair writes, "And I get to play entire pieces in ways I never would have imagined as a naïve elementary

school piano geek growing up in North Carolina; with two baseballs and a catchers mitt, and.....with my nose!"

With this program, Blair McMillen officially embraces this multifarious, multitasking age with gusto. No holds barred. See you at the finish line.

Works to be performed on the "No Holds Barred" program include:

Don Byron, *7 Etudes*, for vocalizing pianist

John Cage, *The Wonderful Widow of 18 Springs*

David Rakowski, *Toyed Together* (for toy piano and piano)

Rakowski, *Schnozzage*

Rakowski, *You Blew It* (for melodica and piano)

Annie Gosfield, *October 5, 1941* (with baseballs/catchers mitt)

George Crumb, *Makrokosmos, Book 2*

WHATEVER CAGE YOU FIND YOURSELF IN

Blair McMillen's "Whatever Cage You Find Yourself In" program centers around Cage's landmark 1948 prepared-piano piece, *Sonatas and Interludes*, and features optional live video processing.

Blair writes, "I have always been as intrigued by the PROCESS of preparing the piano as I have been in playing it. I find that I get a terrific sense of satisfaction out of sharing the preparation process with other people. Of course, this program stands on its own as a musical statement, as a singular event. But when possible, I would very much like to hold a prepared-piano workshop before the concert, the day of or the day before, where attendees join in and help me prepare the piano for the performance. Measuring distances, inserting pieces of plastic and rubber, screwing bolts and screws between specific strings. Workshop attendees can include almost anyone: concert-goers, music students, composers, people young and old, musicians and non-musicians alike. This program is about the bizarre and beautiful sounds of the prepared piano. And the not-insubstantial process of preparation. And finally; sitting back, closing your eyes, and taking in what you've helped to create."



PHOTO BY DANIEL D'OTTAVIO

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program offerings (cont.)

The title of the program is taken from the John Cage quote: "Get yourself out of whatever cage you find yourself in." A discussion about Cage, and a session preparing the piano with willing participants, is ideal but not mandatory.

Works to be performed on the "Whatever Cage You Find Yourself In" program include:

Cage, *Sonatas and Interludes* (1948)

Cage, *4'33* (1952)

MATRYOSHKA

Matryoshka are the ubiquitous (and charming) conical wooden "dolls" that one finds for sale in Russia. These dolls are usually sold in numbers of seven or eight, they fit inside one another, and get progressively smaller or larger, depending on whether you are taking them apart or putting them back together. Matryoshka are hand-painted with the likenesses of important figures in recent Russian history: authors, presidents, actors, classical composers.

This program from Blair McMillen is, quite simply, a celebration: a sonic matryoshka of great 19th- and 20th-century Russian piano music. These are piano works that are both powerful and beautiful, mystical and transcendent; music that moved the art form in new directions, and will continue to stand the test of time for centuries to come.

Works to be performed on the "Matryoshka" program include:

Scriabin, *Sonata No. 9, Op. 68* ("Black Mass")

Scriabin, *Five Preludes, Op. 74*

Prokofiev, *Sonata No. 7 in B-flat major, Op. 83*

Mussorgsky, *Pictures at an Exhibition*

THE FAENZA CODEX, HERE AND NOW

The late Renaissance saw a flowering of secular vocal music, as well as the transformation of the function of music in general. The oldest surviving keyboard manuscript in the world, the Faenza Codex, contains dozens of keyboard arrangements of late 14th-century Italian and French vocal works. For this program, Blair McMillen has arranged and interspersed six Faenza examples with a wide-ranging set of works both

new and very old. Every piece relates directly or indirectly to the Faenza, to the sound-world and spirit of late medieval instrumental music, and to the spirit of keyboard playing and improvising. "Faenza Codex, Here and Now" also includes two works commissioned by Blair: Jon Magnussen's *Toccare!* and Fabrizio de Rossi Re's amplified/vocal-piano piece *Hurucane*. This program, more than anything, pays tribute to the many-centuries-old tradition of keyboard playing, performing, arranging, and extemporizing.

Works to be performed on the "Faenza Codex, Here and Now" program include:

Faenza Codex:

Anonymous, *Constantia*

Francesco Landini, *Che pena questa* ("How it Pains my Heart")

Guillaume de Machaut, *De tout flors* ("Among the Flowers")

Ottorino Respighi, *Three Preludes on Gregorian Melodies*

Girolamo Frescobaldi, *Toccata No. 1, Book 2*

Jon Magnussen, *Toccare!*

John Adams, *China Gates*

Faenza Codex:

Anonymous, *Bel fiore danca* ("Beautiful Flower Dance")

Anonymous, (untitled)

Jacopo da Bologna, *Aquila Altera* ("Proud Eagle")

Fabrizio De Rossi Re, *Hurucane* ("Demon-Spirit of the Wind")

Giacinto Scelsi, *Five Incantations*

Faenza selections arranged by Blair McMillen.



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additional offerings

RHYTHM NATION: PIANO AS PERCUSSION

Of the many elements that define music, rhythm has arguably played the most crucial role in the development and furthering of piano repertoire over the past 100 years. What does it really mean when people call the piano a percussion instrument? You will find this out and much more in this one hour performance-talk. Blair uses the hour to play and talk about piano music in which rhythm appears with an overwhelming presence. Repertoire will include examples from Béla Bartók's *Sonata*, Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, Marc Mellits's *2 Etudes*, George Crumb's *Makrokosmos*, Annie Gosfield's *Brooklyn, October 5, 1941* and Fats Waller's *Swingin' Down the Lane*. Music with repetition, polyrhythms, percussive extended techniques, constantly changing time signatures: all of these things and more will be covered in this program, with time left over at the end for a short Q&A. The length of this program is flexible, depending on scheduling needs.

PIANO 20/21

This is a casual hour-long journey through some of the multifarious trends that constitute 20th- and 21st-century piano music. "Piano 20/21" is geared for pianists, composers, music-lovers, and non-musicians alike.

For this program, Blair will play, demonstrate, and discuss piano music by Aaron Copland, Annie Gosfield, John Cage, Marco Stroppa, György Ligeti, Fred Hersch, and Ray Charles (among others). Blair will touch on many trends: the influence of jazz and improvisation on recent piano music, today's "alt-classical" generation of composers, extended techniques at the piano and what "works," and (for composition students) the clearest way to notate a piano or keyboard part. Perhaps the most important question addressed in this lecture/demonstration is: what makes a piece of piano music memorable, convincing, and worth coming back to, both as a performer and as a listener?

MASTER CLASSES

Blair McMillen has nearly 20 years of teaching experience, and has given master classes at numerous schools and communities around

the country. He has presented master classes to musicians of all ages and levels, and is comfortable coaching soloists and ensembles, in classical repertoire both new and old, orthodox and rarefied. In addition to his classical background, Blair has studied and taught improvisation, jazz, and musical theater, all of which he also enjoys coaching within a public setting. His master classes are targeted, first and foremost, toward the music and the musicians performing. Yet, he knows that involving and engaging the audience, at least to a small degree, is important as well. A short Q&A/discussion session with Blair after a master class is encouraged: it allows for some "down-time" and is an appropriate send-off for everyone involved.

EXTENDED RESIDENCY

The main goal of an extended residency is to allow students to nurture a working relationship with a performing artist over the course of several days. The time period allows for interaction well beyond what is possible in a one-time workshop or master class. The residency often (but not always) takes place in preparation before student performances or specific courses of study.

Residencies can include many facets: master classes, private instruction, performances, youth outreach programs. Discussions about music and the music business are a viable option. A residency often brings exposure to student musicians within the community, outside of their school setting. Ensembles receive several private coachings, and often collaborate with the visiting artist in performance. Instrumentalists and singers benefit from days of lessons and master classes as part of their preparation for performances or auditions.

An ideal residency lasts from 2-5 days, with an appropriate amount of time set aside for rehearsals, master classes, and other interactive programming. There are no age restrictions, and the number of students involved can vary from several to numbering in the hundreds.