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Virtuoso Flutist Claire Chase on Her Inspiration: 'Its Raw, Visceral Energy Blew the Roof Off of My Adolescent Imagination'

BY ALISON KINNEY

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Marc Perlish

Claire Chase wants to show us what solo flute music sounds like when you take away the flute and the soloist. Or when the score is danced, the sound engineer performs, and the flute's played as a drum set. For *Density 2036: part iv*, at the Kitchen from December 1 to 2, Chase puts her instruments in dialogue with other instruments, artists — and absences. "The life and the body of the performer are necessarily ephemeral things," she says. "The body of music that we're creating to go through these two ephemeral things is anything but ephemeral."

It will be the fourth installment of a 23-year cycle of works for solo flute commissioned by Chase and inspired by pioneering French composer Edgard Varèse's foundational 1936 flute solo, *Density 21.5* (named for the density of platinum, of which Varèse's flute was made, in grams per cubic centimeter). "I fell madly in love with the piece when I was thirteen. Its raw, visceral energy blew the roof off of my adolescent imagination," Chase says. "I tried to program it on my junior high school graduation ceremony, on a football field in a Southern Californian public school, but was told to play 'Danny Boy' instead."

Now, with a 2012 MacArthur grant under her belt, Chase can finally devote herself to the piece. Her *Density* project's first installment arrived in 2013 and included works by Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Going forward, Chase has only one rule: "I don't want to recycle ideas,

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vocabularies, [or] languages." Audiences will find that *part iv* diverges visually as well as musically from previous sections, with streamlined stage design and — the critical feature — more focus on Chase's collaborators. "This cycle really blows open the notion of what a solo performer is," says Chase. "In my book, a solo artist is always a collaborative artist, because a solo project is never really a solo project. Even when I'm working with a composer, they're up there onstage with me. If not in physical form, spiritually they're up there."

In this case, though, the composers are often physically onstage. Suzanne Farrin premieres "The Stimulus of Loss," with Chase providing glissandi on flute. Farrin says she wanted to create a "sound world" that combines herself and Chase, capturing "the magical sensibility that exists when two people love and respect each other: the disappearance of other and self, the creation that follows emptiness." They both also take turns performing *Density 21.5*, simultaneously with artist Julie Beauvais's choreography, which Beauvais calls "scores of the body."

Later, Pauchi Sasaki joins Chase to perform "Gama XV: Piece for Two Speaker Dresses," with Sasaki on violin, Chase on bass flute, and both of them in Sasaki's interactive dresses, each made of 96 speakers, which turn their wearers into vibrating feedback instruments. For "Bertha's Lair," composer Tyshawn Sorey plays drums while Chase plays the contrabass flute, the sound of her fingers on its keys amplified electronically into what is effectively a separate percussion instrument. Jazz composer-pianist Vijay Iyer's electronic "Flute Goals" dissolves the soloist entirely — it's built from five sound files that Chase improvised and emailed to Iyer. The program gives performance credit for the piece to sound engineer Levy Lorenzo, Chase's collaborator for the entirety of the *Density 2036* project.

Unlike the rest of the composers, Richard Beaudoin does not himself appear onstage. But he's there through a proxy — his own, transformed version of Chase. For "Another Woman of Another Kind," he used microtiming to slow down an earlier recording of Chase playing *Density 21.5*, finding musical qualities in extraneous elements such as key noise and inhalation — "the little fuzz around the edges of the notes," Chase says. The live performance reunites this composition with the flutist, adding British critic and librettist Paul Griffiths's stories and the choir Roomful of Teeth. "The voices act like a pool of memory, singing the old Claire back to the Claire of the present," says Beaudoin. "The whole work was made to capture and re-express her enormous performing energy."

This energy, for both performance and craft, is what brought Chase her MacArthur — the foundation cited her "purity of tone, technical virtuosity, and delicacy of expression" as primary reasons for awarding her the coveted grant. But it's also something she's acutely aware is temporary.

In 2036, the centennial of Varèse's original composition, Chase and dozens of collaborators will perform the entirety of the immense new repertoire created for this project. Chase anticipates the demands of that performance with mingled trepidation and awe: She'll be 58, in a body she already calls "an imperfect, aging, fragile, and mercilessly temporary home" for her music. But she is undaunted. "I want every *Density* creation to be unique, new, and unabashedly risk-taking," she says, just like her source material, *Density 21.5*. "Twenty-five years later, it still leaves me reeling, reveling, and searching."