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Real Vocal String Quartet

Primary Genre: Acoustic

Secondary Genre: World

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"As good as it gets." (Pacifica Tribune) This all-female quartet plays all original arrangements for strings and voice. Original songs, tributes to a fantastic array of music from Louisiana to Kenya to Brazil, and sparkling improvisation that impresses and moves.

Artist Information

Biography

RVSQ was formed in 2003 by premier San Francisco violinist/composer Irene Sazer. Since then, the quartet has performed to sold out audiences around the Bay Area, and is currently putting the finishing touches on their first studio album. RVSQ's influences range from traditional American string band music to contemporary improvisation, from Brazilian folk rhythms to hypnotic meditations from West Africa. Through it all, the threads of spine-tingling vocal and instrumental harmony and fearless, inspired improvisation weave a web of original acoustic music played with a deep groove.

Irene Sazer is a violinist, composer, arranger and singer. Irene has developed a unique style of putting world and roots music together with her classical, jazz, and pop sensibilities. It's rare to find such a fine instrumentalist so diverse as a musician. Known best to international audiences as one of the founding members of The Turtle Island String Quartet, Sazer has also served as concertmaster with the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra as well as the Bay Area Women's Philharmonic, and has performed with The Oakland Symphony, the San Francisco Symphony, and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. She has performed as soloist with The Peninsula Orchestra, The Rohnert Park Chamber Orchestra, and at the Cabrillo Music Festival. Educated with a performance degree from the Peabody conservatory, she became fascinated with improvisation, and furthered her evolution at the Banff Centre of Fine Arts where she worked with Frank Foster, Slide Hampton, and the Vancouver Ensemble of Improvisation. Her violin expertise has made her an in demand genre-hopping player as well, recording and/or performing with, to name just a few, Jai Uttal, Ali Akbar Khan, Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Charles, Natalie Cole, Frank Sinatra, Kitaro, Smoky Robinson, David Grisman, Linda Rondstadt, Bjork, Maria Marquez and Billy Joel. Irene's CD of original songs is entitled "First Things First."

Violinist Alisa Rose is a member of the Picasso Quartet, the Real Vocal String Quartet, Homespun Rowdy, Forty-Nine Special, and A.J. Roach and the Strange Pilgrims. Alisa performed recently at Hardly Strictly Bluegrass, Strawberry Music Festival, the Olympic Music Festival, Blue Highways Festival in Utrecht, Netherlands, Reinberger Chamber Hall, and in Carnegie Hall. She has also recorded and/or performed with Mars Arizona, Matt Bauer, Rachel Ries, Nels Andrews, Anais Mitchell, ALO, Train, and Bauhaus. Alisa's chamber music collaborators include Jean-Michel Fonteneau, Martha Katz, Jodi Levitz, Bettina Mussumeli and Ian Swensen and she has premiered works for the 5C Composers Collective, David Graves, and David Garner. Alisa received her Bachelor's degree and Master's degree in Chamber Music from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where she studied with Camilla Wicks and Bettina Mussumeli. She currently teaches privately, at the SF Friends School, and runs a San Francisco Conservatory of Music outreach program for young disadvantaged violinists.

Bay Area native Dina Maccabee performs with many Bay Area ensembles on violin and viola. In 2007, she toured in Russia and Europe with Beth Custer's live film score project, "My Grandmother," and songwriter Vienna Teng. In addition to her own songwriting group Ramon and Jessica, she performs with The German Projekt (songs of Kurt Weill), Howard Wiley's Angola Project (contemporary spiritual-inspired jazz), the Japonize Elephants (circus-klezmer-bluegrass), Evie Ladin's Evil Diane (original old-timey folk), and the Middle-Eastern psychedelic ensemble Khi Darag. Her interest in traditional fiddle styles has led her to study with Bay Area fiddle hero Chad Manning, fiddle lessons in Ireland, as well as forays into Cajun and French Canadian styles. Performance highlights include appearances with Donovan, Sufjan Stevens, and Tin Hat Trio, and her playing is featured on numerous successful records with artists such as Vetiver, The Cuts, Vienna Teng, Spencer Day, the Shotgun Wedding Hip Hop Symphony, and Carla Bozulich. She has also composed and recorded scores for Shotgun Players, Just Theater, and several San Francisco filmmakers.

Jessica Ivry (cello) is a freelance musician who plays and composes a myriad of styles including Classical, Balkan, East European and improvisation. She is also an instructor of music at the College of Marin. Jessica plays with the Real Vocal String Quartet, an original music string and vocal ensemble and with avant-cabaret composer and singer Amy X Neuburg and the Cello ChiXtet. Jessica has also performed and toured with the Beth Custer Ensemble (music for silent film), with singer/songwriter Vienna Teng and with Balkan women's choir, Kitka. For San Francisco's A Traveling Jewish Theatre's 2005 and 2007 seasons, Jessica scored and performed original music for *The Bright River*, a hip-hop retelling of Dante's *Inferno*, and for Arthur Miller's classic drama, *Death of a Salesman*. Jessica recorded on Grammy nominated album, "Blueprint of a Lady" for jazz vocalist, Nneena Freelon. Recently Jessica performed with ARK, a conglomerate of Bay Area and New York Klezmer musicians at the 18th Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow, Poland and for the final concert of the 23rd Annual Jewish Music Festival in San Francisco. This project was a feature on "Spark", KQED public television series about Bay Area artists. Jessica holds degrees from Skidmore College and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

Instrumentation

Irene Sazer, violin and voice
Alisa Rose, violin and voice
Dina Maccabee, viola and voice
Jessica Ivry, cello and voice

Discography

Real Vocal String Quartet (2010)

Press Reviews

Inventive and brilliant, Irene Sazer & The Real Vocal String Quartet rock the Sanchez

Pacifica Tribune

By Jean Bartlett
Arts Correspondent, Pacifica Tribune

November 2, 2005

The Italian 19th century virtuoso violinist Niccolò Paganini expressed such near supernatural prowess on the violin that he was the passion of audiences throughout Europe. And he deserved the praise. He was the guy that innovated the left-hand pizzicato. He was the guy who used new and exciting tunings enabling the violin to shout forth animal

cries and the sounds of the human voice. He was also the guy who, late in his show, would cut various strings of his instrument and then boldly play the most difficult passage on the remaining strings, brilliantly. He was so incredibly popular in his time, that even now his name is deservedly a big deal.

Well today we're living in the time of our own big deal virtuoso violinist, and her name is Irene Sazer. Now Ms. Sazer has gone on to add a little spice to her already gripping performance by seating herself within a circle of three other virtuosos; and the sound they shake out is 21st century kick-butt legend.

Irene Sazer & The Real Vocal String Quartet (RVSQ) played Saturday night at Pacifica's Sanchez Concert Hall. Here's the list of the players: Irene Sazer on violin, vocals and guitar; Kate Stenberg on violin and vocals; Dina Maccabee on viola, violin and vocals; and Jessica Ivry on cello and vocals. What I like about RVSQ's sound is they are all about today's music; world music. One of their compositions might take you from a patchwork quilt of Appalachia to under a river current of Congo to over the Hill of Tara and out beyond a choro lit Brazil. Their sound skirts classical, gypsy, folk, Bartok, jazz, light rock and diversity. Some compositions are serene, others are foot stomping but all are intelligent with an undercurrent of thrill.

They opened their show with a string tune-up that brought the house down. Then with vocal strong woman cries they hit the scales running with "Talking String, Talking Drum" (Sazer). In this piece Sazer proves there is a real sibling relationship between violin and drum.

If green beans could sing out in jazz cool while violin/viola strings stirred summertime over mellow pump cello you would have "Green Bean Stand" (Sazer). Bela Fleck and Gerry Douglass wrote The Lochs of Dread and Sazer arranged it for quartet, her quartet. This was shadow cat on a high wire. Viola string strut smoked with cello bass and sashay violin to make a tune happening snap. "Falling To My Feet" (Sazer) is simple talk sweetness. "Kitchen Girls" (Maccabee) threw a little Kentucky Blue Grass, African tribal rock, parlor classical and farmhouse hoedown into the stewpot and rocked. Cellist Ivry wrote "Break Up Song #1" and sang it in a kind of mesmerizing Celtic, ethereal Dylan rock chant. You could almost hear Tibetan bells and a quiet wind rustle between great mountain peaks, making a sound of mist and magic.

Next up, a song Sazer likes to call "Now." Why? Because they write it on the spot. Each musician takes a turn with a tune that comes to be as they create from mind to instrument and the others chime in to make it a Quartet original. Sazer's piece rocked of Romany and Mars. Stenberg's piece climbed through classical and the colors of the Civil War. Cellist Ivry strolled an Appalachian waltz. Violist Maccabee gave a nod to Halloween with casket opening strings, bat flying plucks and a Transylvania melter. My seat neighbor wanted to know how inarnation was she going to be able to buy this made up song on CD?

They ended the first set with a Sazer arranged version of two combined tunes of a Kenya artist. Joy walking, leaves rustling, water falling like gold through cupped hands; this is just a brief description of this string song of serenity, and their harmony chant was a vocal walk through the clouds.

The second set was as good as the first, which hardly seems possible. Dina Maccabee's "Farewell to Spring" must have been whispered to her by the flowers for it was all curtsy and bow to fields of bright colors. "Darling" (Sazer) was sage brush and Joni Mitchell and just a nice place to be. Every song in the set (and in their evening) worth hearing, breathing in and being a part of.

RVSQ defines brilliant musicians with fun personalities playing beautiful, inventive music; that's as good as it gets. Dang it, when is their CD coming out? I'll be checking out their website at <http://rvsq.com> and so should you.

Globally Infused Music
San Francisco Chronicle
NIGHTLIFE

Andrew Gilbert

Irene Sazer was ready for a musical party, but tonight's event at Freight & Salvage wasn't what she had in mind. A force on the Bay Area music scene for two decades, the violinist corrals her far-flung musical passions in the Real Vocal String Quartet, a band that weaves together the textures of a vocal ensemble and a string band with a mix of original songs and Sazer's arrangements of tunes from Ireland, Kenya and Brazil.

Featuring violinist-violist Dina Maccabee, cellist Jessica Ivry and violinist Alisa Rose, the band showcases some of the region's most creative young string players and vocalists. But in the midst of working on the quartet's first album, Sazer was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma, and although her prognosis is good, she's been forced to put the project on hold.

"This band started out with my vision, but has taken on a truly collaborative vision," Sazer says from her home in West Berkeley. "Everybody is an improviser and composer, and they're all so talented and creative. I'm damn sad I have to take a break. This was going to be our yearly concert at the Freight. Hopefully, I'll get better and back in the saddle soon."

Instead of canceling the gig, Maccabee and fiddler Kaila Flexer put out the word to Sazer's musical colleagues, turning tonight's show into a benefit for Sazer, who will take the stage if she's feeling up to it. Among the musicians scheduled to perform are singer-songwriter Vienna Teng, Aux Cajunals multi-instrumentalist Suzy Thompson, fiddler Amy Hofer, the Crooked Jades' Erik Pearson on banjo, reed master Sheldon Brown, klezmer mandolinist Gerry Tenney, jazz and blues guitarist John Schott, and avant-garde cabaret vocalist Amy X Neuburg, a cast that reflects the many stylistic circles through which Sazer moves.

Raised in a musical family from Los Angeles -- her father, Victor Sazer, a longtime fixture on the L.A. studio scene, is author of the instructional book "New Directions in Cello Playing" -- Sazer graduated from the Peabody Conservatory and settled in the Bay Area in 1985.

Within weeks, she helped launch the pioneering, jazz-steeped Turtle Island String Quartet. She's served as concertmaster of the Bay Area Women's Philharmonic and performed with the Oakland and San Francisco symphonies, while playing or recording with everyone from Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra and Ray Charles to Ali Akbar Khan, David Grisman and Bjork.

"The thing I've always appreciated about Irene is that she's mischievous and playful, like a sprite, and at the same time she can tear into that violin and play like crazy," says Flexer, who started collaborating with Sazer 20 years ago in the quirky Composers' Cafeteria band. "I run into a lot of kids who have studied with her. She'll teach a heavy-metal tune on violin or whatever they want to do."

Andrew Gilbert, 96hours@sfchronicle.com

Ladies pluck, bow, and shout

East Bay Express

September 8, 2004

When Irene Sazer helped start the Turtle Island String Quartet in Oakland a decade ago, its classical-ification of Cole Porter and Miles Davis dissolved borders in a frenzy of joyful pioneering, adding a laid-back component to the deconstruction of chamber music that the Kronos Quartet has begun some years before. These days, violinist and violist Sazer still gets her yo-yos out, playing with artists such as Holly Near and Will Bernard and Motherbug, and on soundtracks to such films as Hellboy and Once Upon a Time in Mexico. This week, you can see what's she's been up to with Irene Sazer's Vocal String Quartet, a foursome of ladies who aren't afraid to raise voices and bang on fiddles and such while playing original compositions, Kenyan and Brazilian songs, and a Paul Simon cover.

-- Stefanie Kalem

The Art of Music Engraving

Strings Magazine

The Art of Music Engraving

David A. Lusterman, Publisher of Strings Magazine
January 12, 2009

Graham Pellettieri, music editor of Strings, and I recently had the pleasure of organizing a reading and recording session with the Real Vocal String Quartet (Irene Sazer and Alisa Rose, violins; Dina Maccabee, viola; and Jessica Ivry, cello), who apply their prodigious classical chops to a variety of original and arranged music, occasionally enriching their performances by singing and playing at the same time, a practice I find much easier with a guitar in hand than a cello. Not so these four, who break no sweat and sing remarkably well.

The members of RVSQ are helping us to launch a new sheet-music series called Strings Charts (learn more at www.allthingsstrings.com/books). At our January 7 session, we focused on proofreading three editions that were about to go off to the printing plant. My colleague Graham is an uncommonly thoughtful and disciplined music engraver (if I may use that archaic term in this digital era), and he and the quartet members spent considerable time discussing the nuances of printed part-marking. When and whether to include bowings and fingerings? (Sometimes, especially in editions for younger players.) Should the terms "melody" and "harmony" be used to alert ensemble members as to the relative importance of phrases? (Often a good idea, but the phrase "melody octave" is overkill and perhaps misleading.) Will musicians understand the expressive marking "disaffectedly" (Probably, especially in the string arrangement of a somewhat disaffected rock ballad.) And then there's the killer query of the day: How do players interpret notes over which both a dash and a dot appear? (Very differently, depending on the player.)

So if you've ever stared at the music on your stand and wondered what the editor could possibly have been thinking when he/she topped that series of E-flat quarter notes with the mysterious dash-dot articulation, or asked you to play a passage "disaffectedly," rest assured that the editor was indeed thinking . . . and that, in fact, every piece of well-notated music you ever encounter (or write yourself) involves a seemingly endless series of considerations, hesitations, and decisions. A "bad edition" is merely one that has been prepared either thoughtlessly or in needless haste.

And you thought performing was a complicated business!

Setlist

Talking String Talking Drum (Sazer)
Kitchen Girls (Trad, arr. Maccabee)
Bling - Wide (Sazer)
Night Game (P. Simon, arr. Sazer)
Kothbiro (A. Ogada, arr. Sazer)
A Place for Me (Ivry)
Elephant Sheets (Rose)
Farewell to Spring (Maccabee / J. Olsen)
Darling (Sazer)
Passatempo (Pixinguinha, arr. Sazer)

Basic Requirements

4 vox mics
4 armless chairs
2 - 4 stage monitors
optional: 4 inst. mics

Calendar

Date	Time	Venue	City
Sep 17, 2009	8:00 PM	142 Throckmorton Theater http://www.142throckmortontheatre.com/	Mill Valley, CA
Nov 14, 2009	TBA	Wisteria Ways www.wisteriaways.org	Berkeley, CA
Mar 17, 2010	6:30 PM	Salons at the Rex: Hotel Rex	San Francisco, CA

Performance is part of San Francisco Performances local concert series



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