Brooklyn meets Iran, on Musical Turf

VENTURESONE STRING QUARTET BROOKLYN RIDER RETURNS TO SANTA BARBARA, THIS TIME IN A MULTI-CULTURAL PROGRAM WITH ANOTHER REGULAR VISITOR TO TOWN, THE WELL-KNOWN IRANIAN KAMANCHEH MASTER KAYHAN KALHOR

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent

Brooklyn Rider
with Kayhan Kalhor
When: 7 p.m. Thursday
Where: UCSB Campbell Hall
Cost: $25-$50, general; $10 students
Information: 893-1535
artsandlectures.ucsb.edu

To dig into area code—
speak for a minute, the
718 has been invading
the 805 in recent years,
in a serious musical
way. We're talking, of
course, about the much-
acclaimed and
inately flexible Brooklyn Rider
string quartet, whose Campbell
Hall show on Thursday will
be their fourth area appearance
in as
many years.

True to the changeable nature of
the more than a decade-
old group's aesthetic, each appearance
has been unique. Two concerts
at Hahn Hall, in 2013 and 2015,
balanced the more certifiable
temporary classical stamp
with eclectic detours, especially in
the 2015 "Brooklyn Rider
Almanac" program. Their
residency as part of the 2014
edition of the world-renowned
Ojai Music Festival (where they
will also return this June) put
them in yet different lights.

This time out, Brooklyn meets

Brooklyn Rider

Persia, in a collaboration with the
great kamancheh (a Persian spike
fiddle) player — and frequenter of
Santa Barbara stages — Kayhan
Kalhor. The pairing put out the
intriguing album "Silent City" in
2008, and will cross and interface
cultural boundaries for the
upcoming concert.

"To further flesh out and
pleasingly complicate the broader
story of the constellation of
musicians and projects connected
to this quartet, founding
members, violinists Johnny
Gandelman and Colin Jacobsen,
also play in the stand-up chamber
orchestra the Knights and with
Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project
— both of which have also passed
through our fair city. The multi-
limbed musical family saga
continues.

In an interview last week, I
asked Mr. Gandelman what was
or the horizon for the group,
and he quickly mentioned
three albums "in the can," an
album of new work written for
the group, a collaboration with
musicians with jazz links (Joshua
Bolman, Scott Colley and Satoshi
Takeishi, playing music by Patrick
Zimmerli) and a collaboration
with "string hero of ours," Martin
Heres. "It should be a fun year,"
he surmises.

News-Press: You have made
regular repeat visits to Santa
Barbara and the region in recent
times. Does this area have a
special appeal to you?

Johnny Gandelman:
Absolutely. We've been coming
to the area for almost 10 years now,
and in many ways, it does feel like
coming home. We've been lucky
to be presented by organizations
which have long histories of
tradition and innovation. That
allows us to simply be ourselves.
We feel inspired to bring our
latest projects here, because there
is a sense of trust, between us and
presenters, us and the audience.

NP: How much time do you
spend in Brooklyn these days,
and how has the Brooklyn musical
scene changed since your group
started out? Is it still in a kind of
cross-genre musical renaissance?

JG: It varies from season to
season, but roughly half a year is
spent on the road. The scene is
constantly evolving, there is of
course no shortage of amazing
artists of all genres living and
working in Brooklyn. At the same
time, many of our friends and
colleagues are thinking of leaving
or have already left — the place is
just so damn expensive.

But yes, on any given night,
you can hear live music that will

blow your mind. I have two young
kids, so I almost never get to see
anything.

NP: You made a beautiful
record with Kayhan, "Silent
City," in 2008. I read that you
will also include a Philip Glass
string quartet and traditional
Persian music on the upcoming
concert program. Is the idea to
bridge West and East — and this
particular and ancient Middle
Eastern cultural world?

JG: Philip's music has a lot in
common with Persian classical
music. In both, small melodic and
rhythmic patterns come together
as a larger whole, creating a
beautiful tapestry. Both allow us
to get to a place of alert group
meditation. It's an incredible
feeling.

NP: It must be uniquely
interesting to work with Kayhan,
with his distinctive variation on
the bowed string instrument
theme. Was there a process of
finding common musical ground
with him when you began to
 collaborate, or did it come
naturally?

JG: This project was born out of
our collective work with the
Silk Road Ensemble. We were
immediately blown away by
Kayhan's ability to transform a
room, to draw the audience in
— it's literally magical. So, there
was a lot of mutual respect for
each other's traditions, as well as
a mutual recognition of the space
where our traditions intersect
with each other, and the desire to
explore that space.

NP: You have worked with the
Silk Road project for years. Has
that project really expanded your
musical worldview, drawing you
to places and cultures beyond
the usual Western sources?

JG: Not only has it expanded
our musical worldview and
curiosity, it has also been an
incredible source of inspiration.
Having a chance to be in a
laboratory environment with
musicians who are as much
innovators as they are true
masters of their traditions opens

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**MUSIC**

WAYFARE

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the now and the new?

MD: I do think it's important to sing contemporary works, if they touch you and you believe in them. I am currently working with a wonderful composer by the name of Timothy Collins from Australia. He has written a song cycle for me and a string quartet, which will be premiered in the Aspen festival this summer. "El Nino" by John Adams is a piece I have done quite a few times, including with the LA Phil, and it is always a huge honor to sing.

I had the opportunity of singing and recording "Rage and Remembrance" by John Corigliano at the beginning of my career, which went towards the support of the AIDS quilt. With Elliot Carter, I premiered two of his song cycles. One with James Levine for chamber orchestra, and one with Daniel Barenboim with full orchestra.

These are incredibly difficult vocally and musically, and I loved the challenge of it. They take much more work to understand and appreciate, and I love the moment when you discover it. I think it is imperative that we support and continue to explore and program new works. We have to keep challenging ourselves to learn and understand what the composers are presenting us. Music and art represents the world at the time of composition.

NP: Do you have any longings for projects or musical areas you have yet to broach?

MD: There are certain roles I would like to take on eventually. I also love the idea of doing things like both Cassandra and Dido in "Les Troyens" (she was in the double Grammy-winning recording of that opera, in 2001) in the same night. I did concerts with Boston Symphony and James Levine. In the first half, I sang Jocasta in "Oedipus Rex," and the second half I sang Judith in "Bluebeard's Castle." I love challenges like that.

NP: Do you feel that you have a nice balance of diverse settings in your musical life at the moment, between opera, orchestral work and other things on your plate?

MD: I have been so fortunate throughout my career because I really love all vocal facets, and get the opportunity to do them. I love recital, chamber concerts, full orchestral concerts, concert operas and fully staged operas. Each of these brings a different challenge, a different fulfillment, and a different result, and I wouldn’t want to part with any of them.

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**ART**

STUDENT

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Expectations do a pleasant back flip with Olivia Friedman's wonderful small painting "Pipes," which takes on the industrial subject of its title, but applies a soft-edge impressionistic style rather than the post-Precisionist tack we might expect. She works against type, in other words, to alluring effect.

Megan Kagyeyah's "Transient" is a diptych painting of a colorfully clad and vaguely exotic woman, her face half-obsured by a large flower — but also by said floral burst. Across the room, another art-infomiting-art touch comes into play with Emily Gorsh "The Trolley," with three visions of the great Mexican artist/legend Frida Kahlo before a trolley, referring to the trolley accident which changed the physical fate of an 18-year-old Kahlo.

From the beautiful-yet-deadly expressive niche, Chelsea Willett's "A Study in Poison" is a screen print with nine poisonous mushrooms, lovingly rendered, while also inflected with a fuzzy buzz of peril. Working from a somewhat opposite direction in terms of perceived beauty and artistic ends, Jia Chuan Lily Jones' "Strawberry" zooms in on the rugged skin of the berry we know and love, but by doing so in black and white, and in a hyper-close-up of the seeded surface, this savoury thing yields a strangely gritty countenance. The artist styly invites us to revisit a cherished ideal and pose the question: Strawberry, where is thy sweetness?

For the sake of sentimentally loaded local angles, Adam Cumberbatch deserves some special award for his pencil and ballpoint piece "Anacapa and Ortega" which, come to think of it, may be the straightest artwork in the room, but nicely done. The extra x factor is the subject, the beloved and recently demolished old Cravito Iron Works building across the street from the Paradise Café — a loss which many longtime locals see as another sad reminder of the changing, gentrifying face of our old town.

But we digress.

For another more pertinent local angle, the SBOCC student show is one of those treasured annual traditions in the city, going strong and looking extra good in this year's model.

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**MUSIC**

BROOKLYN

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up so many ideas about what's possible, in music, in life, in finding understanding through mutual respect, curiosity and risk-taking.

NP: Brooklyn Rider has been around for more than a decade now. How would you reflect on its evolution over that time. Has it gone places and done things you wouldn't have imagined in the formative days?

JG: We've been kind of making it up as we go along, but it is still somewhat surprising to see projects come to life with our musical heroes, like Kayhan, or Anne Sofie von Otter. Releasing two albums on vinyl, including a late Beethoven quartet was very special.

NP: Your last Hahn Hall program was the aptly named "Brooklyn Rider Almanac," and a diversified set, from Christian Wolff to Bill Frisell and Henry Threadgill. Is it almost a mission statement for this group to keep moving forward and explore new ideas and areas of music?

JG: Very much so. Our name is inspired by the creative life force of our borough, but also by the artist collective from early 20th-century Munich, the Bla Rider. That was a group of people who explored intersections of tradition, modernity, folk art and artists' role in society. Those are some of the things that drove BR.