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## Music for Violin, With Faustian Strings Attached

By CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM

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Everyone knows that the Devil has the best tunes. And we also know what he plays them on: a fiddle. From Tartini's "Devil's Trill" Violin Sonata of 1713 to the Charlie Daniels Band's 1979 country music ballad "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," the instrument most readily associated with the Crafty One is a violin.



Karsten Moran for The New York Times

**Miranda Cuckson** in a violin recital at the Italian Academy at Columbia University. Blair McMillen performed on piano.

On Wednesday the violinist Miranda Cuckson and the pianist Blair McMillen gave a delightfully devious recital at the Italian Academy at Columbia University. These works were either inspired by devils and mischievous creatures or feature, as Ms. Cuckson told the audience, “strange and mysterious sound effects that make you wonder: how is that done?”

According to Tartini, the Violin Sonata in G minor appeared to him in a dream in which the Devil offered his servitude in return for Tartini’s soul and then played the violin with dazzling mastery. To modern ears, the work’s profusion of trills and double stops does little to mask the really quite innocent sense of proportion underpinning its singing melodies.

Yet curiously it was here that Ms. Cuckson’s playing faltered. Her delicate bowing style appeared almost lackadaisical in the opening slow movement, while the piano accompaniment plodded along. The work was performed in an arrangement by the violinist Fritz Kreisler with the addition of a cadenza that calls for elaborate Paganini-style gymnastics on the fingerboard. When played perfectly, such technical fireworks may well create the impression of Mephistophelian trickery. But here, in Ms. Cuckson’s strained delivery, they served only to underline human frailty.

Ms. Cuckson showed no strain in the contemporary works, even though the demands they made on the player tested the limits of the instrument and, on occasion, the listener’s ear. Salvatore Sciarrino’s *Sonatina for Violin and Piano* (1975) is almost entirely played in harmonics over ghostly piano chords, with the violin producing sounds that ranged from the ethereal to that of fingernails scratching on chalkboard.

Harmonics also feature prominently in the microtonal “Semplice” for solo violin, by Oscar Bianchi, and “Strömkarl” for

violin and piano, by the American composer Jason Eckardt, which here received its first performance.

In Mr. Eckardt's piece, which evokes a mischievous, fiddle-wielding elf from Swedish folklore, the violin plays tricks on the ear with erratic jumps and ever-changing tone colors, while the piano for long stretches seems to bide its time before pounding out a low tumble of notes. The title of "Semplice" — simple — proves to be more trickery, with the violin flitting up and down in quick and complex passages interspersed with slyly innocent resting periods.

In Marco Stroppa's "Passacaglia Canonica" Mr. McMillen made the case for the solo piano as equally capable of messing with ear and mind. Requiring a superhuman hand span — Mr. McMillen said he used a battery pack, a box of staples and his iPhone for help — the piece builds up mistlike chords that are suspended until their overtones hang in the air like flickering halos.

*Miranda Cuckson performs with the ensemble Counter)induction on May 31 at the Tenri Cultural Institute, 43A West 13th Street, Greenwich Village; (212) 645-2800, tenri.org. Blair McMillen performs on June 6 with the Da Capo Chamber Players at Merkin Concert Hall, 129 West 67th Street, Manhattan; (212) 501-3330, kaufmanmusiccenter.org.*

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/13/arts/music/miranda-cuckson-and-blair-mcmillen-at-italian-academy.html?adxnlnl=1&adxnlnx=1371228847-Ryb2ZhCgNUhZhoxs+2ld7Q>