



Gerald Cohen

VOYAGERS

Voyagers

1. **Cavatina** (9:31)
2. **Bhairavi** (6:57)
3. **Galliard** (5:39)
4. **Beyond the Heliosphere** (7:15)

Cassatt String Quartet
Narek Arutyunian, clarinet and bass clarinet

Playing for our lives

5. **Beryozkele** (7:29)
6. **Brundibar** (6:15)
7. **Dies Irae** (8:40)

Cassatt String Quartet

8. **Preludes and Debka** (13:01)

Cassatt String Quartet
Colin Williams, trombone

Telling stories through music is central to all I do as a composer and performer – most explicitly in my operas and vocal works, but also in purely instrumental works such as those on this album. The stories in *Voyagers* and *Playing for our lives* are told by weaving together music that is strongly associated with important events in history, creating an emotional and narrative arc. In *Playing for our lives*, three musical ideas are developed as a narrative to tell the story of the Terezin transit camp inmates, who used creative expression to hold on to their humanity, even while facing the constant threat of imminent death. For *Voyagers*, I wanted to capture the feeling of the first exploration of our solar system and beyond; for this I incorporated musical selections from a special audio collection that was sent into space by NASA on the Voyager missions in the 1970s.

This album is the culmination of the voyage I have taken with the Cassatt String Quartet during the past decade. Creative and ongoing relationships with dedicated performers who are committed to bringing new works to life are a key inspiration for me in creating new compositions. *Playing for our lives* and *Voyagers* were written for the Cassatt: their artistry, their belief in my work, and their dedication in rehearsal and performance to engaging with every expressive and technical aspect of a new piece, have been central to the genesis of this music.

Voyagers was also inspired by another of my cherished collaborators and muses, clarinetist Vasko Dukovski (who recorded all the works on *Sea of Reeds* (Navona, 2014)); *Preludes and Debka* was composed for trombonist Haim Avitsur, who approached me in 2001 to contribute to his ongoing project of creating new repertoire for trombone and string quartet. Dukovski and Avitsur brought these pieces to fruition, and played the premiere and many subsequent performances of these compositions. Narek Arutyunian and Colin Williams were superb in taking on the pieces in the recording process.

I will always be grateful for the collaboration with these wonderful colleagues.

— **Gerald Cohen**, April 2023

VOYAGERS

Voyagers, for clarinet and string quartet, is a tribute to the two Voyager spacecraft, launched in 1977, headed for the outer reaches of our solar system. It was inspired by the music of the Voyager Golden Record, an audio “time capsule” carried on these spacecraft, intended to give extra-terrestrial beings an impression of human culture on Planet Earth.

The creators of the Golden Record compiled an idiosyncratic selection of audio from around the world, including the sounds of animals, wind, and laughter, greetings in dozens of languages, and a wide-ranging and eclectic collection of music. I chose several of these: a Beethoven string quartet (Cavatina), an Indian raga (Bhairavi), and a Renaissance dance (Galliard), weaving them together in a composition that celebrates humanity’s quest to explore the universe, and the power of music to express the rich emotions and cultures of human life.

The piece is not meant to describe the Voyagers’ travels and discoveries, but rather to use the selections from the Golden Record to evoke emotions about the universe and our exploration of it. I am fascinated by the idea of the Golden Record hurtling through outer space on the Voyager, with its creators’ understanding that it almost certainly would not be found by any extraterrestrial civilization, but that it was, nonetheless, a significant message of who we humans were at this moment in time.

Voyagers was premiered in 2017, on the 40th anniversary of the launch of Voyager, at the Hayden Planetarium of the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan, accompanied by images of the Voyager missions projected in the planetarium.

The piece is in four movements, played without pause:

“Cavatina” develops ideas from the Cavatina of Beethoven’s String Quartet, Op. 130. It conveys both the mystery of the vastness of space, and the plucky energy of the Voyager craft as it begins its journey.

“Bhairavi” is a meditative movement with an extended quote and development of the vocal Raga Bhairavi “Jaat Kahan Ho.” For me, it evokes images of humanity contemplating the unfathomable expanse of space.

“Galliard” is a scherzo based on “The Fairie Round,” a Renaissance dance by Anthony Holborne. It bounds between different characters as it explores that dance, and I think of it as both the spacecraft “dancing” its way on its journey, and also the bigger picture of the planets and moons in our solar system participating in a great cosmic dance.

“Beyond the Heliosphere” brings back elements of the previous movements, with the Cavatina as the central element. The work ends with a direct quote of the Cavatina, before fading out on a repeated high note in the bass clarinet, as if the signal of the Voyager continues on, ever fainter, as it continues its interstellar voyage.

PLAYING FOR OUR LIVES

Playing for our lives was composed for the Cassatt String Quartet, who premiered it in 2012. The members of the quartet were programming a concert of music by composers who were interned in the Nazi concentration camp Terezín (Theresienstadt), near Prague. They asked me to compose a contemporary memorial and tribute to the musical life of that place. Terezín was essentially a transit camp where Jews and other prisoners were held until they were sent to Auschwitz and other death camps. The Nazis allowed a certain amount of art and education to take place at Terezín, which both occupied the prisoners and helped to deceive the world about the cruel and inhumane nature of concentration camps in general. There were a great number of excellent artists from many fields imprisoned at Terezín, including performers and composers who were well established in their careers, and so musical life flourished with a passion in these very strange surroundings.

In my string quartet, I use several musical essences of life at Terezín. One is the Yiddish folk song *Beryozkele* (*Little Birch Tree*), a poignant song that was arranged by the composer Viktor

Ullmann while he was a prisoner at the camp (I use the melody, not his arrangement). Folk songs — Czech, Hebrew and Yiddish — were important parts of the lives of the prisoners of Terezín (especially the children), who sang them in choirs formed in their barracks. Another thematic inspiration is a lullaby from Hans Krasa's opera *Brundibar*, an opera performed entirely by children — so popular that it was performed more than 50 times at the camp. Finally, I use excerpts from Verdi's Requiem, a piece that was championed at Terezín by the dynamic conductor Rafael Schachter, and was performed there 16 times, but by several different groups of singers — since transports were steadily taking choristers to their death at Auschwitz.

With all of this music, especially the Requiem, the layers of paradox and poignancy are extraordinarily powerful. For the prisoners, music was something that gave them deep joy; at the same time, the Nazis used the concerts as a propaganda tool to depict Terezín as if it was a pleasant residential model for the Jews. The Requiem — a mass for the dead — spoke to the performers and the prisoners in their audience of their own deaths. At the same time, the *Dies Irae* (*Day of Wrath*) was a defiant message pointed directly at the Nazis.

In my quartet, this range of emotions and musical elements are woven together to create a memorial to the musical and spiritual life at Terezín. The tender lament of *Beryozkele* dominates the early part of the piece; the middle section is a set of variations on the lullaby from *Brundibar*, bringing the joy of that piece to the fore; and the final section is dominated by the passion, anger, and quiet mourning of the Requiem.

The title *Playing for our lives* was inspired by a quote from Paul Rabinowitsch, who at the age of 14 was the trumpet player in *Brundibar*, and was one of the few who performed in that opera to survive the war. "When the SS was present, I always had this shadowy feeling at the back of my head. I knew I could not play wrong, and you can hear every wrong note very clearly on a trumpet. Rahm [the commandant of Terezín] would notice, I thought to myself, and be mad at me, and put me on a transport. And in those moments it was as if I were playing for my life."*

*Quote from *The Girls of Room 28* by Hannelore Brenner (Schocken Books, 2009)

PRELUDES AND DEBKA

Preludes and Debka for trombone and string quartet was composed in 2001 for Haim Avitsur and the Degas String Quartet, who premiered it in Syracuse and New York City that year. I was delighted to take on the challenge of making chamber music with this unusual combination. The melody on which the piece is based is in an anthology of Sephardic music; it struck me as a wonderful theme for the trombone and strings to explore. A "debka" or "dabka" is a Middle Eastern dance, popular in both Arab and Israeli communities, often done as a circle dance.

The composition is in four sections — three preludes and the debka. Though in a way the entire composition is a theme and variations, it is only in the last section that we hear the theme in its entirety. The music grows from a quiet mysterious opening, contrasted by a related idea in sharper, repeated staccato notes. This leads to a scherzo-like second movement in which the trombone and strings take turns with the melody. In the third movement, a slow, tender duet between the trombone and first violin gives a completely new character to material from the first movement. A trombone cadenza leads to the final movement and its variations on the debka melody — mostly lively and playful, eventually becoming rather wild before reprising the debka theme at the conclusion.



Composer **Gerald Cohen** has been praised for his “linguistic fluidity and melodic gift,” creating music that “reveals a very personal modernism that...offers great emotional rewards” (*Gramophone Magazine*). The opera *Steal a Pencil for Me*, a love story set against the terrors of Nazi concentration camp life, had its premiere production by Opera Colorado in 2018. His “shimmering setting” (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*) of Psalm 23, has received thousands of performances from Carnegie Hall to synagogues and churches around the world.

Cohen’s discography of chamber, choral, and vocal compositions include *Generations* (New World Records, 2001) and *Sea of Reeds* (Navona, 2014). In addition to *Voyagers* (innova, 2023), a studio recording of the opera *Steal a Pencil for Me* is being released in 2024.

Cohen’s chamber music has been commissioned by ensembles including the Cassatt String Quartet, Verdehr Trio, Franciscan String Quartet, Chesapeake Chamber Music, Grneta Ensemble, Wave Hill Trio, Bronx Arts Ensemble, and Brooklyn Philharmonic Brass Quintet. Recognition of Cohen’s body of work includes the Copland House Borromeo String Quartet Award, Westchester Prize for New Work, American Composers Forum Faith Partners residency, and Zamir Choral Foundation’s Hallel V’Zimrah award, with commissioning grants from Meet the Composer, National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, and American Composers Forum, and residencies including The MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Copland House, and American Lyric Theater.

Cohen is a noted synagogue cantor and baritone; his experience as a singer informs his dramatic, lyrical compositions. He is cantor at Shaarei Tikvah, Scarsdale, NY, and is on the faculties of The Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College. He received a BA in music from Yale University and a DMA in music composition from Columbia University. Cohen’s compositions are available from Gerald Cohen Music; he also has works published by Oxford University Press, G. Schirmer/AMP and Transcontinental Music Publications.

geraldcohenmusic.com

Hailed for its “mighty rapport and relentless commitment,” the **Cassatt String Quartet** has performed to critical acclaim across the world since its founding in 1985, with appearances at Alice Tully Hall, Weill Recital Hall, Tanglewood Music Center, the Kennedy Center, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Centro Nacional de las Artes, Maeda Hall, and Beijing’s Central Conservatory. The group’s discography includes over forty recordings, spanning the Koch, Naxos, New World, Point, CRI, Tzadik, and Albany labels – including three discs that have been named by Alex Ross to his “10 Best Classical Recordings” feature in *The New Yorker*.

The Cassatt String Quartet’s projects include performances and recordings of new works by Tania León, Dylan Schneider, Shirish Korde, and Daniel S. Godfrey; its annual residencies at the Seal Bay Festival of American Chamber Music and Cassatt in the Basin! in West Texas; concerts in the New York area; and appearances at Tree-tops Chamber Music Society, Maverick Concerts, and Music Mountain.

The CSQ – violinists Muneko Otani and Jennifer Leshnower, violist Ah Ling Neu and cellist Elizabeth Anderson – is named for the American Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt.

cassattquartet.com





Clarinetist **Narek Arutyunian** is an artist who “reaches passionate depths with seemingly effortless technical prowess and beguiling sensitivity” (*The Washington Post*). As First Prize Winner of the Young Concert Artists International Auditions, Mr. Arutyunian was presented in debut recitals in New York at Merkin Concert Hall and in Washington, DC at the Kennedy Center to rave reviews. In addition to solo recitals, he is a frequent soloist with orchestras around the world, performing with The Boston Pops, Orchestra of St. Luke’s, Prague Radio Symphony, the Moscow Virtuosi Chamber Orchestra, and the Moscow State Symphony, among others.

Born in Armenia, Narek Arutyunian’s family moved to Moscow when he was three. He graduated from the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory as a student of Evgeny Petrov, received a Bachelor’s degree from The Juilliard School, where he worked with Charles Neidich, and a Master’s Degree with Mr. Neidich at the Manhattan School of Music.

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Colin Williams is the Associate Principal Trombonist of the New York Philharmonic, an appointment he has held since 2014. He was Principal Trombonist with the Atlanta Symphony and San Antonio Symphony, and has performed with many of the major orchestras in the United States.

Mr. Williams is a passionate performer, versatile educator and advocate for musician’s wellness. A performance-related injury and subsequent recovery shaped his unique approach to teaching and playing and inspired his solo album *Ash* (2018). Mr. Williams recorded the album *Roadwork* (2010) with the Atlanta Trombone Project. He has appeared as a soloist with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the Pershing’s Own United States Army Band, and the Juilliard Orchestra, among others, participated in the Amelia Island and Grand Teton Music Festivals and performed with the Saito Kinen Festival Orchestra.

colinwilliamstrombone.com





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Voyagers and *Preludes and Debka* recorded February
27-28, 2022, at the Auditorium of the Jewish
Theological Seminary, New York, NY.

Produced and engineered by **Judith Sherman**
Engineering & editing assistant: **Jeanne Velonis**
Mastered by **Jeanne Velonis & Judith Sherman**

Images:

Front cover: View of Uranus recorded by
Voyager 2 on Jan 25, 1986. NASA/JPL

Back cover: View of Neptune recorded by
Voyager 2, August 1989. NASA/JPL

Inside: Artist's concept of the Voyager
spacecraft in space. NASA

Excerpt from "Dies Irae" of Requiem by Giuseppe
Verdi, 1874 vocal score.

Voyager 1 view of Saturn on Nov. 16, 1980. NASA/JPL

Gerald Cohen photo: **Susan Woog Wagner**
Cassatt String Quartet photo: **Dario Acosta**
Narek Arutyunian photo: **Aaron Chen**
Colin Williams photo: **David Finlayson**
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