

Concert pianist gets a surprise from the past: One of her own compositions, performed in 1980, pulled from university archives for publication

Description

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It was 1980 and Katrina Krimsky prepared to perform at the Piano Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, New York. An accomplished, but at the time not widely known pianist, she launched into one of her own compositions, a 42-minute piece called â??Soundscape.â?•

Years later, critics praised the difficult, somewhat esoteric compositions she performed that day, one saying â??Her solo recital is too much fun to have been unheralded for so long.â?•

In the 43 years between her performance and that review in the New York Times, a recording of â??Soundscapeâ?• and the other compositions she played that day languished in the music archives of Columbia University.



Katrina Krimsky with her newest digital album, â??1980.â?• (All photos by Colin Campbell)

Now 85 and living on Potrero Hill, Krimsky was happily surprised when the owner of a niche record company called Unseen Worlds emailed her and proposed to publish the recording on CD. â??It was a delightful surprise, as if it came out of the sky,â?• she said. â??One never knows whatâ??s coming.â?•

Because the recording was on old-fashioned analog tape, the producer shipped it to Germany to be digitized. â??I had no idea what it sounded like after all this time. I had to hear it.â?• By February of this year, the CD, complete with cover art painted by her stepdaughter, was finished and released to strong reviews.

â??1980â?• is the seventh recording in a career that spanned more than 60 years, first as a child prodigy (a label she dislikes) in the South, a Switzerland-based composer and concert artist, a music faculty member at Mills College, and a piano player at one of San Franciscoâ??s best-loved jazz clubs.

A talent in many genres

Her tastes and expertise are eclectic, ranging from classical, to jazz, to New Age, to experimental and minimalist. Although her roots are in European classical music, sheâ??s composed for the sitar and other non-Western instruments.

The release of â??1980â?• prompted a critic in a recent edition of Spectrum Culture, an online arts magazine to write: â??Itâ??s an almost impossibly eclectic background and one that suggests Krimsky, now in her 80s, could have led several comfortable careers in differing genres.â?•

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â??Soundscape,â?• which Krimsky first played in 1980 at a music studio in Woodstock, New York, is on her new album, along with many other of her esoteric compositions. (Image from https://katrinakrimsky.bandcamp.com/music)

Krimsky doesnâ??t disagree: â??Music is an expression of my inner life. It reflects the various influences Iâ??ve experienced,â?• she said. But composing and performing in so many genres had a downside: record companies didnâ??t quite know how to position her work, an issue that made sales problematic. â??My first recording included classical, jazz, and contemporary music because I lived and performed in the various traditions.â?•

Music has been her passion since she was a child; sheâ??s never had an adult job that wasnâ??t related.

She was born in Georgia, but raised in Virginia and West Virginia. Krimskyâ??s mother, herself an accomplished pianist, was her first teacher. She inspired me.,â?• Krimsky said. â??The piano was motherâ??s milk to me.â?•

While cooking or doing housework, her mother would sometimes listen to her practice and give her feedback. In high school, Krimsky competed in a statewide piano competition and won with a performance of a piece by Chopin.

She earned a degree from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, and later joined the faculty of American University in Washington. She taught piano privately for 50 years.

Krimsky is thin, wears red lipstick, and moves energetically. She keeps fit with Pilates and walking her dog Coco, a Maltipoo, around her hilly neighborhood. Her hair is thick and completely white, curling toward her shoulders. She wears an Apple watch and is particular about the clothes she wears when being photographed.

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A duo with Woody Shaw



> Krimsky and her Maltipoo â??Cocoâ?• are a common site around Potrero Hill and Dogpatch dog parks.

Her studio is in the downstairs of her home, an Edwardian two-flat built in 1914. Itâ??s sparsely furnished with a bed, a few chairs, and a Steinway grand piano facing a large window that lets in a good deal of light and a view of her garden. From the patio, thereâ??s a view of the Bay, visible between the condos that have sprung up in the adjacent Dogpatch neighborhood in recent years.

Leaning against a wall are six CDs of her work , including a record signed by Woody Shaw, the famed trumpet player. Shaw met Krimsky when she was playing at the Keystone Korner in North Beach. They became romantic partners, living together for a time on Potrero Hill. One cut on the record is â??Katrina Ballerina,â?• written by Shaw and dedicated to Krimsky. (Krimsky performs it here.)

Krimsky moved to San Francisco from New York City in 1972, ready to change her life and â??see the New World.â?• The â??70s, she said, â??were a rich time. San Francisco was so welcoming and doors opened up for us.â?• The jazz scene in New York seemed insular, and San Francisco gave her a chance to experiment with new techniques.

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She started making electronic music, working with a tape delay and a grand piano. She had a huge set of Altec speakers that sheâ??d load onto a borrowed VW bus and drive to different venues around the city to perform.



Krimsky with her first recording, done in 1975 at Different Fur Studios in San Francisco. It includes â??Katrina Ballerina,â?• jazz trumpet player Woody Shaw wrote for her., and the solo piano pieces â??Specsâ?• and â??Epilogue,â?• which they composed together.

The long-gone Keystone Korner jazz club in North Beach, where she performed a few hours at night, played an important role in her career. â??I met everyone, I listened to everyone,â?• she recalls. Cecil Taylor, a pioneering free jazz pianist, was an important influence, and she got to know and learn from jazz greats like Bobby Hutcherson, McCoy Tyner, and Joe Henderson.

She recorded CDs, but lacking a publisher sheâ??d take them to record stores like Amoeba Records on Haight Street and Tower Records to sell them. â??It was a little burdensome, but I was young and didnâ??t mind.â?• She landed teaching gigs at the Community Music Center on Capp Street and Mills

College in Oakland.



Her album â??Time Over Time,â?• released in 2002. (Image from https://katrinakrimsky.bandcamp.com/music)

Her time in San Francisco was productive, but in the early â??80s, Krimsky and her Swiss husband moved to Switzerland. They stayed for some 20 years but made frequent visits to San Francisco before returning to stay in 2001. During her time in Europe, Krimsky performed extensively as a soloist and with ensembles she assembled.

Sheâ??s looking forward to the release of another album by Unseen Worlds. Like â??1980,â?• it includes a performance of a piece written for her: â??Bell Solarisâ?• by David Rosenboom, a pioneer in American experimental music.

For now, Krimskyâ??s performances are private, but she continues to compose and play. Her health is good and her hands remain strong and supple, with no hint of the arthritis or repetitive stress injuries that plague many older pianists. If in the future she misses public performances, â??Iâ??ll know it in the moment. For now, Iâ??m spending my time devoted to my art and maintaining my life.â?•

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Date Created
28/11/2023
Author
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