

The 2024 Ronald G. Pogorzelski and Lester D. Yankee Annual Competition

Winning Work to Be Premiered May 20, 2024, at Indiana University of Pennsylvania



Udi Perlman
(photo: Matthew Fried)



Janet Yieh
(photo: Angela James)

The AGO Committee on New Music, through its various educational efforts and competitions, encourages composers and performers to engage with the pipe organ. One of the competitions sponsored by the committee is the Pogorzelski-Yankee Annual Competition, funded through the generosity of Ronald G. Pogorzelski and Lester D. Yankee and connected to Indiana University of Pennsylvania. As a member of the committee, I was happy to spend some time recently with the winner of the 2024 competition, Udi Perlman, and the performer who will give his new piece its premiere, Janet Yieh.

Udi is currently pursuing a DMA degree in composition at the Yale School of Music; Janet previously earned degrees from the Yale School of Music and Juilliard. Udi now resides in Berlin, while Janet lives in New York City, where she is the director of music at the Church of the Heavenly Rest.

Udi's fascinating piece is titled *DISSERTATIO DE MAGREPHA*. This exciting new work will be premiered at Indiana University of Pennsylvania on Monday, May 20, 2024. Its three movements explore the history and latter-day reception of the phenomenon of the *magrepha*, a winded instrument that is mentioned in Jewish literature as far back as 200–300 C.E. Little is known about the *magrepha*; literary references to it are vague, and some modern scholars have suggested that the instrument may have been a fictional construct.

What follows is an edited version of the Zoom discussion that I enjoyed with these two superb young musicians.

BRUCE NESWICK

Bruce Neswick: Just to get things started: I'm assuming you both met at Yale. Is that true?

Udi Perlman: We did not overlap, in fact—Janet was there before me. I'm technically still enrolled and in the post-residential phase of my DMA. We do have a few mutual friends, mutual colleagues, and we met through these connections.

Janet Yieh: I've known Udi's name and music for some time, because one of his organ works was premiered by our mutual friend Carolyn Craig, another Yale graduate from his era. And so I had known of Udi's organ music being played at Woolsey Hall, at Yale, in Carolyn's recitals.

UP: Yes, *DISSERTATIO* is my second organ work; the first one I wrote was for Carolyn.

BN: And what was Carolyn's piece about? What was its title?

UP: The name of that piece is *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*. It was inspired by an engraving by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. And it was a real collaboration, as I didn't know much about the organ then. I grew up in Israel, in Tel Aviv, and the first organ recital I went to was when I was 30, just a few years ago, in Europe.

BN: Because there aren't too many organs in Israel?

UP: There are a few organs, not that many—a few in the Old City of Jerusalem, and in Nazareth and elsewhere. But the organ is not part of Israel's musical life

in any significant way, I would say. It always felt kind of strange, a bit foreign to me even, and the whole organ world and its repertoire wasn't ever on my radar, so to speak. I maybe knew that it existed, but I had never heard it. That only happened later in my life, in Germany, where I studied in the past and where I am currently living. I went to this organ recital in Lübeck, at the Marienkirche—this was during COVID, actually—and there was this awakening, in a sense: I realized that I'd been missing out on a big part of the musical repertoire.

This was around the time that I started my DMA at Yale. Carolyn and I took this class together, and I suggested that we collaborate. She was very kind and patient in working with me, and she showed me many of the basics, how things work at the organ. I'm really happy with that piece. She has performed it quite a few times—in her MM recital at Woolsey Hall, but also at other venues in the United States and in the U.K. She made a really nice recording and a video with Camilla Tassi, a colleague from the School of Drama, who made all these projections of the Bruegel engraving.

BN: So what was the class that you took with Carolyn?

UP: The class was not organ-related. It was a seminar on poetry and meaning in music—music and text from the Middle Ages to the present.

BN: Were you in school with Carolyn then, Janet, or did you know her just from the organ world in general?

JY: Carolyn and I know each other through Walden Moore, because we both worked with Walden at Trinity Church on the Green. We connected in 2020, cofounded the Amplify Female Composers project, and worked together throughout 2020 to bring together women composers from across the United States and the U.K.

BN: I forgot about that connection. How wonderful! But back to the relative obscurity of the organ in Israel. I've always wondered whether some of the synagogues in Israel might have organs.

UP: There aren't organs in synagogues in Israel: that's more of a German and, later, American phenomenon that never migrated to Israel. Organs are either in churches or concert halls, though they are quite rare. There are perhaps 40 organs throughout the whole country.

BN: I just loved reading through your new piece. It wasn't completely evident to me, but I'm guessing there aren't any actual Jewish liturgical themes present. Is that true?

UP: Yes, that is correct. I was kind of playing with the idea of imagined folk music. The whole premise of the piece is about the imagination of this instrument that existed—or perhaps didn't. There's no physical evidence of an actual *magrepha* and no knowledge of how it might have sounded. So it was all about trying to imagine what this instrument would have sounded like and what kind of music might have been played on it—and, even more, how people have imagined it through the ages. So I didn't actually use any quotations or any allusions to anything.

BN: I was struck by some of the percussive aspects of the score. And I wondered if maybe you were referencing what some scholars think *magrepha* denotes—the dropping of a shovel in a liturgical ritual atmosphere, as sort of a judgment call, if you will.

UP: Yes, I was definitely thinking of this. In fact, in modern Hebrew, *magrepha* means shovel. So I was thinking a lot about that gesture of just throwing away something. And that's where the idea for the opening gesture came from, with that ascending scale. But yes, you're absolutely right about the percussive element, because one etymology of the word suggests that the *magrepha* was actually a percussion instrument similar to a gong. The idea is that people would bang this gong as part of the ritual. In reality, the whole history of the instrument—or what people thought it was—is very convoluted. Some people throughout the ages have tried to reconcile the winded and percussive aspects of the instrument, but it doesn't really add up in any way.

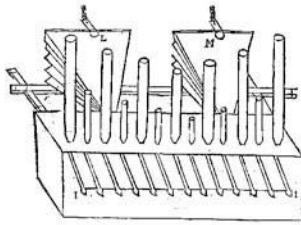
JY: Earlier, you mentioned having taken a class about music based on poetry. When reading through this piece, you notice that each of its seven parts is preceded by a quote. And you really do illustrate the chosen quotations. For instance, the gesture with ten notes matches the quote from the Talmud: "There was a *magrepha* in the temple with ten holes in it." You've been really carefully illustrative in each of these smaller sections.

UDI PERLMAN

DISSERTATIO

DE

MAGREPHA



for organ

UP: And that was an intentional reference. The earliest descriptions refer to an instrument with ten holes. So I definitely wanted to do something with ten pitches.

BN: Within the three movements of your work, Udi, there are the seven smaller sections that Janet just referred to, and I'm wondering if there is any symbolic significance to the use of that number—a reference, say, to the seven-day week, or the biblical importance of the number seven.

UP: That would be nice, but no. For inspiration, I drew from various sources. I was interested in the development of the idea of the *magrepha* and thought of that development almost like the game of “telephone,” in which you say something and repeat it to someone, and it gets repeated to someone else, and the message gets distorted. That's what happened throughout history with the *magrepha*. There was this mention early on, and then somebody repeated it and repeated it, and this little piece of information became a fact, because it was printed again in the encyclopedias and in treatises—to the point where people actually believed that the instrument existed. The quotations over the seven sections are like moments in history.

The first movement relates to the first mentions of the instrument. And then the second movement, with its imitative counterpoint, deals more with the 18th century, and of how *magrepha* were conceived of then. It is almost a quasi-Baroque movement. There is a Baroque-era book in Yale's Beinecke Library (*Musurgia Universalis*, Athanasius Kircher, 1650) that contains a blueprint for a *magrepha*, but this is ridiculous, because it is based purely on imagination. And there are other scholarly references to the instrument in the same time period, but this is where the history ends. The final movement is more of an epilogue, referencing the New Grove article on *magrepha*, which states that the instrument may only be a literary creation rather than an actual observed artifact.

BN: Yes, it's so important to know all this in advance of listening. In my listening, I was really struck by the end of the sixth section, where you bring back the opening idea of the piece. The music begins to compress and reduces down to a two-note chord. I was wondering if that was your way of providing an arc shape to the piece.

Janet, can you talk about the organ at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where the premiere will occur?

JY: Yes, the Pogorzelski-Yankee Organ! This instrument has such an interesting story, because it belongs to the AGO but lives at the university. We've gotten to work with Prof. Christine Clewell, who's been organizing the premiere performance. One of the first things that Udi and I talked about was looking at the stoplist of this organ, because the previous piece that he had written for organ was for a very different kind of instrument. The IUP organ is 24 ranks, 21 stops, and two manuals, and I think it was good for Udi to know this before starting. And then in August of this past year, we met up at my church in New York City, and we sat down together at that organ. I knew he had already been thinking about the structure of the piece and had many ideas. But we looked together at the organ's stoplist, and we talked about the quality of all the stops, and how best to indicate the sounds that he was hearing in his head—in a way that would also travel well.

I look forward to going to IUP and seeing this organ again soon. It has a mechanical action, and that's also something we talked about—how you approach a tracker instrument, and how it's different from organs you might find in in other spaces.

BN: Udi, are your registrational indications based on the organ at IUP? Are they more general suggestions?

UP: I'd say that they're general, but made with that organ in mind. I definitely considered the possibilities available there. With my first organ piece, for Carolyn, we really workshopped it. It went through various phases, and I really enjoyed that.

JY: Udi and I also talked about what it means to write for a two-manual organ: the conventions of the Great typically being louder, the Swell typically being expressive—those tiers of dynamic possibility on the organ. I'm really glad that there's a section in the middle that is very much a trio.

BN: Yes, I love that trio section and the fact that you call for three distinct sounds. That's so evocative of our history. That kind of texture, I think, works extremely well on the organ, though not all composers choose to go down that path.

UP: I love the way the instrument is built for polyphony. It's one of the things I love most about the organ.

BN: Janet, I think the readers might be really interested to know how you start to unpack a new piece. I mean, I'm sure you've played lots of new works.

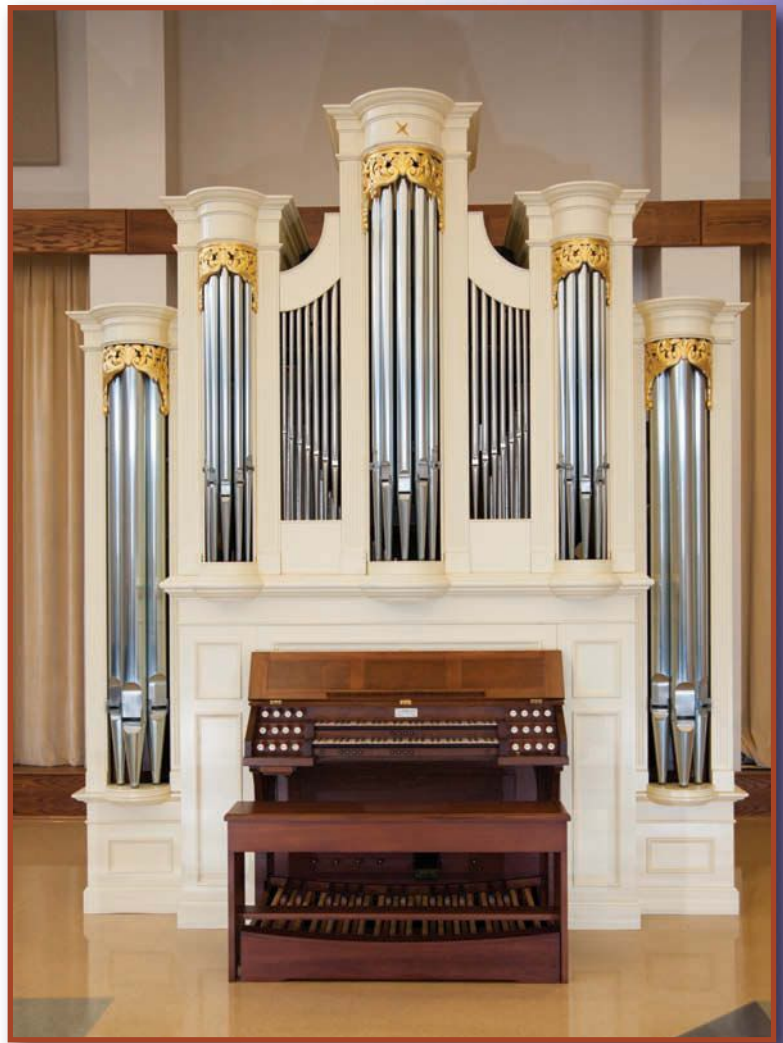
JY: Well, first of all, just the ability to talk to the composer is such a special thing. I already had a few questions for Udi early on, and this opportunity to visit was wonderful. This piece has many different textures, so I approach the different sections in a variety of ways. In the trio section, hearing each voice individually was key. My teacher in high school, John Walker, often had me practice Bach trios with one voice sounding and the other two silent. That way, you're having the action of playing all three voices at the console, but you're hearing each one individually, singing along with each line as you go. And then there's a passage with chords in the feet. Here, I isolate the pedal, to be sure that each chord is percussive and moving in the right ways. And then there's quite a bit of texture that's chordal as well. So that's the kind of thing that's best not to practice on full organ, but by making sure that all of the notes in each chord are exactly as they should be. This has been helpful, for instance, in that opening figure you mentioned. A lot of this is about knowing and honoring the intention of the composer in new music. Udi and I are actually hoping to have a Zoom call soon where I'll be at the organ; we'll be in separate cities but using the technology to work together.

BN: That's fantastic! This is one of the great things about modern communication. You can do that sort of thing now—it's amazing.

JY: Definitely! I will say that, in this particular piece of new music, the rhythms are really specific. And Udi, I think, has built meaning into the ways that the time signature changes. He has been very detailed about that. The ways that rhythms bounce off each other in the two hands—I would certainly want to be careful in passages like these. To avoid practicing at full force on a tracker organ, putting wrist or arm weight into it, I think the piano is a great place to start.

As we look carefully at Udi's detailed writing, it really is clearly thought out. Everything fits well under the fingers, I think. Udi has composed with the organ keyboard in mind, because the figures and the chords all lay under the hands in a way that makes a lot of sense.

BN: I agree. It looks very idiomatic. Sometimes composers go way too high in the manual keyboards—and stay there!—or sometimes they write without showing an awareness of the fact that you can't sustain like you can on a piano. Are you thinking about the differences between the piano and organ with respect to sustaining tone?



The Pogorzelski-Yankee
Memorial Organ

UP: Yes, absolutely. I tried at least to be aware, as far as possible, of the differences between those two instruments. I also tried to immerse myself within the repertoire, just listening to organ music all the time. Many episodes of *Pipedreams*!

BN: That's really great.

JY: He's done his research!

UP: I would listen to episodes about passacaglias or episodes about variations, because this shows you different ways to do the same thing. I listened to the full range of literature throughout the history of the instrument in order to try to get into its sound world, as well as into its physicality. It's hard, because I don't play the organ, though I do play piano. It's deceiving, too, because you think you know how things will work—but then I'm always curious to see how everything actually sounds in real life.

BN: I'm kind of curious: Who are some of the organ composers that have inspired you, as you've done some of this listening?

UP: Definitely major figures, like Bach and Messiaen. I listen to Jehan Alain as well. His mixture of modal folk music appeals to me, and the harmonic language sounds jazzy. I must also mention Vierne and Reger!

JY: You've sort of pulled modality out of listening to Jehan Alain. Were you doing so purposefully? Because to me, the A section of your piece sounds very much in the Lydian mode. Was that purposeful?

UP: It's definitely Lydian, but I was thinking more of Debussy and Stravinsky. There's definitely a kind of style study here—moving from some kind of ancient past to this retro 18th-century world, and then something more postmodernist with this kind of collage-pastiche, where you just juxtapose things over each other.

BN: I think I've seen on your website that you've written a fair amount of piano music. Is that right?

UP: A bit. I wrote a piano solo piece at Yale and a few before that.

BN: I wonder if some composers think of the organ as being limiting—limiting compared to writing for the piano. There are endless possibilities for capitalizing on limitation, of course, but did the idea that maybe the organ is limited in some respects compared to the piano enter into your thinking?

UP: The other way around! I feel that there's something more exposed about writing for the organ. Of course, you can just bash away, pulling out all the stops, but there's something very refined about this kind of instrument, where the voices need to be clear.

BN: I'm just loving your pedal writing! Did you and Janet talk about what it's like to write for the pedals? You write creatively, but also practically.

JY: That's a great observation, Bruce. I think that what you've done so well, Udi, is that there are moments where you have made the pedal very much the bass line in a very organ-centric way. The left hand is very much playing the part of, say, tenor or continuo. The right hand is doing something that feels very idiomatic to the organ. And then, in contrast, I think there are moments where the pedal really is its own percussive voice—moments that are doing something completely separate from the hands. I think you've balanced those two imperatives in such a way that is organ-centric while bringing out two different sides of what the pedal can do. And I've not yet felt like I'm going to fall off the bench, which is a great starting point!

BN: My sense is that your new piece, Udi, honors the middle of the keyboard as the center of gravity. Would you two agree with that assessment?

JY: Center of gravity is a wonderful way to put it. There's definitely that kind of energy to the piece, of things building away from that center. And yet I think Udi started out thinking about counterpoint first. To me, the piece makes sense horizontally, as well as vertically.

BN: I agree completely. Can you describe some of the activities with the premiere?

JY: Udi's piece will be the beginning of the second half of the organ program on May 20, sponsored jointly by the national AGO, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and the Pittsburgh AGO Chapter. While there, he will speak to some of the IUP composition students, while I will work with the school's organ students.

BN: Well, best of luck to you both, and thank you so very much for taking the time to visit!