



THE *TIGHT LINES* PROJECT

BY JOHN ATKINSON & ART DUDLEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ATKINSON + JOSEPH D'ALESSIO + SASHA MATSON

WE LAST RELEASED A RECORDING ON THE STEREOPHILE LABEL SIX YEARS AGO—A JAZZ ALBUM FEATURING ATTENTION SCREEN, THE LATE BOB REINA'S FREE-JAZZ ENSEMBLE.¹ THIS DRY SPELL WAS MAINLY DUE TO THE INCREASING DEMANDS MADE ON OUR EDITORIAL TEAM'S TIME BY SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE MAGAZINE'S WEBSITE, BUT ALSO BY JOHN ATKINSON'S RECORDING ACTIVITIES WITH THE PORTLAND STATE CHAMBER CHOIR, WHO ISSUE THEIR RECORDINGS ON THEIR OWN LABEL. NEVERTHELESS, WE'VE BEEN KEEPING OUR EYES AND EARS OPEN FOR SUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES.

THE STUDIO IS SET UP FOR THE STRING QUARTET IN *Cut to Bar Interior*. The Neumann M50 room mikes can be seen above the conductor's podium.

Back in 2011, composer Sasha Matson asked John Atkinson to produce his jazz opera about baseball, *Cooperstown*, which was released on Albany Records and was subsequently chosen by music editor Robert Baird to be our "Recording of the Month" for April 2015.²

Following the release of *Cooperstown*, Sasha was putting together a program of his music for

various chamber ensembles (see sidebar, "The Music," on p.47), and once again asked JA to produce the project, this time for Stereophile. The result is *Tight Lines*, available on CD, a

1 See www.stereophile.com/content/attention-screen-takes-flight-yamaha.

2 See www.stereophile.com/content/recording-april-2015-matson-cooperstown.



LEFT: Bassist Jeff Bandy soloed in *Tight Lines'* final movement.

BELOW: Peter Kent's solo violin for *Annunciation* was miked in stereo.

180gm LP, and as a high-resolution (24-bit/96kHz) download from the *Stereophile* website, and, we plan, from on-line music retailers.

ART DUDLEY ON THE MUSIC

Some composers are attracted to the purely abstract, but not Sasha Matson: "All of these works on *Tight Lines* are deliberately programmatic," he says. "Not only stories, but watercolors and oils and film—all play a role. I am comfortable in this mode, utilizing the experience I gained from years of scoring for film and media."

Of the four movements comprising Sasha Matson's *Tight Lines* suite, the first I heard was *Headwaters*, a hypnotic piece whose sustained melody notes, rhythmic underpinnings, and unexpected chord changes suggest a journey in which discovery follows discovery. When Sasha told me the title he'd chosen for the suite—the source is a quotation from noted angler and former President George H.W. Bush, who used the phrase as a good-luck greeting—I thought of my then-most-recent trip to the Hazel Bridge Pool, near the junction of the Beaverkill River and Willowemoc Creek: the holiest of holy sites for fly-fishing in upstate New York. Even on a gray winter's day, even in the comfort of Sasha's fine old Victorian house in Cooperstown, New York, the music's *pull* made me think of standing chest-deep in cold, rushing waters, while scattered notes on the celesta suggested brightly colored leaves dropping all around me to the surface. (Or were they midges?)

I had to wait another year before hearing the rest of the suite, of which *Headwaters* became the opener. From there, cello, double bass, and the piano's lowest register set a tone of mystery and anticipation for the appropriately titled

Dark Pool. Sitar-like glissandos—actually the sound of a plectrum raked across the strings of a piano—add to the tension, broken by a stark piano chord and the first of many *portamento* figures in the double bass: what is lurking in those still, deep pools?

Suspense gives way to action in the third movement, *Jigging the Reel*, whose title is a play on words: To an angler, *jigging* refers to the fine art of tugging the bait or lure vertically, rather than laterally, through the water. As the movement's placid opening bars—they call to mind the introduction to Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending*—progress to a stately dance, massed strings put a jump in the beat, and *Jigging the Reel* becomes an actual jig for modern ears. The final movement, *Rise to the Fly, Run to the Sea*, opens with gently insistent chords that call to mind water lapping at the shore, before building to a powerful climax—and then release, as in *catch and . . .*

Sasha says of this suite, "It has been my pleasure to get to know the Beaverkill through property owned by my in-laws. My two sons have learned to fly-fish there. This four-movement work musically heads downstream . . . through various pools, waterfalls, riffles, and runs, and eventually into the sea." Indeed, as I listened, I couldn't help thinking of the famous quote attributed to Mahler, uttered when the visiting Bruno Walter paused to admire the mountains visible near the composer's retreat in the Austrian countryside: "Don't bother to look, I've composed them already." And so it is here—although no one, least of all Sasha Matson, would want you to miss seeing the beauty of rural New York for yourself.

When I first met Sasha, he was teaching a course titled Music in Film—for which he drew on his own experience scoring for films when he lived in his native California. This experience informs *Cut to Bar Interior*, for piano and string quartet, which has a sense of drama both vivid and ever-changing. (Notwithstanding the work's occasional glimpses of humor, after my first listen I felt somewhat emotionally drained.) The work also harks back to when

THE COMPOSER

Sasha Matson spent his formative years in Berkeley, California, where his father taught philosophy at the University of California. He received a bachelor's degree in composition from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Moving to Los Angeles, Sasha began scoring music for feature films and other multimedia, and received a PhD in composition and theory from UCLA. Recordings of his work have been released on the Albany/Troy, AudioQuest, and New Albion labels. Sasha writes about audio and music, and is currently a contributing editor for *Stereophile* magazine. He has taught at LaGrange College, Long Island University, and the State University of New York at Oneonta. In 2000, he moved with his family to Cooperstown, in upstate New York.





Sasha lived in the American south—a part of the country where, as he puts it, “Country & Western music is the rule, not the exception.” As a result, the piano line in this piece contains turns and triplets that bring to mind the archetypal C&W pianist Floyd Cramer.

Annunciation, for violin, harp, and electronic delay, is a work in three movements—*Presence*, *Annunciation*, and *Reflection*—inspired by the painting *Annunciation with Saint Margaret and Saint Ansanus* (1333), by the Sieneese painter Simone Martini (ca 1284–1344). Sasha’s original version of *Annunciation*, from 1985, was scored for violin, Casio keyboard, and an Echoplex tape-loop device; he revised it in 1991, after which a demo version was recorded by violinist Peter Kent and his wife, harpist Amy Shulman. Since then, according to Sasha, “music technology has caught up with the intent of the work. The echo delay that sets the tempi for the three movements and is part of the texture can now be created at the same high-resolution quality as the original sound: there is no longer a difference in quality between the two signals. It also gives me pleasure to now record a definitive version of this piece with the same friends and musicians who recorded a demo version for me 25 years ago!”

The ballet-like *Berkeley Hills*, arranged for a mixed septet similar to that Stravinsky used for his *L’Histoire du soldat*, was composed in honor of Elinor Armer, a longtime professor of composition at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Armer is also a longtime friend

and mentor to Sasha, who writes, “I grew up in Berkeley, and composer Elly Armer has long had a home on the top of the ridge there, a part of the coastal ridge referred to by locals as the Berkeley Hills. Memories of fog coming and going in the summer months, over the slopes of dry, brown grass and eucalyptus trees, are part of the landscape pictured in the music. I included a few musical devices that I like, including a brief, fanfare-like outburst that also occurs as a signature in other of my compositions. Elly Armer is an accomplished pianist, and the brief 12-tone flourish from the piano that begins and ends the work is a musical tip of my hat in her direction.” *Berkeley Hills* was first performed in 2014, by the San Francisco Conservatory New Music Ensemble, in a concert celebrating Armer’s 75th birthday.

Bringing to life these works are some of southern California’s finest studio and concert musicians, led by concertmaster Peter Kent, a veteran of countless film, television, and record projects and one of Sasha Matson’s frequent musical collaborators. The high level of music-making is matched by a quality of recorded sound that’s water-clear, richly textured, and colorful. Standouts abound—including, for me, the convincing spatial presence of the strings in *Jigging the Reel*, the timbral colors of the woodwinds in *Berkeley Hills*, and that delicious double bass in *Dark Pool*. I’m sure you’ll discover favorite moments of your own.—Art Dudley

JOHN ATKINSON ON CAPTURING THE SOUND

My experience with recording chamber and orchestral music has been formed by having ensembles play in a church or concert hall with supportive acoustics and using relatively minimal miking to capture the sound. So when Sasha Matson told me that the availability of A-list musicians in Los Angeles meant that we were going to record on a Hollywood scoring stage, with close microphones on each instru-

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: As well as playing piano, Mark Gasbarro was featured on harpsichord and celeste; Kevin Gray threads one of the analog tape masters to cut an LP side; The lacquer waits to be cut.



THE CAST

Composer, conductor:
Sasha Matson

Violins Peter Kent (concertmaster, solo violin), Becky Bunnel, Roberto Cani, Joel Derouin, Clayton Haslip, Ben Hudson, Marina Manukian, John Wittenberg.

Violas Briana Bandy, Andrew Duckles, Daniel Oguri, Cameron Patrick, Kari Prescott.

Cellos
Erika Duke-Kirkpatrick, Paula Hochalter, Cameron Stone

Double bass Jeff Bandy

Clarinet Phil O’Connor

Bassoon
Anthony Parnter

Trumpet Marisa Benedict

Solo harp
Amy Shulman

Percussion
Scott Higgins

Keyboards
Mark Gasbarro

Production, CD/file mastering
John Atkinson

Recording, Mix on Cut to Bar Interior
Michael C. Ross

Editing, Mixes on Berkeley Hills, Annunciation, Tight Lines Mike Marciano

Original Pro Tools engineering Jeremy Miller:

Analog tape transfer
Joe Marciano

LP mastering Kevin Gray & Joe Harley

Recorded June 1 & 2, 2016, at EastWest Studios, Hollywood, CA.

Edited and mixed August 17 & 18 at Systems Two Recording Studio, Brooklyn, NY



the live sound. The average level is typically -24dBFS , but the peaks reach within 0.1dB of 0dBFS , or full scale.

I mastered the CD and high-resolution files using Bias Peak. This program is no longer available, but I have found its options for sample-rate conversion—to 44.1kHz for the CD release, and for reducing the original mixdown files from 32 to

24 bits for the hi-rez release, then to 16 bits for CD—to sound superb. However, for the LP mastering, for which we'd decided to prepare an analog tape transfer, we returned to Systems Two, where Mike and Joe Marciano had rented a Studer A67 open-reel tape deck running $\frac{1}{4}$ " tape at 30ips.

For the transfer to analog tape, I played the mixdowns using the Pure Music 3 app on my MacBook Pro, the latter's USB port feeding 32-bit data to an Ayre Acoustics QX-5 D/A converter. To provide extra gain in case we needed it, the QX-5's balanced analog outputs were connected with AudioQuest cable to an Ayre K-XR Twenty preamplifier, the outputs of which fed the Studer, again via balanced AudioQuest cables. For the cutting session, Sasha hand-delivered the analog master tapes to Joe Harley, whose accomplishments in music and sound need no introduction,⁴ and Kevin Gray at Gray's Coherent Audio studio, in California. Once the acetate masters had been cut, the stampers were prepared and the LPs pressed by RTI, in Camarillo, California—on Joe Harley's favorite press there. (In 1997, RTI had pressed *Stereophile's* last LP, of Robert Silverman performing Liszt's massive Piano Sonata in b.⁵)

With its mix of state-of-the-art digital technology and vintage microphones and mixing console, this was a fascinating project to be involved in. My thanks to Sasha Matson for the opportunity—but, more important, for the music.—John Atkinson

3 Studio One at EastWest is a large film-scoring stage. During a break, I went and stood in the small Studio Three, where Brian Wilson recorded *Pet Sounds* in 1966, when the studio complex was called Western Recorders. I swear that I could hear, in the silence, Mike Love haranguing Brian to write more songs about girls and surfing.

4 See www.stereophile.com/content/joe-harley-both-sides-now.

5 See www.stereophile.com/features/131/index.html.

ment, I wasn't sure what to expect.

Fortunately, once we arrived at EastWest Studios' Studio One, in Hollywood,³ it rapidly became apparent that this would be a great-sounding record. Not only did EastWest have a superb collection of vintage microphones for engineer Michael C. Ross to choose from, he had positioned a pair of Neumann M50 tubed omni mikes—the model used in the classic recordings made in the 1950s and 1960s by RCA Living Stereo, Mercury Living Presence, and Decca—on tall stands above the conductor's podium, to capture the sound of the room. And in case those mikes didn't provide enough studio ambience, rather than use a soulless Pro Tools plug-in, we had arranged for the availability of a vintage EMT echo plate. The exception to this plan would be the three movements of *Annunciation*—because we would be adding the repeat echo in the mix and thus needed maximum isolation between instruments, the harp would be placed in a separate booth.

We would be recording straight to Pro Tools, with the output of EastWest's vintage Neve console feeding multiple Pro Tools A/D converters. In digital recording, the primary question is what bit depth and sample rate to use. Michael felt that the Pro Tools converters sounded best at 96kHz rather than their highest rate of 192kHz , so that's what we used, setting the word length to 32 bits to give the maximum headroom in postproduction. The only complication involved the piano: its optimal placement for sound quality meant that the pianist couldn't see Sasha, who was conducting. After some experimentation, we found a position that met both conditions.

The sessions went quickly, with Michael Ross mixing on the fly to a separate pair of Pro Tools tracks. We ended up using Michael's mix for *Cut to Bar Interior*, but for the other works, which were more complicated, we spent two days at Systems Two Recording Studio, in Brooklyn, with Mike Marciano, who has won two Grammys for engineering. As well as recording Sasha overdubbing some prepared-piano effects for *Dark Pool*, Mike came up with the optimal repeat echo for *Annunciation* and did the final mixes for the other works on the album, again using a vintage EMT echo plate that Mike's brother Joe Marciano had restored to working order. No compression or gain riding to reduce peak levels was applied—not in the recording, the mixing, or the mastering: What you hear on this recording is the full dynamic range of

LEFT: For *Berkeley Hills*, the septet comprised string trio plus trumpet, clarinet, bassoon, and percussion.

BELOW: For maximum isolation from the violin in *Annunciation*, Amy Shulman played in a booth and was miked in stereo.



THE MUSIC

Tight Lines: Music by Sasha Matson (DDD) STPH022-2 (CD); (DAA) STPH022-1 (LP)¹

[1] *Cut to Bar Interior*, for string quartet and piano 8:29

Annunciation, for violin and harp with echoes

[2] *Presence* 4:02

[3] *Annunciation* 5:07

[4] *Reflection* 6:27

[5] *Berkeley Hills*, for mixed septet 4:36

Tight Lines, for string orchestra and keyboards

[6] *Headwaters* 4:59

[7] *Dark Pool* 5:20

[8] *Jigging the Reel* 5:27

[9] *Rise to the Fly, Run to the Sea* 5:46

Total Playing Time: 50:22

¹ Side 1 of the LP has *Cut to Bar Interior* and *Annunciation*; Side 2, *Berkeley Hills* and *Tight Lines*.

