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‘Creamy chamber music’ from Redding composer

[Rob Ryser](#) June 16, 2019 Updated: June 16, 2019 12 a.m.



Derek Piotr, of Danbury, is an electronic composer with a new album coming out in August. Thursday, May 30, 2019, in Barrister's Coffee House, Danbury, Conn. Photo: H John Voorhees III / Hearst Connecticut Media
DANBURY - Growing up in the woods of Redding, it was nature that spoke most to Derek Piotr about the multifarious dimensions of music.

But in his time of trial, it was the organ in the sanctuary of St. Peter Church in downtown Danbury that helped Piotr turn the corner on a challenging album in honor of his grandmother's passing.

“Recording in that church in December really kickstarted the record in a way that made sense for me,” said Piotr, a 28-year-old composer and producer whose album, “Avia,” is due out in August. “I had written some very simple scores on my laptop, but once I gave them to the violinist and played them on organ, it really fell into place, and I was able to finish in three-and-a half months.”

The release of Piotr's eighth album represents a new movement for a composer whose electronic and acoustic productions have featured everything from noise distortion and voice manipulation to sustained and rhythmically subdued tones known as drone.

He is still searching for beauty and truth in his music, but now from a place of loss - mourning his spirited grandmother, Dorothy Crofut, who died last year at 99.

The result is what he describes as "creamy chamber music."

"I love my parents very much, but they could not emulate or replicate the experience of being around my grandmother," says Piotr, who was adopted from his native Poland when he was 9 months old. "She was such a beacon of possibility for me that you just don't want to complain after you see someone live their life like that."

Never mind that his grandmother never listened to "Grunt" - his 2018 album featuring "confrontational vocal recordings processed in various recognizable and alien ways," or any of his music, for that matter.

"I remember trying to play her some music I cared about, and she just said 'Oh, that's okay,'" because music for her was much more about reminiscence than a listening experience," Piotr said. "She wanted to hear Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller, and I didn't have an issue with that."

What Piotr is having an issue with now, 14 months since her death, is the power of the recordings he made of her on his smart phone - some of which appear on tracks in the new album, and some of which Piotr says are too personal to publish.

"I was really careful about what memories I chose to share," said Piotr, who described her as 'a little bit lewd, very humorous and very devil-may-care.' "Some of them I would never share."

Why not?

"If you give everything away, you are emotionally bankrupt," he says, looking out the window of Barrister's Coffee Co. in downtown Danbury toward the St. Peter Church spire. And you can't give anything else."

Like all working artists, Piotr has tension to manage other that what to make public and what to keep private. There is the tension between his vision and his execution, and the tension between his ambition and his reception.

"I am trying hard not to make art music where you have to read the liner notes to get it, or where I am trying to trick the listener or be show-offy," says Piotr, who works as a barista in Bethel and has been living in Danbury for two years. "With this new record, with all the acoustic instruments, it's the closest I have gotten to folk music."

Piotr's first local test will come in September during a chamber music concert planned at Marian Anderson Hall to benefit the Danbury Music Centre. Piotr is adapting his album for violin, organ, keyboard and harp.

Barbara Adams Jaeger, executive director of Danbury Music Centre, said she has yet to hear Piotr's music, but she is supportive of his work and is confident that members will take to it.

"We have an older clientele, but a lot of people nowadays are very interested in a new modern approach to making music, and what new approaches have to say musically," she said.

Jaeger suggested Piotr was not unlike another unconventional composer with a fondness for folk, Charles Ives.

"He would start bands at opposite ends of the street playing different music, and have them come together, each playing their own music," Jaeger said.

In the end, Piotr says he expects audiences will connect in the same places that he has found himself moved while producing the album.

"Some of these tracks are instrumental - such as this very long ambient track - and then suddenly her voice will come in, and it's jarring," Piotr says. "I think that is the definition of beauty - this searing mainline into an emotional experience that sometimes knocks you out - you know, in a good way."

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