

By



Brick

Violist and composer
Jessica Pavone
rebuilds from injury with
a new take on the
higher registers of the
string quartet. By
Philip Clark

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In 2012, after an existing condition became aggravated by what she describes as a severe injury, violist/composer (and occasional violinist and bassist) Jessica Pavone had little choice but to step away from active music making. “I was going to the doctor once a week and physical therapist twice a week,” she recalls, “and when you are in a physical place like that, everything around you gets stripped down, back to the basics.”

Prior to her illness, Pavone had played a vital part in New York’s creative music scene. Her duo with guitarist Mary Halvorson was both slow talking and quick-witted, as disarmingly direct melodic lines got dragged across complex structural grids – whimsy that would have made Erik Satie beam from ear to ear. Anthony Braxton and William Parker were eager to draw on Pavone’s creative spirit and she played on the final flowering of Braxton’s *Ghost Trance Music* compositions – recorded live in 2006 and released as *9 Compositions (Iridium)* – and, a year later, on Parker’s *Double Sunrise Over Neptune*. Throughout this period, Pavone kept working on her own music, which included a sequence of pieces for unusually configured string ensembles. *Songs Of Synastry And Solitude* (its title riffing off Leonard Cohen’s *Songs Of Love And Hate*) was string quartet music that took one violin away and added a double bass to the traditional two violins, viola, cello format; *Hope Dawson Is Missing*, recorded just before Pavone’s health problems, supplemented that same ensemble with guitar, voice and drums.

Her latest release *Brick And Mortar* offers a further perspective on the idea of the string quartet. Where her earlier projects bolstered the bass register of the ensemble, this new project, scored for two violins and two violas, strips away the lower octaves altogether.

“In April 2017, I was on the last leg of a rock tour as the bass player,” Pavone explains. “For five weeks I had schlepped around a lot of gear and endured very long soundchecks. Driving home, a violin came on the radio and, wow, it was the most beautiful sound in the universe and I knew it was time to start writing string music again. Violins and violas only, because all I could think about was a group that was lightweight and compatible – a compact ensemble that could potentially play spaces where music is not traditionally heard like gardens and hospitals. Like a dam that’s been broken I was flooded with ideas, and wrote the entire album the following month.”

Typically for Pavone, wasted notes or gestures are held in disdain, and the five compositions of *Brick And Mortar* run to little over 30 minutes. Intricately organised, easy to negotiate, interlocking patterns that begin the opening piece “Hurtle And Hurdle” are gently nudged out of alignment – and then plunged into complex overlays. Pavone designed her title track around floating harmonic overtones, which are notoriously problematic to notate, and her record is defined by a tension between comely patterns and moments when she cuts her musicians different sorts of slack – precisely what someone immersed in both composition and improvisation ought to be writing.

““Hurtle And Hurdle” is completely notated, apart from near the end when the violists, who have been playing harmonics, get to choose the order to play them until the end,” says Pavone. ““Brick And Mortar” was composed in block form and musicians are instructed to sustain a pitch or alternate between pitches. A digital clock acts as the conductor and times are indicated on the score for when to move to the next cell. There is a window of time when the performers can choose to move on, enabling an overlap

where the ensemble does not proceed to the next sonic landscape simultaneously. In the opening part of another piece, “Sooner Or Later”, the musicians are also given cells to move through as instructed by a clock, however they are instructed to play the same figure over and over again, but at their own tempo and independently of one another. The particular figure was composed to feel good to play, something I had devised for myself for my solo playing. The passage sits on a comfortable spot on the neck of the instrument and, with the trance-like repetition of the bow, physically affects the people playing – I want the musicians to get lost in what they are playing.”

After nursing herself back to health, Pavone rekindled her relationship with the viola through a trilogy of unaccompanied albums using the instrument: *Knuckle Under*, *Silent Spills* and *In The Action*. Removing herself from the responsibilities of administering large-scale projects, and not depending upon others to realise her creative ideas, felt necessary. “I wanted to play music that felt good for me in my body,” she says. And that process became the bricks and mortar of *Brick And Mortar*. “During the years spent composing solo music, notation wasn’t always necessary,” she concludes. “I could jot down a quick note in a way that I understood. Eventually I began using a clock during performances to pace myself, or sit in certain sections of the music for specific lengths. I had a tendency to rush, when I needed to give certain sections space, and that directly influenced writing block form time-based compositions. Composing music, leaving sections for improvisation never really worked for me. So while there are elements of choice in this new album, I intend the result to sound organic.” □ J Pavone String Ensemble’s *Brick And Mortar* is released by Birdwatcher

Logan White