STRINGS

The Transfiguration of Caroline Goulding

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Strings

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The young violinist embarks on a journey of self-discovery set against the wild landscape of rural Montana

Violinist Caroline Goulding under an Alexander Calder sculpture. Photo by Kathy Kasic

Caroline Goulding has been thinking a lot about Yehudi Menuhin. The 24-year-old violinist, like Menuhin, started young—picking up a violin at age three and debuting at 13 years old with the Cleveland Orchestra. By 16, she had her first Grammy nomination for her self-titled 2009 release on Telarc, which made the classical Billboard Top 15.

Now, as Goulding is poised to present and perform the first concert program she's ever curated, Menuhin seems to be following her. It started at the 2017 Sommets Musicaux de Gstaad, where Goulding received the Thierry Scherz Prize honoring the best performance with an opportunity to return and record an album under the Swiss label Claves Records. In 1957, Menuhin and his family moved to Gstaad, Switzerland, where he founded the Menuhin Festival.

"I remember being there, in Gstaad, and I felt the heart of him. This flow was happening throughout this whole year. It really feels like the seeds were planted," says Goulding, sitting across from me in a sundress and bare feet, pink bug bites dotting her porcelain skin. "I'm itching again!" The rural Montana

mosquitoes at Tippet Rise Art Center—where she's performing her program in four concerts over two days—have feasted on both of us, and I hand her a bottle of anti-itch spray.

"Yesterday, I was playing Bartók's solo sonata—it was written for Yehudi Menuhin—and that night, Paul Kantor and I spoke on the phone. He was one of my teachers. We hadn't spoken for a year. He was in Cleveland and I happened to call him. He said, 'I was in our old studio, where you took lessons, and there's a picture of Yehudi Menuhin and I took a photo of it today because I was so moved by it.' I said 'You've got to be kidding me, I was playing his Bartók today!'

"Talk about an amazing, unbelievable soul," she continues about Menuhin. "He was a child prodigy, you could say, though he was a cultivated artist right at 16. He went through a process [at age 19]—he went onstage and he couldn't play. He just stopped. Something happened. So what did he do? He took it and ran with that experience, totally open to it. He started exploring all kinds of different music. He was a yogi, you know?"

Goulding has been doing yoga since her studies at New England Conservatory. The practice piqued her curiosity about meditation, and she went to her first class in Boston with her classmate Luke Hsu. She's been at it ever since, developing the program for Tippet Rise at the Colorado-based Buddhist meditation retreat Shambhala Mountain Center and at Karmê Chöling in Vermont.

The title of her program, presented July 14 and 15 with Joshua Roman on cello and David Fung on piano, is cryptic at first—*Universe as Poet: Transfiguration through Cycles, Sages, and the Collective Unconscious*. Not even Goulding can explain it in clear, concise language. Yet as the performances unfold and she becomes increasingly vulnerable, she reveals herself as not just a virtuosic violinist, but as a young woman in the throes of discovering who she is. Both in the music and in the unpredictable moments—watching the summer breeze blow her sheet music off the stand or her string break mid-solo—she allows us to witness her figuring it out.

Violinist Caroline Goulding and pianist David Fung. Photo by Emily Rund

Tippet Rise is the ideal environment for such an experiment. An 11,000-acre working ranch in south-central Montana, north of Yellowstone National Park, its vast landscape—peppered with large-scale sculptures by world-class artists—makes you feel like anything is possible. Nestled in the foothills of the

Beartooth Mountains, Tippet Rise's rugged canyons, high meadows, and big sky glow in washes of gold, olive, and azure. Sheep and cows outnumber the people here, even in the summer months when Tippet Rise hosts concert-goers in the 150-seat Olivier Music Barn and sculpture tours.

Philanthropist couple Peter and Cathy Halstead modeled the space after Storm King Art Center in New York's Hudson Valley, and incorporated their passion for classical music (Peter is a pianist) with a summer music program that's attracted top string players since its inaugural 2016 season, including Goulding and cellist Matt Haimovitz who both returned for the 2017 season.

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Goulding's first season at Tippet Rise was curated by then-musical director Christopher O'Riley, host of NPR's *From the Top* and a longtime friend of the Halsteads, but this year she was offered an opportunity to create a program from scratch. With Peter Halstead as her mentor, Goulding shaped the program around emotionally weighty and technically challenging pieces, which included Schoenberg's seminal Verklärte Nacht (Transfigured Night), Op. 4; Ravel's posthumous Sonata for Violin and Cello in C major; Enescu's Impressions from Childhood, Op. 28; Beethoven's Piano Trio, Op. 70, No. 2, in E-flat major; and three pieces by one of Goulding's favorite composers, Schumann: 6 Studies in the Form of Canons, Piano Trio No. 3 in G minor, Op. 110, and Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 2 in D minor.

"Caroline has a unique ability to play things the way you're not used to hearing them," says Peter Halstead. "By changing the expectation of what a note is, not only does Caroline make old music modern, but she makes modern music accessible—old, in a way. It's something that people don't do, maybe they're scared to do it—and there's a tradition that you're supposed to make the same sound that's on every CD that anybody owns. But why? Why not have the nerve and the imagination to open things up? That's what Caroline does, which is very unique among musicians. She's such a prodigy and she's so brash and bold that she has the guts to do it."

Goulding neither embraces or rebuffs the prodigy label. "When you're starting your career young, there's always going to be some kind of effect—positive and negative," she says. "To be honest with you, if you start early, you can't get around it being a little different—a little different than just being able to go to school. There's pressure involved in what we do and that's not necessarily a bad thing."

Violinist Caroline Goulding. Photo by Sarah Lanier

Her career has so far checked many of the boxes of your typical violin virtuoso: summer festivals at Marlboro, Yellow Barn, and the Aspen Music Festival—where at 13 she won first prize in the concerto competition; at 14, she appeared on O'Riley's PBS program *From the Top: Live from Carnegie Hall;* by 16, she was offered a three-album recording deal with Telarc and won first prize at the Young Concert Artists International Auditions; at 18, she received an Avery Fisher Career Grant and started studying with Donald Weilerstein at the New England Conservatory.

Working with Weilerstein sparked Goulding's interest in yoga, and eventually meditation, though the famed violin teacher never directly spoke of either practice.

"The way he teaches is all about the body," says Goulding. "He's connected to people in a loving and authentic way—talk about a compassionate being."

Before starting meditation, Goulding understood it on an intuitive level, but had no name for the sensation of being embodied—fully grounded in mind and body—that she experienced while performing. "Musicians are constantly meditating on a single point of awareness when they're in the state of performing music. [Meditation] is exactly like listening. It's all about sense perceptions and then honing in on that. It's challenging, I'm not going to lie. This process has been very slow. It's not like you sit down on the cushion and it's like 'Oh yeah, awesome.' You're sitting with yourself, you're working with yourself. It's like tuning your body to harmonize with your mind, to a point that you can feel comfortable and relax."

The harmony is evident in her interactions with Roman and Fung, who allow her to lead them into dissonant and chaotic places. In Verklärte Nacht, the trio breathes each note together, which run the gamut of strained and atonal to a symphonic wall of sound. Goulding plays with her entire body, but reveals little in her expression—mostly hidden behind her curly blonde bob—until the piece ends. The three musicians are awash with relief, letting the tension go in a shared grin as the sun sets behind them in Olivier Barn's massive picture window. The audience exhales too, before bursting into applause and jumping to its feet. Crows fly in the distance, gathering to roost, and night is nearly upon us. I don't know if it's transfigured, but somehow, we are.

Violinist Caroline Goulding and cellist Joshua Roman. Photo by Sarah Lanier

The next morning, we head to Domo—a massive, cave-like sculpture formed in concrete and created by the Spanish architecture firm Ensamble Studio specifically for Tippet Rise. The audience is seated beneath the sculpture and encircles a small stage; the space feels incredibly intimate despite the fact that we're perched on a high meadow with expansive views from every angle. Nature pays us no mind and in the middle of Schumann's 6 Studies in the Form of Canons, the wind whips through Domo's narrow passages and Goulding's sheet music flies off her stand. An audience member grabs the pages from the gravel and the trio continues without regard. There's a long break as Goulding and Roman scramble to organize her music and the audience whispers over the buzzing sound of grasshoppers in flight. The trio fully rebounds during Beethoven's Op. 70, No. 2, which revs into a call and response bursting with phrasing that feels like a delicate dance of power and restraint.

"I've never played outside like that," Goulding reveals after the performance. "It was casual, and so gorgeous. It was as much about the music as the sculpture and the entire landscape. And also the bugs biting me!"

Back at Olivier Barn, Goulding and Fung carry the casual air into their final performance, walking onstage barefoot. Goulding can't find her shoes and they just go with it. "That's Caroline," Fung later explains. "She's so free spirited and it's amazing."

As she launches into the sombre opening of Impressions from Childhood, Goulding captures the mystery and innocence of Enescu's memories by making her violin moan and gasp and whistle like the eerie ghost of a freight train. It's still Romantic, but not pretty per se, and Fung matches her mood with brooding and rumbling fingerwork. He also supplies the piece's birdsong and cuckoo-clock sounds—so convincingly that I scanned the barn's pitched roof for evidence of a trapped bird. As Goulding builds into a frenetic crescendo during the final movement, Lever de soleil (Sunrise), her fervent, all-consuming effort is interrupted when a string snaps.

The spell is suddenly broken, and Goulding straightens her body and announces the show's over in a deadpan tone. Fung reassures the audience, "We'll be back," as they retreat backstage to repair the string. The audience swells with excited chatter, as many still don't know that Goulding was kidding, and we wait to see what will happen next. Goulding and Fung return with smiles, reprising the movement

with the same energy as when they left it—perhaps even more. Goulding faces the audience with a new confidence, fully revealing the concentrated expression behind her blonde bob. It feels like the string was meant to break, as if the music required it, and Goulding and Fung and the audience are further bonded as a result.

"It was totally spontaneous and totally human," Goulding tells me after the set. "There's beauty in the imperfections—the things that are out of our control—like the wind blowing the music away from my stand. It makes it beautiful because it's live and it's fresh and it's present. It wakes people up."

But why did *she* seem more confident after the string broke, I press. "That's where the meditation has informed the music. It's impacting the way I'm operating in the world—through surrendering control—which is a similar thing that happens in art. When you're surrendering, you're letting go of that narrative you've told yourself a million times over and over again. It could still be there in the background—it's not like you get to a point and it's like 'Oh, it's not there anymore, it's all perfect.' You're surrendering that illusion of who you've been or who you are for the reality of the moment, which is the only reality that we ever have. You're becoming embodied. You're becoming in harmony with everything there is.

"It has to be nurtured with courage and fearlessness. It's very personal, but then you transcend the personal and you get to the universal. It's like everything is included—the performers, the audience, the grass on the hill. There is no boundary. You're transcending the illusion of boundaries because you realize there are no boundaries at that level and there never have been. We create them and that's to the detriment of us. I've been feeling this today, in rehearsing. It must be the energy of this entire place. It's liberating to know who you are not and, in that, there becomes more choice. The ending of a series like this can be emotionally fascinating. It's beyond words. It's feeling."

She pauses, grabbing a bite of bread and cheese from the massive spread the Halsteads put out for performers and staff. "I know I'm getting very abstract—what are you going to write?"

We turn to Peter Halstead, who's opining about why certain moments of the program struck a chord. "My teacher Russell Sherman used to say to me 'Why does everything have to be pretty? Sounds can be ugly. Sounds can be disruptive.'"

Goulding jumps in, "Christian [Tetzlaff] says that, too."

"To make Haydn just pretty is to miss a lot of what was going on," Halstead continues. "You've got to open yourself up to a world of sounds."

"You know who's the inspiration for all this, right?" Goulding asks Halstead, before giving him an opportunity to answer. "The Yehudi." It takes me a minute to realize that she's referring to Menuhin, but Halstead immediately catches on. "Oh yeah," he replies, "What would Yehudi do?"