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Spontaneity SKY Concert Series Delves Into Bach Inventions, Jazz, and Spontaneity

Jeff Kaliss on April 7, 2026.



Lara Downes and Christian Sands | Credit: Lydia Daniller

Classical California, the company created last year by merging stations KDFC and KUSC, has reimagined Marshall McLuhan's definition of radio as a hot medium with several cool concepts. They include the continuation of the SKY Concert series, held at the panoramic Barbro Osher Recital Hall, nine floors above Classical California's studio and offices in the Bowes Center on Van Ness Avenue, in San Francisco.

On a particularly hot last Sunday afternoon, the SKY concert provided climatic relief and glasses of Miner wine to a couple hundred souls, some garbed in aloha shirts. The host of the series has been Lara Downes, who's also the organization's resident artist and evening on-air personality. Downes, known for her advocacy and showcasing of the music of contemporary composers, including women and minorities, had engaged fellow pianist Christian Sands for a unique tandem take on the music of J.S. Bach. The pair had partnered earlier this year in performances of the Philip Glass Etudes.

On a couple of juxtaposed Steinways, each of Downes's renditions of eight of Bach's Two-Part Inventions was followed by a "reinvention" from Sands. The performance was preceded by a welcome from the president of Classical California in San Francisco, Bill Lueth, and was followed by the performers' commentary on their project and a Q&A with the audience.



Lara Downes | Credit: Lydia Daniller

Downes's readings were, in Inventions Nos. 1–3, rather rushed and not crisp enough, with the piano tuned slightly flat. She did better with the dancey No. 10, and paced more pleasantly on Nos. 9 and 11, displaying the emotional reflectivity of the composer.

Sands, who had been mentored in jazz piano by the late Billy Taylor and had toured with Christian McBride, was well-suited to a collaboration with Downes. In remarks, he called Bach “the first jazz musician.” But he shared with her, in the earlier of his pianistic responses, a tendency to speed and blur his approach to the keyboard, and to favor a fortissimo which occluded the composer’s cantabile intention.

Credit Sands, though, with the ability to spontaneously generate original music in the moment, incorporating melodic and dynamic aspects of the source material. His right-hand voicings were often sweet, evoking Keith Jarrett in their positioning against a left-hand ostinato — notably in his response to Invention No. 3. But his default to repetition distanced him from Bach, as did some furtive structuring of harmonic changes and improvised melodies.



Lara Downes | Credit: Lydia Daniller

Both pianists finished well on Invention No. 8, with Downes confident and Sands birthing what could be a fascinating standalone piece, his right-hand romping merrily alongside his locomotive left. This rightly earned enthusiastic applause.

Their verbal interchange was genuine and engaging. Downes noted that “we both grew up with Glenn Gould,” and testified to “a time in my life when the only thing I could listen to was the *Goldberg Variations*.” Widening her listening, she learned that “there are rules in jazz, and rules in Bach. And learning Bach, the ornamentations are sacred.

“That makes me think of Charlie Parker, where the ornamentations are the personality,” responded Sands. He noted that Bach “reminds me of bebop: how do you get from point A to point B without breaking the momentum.” He answered a “what is jazz?” query from an audience member with “a documentation of human experience [and] the freedom to create.”



Lara Downes | Credit: Lydia Daniller

Downes reported just finishing her new album, *Hold These Truths*, in connection with her Declaration Project and marking the 250th anniversary of this nation. It will be released by PENTATONE on July 3. She and Sands then returned to the Steinways for her arrangement of the Shaker hymn “Simple Gifts.” Her interpretation was simple enough and sweet, in places mirroring Aaron Copland’s luminous arrangement in *Appalachian Spring* but flattening the shape of the melody a bit. Sands responded with a honeyed and folksy bouquet.

In conversation after the event, Bill Lueth confirmed that the SKY Concert series will continue in San Francisco as well as in Los Angeles and elsewhere in California. He said that Classical California is “a rare, free gateway to enjoy classical music,” now working through studios in both SF and LA, with 11 broadcast signals across the state as well as a global web presence and streaming. The multifarious Downes has her own *Classical Americana* program.

Jeff Kaliss has featured and reviewed classical, jazz, rock, and world musics and other entertainment for the San Francisco Chronicle and a host of other regional, national, international, and web-based publications. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University, is a published poet, and is the author of *I Want to Take You Higher: The Life and Times of Sly & the Family Stone* (Backbeat Books) and numerous textbook and encyclopedia entries, album liner notes, and festival program notes.



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