

Joel Styzens - *RESONANCE* // Fall 2023

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Performed by **Sophie Webber, Rob Clearfield, Jinty McTavish, Sabrina Tabby, Genevieve Tabby, Rita Andrade, and Joel Styzens**; recorded and mixed by **Rick Barnes**, mastered by **Howie Weinberg**

RIYL: **Ólafur Arnalds, Sigur Rós, Múm, Thomas Newman, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Zoe Keating**

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*Resonance*, the upcoming album by composer and multi-instrumentalist **Joel Styzens**, features a full hour of hammered dulcimer, acoustic guitar, cello, piano, and string quartet compositions designed to take listeners on an instrumental journey about the transformative power of connection. “In an age of singles and ping-pong streaming, *Resonance* offers listeners an opportunity to deeply listen, to reflect, to interact with the music by being musically guided or by imaginatively choosing their own adventure,” Styzens says.

Transformation is also a theme in Joel Styzens’ life. Severe tinnitus and hyperacusis sidetracked his career as a percussionist causing him to temporarily lose his identity as a musician while he focused on dealing with symptoms and finding therapies. Styzens founded a Chicago-based support group and he found a new way to create music that his ears could tolerate by writing it himself for stringed instruments, performed at a lower volume. The result was *Relax Your Ears* (2011), Styzens’ first album, which earned international notice for its acoustic soundscapes.

*Resonance* connects to *Relax Your Ears*, which was primarily composed for guitar and cello. The foundation of rhythmic attention is key in any piece he composes—the regard to silence, pauses, a carefully placed vibrato or tempo change. However, the last decade of musical growth has helped Styzens understand more about how he composes by using the grandeur and complexities of classical works and visualizing them as more traditional songs, thereby making them more accessible to a wider audience. He is heavily influenced by his love of 90s grunge and alternative rock, jazz, world music, and his childhood exposure (through his parents) to folk, bluegrass, and old-time string bands. Styzens teaches at **Old Town School of Folk Music** in Chicago and reconnected with the hammered dulcimer there, building upon its percussive qualities. He has practiced yoga and meditation for many years and understands the ability of music to take listeners on a journey or keep them acutely present.

Joining Styzens on *Resonance* are the British cellist **Sophie Webber** and jazz pianist **Rob Clearfield**. Webber and Styzens have worked together creatively for years, even living in a shared artists’ house. Through his jazz drumming gigs, Styzens met Clearfield, a pianist with incredible improvisational technique. Styzens brought in the **ATLYS Quartet**, comprised of **Jinty McTavish, Sabrina Tabby, Genevieve Tabby, and Rita Andrade**, to deepen the compositional textures. Brought together, *Resonance* maintains the intimacy of *Relax Your Ears* while expanding the record dynamically and texturally.

From the first track, “**Opening**,” *Resonance* captures the relationship between our connections with others, nature, and the unknown, illustrated through the ensemble’s push-and-pull between quiet, propulsive moments and swaths of expansive string textures. Styzens describes the piece as exploring “the cosmos colliding as a metaphor for the evolution of intimate relationships.” Another bond highlighted on the album is the one between Styzens and his grandmother, who found immense comfort in his music, her final musical request being his piece, “**Ascendance**.” The composition maintains a consistent sense of motion, while melodies float tranquilly above, literally ascending. “**The Garden Suite**,” inspired by the Chicago Botanic Gardens, immerses the listener in the natural world. Styzens says “The Garden Suite” examines how “music without words can also narrate and capture specific moments in time,” providing freedom to “choose your own adventure in the moment.” He adds, “But if you want to listen for specific imagery, you might hear dragonflies joyfully darting in the shadow and light of ‘Walled Garden,’ and

graceful, falling cascades in 'Waterfall Garden.'”

In each second of *Resonance*, the musical gentleness and majesty blend seamlessly through the warmth amongst the musicians involved and the care for the stories behind the compositions. “*Resonance* is based on connection,” says Styzens, “and how we resonate with each other, with nature, with the great beyond. It’s a celebration of the challenges and triumphs of life and the potential for transformation.”