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# News

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Release date: August 12, 2014

## Fifth House Ensemble Scales the Heights on Cedille Records Debut

World-premiere recording of Caleb Burhans'  
hypnotic 'Excelsior' anchors album evoking  
vast spaces and boundless possibilities

*CD includes Alex Shapiro's 'Perpetual Spark,'  
Jesse Limbacher's 'Air,' and Mason Bates'  
'Red River'*

Fifth House Ensemble, the visionary Chicago-based group known for its innovative “narrative chamber music” productions, makes its Cedille Records debut with *Excelsior*, an album of works by four contemporary American composers, including world-premiere recordings of three pieces written for the ensemble.

Premieres include the title track, Caleb Burhans' haunting *Excelsior* for soprano and chamber ensemble, inspired by the U.S. Air Force's experimental, extreme-altitude skydiving project of the Cold War era; a chamber arrangement of Alex Shapiro's radiant *Perpetual Spark* for solo piano, honoring the memory of an irrepressible music educator; and Jesse Limbacher's *Air*, a wind trio demanding a challenging array of extended instrumental techniques.

Mason Bates' scenic *Red River* takes listeners for an overflight of the Colorado River on a jet stream of acoustic music and electronica.

*Excelsior* was released August 12 on CD and as MP3 and FLAC digital downloads (Cedille Records CDR 90000 148).

### A Flying Leap

In the late 1950s, the U.S. Air Force established the Excelsior Project to devise a high-altitude, parachute escape system for fliers. During a test on August 16, 1960, Capt. Joseph W. Kittinger Jr. ascended into the stratosphere in a gondola lifted by a helium balloon. He jumped from a then-record height of nearly 20 miles above the earth before landing safely in the New

Mexico desert after a 13-minute descent. During his initial four-minute 36-second free fall, assisted only by a small stabilizing parachute, Kittinger experienced temperatures as low as minus-94 degrees Fahrenheit and a maximum speed of 614 miles per hour.

Burhans (b. 1980) evokes this mind-boggling mission in *Excelsior* (2012), a 30-minute work written for Fifth House Ensemble through a New Music USA commission, with a libretto by New York poet John Coletti.

Burhans and Coletti found a touchstone for *Excelsior* in composer Morton Feldman's *Neither* (1977), Coletti said in an email to Fifth House Ensemble. Feldman's monodrama for soprano soloist and chamber orchestra, with libretto by poet-playwright Samuel Beckett, "was a powerful guide for both of us."

The diverse influences heard in *Excelsior* reflect Burhans' deep involvement, as a singer and instrumentalist, in music both sacred and secular, early and new, explained Fifth House Ensemble flutist Melissa Snoza in an interview with Cedille Records.

The full, ten-member Fifth House Ensemble gets into the act: flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, violin, viola, cello, bass, and piano; plus soprano soloist Martha Cluver (the composer's wife) and the New York duo *itsnotyouitsme*, consisting of Burhans on electric violin and Grey McMurray on electric guitar.

The same forces gave the world premiere of *Excelsior* at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art on March 9, 2013.

A concert review on [ICareIfYouListen.com](http://ICareIfYouListen.com) described how "the music unfolded in an ethereal, floating swirl through the ensemble, marking Kittinger's . . . free fall, then burst forth with intensity following the opening of his parachute." *Splash* magazine called it "a quite beautiful, dramatic composition, and it subtly captured the emotional highs and the anxieties produced by the audacious feat that inspired it."

*Excelsior*'s August 12 release date closely coincides with the 54<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Capt. Kittinger's historic skydive of August 16.

### **More Fresh Ink**

Prolific West Coast composer Alex Shapiro (b. 1962) wrote her *Perpetual Spark* (2011) in memory of multitalented performer and teacher Dale Mara Bershad, an upbeat, inspirational figure in early childhood music education in schools and museums in Washington, D.C., where she died of cancer at age 59 in 2010. It was originally written for solo piano, and the piano plays

a crucial role in the rich harmonies and sparkling textures of this arrangement, which adds flute, violin, viola, cello and bass. Ensemble pianist Jani Parsons writes in the program notes that these instruments provide “a new dimension — a sense of propulsion and lift in the sound inherent to Shapiro’s style, that can only be described as exhilarating.”

Fifth House Ensemble launched its annual summer **fresh inc** chamber music festival in 2012 to offer workshops, coaching, and concert opportunities for early-career composers and performers from across the country. Limbacher (b. 1991) wrote his *Air* for oboe, clarinet, and bassoon for the 2012 festival, where it received its premiere

Limbacher describes the single-movement piece as an essay on the various meanings inherent the word ‘air’ and as “a life-affirming expression of the human condition.” Fifth House clarinetist Jennifer Woodrum writes in the liner notes that the score requires quick transitions “between key clicks, traditional singing sound, whispering with speaking voices, blowing air, and speaking with heavily articulated percussive syllables.” It was “as if I had taken up a new instrument,” she writes.

*Red River* (2010), a five-movement work by Chicago Symphony Orchestra composer-in-residence Bates (b. 1977), combines clarinet, violin, cello, and piano with a prerecorded track of electronic sounds activated by the pianist. In the liner notes, Bates writes of combining “a chamber ensemble with the rhythmic power and drama of electronics” to trace the Colorado River from its sources in the Rocky Mountains, onward to the Grand Canyon and Las Vegas, completing the journey in the Sonoran Desert of southeastern California.

“There are some wonderfully expressive lyrical moments in this work, and the electronics are used at times to represent human intervention with nature,” noted a MusicWeb International review of MSR Classics’ release of *Red River*, the work’s only other recording.

### **House of Creativity**

Fifth House Ensemble takes its name from astrology’s fifth house, the realm of creativity, self-expression, and spontaneity. Praised by the *New York Times* for its “conviction, authority, and finesse,” the ensemble has performed at Chicago’s Ravinia Festival and Museum of Contemporary Art and at New York’s Miller Theater. The ensemble has presented performances and training programs at the Eastman School of Music, Yale and Indiana Universities, and the New England Conservatory. The ensemble’s cross-media projects include its signature concert series *Black Violet*, *The Weaver’s Tales*, *In Transit*, and *Caught*. Website: fifth-house.com.

## **Recording Information**

*Excelsior* was produced by multiple Grammy Award winner Judith Sherman and engineered by Cedille's chief recording engineer Bill Maylone at sessions June 5 and September 27–28, 2013, at Chicago Recording Company studios.

## **Cedille Records**

Approaching its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this fall, Grammy award-winning Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE) has been dedicated to showcasing the most noteworthy classical artists in and from the Chicago area since its debut in November 1989.

The audiophile-oriented label releases every new album in multiple formats: a physical CD; a 96 kHz, 24-bit, studio-quality FLAC download; and a 320 Kbps MP3 download.

Cedille Records is distributed in the Western Hemisphere by Naxos of America and its distribution partners, by Select Music in the U.K., and by other independent distributors in major international classical music markets.

An independent nonprofit enterprise, Cedille Records is the label of Cedille Chicago, NFP (formerly The Chicago Classical Recording Foundation). For a free catalog and the locations of local retail outlets, contact Cedille Records, 1205 W. Balmoral Ave., Chicago, IL 60640; call (773) 989-2515; e-mail: [info@cedillerecords.org](mailto:info@cedillerecords.org). Website: [cedillerecords.org](http://cedillerecords.org).

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### *Excelsior*

**(Cedille Records CDR 90000 148)**

**Alex Shapiro: *Perpetual Spark* (6:53)**

**Jesse Limbacher: *Air* (6:09)**

**Mason Bates: *Red River* (19:23)**

**Caleb Burhans: *Excelsior* (30:57)**

**Fifth House Ensemble**