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News

Recording release date: August 19, 2022

Saxophonist Julian Velasco, Cedille Records Competition Winner, Headlines Debut Album, Out August 19

**‘As We Are’ features world-premiere recordings
of Steven Banks’ ‘Come As You Are’ and saxophone versions
of works by Amanda Harberg, Elijah Daniel Smith,
and Christopher Cerrone**

**Works by David Maslanka and John Anthony Lennon
round out a project reflecting ‘What I am right now,’ artist says**

Chicago-based classical saxophonist Julian Velasco, winner of Cedille Records’ first Emerging Artist Competition, plays contemporary works for tenor, alto, and soprano saxophone on *As We Are*, his debut recording as a featured artist, set for release August 19, 2022.

On his first-ever album as a headliner, Velasco highlights music from composers he credits for playing large personal and musical roles in shaping his identity as an artist over the past few years.

Velasco, 27, calls the opportunity to record an album for the label “one of the greatest prizes anyone could ever imagine.”

The competition, launched in 2019 to celebrate Cedille’s 30th anniversary, “underscores the label’s mission of elevating the profiles and documenting the artistry of outstanding classical musicians in and from the Chicago area,” James Ginsburg, Cedille’s founder and president, says.

As We Are offers four pieces for saxophone and piano and two for saxophone and electronics, i.e., prerecorded tracks of layered saxophone sounds that accompany or blend with the solo part (Cedille Records CDR 90000 213).

Works with piano comprise world-premiere recordings of Steven Banks’ recent *Come As You Are* for tenor sax, which inspired the album’s title, and the soprano sax version of Amanda Harberg’s *Court*

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Dances, first written for flute and piano. Velasco played excerpts from those works in his competition-winning performances.

In addition, Velasco performs two pieces for alto saxophone and piano: David Maslanka's *Tone Studies No. 5: Wie Bist Du, Seele?* and John Anthony Lennon's *Distances Within Me*.

Pianist is Winston Choi, the highly regarded Canadian-born collaborative pianist and chamber musician who chairs the piano department at Roosevelt University's Chicago College of Performing Arts.

Works for saxophone and electronics include the freshly minted soprano saxophone versions of Elijah Daniel Smith's *Animus* and Christopher Cerrone's *Liminal Highway*. Both are world-premiere recordings of works originally scored for flute and, in the case of *Liminal Highway*, piccolo as well.

"These are the people who made the largest impact on the music I'm playing today," Velasco says. "*As We Are* is nothing other than what I am right now — a result of my relationships with these unique and wonderful individuals."

"Gorgeous Moments" for Tenor Sax

In the album liner notes, Banks, whom Velasco considers a friend and colleague, describes his four-movement *Come As You Are* as "an expanded arrangement, or setting" of traditional African American spirituals and other Black sacred songs. Each movement, he says, "is configured in a way that is intended to align with a slightly deviant four-movement sonata form" seen in works by Schumann, Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich, and others.

Velasco says classical works for tenor saxophone, such as *Come As You Are*, are rare and that Banks' new work "is beautifully written, highlighting the most gorgeous moments that a tenor saxophone can bring."

Velasco says he recorded Maslanka's *Tone Studies No. 5: Wie bist du, Seele*, based on a J. S. Bach chorale, as an elegy to the late composer, with whom he studied privately. The composer's program note, reprinted in the album booklet, says, "This music asks and requires that you listen deeply. When you do, a special settled heart energy arises." Velasco describes the work as "serene, sublime, and deeply moving."

Lennon is the only composer represented on the album with whom Velasco has never worked directly. His *Distances Within Me* was, however, written for the saxophone professor who was mentor to

Velasco's own undergraduate saxophone teacher at Michigan State University; Velasco sees himself as part of that pedagogical lineage.

“At its core, the work is a dark and mysterious rhapsody that ebbs and flows,” Velasco says. “The saxophone and piano merge their voices into an equal partnership.”

Harberg's *Court Dances* is a celebratory three-movement suite inspired by 16th- and 17th-century dance music for European royalty. Velasco describes it as “playful and light, toying with the juxtaposition of traditional, contemporary, and jazz influences throughout the work. It's a really charming piece.” He suggested to the composer that it would lend itself to soprano saxophone, and the two collaborated closely on the version heard on the album.

Smith writes that his intention in *Animus* was to create “a composite instrument from the live solo line and ‘tape.’ The soloist is in conversation with themselves and their own recordings, creating an atmosphere that is simultaneously one player and an indistinct number of players through a hazy veneer.”

Velasco says listeners often wonder what, exactly, they're hearing. “Everything you hear on this track is me,” he says, “but with many layers of saxophone processed, distorted, and twisted together to create an otherworldly orchestration.”

“There's a really visceral quality to this writing that creates sounds completely different from the rest of the record,” he says. “It is a sound world that you would never expect.”

Cerrone's *Liminal Highway*, the final piece on the album, was inspired by a poem of the same name by John K. Samson. Each of the five movements takes its name from a line in the poem.

The composer says the original work, for flute and piccolo, “sought to explode the idea of a traditional flute solo by incorporating new techniques such as key clicks, multiphonics, air sounds, and pre-recorded and live electronic processing.”

The soprano sax version, which Velasco worked with the composer to create, calls for similar extended techniques, but with Velasco also playing two harmonicas, to attain the high registers of the piccolo, as well as five beer bottles.

“This work uses all the components of the saxophone in fresh and interesting ways,” Velasco says. “The composer found creative ways of taking both conventional and unconventional sounds of the

instrument to create an orchestra's worth of different sounds.”

“Winning Personality”

Velasco won the opportunity to record an album of his own choosing on Cedille through his competition performances before a panel of classical music industry professionals during semi-final and final rounds of judging November 21 and 22, 2021, in Chicago. All costs to produce and market the album were covered by donors to Cedille’s nonprofit parent organization, Cedille Chicago NFP.

Cedille’s Ginsburg, one of the judges, says, “What stood out most to me, the other judges, and the audience was how Julian’s literally winning personality came through in his performances. You really felt that he had made the music completely his own, and his ability to communicate that vision to the audience established an emotional connection that is the hallmark of the best performers.”

To be eligible, contestants, whether individual artists or ensembles (sextet or smaller) must not have appeared as the featured performer on a commercially released CD. Rules also required that contestants reside in or come from the Chicago metropolitan area and placed age limits on participants.

Event Yields High-Profile Engagement

Velasco says his participation in Cedille’s competition boosted his career even before the release of *As We Are*. At the conclusion of the event, he was approached by an audience member, the Chicago Sinfonietta’s chief executive officer Blake-Anthony Johnson, about appearing as a guest soloist with the orchestra at a subscription concert. As a result, Velasco will make his Chicago Sinfonietta debut as soloist in Roberto Sierra’s jazz-infused Saxophone Concerto, conducted by the orchestra’s music director Mei-Ann Chen, September 17, 2022, at Wentz Concert Hall, Naperville, Illinois, and September 19, 2022, at Chicago’s Symphony Center, home of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Recording Team

The album’s works for saxophone and piano were recorded by the Grammy-winning team of producer James Ginsburg and engineer Bill Maylone March 15–16, 2022, in Northwestern University’s Galvin Recital Hall, Evanston, Illinois. Works for saxophone and electronics were recorded April 12–13 and May 3 and 5, 2022, at Shiny Things Studio, New York. Christopher Cerrone and Mike Tierney co-produced Cerrone’s *Liminal Highway*, which Tierney engineered. Tierney produced and engineered Smith’s *Animus*.

Julian Velasco: Saxophone Soloist, Doctoral Candidate

As a soloist, collaborative artist, and educator, Julian Velasco is a passionate proponent of contemporary music.

The saxophonist has premiered more than 50 new works, collaborating and performing with artists including, among others, Ron Carter, Billy Childs, Jimmy Cobb, Christian McBride, PRISM Quartet, and Bang on a Can All-Stars.

Recent collaborations, fellowships, and premieres have been lauded by *The New York Times* and included in the *Chicago Tribune*'s "Chicago's Top 10 for classical music, opera and jazz that defined 2021."

His is soprano saxophonist of ~Nois saxophone quartet, which has performed across the US at festivals such as Big Ears and the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festivals and at the University of Chicago Presents series. The ensemble has held residencies and given performances at institutions including the University of Southern California, Manhattan School of Music, and Princeton University.

A Luminarts Cultural Foundation Fellow in Classical Music, Velasco has garnered top prizes from the Music Teachers National Association, Vandoren Emerging Artists Competition, Yamaha Young Performers, and the North American Saxophone Alliance.

Velasco lives in Evanston, Illinois, where he is pursuing a doctorate in saxophone at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music. He received his master's degree from Bienen and his bachelor's in music from Michigan State University.

A Southern California native, raised in Whittier, Velasco comes from family of professional musicians. His father, Edmund Velasco, is a jazz saxophonist and composer in greater Los Angeles, where his mother, Wendy Velasco, is a freelance orchestral cellist and cello instructor. His website is julianvelascomusic.com.

Cedille Records

Launched in November 1989 by James Ginsburg, Grammy Award-winning Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE) is dedicated to showcasing and promoting the most noteworthy classical artists in and from the Chicago area. The label's catalog of more than 200 front-line albums brims with attractive, off-the-

beaten-path repertoire from the Baroque era to the present day. Works from the classical canon, when they do appear, are usually heard in particularly imaginative pairings.

Cedille has recorded more than 180 Chicago artists and ensembles, with over 80 making their professional recording debuts on the label. Its catalog includes the world premieres of more than 400 classical compositions.

The audiophile-oriented label releases every new album in multiple formats — physical CD, 96 kHz, 24-bit, studio-quality FLAC download, and 320 Kbps MP3 download — and on major streaming services.

An independent nonprofit enterprise, Cedille Records is the label of Cedille Chicago, NFP. Sales of physical CDs and digital downloads and streams cover only a small percentage of the label's costs. Tax-deductible donations from individual music-lovers and grants from charitable organizations account for most of its revenue.

Cedille's headquarters are at 4311 N. Ravenswood Ave., Suite 202, Chicago, IL 60613; call 773-989-2515; email: info@cedillerecords.org. Website: cedillerecords.org.

Cedille Records is distributed in the Western Hemisphere by Naxos of America and its distribution partners, by Naxos Music UK, and by other independent distributors in the Naxos network in classical music markets around the world.

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As We Are
Julian Velasco, saxophone
Cedille Records CDR 90000 213

Works with piano

Steven Banks: *Come As You Are** (18:07)
David Maslanka: *Tone Studies No. 5: Wie bist du, Seele* (4:56)
John Anthony Lennon: *Distances Within Me* (11:21)
Amanda Harberg: *Court Dances*† (13:46)
Winston Choi, piano

Works with electronics

Elijah Daniel Smith: *Animus*† (7:37)
Christopher Cerrone: *Liminal Highway*† (16:35)

* *World Premiere Recording*
† *World premiere recording of version
for soprano saxophone.*