I travel a lot. Why? Where do you go, and what do you do?" he asks. "Of course it’ll be bad sometimes. It’s supposed to be."

Enough have taken a chance on him—Boston’s Gramercy Trio, San Antonio’s SOLI Chamber Ensemble, the Metropolitan Opera’s New Works program, the composing residency at Dumbarton Oaks—that Aucoin feels able to take one himself. Introduced to conducting in college, he’d found it was “a total narcotic experience. I got into it so fast that it precipitated a quarter-life crisis”—he knew it was steadier, better-compensated work than composition. Though he says, “I’d go slightly crazy if I did only one or the other,” he can now accept fewer orchestra gigs, and allow himself unbroken time to sit at his piano and write.

That narrative of risk and discovery runs through his recent pieces. In Crossing, Whitman’s intimacy with a wounded Confederate soldier in disguise is electrified by the possibility, or threat, of romance. Second Nature, a one-act children’s opera premiering in Chicago this summer, also has heroes who dare to venture beyond what’s safe. (Asked if he changed his style for younger listeners, Aucoin remarks, “I think kids are more musically open than many opera audiences—they’re less likely to complain that I don’t sound like Puccini.”)

Set on a wrecked Earth where humans live in zoo-like protective enclosures, Second Nature tells a dystopian fairy tale in which two children meet a monkey who’s been growing a real, illegal fruit tree. Aucoin calls it a “reverse Garden of Eden.”

GET STOPPED A LOT at borders,” says Kavita Shah ’07, laughing. “I think they think I’m smuggling drugs because they see my passport and they’re like, ‘You travel a lot. Why? Where do you go, and what do you do?’”

A jazz singer, composer, and arranger, Shah plays gigs around her hometown, New York City, and has performed throughout North America and Europe. She spent childhood summers in India, her parents’ native country; as a Latin American studies concentrator, she studied Incan architecture in Peru and worked in Brazilian favelas. Reflecting her varied experiences, her sound challenges the boundaries of geographic territories and musical genres.

She first experienced different musical structures and traditions as a member of the Young People’s Chorus of New York City, which performed folk songs, gospel, Western classical music, and children’s opera. Today, Shah sings in a number of languages, including English, Portuguese, Cape Verdean Creole, and sargam (Hindustani solfège); the Indian tabla (a hand drum similar to the bongo) and West African kora (a type of lute) appear in the instrumentation of her debut album, Visas and Visions. On it, the suite “Rag Desh” begins with a rhythm from the tabla and spoken vocals called tabla bols, used in Hindustani classical music to vocalize the different sounds of the instrument, then concludes with “Meltdown”, a bluesy, moody tune that deconstructs the traditional raga, or
An Oxford Efflorescence

Their massive portrait enfolds the Christian writer (Lewis), mythmaker and Old English scholar (Tolkien), historian of language (Barfield), and publisher and supernaturalist (Williams), among others. From the prologue:

During the hectic middle decades of the twentieth century...a small circle of intellectuals gathered on a weekly basis in and around Oxford University to drink, smoke, quip, cavil, read aloud their works in progress, and endure or enjoy with as much grace as they could muster the sometimes blistering critiques that followed. This erudite club included writers and painters, philologists and physicians, historians and theologians, soldiers and actors. They called themselves, with typical self-effacing humor, the Inklings.

Novelist John Wain, a member of the group who achieved notoriety in midcentury as one of England's "angry young men," remembers the Inklings as "a circle of instigators, almost of incendiaries, meeting to urge one another on in the task of redirecting the whole current of contemporary art and life." Yet the name Inklings, as J.R.R. Tolkien recalled it, was little more than a "pleasantly ingenious pun...suggesting people with vague or half-formed intimations and ideas plus those who dabble in ink." The donnish dreaminess thus hinted at tells us something important about this curious band: their members saw themselves as no more than a loose association of rumpled intellectuals, and this modest self-image is a large part of their charm. But history would record...that their ideas did not remain half-formed nor their inkblots mere dabblings. Their polyvalent talents...won out. By the time the last Inking passed away on the eve of the twenty-first century, the group had altered...the course of imaginative literature (fantasy, allegory, mythopoetic tales), Christian theology and philosophy, comparative mythology, and the scholarly study of the Beowulf author, of Dante, Spenser, Milton, courtly love, fairy tale, and epic; and drawing as much from their scholarship as from their experience of a catastrophic century, they had fashioned a new narrative of hope amid the ruins of war, industrialization, cultural disintegration, skepticism, and anomie.... They were...lovers of logos (the ordering power of words) and mythos (the regenerative power of story), with a nostalgia for things medieval and archaic and a distrust of technological innovation that never decayed into the merely antiquarian. Out of the texts they studied and the tales they read, they forged new ways to convey old themes—sin and salvation, despair and hope, friendship and loss, fate and free will....

At certain moments, creative sparks fly. How this came to pass at one such moment is the subject of The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $30), by Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, Ph.D. ’84, professor of world religions at Smith College.
The album’s sprawling, multilayered sonic landscape is produced by Visions, a mentor and collaborator, as well as a co-producer of Herbie Hancock’s albums; he became a jazz guitarist who’s performed on two she reached out to Lionel Loueke, an African quartet, a jazz rhythm section, a tabla, and gathered an ensemble that included a string musician. Shah was on a college study-abroad program in Brazil, working in a rural town that was previously a quilombo, a runaway slave QMONTAGE

"You, now that you've seen all these things, what are you going to do about it?" Although she'd thought they had a lot in common, she realized she would return home to a reality starkly different from his, and that her ability to travel—around the globe, and back to the United States—brought responsibility to tell stories that conveyed what she’d seen. After graduation, she held a series of jobs in journalism and the nonprofit sector while she considered graduate or law school, but music was always on her mind. “I think I always knew in my heart that this is what I wanted to do,” she says, “but it took some time to muster up the courage, and also the know-how, to take that plunge.”

A chance encounter on the subway with legendary jazz singer Sheila Jordan provided the push she needed. “The train doors opened and she was literally right in front of me. I started talking to her. It was so serendipitous,” Shah says. Along with words of encouragement, Jordan gave her music lessons and introduced her to other young musicians. Soon after, Shah enrolled in a master’s program in jazz performance at the Manhattan School of Music, where she refined her technique and explored her voice, asking herself what experiences and ideas she could bring to jazz that others couldn’t. For her pre-graduation recital in 2012, she gathered an ensemble that included a string quartet, a jazz rhythm section, a tabla, and a kora to perform her arrangements. Later, she reached out to Lionel Loueke, an African jazz guitarist who’s performed on two of Herbie Hancock’s albums; he became a mentor and collaborator, as well as a co-producer of Visions, released last year. The album’s sprawling, multilayered sonic landscape was praised as a “sparkling debut” by The Boston Globe and said by Connecticut’s WNPR to reflect “the insatiably curious mind of an ethnographer, the soul of a poet, and the eye of a painter.”

To Shah, her album answers the question posed to her in Brazil: by creating complex but accessible arrangements, she wants to expand her audience’s conception of what jazz can be, while connecting them to music from around the world. Her interpretations of jazz standards like Wayne Shorter’s “Deluge,” and pop songs like Stevie Wonder’s “Visions,” and Joni Mitchell’s “Little Green,” can reach audiences otherwise uninterested in jazz, or unfamiliar with the instruments she uses. Her version of the rapper and pop singer M.I.A.’s “Paper Planes” reimagines the 2007 hit, pulling in saxophone and having a tabla beat replace the final word of the first few lines. Shah sings, “Fly like paper, get high like—/catch me on the border I’ve got visas in my—”: the music speaking for her. Where the original is sung with unapologetic confrontation, Shah’s tone is playful and welcoming, as if she’s inviting listeners to traverse the boundaries with her.

Grow Up!

A philosopher’s take on individuals and maturity, in a world of institutions

by HARRY R. LEWIS

Why Grow Up? Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age, by Susan Neiman ’77, Ph.D. ’86 (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $18)

Shah recently toured with the ensemble for Visions, which included piano, bass, guitar, and mridangam, a two-headed drum from southern India.

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