



JOHN KAMEEL FARAH

composer, pianist

John Kameel Farah is a composer, pianist, electronic musician based in Toronto and Berlin. Toronto's *NOW Magazine* named him as *Best Pianist 2006* for his unique fusion of Renaissance and Baroque counterpoint, experimental improvisation, middle-eastern texture, ambient minimalism, and all forms of Electronic Dance Music. An artist whose work reaches beyond the confines of modern definitions, he has the unique fortune of being reviewed by the *Toronto Star's* classical critic one day, gigging at an avant-garde jazz festival the next, and performing at an underground electronic event a few days later.

A virtuosic keyboardist simultaneously using piano, synthesizer sound sculpture, computer sequencing, and at times even harpsichord and organ, his music draws upon an interest in history, mythology, painting and psychology to help deepen his understanding of life and the universe.

Classically trained in composition and piano performance at the University of Toronto and the Royal Conservatory, John received the Glenn Gould Composition Award twice during his studies. The influences of the classical and avant-garde works he performed can be felt in his music, mixing with forays into free improvisation, minimalism, jazz, Arabic rhythms and microtonal scales, and electronic genres such as Drum & Bass, Dubstep, Techno and IDM.

In 1999, after meeting minimalist composer/pianist *Terry Riley* in NYC, he had private lessons with him in California, and twice he studied Middle-Eastern classical music at the Arabic Music Retreat in Hartford. In 1998 he performed the complete solo piano works of Arnold Schoenberg in Toronto. Also a prolific visual artist, his drawings and paintings are often featured in projections during his performances.

Farah performs regularly in Toronto and Berlin, and has also toured throughout Europe and the U.K., United States, Canada, Brazil, South Korea, the Middle-East and Mexico, once even playing a concert atop the Aztec "Great Pyramid of Cholula" with visuals created by astronomer John Dubinski. In 1999 and 2002 he visited the Edward Said National Conservatory in the West Bank, giving concerts and masterclasses in Ramallah, Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

Toronto's *NOW Magazine* named him as *Best Pianist in 2006*. He has released three albums, "Creation", "Unfolding" and "Pieces of the Earth" and is releasing his next album in 2013.

John recently was given the 2011 K.M. Hunter Artist Award by the Ontario Arts Council. He is currently the pianist for Peggy Baker Dance Projects, working with acclaimed Canadian choreographer Peggy Baker, and is the SoundMakers-Composer-in-Residence with Canadian new-music organization SoundStreams. In Germany and Europe he is represented by Annette Gentz Arts.

PRESS QUOTES

"John Kameel Farah represents the antithesis of the all-too-common "superficial modernist", making deep connections between all the elements that go into his music... translating into unified performances that have a symphonic scope. From Renaissance William Byrd, to avant-garde Stockhausen, free improvisation, Middle Eastern scales, sampled beats and ambient soundscapes, all are subtly combined in an enveloping sonic experience of genuine artistic vision." – Glen Hall, **Exclaim Magazine, 2013**

"Revered and ambitious avant-garde composer/pianist John Kameel Farah is thrilled to be back in Toronto for a special set that showcases a different side of his music....by the sound of Farah's descriptions, they've taken his piano/synthesizer compositions into a realm he's been eager to explore for some time... messing with computers, loops and mixing techniques to stretch the parameters of keyboard music." –Vish Khanna, **Canadian Broadcasting System (CBC.ca) 2012**

"Unable to find an assessment of John Kameel Farah's music that doesn't use vague terms like "cutting edge" and "genre busting", we thought JKF might like to enlighten us in his own words. Classically trained, sonically obsessed and at a cultural crossroads, he reluctantly offered: "Post-Modern... but after that". –Ted Niles, **Wheel Me Out Magazine, London, U.K., 2011**

"One of Toronto's most eclectic pianists and improvisors, electronic composer John Kameel Farah has gained a diverse following across several genres, merging his backgrounds into one unified voice. Farah brings his tour-de-force to his NYC debut; an 80-minute concerto for piano and electronics filled with cascading keyboard work and lush electronic orchestration - at one point even merging classical Arabic forms with Dubstep." -**New York Daily News, April 2010**

"John Kameel Farah's made sure the "I" in IDM was written in 72-point boldface, with his insane, baroque keyboard and electronic compositions. This new release sees him paired with equally pyrotechnic pianist Attila Fias and their incredible dexterity is much more than mere flash... You've never heard a piano duo like this." –David Dacks, **Exclaim Magazine, 2011**

"JKF makes light work of blending Squarepusher-esque electro basslines and drum 'n' bass, with deft jazz and classical keyboards..." -**Time Out, London, July 2010**

"If your word of the day calendar gave you *polymath* today, it might also include a photo of John Kameel Farah. Like a musical super virus, Farah bursts into many of Toronto's bubble-like music communities, drawing from baroque, jazz, hip hop, classical, drum&bass and Arabic practices and merging them all into a web of unlikely connections." -**Tori Allen, CBC 94.1FM Metro Morning**

"Farah is redefining electronica... a force connected to the living, breathing, cutting edge of music... Farah, is bravely, imaginatively forging new sonic ideas at the remote point where the starchy concert hall and dance club could possibly intersect. His barrier-busting mix of electronic, acoustic composition and improvisation contains everything from early Middle Eastern and Western Baroque to 20th-century serialism and minimalism, as well as the deep, complex percussion loops of the dance floor. It's a crazy mix. But it has the power to mesmerize even listeners who have no idea about the complex theories behind how these sound waves came to be..." -**John Terauds, Toronto Star, 2007**

"Eastern and Western, traditional and avant-garde, electronic and acoustic – to Farah these are all puzzle pieces to be arranged, rearranged and deranged to create fascinating new permutations of music..." -**Rupert Bottenberg, Montréal MIRROR Magazine, 2006**

"...a trance-inducing landscape inspired by the vast history of music, from 16th-century English pavaues, to techno, to Arab influences. The interaction of looped beats and repeating sound samples has the power to pull us out of ourselves - a measure of great music...For Farah, it's a quest to understand how and why the world is as it is. To do this with sounds that appeal to club kids and new music fans equally is a major achievement." -**J. Terauds, TORONTO STAR, 2006**



Baroque structure meets 21st century electronics at the creative hands of John Kameel Farah

October 19, 2012



John Kameel Farah continues to raise the level of artistry involved in mixing ebony, ivory and silicone chips. The proof is in his new EP, *Distances*, being launched at the Music Gallery on Sunday night. The Music Gallery, a haven for anyone on the cutting edge of art music in Toronto, has included Farah in the seventh edition of its X Avant festival, dubbed “Expanding Circuits.”

Farah, a University of Toronto-trained pianist and composer, has spent the last 10 years honing his diverse skills not only at the piano (and harpsichord) but at the computer, turning him into a one-man orchestra.

Unlike many of his experimental peers, Farah views what he does through the filter of traditional harmony and counterpoint, flavoured with the seductive melodies of the Middle East. The two Farah solos on the EP are not only fascinating explorations in structured sound, they are masterful examples of clearly defined, engaging musical narrative. The closing track, “Earth,” is a passacaglia rendered in 21st century baroque embellishments made up of overlaid beats, glitches and an elaborate acoustic piano part that build in intensity in much the same way a piece by J.S. Bach would.

Farah describes his decade-long journey from traditional concert pianist looking for something a bit more stimulating to someone being recognized with commissions and regular gigs as personally satisfying. He feels he has now reached a level of proficiency in composition as well as electronic manipulation of sound that are allowing him to expand his musical storytelling abilities.

Farah has learned how to structure, establish and develop musical thoughts. “Like a Prokofiev sonata,” he says, before blushing slightly and modestly insisting that he’s not trying to say his music is as good as that, yet. But I think Farah is selling himself short, because Prokofiev was only working one keyboard, while Farah is working with several.

The Torontonians says his goal is to produce music as satisfying to him as the works of English Renaissance composer William Byrd. “I want something that you can listen to 100 times and hear something new, just the way I play Byrd over and over again, because I can’t believe how much is loaded into just four bars.”

Farah describes his favourite type of concert setting as something that has the feel of a large living room full of friends, where he can say — in music, not necessarily in words — “look, here is something I’ve just composed; listen to this part, isn’t it amazing?”

Sunday night should be just the ticket.

Few musicians have performed across such a diverse spectrum of cutting-edge underground arts spaces and established concert venues such as:

Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin
Approximation Festival, Düsseldorf
Ambient Zivilisation der Liebe, Köln
London Jazz Festival, U.K.
Vortex Jazz Club, London
Transmediale Festival, Berlin
Robert Schumann MusikHochschule, Düss.
Melkweg, Amsterdam
Beats, Breaks & Culture Festival, Toronto
Collaboratorium, Bochum, DE
NonClassical music series, London
Distillery Jazz Festival, Toronto
The Music Gallery - X Avant Festival
Guelph Jazz Festival, Canada
NUMUS festival
The Ambient Ping, Toronto
The Theatre Centre
Fleck Dance Theatre, Toronto
Toronto International Short Film Festival
Promise techno parties
fFIDA International Dance Festival
Arab-Canadian Heritage Festival
Taiwanese-Canadian Culture Festival
The Harvest Festival (Electronic/Rave)
Casa del Popolo, Montreal
M.I.T. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

including these most extraordinary ones:

A concert atop the Aztec Great Pyramid of Cholula with galactic visuals created by astronomer John Dubinski.

In 1998 he gave a performance of the complete solo piano works of Arnold Schoenberg in Toronto.

In 1999 and 2002 he visited the Edward Said National Conservatory in the West Bank, giving performances and masterclasses in Ramallah, East Jerusalem and Bethlehem.



JKF: Invited by Mexican astronomers to perform a soundtrack to the universe projected onto an Aztec pyramid.



JKF: in concert at a warehouse art exhibition



JKF: playing in an abandoned factory filled with ravers



JKF: pre-concert with piano, harpsichord, synth, lapto

NOW

★★★ BEST OF TORONTO

Best pianist **JOHN KAMEEL FARAH**

Farah occupies a fairly idiosyncratic (and possibly lonely) place as a keyboard player. He's classically trained and technically proficient, but also steeped in experimental improvisation, and he consciously integrates non-Western traditions and ideas while also freely borrowing from electronic dance music. Not many would try to play cascading harpsichord figures over top of skittish experimental drum 'n' bass rhythms, but we're glad he does, as few others have the chops or the creativity to pull it off.

▶ TORONTO STAR ◀

ELECTRONIC

JOHN KAMEEL FARAH

Creation (Indie)

★★★★ (3.5/4)

Toronto composer/keyboardist John Kameel Farah crosses genres and breaks down traditional boundaries with his electronic-inspired invention. He plans and improvises in equal measure. He interweaves acoustic and synthetic. He is equally comfortable on the dance floors of the 16th and 21st centuries. Here, in 21 seamless tracks, Farah takes us on an entrancing, beat-loop-powered tour of our interior cultural-musical psyche. My two favourite tracks (the 9-minute "fantasie and toccata") introduce the harpsichord music of William Byrd to the synthesizer and sequencer. Long live the mash-up. For details on how to buy *Creation*, visit www.johnfarah.com. John Terauds



disc reviews Experimental



JOHN KAMEEL FARAH *Creation* (independent) Rating: **NNNN** (4/5)

Ideally, all musicians' influences would be as diverse as the sonic world John Kameel Farah inhabits. It can be tough trying to combine your various loves into a sound that actually makes sense, and most artists choose to focus on one style at a time. When someone actually combines the elements of their musical history without making them sound like a bunch of empty references, the results are genuinely exciting. A skilled classically trained piano player, Farah also dabbles in modern improvised music, as well as dance and experimental electronic music. This isn't the type of crossover stuff that's going to be rocking dance floors any time soon, but he links his various ideas and tangents in many ways like a DJ set, with interludes joining the tracks and a real sense of a journey emerging over the album's length. **Farah plays the Gladstone Art Bar tonight (Thursday, September 21).**

BB

HOUR MAGAZINE, MONTRÉAL



John Kameel Farah - (Dross:tik Records)

Unfolding 5/5 stars



"Celebrated Canadian pianist John Farah has been fusing electronic beats with future jazz and classical composition since 2005. Trip-hop, drum'n'bass and experimental electronica enthusiasts will be floored by Farah's seamless mastery of the myriad sonic layers here: percussive elements, keys, synthesizers, Amen breaks and soft jazz chords intermingle in a breathtakingly complex dance.

Whether drawing from breakcore and dubstep, North Indian modal traditions or abstract baroque compositions, Farah's music works on a dizzying array of levels and will astonish chin-stroking jazz nerds, brain dead bass-heads and those seeking the coolest new background music. Incomparable."

-Steve Lalla, electronic music columnist

WHAT I PLAY

What I Play

John Kameel Farah
By David Dacks

DEC 2007

Many classically trained musicians get to a point in their academic work where their musical tastes have far outstripped their desire to stick with the European canon. John Kameel Farah isn't a "lapsed" classicist; he keeps building on everything that came before. He won two Glenn Gould awards for composition while studying at the University of Toronto, then proceeded to further investigate the work of noted boundary breakers such as Arnold Schoenberg and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Ever since, he has found numerous ways to incorporate his education into bold and uncategorisable musical activity that includes elements of renaissance and baroque music, free improvisation, Middle Eastern textures, ambient minimalism, techno, dubstep and electro-acoustics. He is as comfortable at the Om Festival as he is in a concert hall. His first solo release *Creation* (2006), earned him suitably diverse media attention. Any investigation of what Farah plays quickly raises questions about how he plays and in essence, how he thinks.

Farah's world is keyboards — from early renaissance instruments to the alphanumeric variety. His arsenal is composed of piano, synthesiser, Fender Rhodes, Hohner Pianet, several different flavours of harpsichord and a laptop, with each keyboard having different possibilities for self-expression. Farah describes each of his instruments as either pianistic or colouristic.

Sometimes sound design wades into classical forms. Because Middle Eastern scales and modes are part of his musical vocabulary, he has had to find a way to play melodically while accommodating its unique demands. "Korg has a parameter to detune their keyboard to Eastern scales... to play quartertones. I have my own style of playing on an equal temperament keyboard, which accesses the same frame of reference of ornamental, oriental notes. But it's more atonal. I can play asymmetrical scales that have a hazy balance of tonality and atonality."

Farah expresses both fascination and frustration with his computer, because it opens up worlds of possibilities while presenting a new set of technical and mental challenges. He sees his computer as a compositional tool and an accompanist, but not as an all-in-one improvising and recording device. There are philosophical and practical reasons behind this. "The live electronic processing I leave to my synth board. I'm a very hands-on person: clicking is not an active process."

Farah thinks in terms of structures in whatever he does — even the outer margins of free improvising or breakcore can be part of a greater overall structure. "Everything is in a galactic symphonic context... What [I'm] doing is essentially creating a piece of musique concrete. Let's say somebody's performing a piece for marimba and tape, he has his graphic score of the tape part that goes all over the place, he interacts with the recording going on, he phases himself out in certain spots and it just grows organically from that. I conceive of it that way." —David Dacks



DEC 2007

