

## VONN VANIER

### *Dawn*

#### Project Bio



Bright, new composers offer the best kind of promise for American music, and Vonn Vanier – at the age of 17 – is well on his way. With his quiet confidence, thoughtful ambition and rapidly evolving talent, he is an emerging voice within the world of classical music. The proof is in the remarkably varied compositions Vanier has written in his recording debut on the new album *Dawn* from Montclair Records.

*Dawn* introduces listeners to the young composer's initial orchestral, chamber and solo works that reflect his interest in bringing together the intellectual innovation of contemporary music with the sounds of classical tradition.

Vanier discovered his future early, as an inquisitive member of the century-old Grace Cathedral Choir of Men and Boys in San Francisco. By the time he was in the eighth grade at the Cathedral School for Boys, he had composed a hymn the choir performed, and, in his words, his direction began to “bloom and develop to where I am today.”

When the pandemic lockdown hit, Vanier took advantage of the isolation to immerse himself in theory and orchestration books and in learning repertoire, as well as honing his improvisatory skills as a pianist. Three succeeding summers as an invited participant in the Boston University Tanglewood Institute (BUTI) introduced him to more a formal course of study and development, chiefly with Dr. Martin Amlin, Boston University’s Chair of Composition, and Drs. Len Tetta and Justin Casinghino.

Those achievements aside, Vonn Vanier might also be described as a typical, soccer-playing American teenage boy, with a taste for jazz and salsa. His enduring fascination with mathematics comes as no surprise – an analytical mind can be an asset in serious musical composition – but his articulate enthusiasm when he talks about his work suggests he is way ahead of the curve.

Two orchestral works anchor the album, performed by the Skywalker Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Daria Novo: “Rhapsody in C Minor,” written in 2023, and

his first orchestral piece, “Lost at Home,” a symphonic poem inspired by Vanier’s impressions of reading Erich Maria Remarque’s novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

“I was very excited to see the score and know that it comes from this young composer,” Novo said of “Rhapsody in C Minor.” “It’s written for a huge orchestra, so I was excited to work on it... I think the piece is very Romantic actually, and it has lyrical moments. It felt very big... Vonn is incredibly mature, a very hard-working person, and he’s very well-prepared, very well-educated. He knows what he’s doing.”

In three contrasting sections, “Lost at Home” evokes the wrenching metamorphosis of a sensitive German boy, Paul Bäumer, who becomes an obedient warrior in the carnage of World War I. Vanier uses themes from Brahms’ *Variations on a Theme by Haydn* to indicate Paul’s sense of home and security, and a motif from Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 11 to introduce the terror and carnage of total war.

“OPCI” – standing for the formal analytical concept “ordered pitch-class intervals” – is a work for solo piano, performed on *Dawn* by Brenda Vahur, which explores the world of atonality. The technical musical system of “OPCI” gave Vanier a point of departure in creating this suite for piano in brief, contrasting movements.

If the mention of “atonality” strikes fear in the listener, Vanier finds in “OPCI” a way to achieve melody and expression in a musical atmosphere free of a tonal center or functional harmony.

“Each little movement has its own personality,” he says. “Some are humorous, to make you smile or laugh. Others are slow and mournful. I’d say what characterizes this piece is the variety of different emotional sentiments and qualities it seeks to invoke in the listener.”

“It’s written very logically, but it sounds very free,” Vahur said, in discussing her performance of “OPCI.” “If you investigate what exactly is going on, everything is so meticulous. But it shouldn’t sound that way. It has to sound like music, and I think it’s very successful that way. I love the melodies. I love how they weave in and out of each other... It’s very cool!”

“I love the six voices that are going on,” she adds about the score. “It just reminds me so much of the Bach fugues. They’re just so fascinating. They’re fun to play... I think it’s really great writing, a little bit of everything, and it’s a complete work.”

The other works on *Dawn* were written for various chamber ensembles – “Witching Hour” and “Jagged,” both performed by Quartet San Francisco; “Shimmer,” for piano quintet, in which pianist Brenda Vahur joins Quartet San Francisco; and “Bloom,” for wind quintet, performed by Quinteto Latino.

“Witching Hour” is a short, playful piece that grew out of a motif Vanier created when he was studying at Tanglewood in the summer of 2023.

“I thought it could be a fun motif for a spooky piece,” Vanier said. “What makes this piece unique is its spooky atmosphere, which isn’t necessarily a common sentiment in the string quartet repertoire... My favorite part of it is some of the special effects I used – glissando to express creepy noises, like ghosts wailing or spiders crawling. That has a cool and unique effect.”

“That piece is a Halloween-themed piece for strings, and I like music that’s about things,” says violinist Jeremy Cohen, founder of Quartet San Francisco, which performs “Witching Hour” on *Dawn*. “It gives us the ability to transcend notes on the page – and animate ‘spooky’ or ‘tense,’ whatever it is. It gives us that extra doorway of expression. Also, we learned that here’s a young composer who is capable of opening that doorway for us, as professional musicians.”

“Jagged,” also for string quartet, reflects its title. Vanier calls it “a bit more of a technical composition” – contrasting and combining rhythmic structures in different ways, experimenting with asymmetrical meters and jagged rhythms. The piece may be best summed up in what he says he was trying to capture: “unpredictability in motion.”

Inspired by the image of a glistening lake, Vanier describes “Shimmer” as another of his efforts to create something novel that unifies innovation with traditional tonality. It uses a harmonic style much like, he says, “the Impressionists at the start of the 20th century – quartal harmony, the whole tone scale – also fusing that with the standard tonality that classical composers would’ve used.”

“I wrote ‘Bloom’ last summer,” the composer says of his first work for wind quintet, “and I started with the opening line, which is for clarinet, and from there, expanding it outward, adding different instruments and harmonies along the way. The main idea with ‘Bloom’ is that it reflects the idea of growth and expansiveness that you see especially in the spring, not only in terms of the color and the harmonies used, but also in terms of the form and structure.”

“I think wind quintets offer a challenge in orchestration,” Vanier adds. “All of the instruments are so different. When they blend, they tend to be colorful and expressive. Playful dialogues occur, rather than more of a homophonic texture. And that, of course, follows along with the idea of spring and animals coming out of hibernation – not only the color of spring, but also the motion of it, the rebirth.”

The composition and recording of *Dawn* reflect an emotional and technical journey for Vanier, whose years of passionate study thus far have culminated in the release of this first album. He invites the audience to listen for the variety of styles within his work and how they blend in an imaginative musical voice, as novel as it is assured. *Dawn* is the opening chapter in a new musical adventure.