

“The Isle is Full of Noises”: C Force and Musical Life in The Bahamas

Cathleen LeGrand
Librarian, Lyford Cay International School¹

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a profile of the C Force, a faculty trio ensemble of the College of The Bahamas founded in 2008, comprising the unlikely combination of piano, flute and euphonium.

INTRODUCTION

C Force, the faculty ensemble from The College of The Bahamas (COB), is the most important band you have never heard of. Their importance lies in the ways their musical projects place them at an intriguing and inspiring intersection of education and artistry.

In a rare convergence of instruments, C Force is quite possibly the world's only piano/flute/euphonium trio. The euphonium is the mystery instrument here – think “small tuba” and you are pretty much there. The members of C Force are academics as well as performers; all three are professors of music at The College of The Bahamas, full-time lecturers with busy teaching loads. The Bahamas has a lively musical culture, fuelled in part by the active music programme offered at COB.

The context

COB's music department has been in existence since the College's founding in 1974. COB offers two music degrees, an Associates degree in Music and a Bachelor of Arts in Education with a focus in music, helping to supply the nation with the musicians and music

educators of the future. For non-music majors, courses in Bahamian music and world music are available as part of the College's general education programme.

Members of C Force have several goals for the ensemble: to foster music education and music activity; to improve opportunities for music students; to promote the rich but lesser-known art music tradition of The Bahamas and the greater Caribbean; to model good musical, professional and academic practices for students; to enhance the visibility and reputation of the music programme at the College. These goals are evident in the rich ways in which the group manages to blend teaching, learning, and research, with musical arrangement and performance.

The history

C Force came together in 2008 and takes its moniker from the alliterative and curiously similar first names of its members: Christian Justilien, Dr. Christine Gangelhoff, and Dr. Christy Lee (listed in the order in which they rank themselves – not alphabetically, but in order of their seniority at COB). The “three Chrises” were, at first, simply an amusing

¹ Cathleen LeGrand, Librarian, Lyford Cay International School, Lyford Cay, New Providence, Bahamas.

E-mail: zanzibarfish@yahoo.com

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coincidence and are now a key, though still amusing, part of the group's professional identity.

Each member is the product of unique and eclectic musical experience. All have had extensive formal musical education and serious classical training. All have played with orchestras and have extensive recording and performing resumes. And each has a wealth of formidable and fascinating non-formal and non-classical experience to add to the mix.



C Force: Christy Lee, Christian Justilien and Christine Gangelhoff. Photo ©

Chris the first

Christian Justilien (euphonium) is the lone man and the lone Bahamian in the group. He grew up in Pinder's Point, a small and remote settlement on Grand Bahama. Both his settlement and family were culturally diverse (Justilien's parents were originally from Haiti). Justilien attended junior high school in Florida, where his fondness for music led him to play in both the band (where he was introduced to the euphonium) and the orchestra (in which he played the violin). He remained in the U.S. through graduate school. His graduate research on Bahamian musicians is one of the most thorough resources available on the

topic. His connections in the musical community and his unique understanding of the Bahamian music scene make the resource particularly rich.

Justilien came to COB in 1998, when he started the College band that he still directs. He is also deeply involved in The Bahamas' Junkanoo Festivals. He leads the "Colours Entertainment and Junkanoo Group," playing an instrument even more improbable than the euphonium – the conch shell. He is both a fan and a student of traditional Bahamian musical styles.

Chris the second

Christine Gangelhoff (flute) is one of the two American women in the trio. She has a long list of academic and professional credentials, and her musical travels have taken her across North America and to far-flung locales such as Serbia and Tonga. While much of her formal education focused on western classical music, she has a wide knowledge of various folk musical traditions. She has played with a traditional Balkan ensemble and, during her time in Newfoundland, founded the province's first Klezmer band. (Is there a more statistically improbable phrase than "Newfoundland Klezmer band?"). Gangelhoff has taught music at COB since 2007.

Gangelhoff is a leading researcher on Caribbean art music, a rich but unexplored musical tradition. She has worked extensively to document and promote art musical works from Caribbean composers. She is the co-author of an ongoing comprehensive bibliography of compositions and composers², and was the chief organizer of an international symposium on the topic, hosted at COB. Her research has unearthed little-known compositions that serve as new repertoire, both for the ensemble and for students to use for arrangement and performance.

² The author of this profile is co-author of the bibliography

Chris the third

Christy Lee (piano) spent much of her youth in Spain – which helps explain her excellent command of Spanish, so very useful in the group's travels and performances in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. In addition to her myriad academic accomplishments, Lee has had a rich career as a collaborative pianist and chamber musician. She also has deep roots in the opera world, working as a voice coach, conductor and pianist for opera companies and festivals all over the world. She came to COB in 2008 and spent several years directing the College's Concert Choir³.

The C Force's work as an ensemble is influenced by their peripatetic lives and careers. Their various international experiences have given them "a curiosity and an appreciation for different styles and ways of approaching music and culture" (C. Lee, personal communication, April 4, 2014). Justilien agrees that having been exposed to so many styles of music "helped to shape [his] life and character" (Wright & Gangelhoff, 2013, p. 86).

The recordings

This eclectic experience manifests itself in most obvious fashion in the array of selections for their first CD, *Tchaka Mizik* (2010). Lee's vast knowledge of opera is evident in her choices, arias from Verdi, Bizet, and Delibes, arranged by Lee for the group's unique instrumentation.

Gangelhoff's research and discoveries regarding Caribbean art music led to the inclusion of several classical pieces by composers from Guadeloupe and Haiti. Justilien pays homage to his homeland with *Tilla*, composed expressly for C Force and "inspired by the simple harmonies, the rhythmic complexities, and the acoustic sound

³ Since August 2014, Dr. Christy Lee has been Assistant Professor of Piano and Theory at the University of Virginia College at Wise.

of the once-popular Goombay style of the Bahamas" (Wright & Gangelhoff, 2013, p. 87).



Their second CD, *Deep Blue* (2013), concentrates more locally, on The Bahamas itself: its music, its geographical setting, and its natural beauties.



The CD includes original compositions and arrangements by Bahamian composers – Bahamian either by birth or by adoption (in the case of Terry Manning, formerly of Compass Point Studios). *Deep Blue* includes the debut performance of Justilien's *Bahama Islands Suite*.

A third CD is waiting in the wings, thanks to their last, particularly productive recording sessions. The planned double disc set, proposed for release in 2015, will include exclusively music from Caribbean composers. Most are pieces that Gangelhoff brought to the group's attention through her research.

These recordings are a testament to their interest in collaborating with their colleagues and artistic comrades. The artist John Cox, their colleague in COB's School of Communication and Creative Arts (SCCA), created the art for their two CDs. The popular Bahamian poet (and avid flute player) Marion Bethel composed poetry to accompany Justilien's *Bahama Islands Suite* – a performance is included on *Deep Blue*. Other collaborators include Terry Manning (recording, mixing and mastering) and Jeff Major (photos).

The performances

C Force performs concerts, recitals and workshops throughout The Bahamas and the greater Caribbean. They mine their unique and growing repertoire of Caribbean art music with the goal of always including in their performance works native to the country where they are playing. Often, it is a performance by C Force that allows local audiences to both hear and hear of these works for the first time. Some are classical works from the nation's proud past; others are by contemporary classical composers not yet well known. Serving as “ambassadors” for Caribbean art music, C Force highlights works of local interest, “reintroducing the region to its roots” (Shimel, 2014, para 8). “Wherever they go, they leave listeners with a sense of their own history” (Shimel, 2014, para 4).

For instance, Bahamians are aware and proud of their local folk musical traditions such as Junkanoo, rake 'n scrape, and Goombay. But many have no idea that local art music exists and are delighted at the discovery. When C

Force performs such works, their listeners “are always shocked [to find] what kind of music is happening in the Bahamas” (C. Gangelhoff, personal communication, March 6, 2014).

Among C Force's most enthusiastic audiences are schoolchildren. In 2014, C Force conducted a recital and master class in St. Thomas (U.S. Virgin Islands). C Force included works from two important composers from the U.S. Virgin Islands in the recital programme and performed alongside students in the Bertha C. Boschulte School Concert Band. The students practiced for weeks to prepare for the performance and gained valuable experience and exposure.

Their 2014 visit to Grand Bahama Island (original home of Justilien) was particularly well received. They performed a formal evening concert for the Grand Bahama Performing Arts Society as well as two school concerts for local students. Students from schools all over the island attended, including students from Justilien's own primary school, Lewis Yard. Audiences were especially pleased that Justilien had “come home” to play.

The educational payoff

C Force serves as a role model for students, demonstrating what is possible in terms of performance in all its musical, professional and academic senses. Students can watch C Force select and arrange repertoire, rehearse, perform, record, and organize concerts, and can learn exactly what a musical career entails. Students gain “firsthand experience [of] what it takes as far as time, discipline and commitment to be an active performer, [which] has, in turn, raised their levels of performance” (C. Lee, personal communication, February 27, 2014).

Several students have been fortunate to travel with C Force to international conferences. Giving students “that exposure and experience is monumental in the life of a young musician”

(C. Lee, personal communication, February 27, 2014). For instance, in 2012, two music students accompanied C Force to the International Conference on the Steelpan in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. The students presented their own research findings alongside C Force during the group's conference presentation.

In addition to conducting and presenting their own research, students are further encouraged to improve their understanding and knowledge of Caribbean art music by completing and performing their own arrangements. In 2014, students in Gangelhoff's Small Chamber Ensemble course at COB, inspired by C Force and by their *Deep Blue* CD, produced and performed a concert entirely of Bahamian music from the many native genres. One performance was so moving and charming that the audience of businessmen offered to provide funding so the students could record a CD of their own. There is also talk of the same audience members starting a foundation to help support young artists in the Bahamas (C. Gangelhoff, personal communication, April 17, 2014). This student ensemble forged their own success story by following the C Force's example.

C Force is a powerful teaching tool, both for students and for the group's own members. Performing with C Force, playing their innovative repertoire, gives members

inspiration, motivation, and challenge in their working and performing lives. Lee believes that playing with C Force has helped her grow as both a musician and an educator:

Especially with the music that Chris has written for us, the levels of syncopation have pushed me way beyond my "traditional" classical training. Having that deeper understanding of rhythm has definitely spilled over into my teaching and my more classical performing (C. Lee, personal communication, February 27, 2014).

The takeaway

A small faculty ensemble from a small college on a small island can make a difference. There is no windfall funding their work and few accolades for them to win. They schedule their own concerts and book their own travel, sometimes with adventurous results. But no confusion over flights, hotel bookings or the last-minute discovery of the absence of an actual piano at a performance venue has kept them from impressing audiences with their prowess and with the rich musical history of the region. Their legacy will be seen in the progress of their students (and, as most of their students will be music teachers themselves, with the students of those students); in the regional sustenance of art music; and in the way everybody will finally know what a euphonium is.

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