

**Michael Nix  
New Classic Banjo Project**

Michael Nix: gourd banjo, 5-string banjo, 7-string Banjar

Koromanti: Original Transcription	As Published by Hans Sloan
Koramanti: Part 1 and Part 2	Michael Nix
Overcome	Jim Dalton
Banjar Lam Plearn	Michael Nix
Kenningales Mystery Serenade	Thomas Schuttenhelm
Spanish Fandango Variations	Michael Nix
Aperçu	Michael Nix
No. 1	
No. 2	
No. 3	
No. 4 (Chorale)	
No. 5	
Barton Cove	Michael Nix

**The instruments:**

Gourd Banjo (2014) A stylized reproduction of an early 1800's minstrel style banjo by Jonathan Vocke, Baltimore, MD.

Seven-String Banjar (2004) Designed by Michael Nix, built by Michael Ramsey, Appomattox, VA, bridge by Ivon Schmuckler, Williamsburg, MA.

Five-string Banjo (1907) Fairbanks Reagent Whyte Laydie, Boston, MA

## Program Notes

### **Koromanti, Michael Nix**

Gourd Banjo – Hans Sloan transcription of the A section.  
Seven-String Banjar

Koromanti is based on music of a gathering or festival of the enslaved in Jamaica in 1688, transcribed by a Mr. Baptiste for the British explorer Hans Sloan and published in the 1707 volume "Voyage to the Islands of Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica". The word Koromanti refers to the Akan people from what we know call Ghana.

The transcription was originally in three sections. I have used the themes from each of the sections, and added my own material to make it parse well for modern ears.

### **Overcome, Jim Dalton**

Seven-String Banjar

This year (2019) marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of singer and activist Pete Seeger. Written on the head of Seeger's banjo was the phrase, "This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender." Recent events have made this statement and the intent that it embodied even more meaningful to me.

Michael Nix's offer of a commission to write a concert piece for banjo gave me an opportunity to commemorate this significant presence from my formative years as a musician and person of conscience.

Though I use some of the tunes connected with Seeger as source material, they are usually buried in the texture and counterpoint and not meant to be overt. The two movements use musical metaphors to express the ideas embodied in the movement titles. Paired with a form of the ancient technique of *soggetto cavato*, these give shape to the composition though they are likely not obvious to the listener.

### **Banjar Lam Plearn, Michael Nix**

Seven-String Banjar

While on tour in Thailand, I had occasion to travel in the Northeastern Provinces to the Issan region abutting the Mekong River near Laos. I fell in love with the raucous folk music known as Morlam played there. Typical instrumentation includes the khaen, a free reed mouth organ with two rows of bamboo pipes; and the phin, a three stringed guitar with an elaborate carved dragon headstock. Modern players electrify their instruments, and include drums and electric bass.

Lam Plearn is a mode or style of Molam music, characterized by virtuosic playing. The style often consists of three distinct sections: 1) A virtuosic burst of solo khaen music marked by rhythms that mimic quick breaths, 2) A slow, free ad-lib section in wandering meters and tempos, and 3) a highly rhythmic section in a duple meter wherein the phin player develops a traditional theme.

### **Keningales Mystery Serenade, Thomas Schuttenhelm**

Seven-String Banjar

#### *Keningale's Mystery Serenade*

Julian Hawthorne (1846-1934) was an American writer and journalist and the son of novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne. In his story "Ken's Mystery" (1883) the protagonist Keningale describes his encounter with a two-hundred year old woman, Ethelind, who was "awakened from her centuries of sleep" by a song he played on his banjo. Shortly after Keningale's serenade to Ethelind he discovered that the banjo appeared to age two-hundred years. This song-serenade is a reimagining of the mystery, music, and mutations that were enacted upon Keningale's strange banjo.

### **Aperçu No. 1, 4, 5, Michael Nix**

Five-string Banjo

Aperçu: (French) A survey or sketch as in an outline; or an immediate impression, especially an insight.

I write these Aperçu as a way of introducing my ideas for a New Classic Banjo style to the 5-string banjo community. While most of my work has been for the extended range of my self-designed seven-string banjo, I feel it is important to continue the tradition of the nylon five-string finger-style classic banjo and to bring the art form of this rich style of playing from the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **Spanish Fandango Variations, Michael Nix**

Seven-String Banjar

"Spanish Fandango" neither Spanish nor a Fandango, was a favorite theme for composing banjo or guitar variations. After playing through many of these pieces I decided to write my own to exploit the range and textures of the Banjar.

### **Barton Cove, Michael Nix**

Seven-String Banjar

Three miles from my house is the site of a pivotal battle in King Phillips war of 1675 and 1676. English settlers under Captain William Turner attacked and massacred nearly 400 multi-tribal natives, mostly women, children and elderly. Regrouping with reinforcements, the Native alliance rallied, killing Turner. The war, which provided a blueprint for the removal of Natives and the taking of their land, ended with Chief Metacomet (King Phillip) was captured and shot to death. *Barton Cove* was composed after I attended a reconciliation ceremony between the select board of Turners Falls, Ma, and representatives of the Abanaki people on the shores of the Connecticut River at Barton Cove.

I combine the idea of the classical guitar arpeggio piece with expressive banjo gestures for this evocative work.

## **New Classic Banjo Project**

The New Classic Banjo Project was instituted to develop and record a modern classical banjo repertoire, to include five, six, seven string and other hybrid banjos. Compositions for the 2019/20 season have been commissioned for the Banjar, a seven-string classical banjo designed by Michael Nix.

### **Composers**

Banjo innovator, Michael Nix designed the Banjar; a modern seven string banjo combining elements of the five-string banjo and classical guitar; bringing the classic finger-style banjo of the late 1800's into the twenty first century. He initiated the New Classic Banjo project to commission, record, and perform new works for the classic finger-style banjo. Nix performs on classical guitar, banjo, and mandolin throughout the United States and Asia, and he has recorded for the PBS series "American Experience", independent documentaries, and numerous CD projects. His compositions are performed internationally. His music has been heard on "Weekend Edition", and other NPR programs. Recently Nix performed his compositions at the Smithsonian Museum of American History, and participated in Seegerfest 2014, commemorating the life of Pete Seeger.

American composer Jim Dalton is a professor of music theory at the Boston Conservatory at Berklee. His works are performed by soloists and ensembles throughout the US, Canada, and in Europe, including venues such as Musique Nouvelles, Lunel, France; the Kansas Symposium of New Music; Sound: Scotland's Festival of New Music; and Akademie der Tonkunst (Darmstadt, Germany). He has enjoyed recent premieres by Aaron Larget-Caplan, Carson Cooman, Sharan Leventhal, Stephen Altoft, Transient Canvas, and Scottish Voices. Dalton is an active performer (solo, chamber, orchestra) on guitar, mandolin, and both tenor and 5-string banjos. He has recently played banjo with orchestras in the U.S., Mexico, and China. He and his wife, soprano Maggi Smith-Dalton, perform frequently throughout the US, specializing in historically-informed performance of 19th and early 20th century American music.

Thomas Schuttenhelm is a composer and guitarist whose compositions have a strong conceptual component. His music uses embodied programs and celebrates in allusions to the musical, literary, poetic, visual, and theatrical influences that resonate throughout his compositions. Much of his music is the result of collaborations with musicians, poets, actors and artists. The music he writes is often as much 'about' the people he collaborates as it is for them to perform. He is the Artistic Director at Network for New Music in Philadelphia.