

Kathleen Supové '73 has devoted decades to demolishing the staid recital and bringing a jolt of energy and innovation to piano performance. **Buckle up, classical music fans.**

EXPLODING THE PIANO

Story by Alexander Gelfand / Illustration by David Riley

“I LOVE '50S VARIETY SHOWS,” SAYS PIANIST KATHLEEN SUPOVÉ.

Supové is sitting in her studio in the Brooklyn apartment that she shares with her husband, the composer Randall Woolf, and an extremely shy black cat named Frankie. Neither Woolf nor Frankie are to be seen; the composer is in Australia for the week, and the cat is probably hiding underneath a sofa in the living room. Most of the studio is taken up by Supové's Steinway baby grand, its black frame half-concealing a pile of those miscellaneous belongings that seem never to fit neatly into a New York apartment—including two toy pianos that nestle beneath their full-sized cousin like chicks beneath a hen.

“When I was a kid, I'd make up shows, and there would be commercials and entertainment. And I'd be the entertainment because I'd play the piano.”

Long a fixture of the downtown piano scene—“downtown” referring here not just to the geographical precincts of lower Manhattan but, more generally, to the kind of hip, avant-garde sensibility for which they are known—Supové, Pomona Class of 1973, is still putting on shows. They've just gotten a whole lot more sophisticated.

The traditional piano recital is, for the most part, a fairly staid affair. A lone pianist dressed in formal attire sits before a polished keyboard, plowing through fondly remembered staples of the classical repertoire—Beethoven and Brahms, Chopin and Schumann, Rachmaninoff and Ravel—for listeners who sit in respectful silence. If there's any interaction between performer and audience, it comes at the very end, when the pianist rises to bow and the audience, if so moved, rises to applaud.

Supové does not do traditional piano recitals—far from it. Her goal in life appears to be to demolish the boundaries of the genre—to free the piano from the polite confines of the salon, give it a thoroughly modern makeover and loose it upon the world. Hence the name of her ongoing performance series (and her latest CD), *The Exploding Piano*.

Toward that end, Supové has worked with choreographers, video artists and DJs; performed duets with the Yamaha Disklavier, a computer-enhanced grand piano, and with laptops running sophisticated music software (“Delta Space” by Lukas Ligeti); and draped a white spandex cover over the lid of her instrument, transforming it into a film screen on which images of a changing sky are projected.

Supové has also evolved an edgy, theatrical stage persona—one given to unusual entrances, original monologues, costumes and props. In a profile that ran in the *Wall Street Journal* this past summer, Barbara Jepson wrote that Supové's onstage wardrobe “runs to hooker-chic vinyl and leather.” (For the record, when we met on an early fall afternoon, the pianist was clad in an elegant green knit ensemble that set off her brilliant red hair.) Some years ago, she kicked off a show in Montclair, N.J., by imperson-

ating her downstairs neighbor, a paranoid schizophrenic who “thinks they're coming to get her.” Supové came on stage wrapped in a blanket, holding a broom as a pretend rifle, and proceeded to act like a crazy person—“act” being the operative word in this sentence.

“You're always playing a role, whether you think so or not,” Supové says. “For most musicians, the role is a librarian. And I don't want to do that.”

There's often a danger that such a powerful persona will overwhelm the music—that the showmanship will obscure the art. But this has not happened with Supové, who garners as much praise for her technical skill and interpretive sophistication as she does for her ability to entertain an audience. This is unusual insofar as the words “entertain,” “entertainer,” and “entertainment” are regarded with suspicion, if not downright contempt, by the kind of classical-music purists who draw a bright, clear line between “serious” music and more vulgar forms.

Then again, Supové's own move toward a more inclusive, accessible vision of the piano recital has been accompanied by a general trend toward greater inclusivity and accessibility in modern classical music. And younger composers, like younger listeners, are disinclined to respect musical categories; instead, they embrace everything from hip-hop to electronica to world music. All of which suits Supové, who enjoys a side-gig with the art-rock band Doctor Nerve (“massive keyboards, massive sound, massive vocal rants”) and has in recent years commissioned pieces that incorporate electronics, spoken word and North Indian percussion.

Supové's wide-ranging musical tastes owe something to her upbringing in Portland, Ore. Her father, Larry, was a civil engineer with a passion for classical music. When Kathleen was 12 years old, her musical talent already apparent, he presented her to a local teacher, Elesa Scott Keeney, with the simple directive: “You will teach my daughter.”

Larry Supové passed away in 1966, but his presence can still be felt. A black-and-white photo of him standing at a surveyor's sextant hangs above his daughter's desk. On the wall directly behind her piano, positioned so that she can't fail to see it whenever she sits down to play, hangs a poster from a concert series titled “Air Rights,” inspired by Larry's efforts to persuade the Portland City Council to buy up air rights for future multistory parking garages.

Keeney made an immediate impression on young Kathy. “Most piano teachers I'd seen were really old ladies in old lady dresses,” Supové recalled in an email. “But Elesa seemed younger, wore outfits kind of like the redheaded character, Joan, in *Mad Men*. ... She could play showy things on the piano, she had a raspy voice, kind of Lauren Bacall-like ... She also seemed to have some secret wild life, either then or in the past.”

Rather than restricting Supové to the standard classical repertoire, Keeney also made room for midcentury pop and light classics like Richard Rogers' "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" from the musical comedy *On Your Toes*, and the Spanish pop hit "Malagueña" by the Cuban pianist and composer Ernesto Lecuona.

"It made for holes in my conventional repertoire," Supové said in a 2007 interview for the website Composition Today. "But I think it's what really instilled in me a feel for contemporary music." Supové's interest in new music blossomed at Pomona, where the composer and pianist Karl Kohn introduced her to the music of Arnold Schoenberg, a fellow Viennese émigré and the *enfant terrible* of 20th-century music who pioneered a style of composition that did away with conventional harmony and melody.

Supové went on to earn a master's degree from Juilliard, then moved to Boston to study with the pianist Russell Sherman, a man known for his insightful and often surprising interpretations of works both classical and modern. She also became involved in the electronic music scene at MIT, performing works by the composers Tod Machover and Robert Rowe, both of whom use computers to process and enhance the performances of living, breathing musicians in real time.

After moving to New York to launch her professional career, Supové gradually abandoned the traditional concert pianist's repertoire in favor of a steady diet of avant-garde works that had never been played before, and might never have *been* played without her intercession. "If you don't play it, it won't be heard," she says of new music. "You're sort of co-creating it."

This is not something that can be said of a composition by Mendelssohn or Liszt that has been performed countless times by scores of great concert pianists, and is already burdened with one or more "definitive" interpretations.

Supové knows that many solo pianists swear by the idea of a "well-rounded" repertoire, one that contains something for everyone: a bit of Bach, a smidgen of Shostakovich, maybe even something new and then by a living composer—just not so often that you risk alienating more con-



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servative listeners. But she will have none of it.

"That would be like George Clooney or Robert DeNiro saying they couldn't have a meaningful life as an actor if they didn't go back and do Shakespeare or Christopher Marlowe," she says.

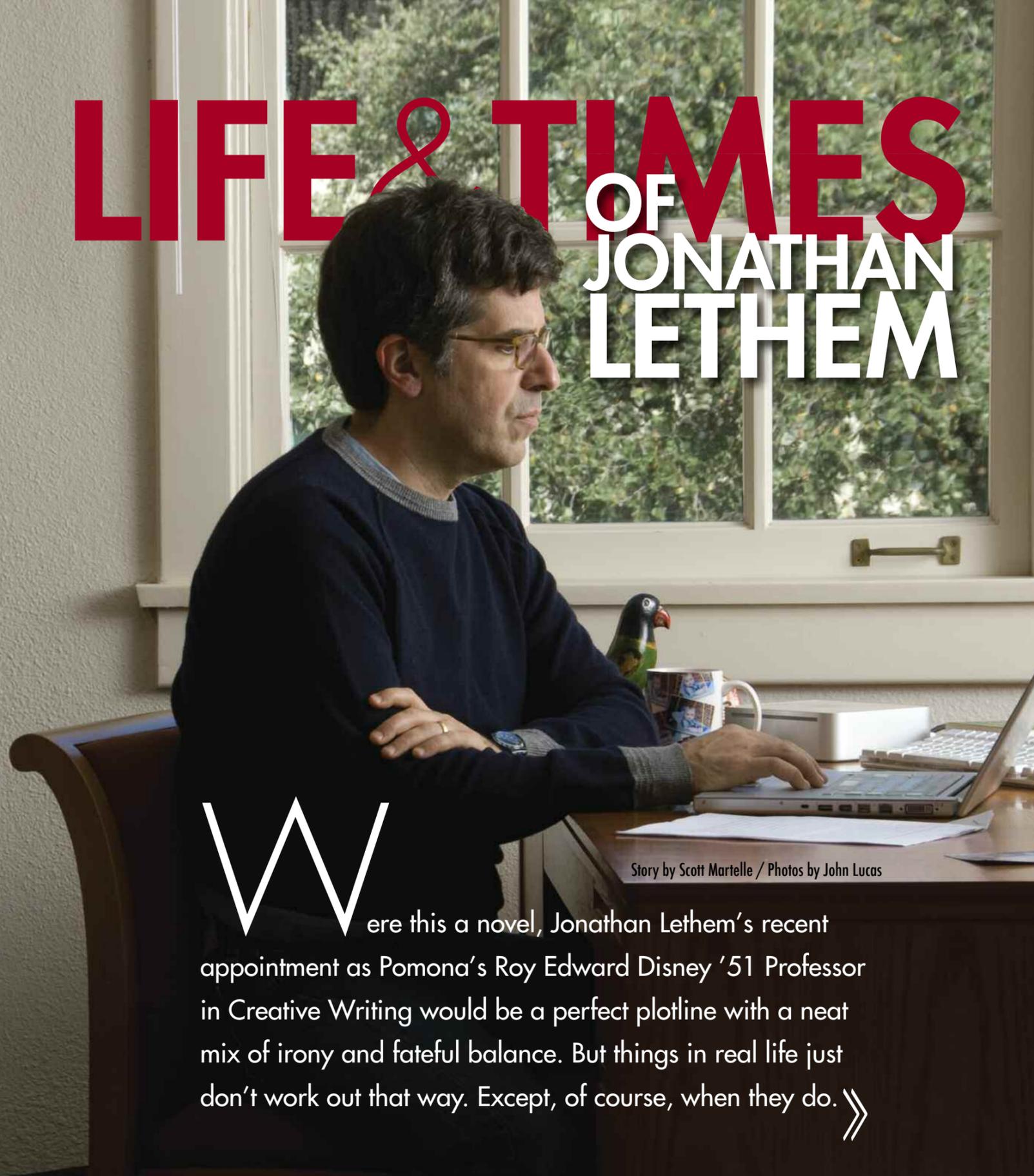
Besides, Supové likes the *sound* of new music; it reminds her of the light classics she first played as a child, and of the work of Claude Debussy, the 19th-century French Impressionist composer whose work was considered to be as radical in its day as Schoenberg's.

And Supové hardly seems to suffer from a narrow artistic focus. Her latest album, *The Exploding Piano*, leans heavily toward what she calls "the soundtrack idea." Having spent years reciting monologues over pop-music soundtracks during her recitals, she began commissioning works which *themselves* resembled soundtracks—if you can imagine a film or television score constructed from digital audio samples, "found sounds" (i.e., ones not normally associated with music, or produced by musical instruments), and heavily processed acoustic piano. Dan Becker's "Revolution," for example, sees Supové facing off against a Disklavier while Martin Luther King Jr. intones "Remaining Awake throughout a Great Revolution," a speech he first delivered at his alma mater, Morehouse College, in 1959. Woolf's "Sutra, Sutra," meanwhile, parachutes Supové and her piano into a surreal environment occupied by samples of Indian tabla drumming, Sufi chanting and whispered discourses on string theory delivered by the pianist herself, creating an aural encounter between Eastern mysticism and Western science.

Ever the restless soul, Supové has already moved on to new creative pastures. Lately, she's been collaborating with laptop-wielding DJ Scientific, with whom she created a remix of Debussy's "Hommage à Rameau." The remix is the first installment in her next big project, *Digital Debussy*—Supové's bid to drag her favorite composer into the 21st century, something she has already accomplished for the piano recital as a whole.

"I push myself to take more liberties," she says. "I'm just that kind of person."

LIFE & TIMES OF JONATHAN LETHEM



Story by Scott Martelle / Photos by John Lucas

Were this a novel, Jonathan Lethem's recent appointment as Pomona's Roy Edward Disney '51 Professor in Creative Writing would be a perfect plotline with a neat mix of irony and fateful balance. But things in real life just don't work out that way. Except, of course, when they do. »»