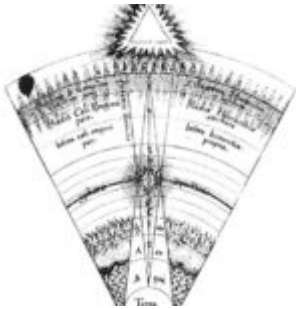


# Ears Embiggened: The Fine Vibrations of the Well Plucked String



*Another in a series of 2018 Big Ears Festival previews courtesy of the i2b staff. All one of us. Share this widely if you please.*

A passel of soul-thieving tempters in disguise; Pythagoras was fascinated by them, developed several laws of physics by observing them, and found his way to proposing a cosmology based on those laws. The well plucked string is a slippery damn slope, no question. Ask anyone who has a bottomless guitar collecting habit. Or ask their significant other.

There's something irresistible about an exquisitely excited string. Acoustic or electric, nylon or steel or gut, strung taut over wood or gourd or some kind of animal skin – or even an old cigar box or tin can. Cleanly replicated or tormented beyond recognition by tubes, transistors, and unholy volumes. Plucked, strummed, bowed or otherwise placed in motion, the string is the elemental sound of life, of sex, of sadness and joy, mourning and loss and ecstasy on a strand of molecular vibration. If recent physics theory is to be believed, the string is essence of all existence.

Pythagoras was no fool.

So the old guy he would have been beside himself at the prospect of the string ticklers scheduled at this year's Big

Ears. You've got banjos (Bela Fleck and Abigail Washburn chief among many) and dobro (Jerry Douglas is as good as any musician on the planet). A highlight of the 2017 fest, Wu Fei returns with her *gezhen* in duet with Washburn and as the leader of a massive "improvisation game" at the Knoxville Museum of art. Deep-dive folk archivers Anna & Elizabeth might wield any manner of stringy thingy as serendipity demands.

There's a string quartet – Brooklyn Rider in full and in collab with Fleck, and their violinist will present a concert of the entire Bach solo violin repertoire – and the string sections of the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the International Contemporary Ensemble, and the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra, together, apart, re-configured, hell, hanging upside down from a chandelier, even. Anything is possible.

Cellist Okkyung Lee draws sounds out of her instrument that are surprising and soothing and sometimes disturbing. Violinist Jenny Scheinman brings her distinctive jazz/folk/rock voicings in multiple contexts, from trad with silent films (Kannapolis: A Moving Portrait) to a paint-peeling Coltrane-ish howl for Rova's Electric Ascension. (Trust me, you've heard her, either with Bill Frisell or Norah Jones or Lucinda Williams or too many others to list. You've heard her. And she is fantastic.) Aine O'Dwyer is certain to play the harp – the proper harp, the thing that looks like the inside of a piano – though tbh, I am hoping she plays her *Music for Church Cleaners* for pipe organ.

Pedal steel player Susan Alcorn takes her instrument way outside the expected mainstream suggested by its history. She can shift on a dime, from dreamy twang to terrifying yowls, but always with a connection to the instrument's traditional heritage. Lap steel player Frank Schultz – half of the aptly named Duet for Theremin and Lap Steel – tends to a more gentle approach, coaxing dream tones and reverberations that compliment Scott Burlands oddball sci-fi doohickey clouds.<fn>I kid. Scott's a pal and I love his whatzamazammer

noise machine.</fn> They are playing three times, so you have no excuse not to catch them at least twice.

From Africa, Tal National and Innov Gnawa blend electric guitars and traditional instruments like the *sintir* to induce trance with an interlocking sound that will drag even the most doubly-left footed lunk onto the dance floor. Be prepared. You will dance and you will sweat.

Then there are your basic, run of the mill guitar players. Right. The guitarists at Big Ears this year are a veritable hero gallery. Nels Cline, Arto Lindsay, Marc Ribot, David Hidalgo, and Mary Halvorson – a lineup akin to the 1927 Yankees, heavy hitters every one of them – are on hand to demonstrate pretty much the full range of what a guitar has to offer.

And no slouch herself, Anoushka Shankar, daughter of Ravi and established sitar master in her own right, brings her poignant piece about immigration, “Land of Gold”, to the Historic Tennessee Theater. One of the festival’s must-see events, you can expect a big crowd for this one, so go early if you want a good seat.

Have I missed anyone? You bet. Godspeed You Black Emperor fields a trio of guitarists as part of their sonic onslaught, and Atlanta-based Algiers thrashes with the best of them. And we haven’t even begun to talk about the broad array of bluegrass/traditional pickers that will be literally all over downtown Knoxville throughout the festival.

We could go on, yes, we could. And we will, with coverage throughout the weekend from our crack team. i2b never sleeps.