Pandemic or no pandemic, New York retains a remarkable cadre of composers, most in their 30s and 40s. Some, such as Ellen Reid and David Hertzberg, come into town from as far afield as Los Angeles, but the bulk of them, even if they have temporarily fled into self isolation, remain based in New York (especially Brooklyn) and have created a body of music attractive to an ever-growing audience.

Central to this scene are imaginative impresarios such as Prototype’s Beth Morrison and Deborah Borda, president of the New York Philharmonic, with her Project 19 commissions to female composers. Then there are composers with an organisational bent, such as Reid and Missy Mazzoli. But chief among these is the singular figure of Paola Prestini.
As a composer, Prestini has a new work about to premiere called *Con Alma: An Operatic Tableau on Isolation*. Her music is lyrical, usually modest in scale, vocally driven, determinedly eclectic and collaborative in one way or another. Her scale may be growing soon, however, with an operatic project called *The Old Man and the Sea* (formerly *Two Oars*) in the works.

Parallel to her composing, and sometimes even threatening to overshadow it, are her organisational achievements. As a student at the Juilliard School she gave early signs of her entrepreneurial skills with a composers’ collective called VisionIntoArt that included Nico Muhly. These have since blossomed into myriad competitions, commissions, residencies and, now, digital commissions, all backed by a plethora of grants.

Her greatest achievement was the co-founding (with a music-loving philanthropist) in 2015 of National Sawdust, currently precluded from live concerts but poised for a return once the Covid vaccines kick in. It has for some time been about the liveliest forum in town for new music, located in an old Brooklyn sawdust factory with a welcoming atmosphere, a record label, a fine restaurant and an online journal that fosters young critics (part of a Prestini mission to bring composition and criticism closer together). She also finds time to sit on various boards, including Morrison’s constantly expanding Prototype organisation for new works of musical theatre.
Prestini clearly owes her organisational success to her imagination and drive, but also to her charm, to judge from my recent Zoom interview with her. She has a piquantly mixed background. Now a naturalised US citizen, she was born in Italy in 1975 and raised by her mother in Nogales, just north of the Mexican border, and then in Tucson, Arizona, to the north. Prestini is fluent in English, Italian and Spanish, a gift she shares with her 11-year-old son Tommaso. Her husband, Jeffrey Zeigler, for eight years the cellist in the Kronos Quartet and now a solo artist, is half African-American and half Japanese. Prestini says she is disappointed that Tommaso hasn’t picked up Japanese as a fourth language.

Having come to New York in her teens to study at Juilliard, Prestini still values the grounding she received there in modernist composition. But when she left the school, she wanted more.

“I was very happy with the training I got,” she says. “But there was an entire world out there that I wanted to explore.” Which meant collaborations with musicians from all over the world but also with poets, scientists, puppeteers, filmmakers and voices from the past (Hildegard of Bingen; Palestrina, who crops up in Con Alma).

Did she ever worry that her organisational activities would get in the way of her composing? “I knew I didn’t want to teach,” she explains. “Collaboration was a way for me to continue learning, stretching.” She admits that the early years of National Sawdust were taxing, but now (even with pandemic redundancies) there are staff to help shoulder her load. “If I knew now how hard it was to keep composing and organising in balance, I maybe would not have done it in my 30s,” she concedes.
Ultimately, she says, her penchant for collaboration, bolstered by National Sawdust, only stimulates her composing. *Con Alma*, a female-centric ode to nature, was recorded by some 30 musicians scattered in isolation across three continents. It is a co-creation with Magos Herrera, a Mexican folk and jazz singer and composer and a friend of Prestini’s for nearly 15 years. A longtime resident of Brooklyn, Herrera has returned to her native Mexico, for now at least; hence the involvement of the Mexican Ministry of Culture in the presentation of a “live virtual event” of *Con Alma*, which will include videos, live drawings and animations, conversations and storytelling.

In a sense, given its collaborative embrace of styles and its female creators, *Con Alma* is a mirror of Prestini’s enthusiasm for the New York new-music scene of which she has been so integral a part. “There’s a wonderful sense of camaraderie,” she says. “We are all exploring the links between styles. Music is not in a box any more.”

‘*Con Alma*’ album is released on National Sawdust Tracks on December 4. The live digital event is broadcast on December 13 on WNET’s All Arts channel and in Mexico on Canal 22, live-streamed on live.nationalsawdust.org and available on allarts.org

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