Composer Douglas J. Cuomo’s *Seven Limbs* – Featuring Nels Cline and the Aizuri Quartet – out August 27

*Inspired by a prayer, the work is an unpredictable mix of improvisation and notated music performed by artists at the top of their game.*

Composer Douglas J. Cuomo’s *Seven Limbs*, written for and featuring Nels Cline and the Aizuri Quartet, is out on August 27 on Sunnyside Records. The work is a ritual in seven movements, based on the Seven Limbs – a fundamental Tibetan Buddhist practice of purification. The spiritual grounding of the music is in the tradition of John Coltrane, Arvo Pärt, and John Tavener.

Called one of the “100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time” by Rolling Stone, Nels Cline brings his wildly creative improvisational skills and sonic range to the work. Drawn to the Grammy-nominated Aizuri Quartet’s precision and grace, Cuomo sets these five musicians in a landscape that is slightly unfamiliar - where the ground under their feet is always shifting a bit in unexpected ways. This requires a musical alertness and philosophical openness to whatever the moment brings, an outlook that has parallels to the Buddhist practice of the Seven Limbs. Cuomo describes his attraction to the artists:

“I intended to allow Nels the opportunity to play in all the different ways that he does –
explosively and delicately, with lots of electronic effects or totally acoustic. His range drew me to him but equally important, even in his sonic mayhem mode, he is always wonderfully sensitive and reactive to what’s going around him musically. And the first time I heard the Aizuri Quartet, I was knocked out by their sound, precision, and rhythmic suppleness. They have such a beautiful musical and personal energy, and it just beams out at you from the stage. I knew I could write the kind of demanding music I was imagining and they would just eat it up.”

Before Cline goes on tour with Wilco, there will be a live outdoor performance of Seven Limbs on July 9, 2021 at Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts, in Katonah, NY.

Cuomo began his musical studies as a jazz guitarist, but his interests led him away from performance to composition, where he remained mainly self-taught. Cuomo found success in the early 1990s writing music for film and television, including the highly regarded drama series, Homicide: Life on the Street. After 15 years in the industry, Cuomo decided to step back and focus on composing for passion projects in theater and contemporary classical fields.

Also a practicing Buddhist, Cuomo writes: “The practice is about exploring your mind and facing what’s there. I tried to make the music reflect the same thing — stillness, turmoil, suppleness, resistance, euphoria, high drama. I wrote it to be like a dream, like looking inward and discovering a terrain.”

Seven Limbs creates a world of musical ideas and settings that allow the musicians to explore ideas of meditative tranquility, subtle levels of mind, the battle with inner demons, the circle of karma, and sudden bolts of insight. Both strings and guitar are shape-shifters in that the roles are fluid — at times the guitar is in front with the quartet playing a more supportive role, at other times the guitar conjures a multi-layered and evolving drone-like sonic environment and the strings step to the fore. There are also many instances when both find equal footing, intertwining in a way that makes such distinctions moot.

Despite being written and recorded during the COVID pandemic, Seven Limbs was a true collaboration. Cline and Cuomo met just before lockdown. Cuomo Skyped and exchanged written music and rough recordings with the Aizuri. In February 2021, everyone assembled for rehearsal, three livestreams, and the recording of the piece. The joy everyone felt to be in a room making music together after so many months of isolation was palpable.
Douglas J. Cuomo
SEVEN LIMBS
Release Date: August 27, 2021
Format: Digital, CD
Sunnyside Records

featuring:
Nels Cline, guitars/electronics
Aizuri Quartet
Emma Frucht, violin
Miho Saegusa, violin
Ayane Kozasa, viola
Karen Ouzounian, cello

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DOUGLAS J. CUOMO
Douglas J. Cuomo has composed for concert and theatrical stages, television, and film. Cuomo’s music, with influences from jazz, world music, classical, and popular sources, is as personal, distinctive, and recognizable as it is wide-ranging. His compositions range from evening length works for theatre, including the opera *Doubt*, (premiere at Minnesota Opera in 2013); *Arjuna’s Dilemma*, a chamber opera based on the story of the Bhagavad Gita, (premiere at BAM’s Next Wave Festival in 2008); *Black Diamond Express Train to Hell* (premiere 2010 at Carnegie Hall by American Composers Orchestra), a single movement concerto featuring cellist Maya Beiser and a sampled recording of a 1927 preacher’s sermon; and *Savage Winter* (premiere 2018 at Pittsburgh Opera), a staged interpretation of Wilhelm Mueller’s *Winterreise* poems for tenor, electronics, loops, electric guitar, keyboards, and trumpet. His concerto for saxophone and orchestra, featuring Joe Lovano, will premiere in London in 2022 (with further performances planned in the U.S.). Cuomo composed the music for *Sex in the City* and seven seasons of *Homicide: Life on the Street*, as well as over 20 feature films. His last film score was for the award-winning film *The Pollinators*. Cuomo is published by Schott Music.

NELS CLINE
A true guitar polymath, Nels Cline’s recording and performing career spans jazz, rock, punk and experimental musics with over 200 recordings, including 30 as a leader, to his credit. His many accolades include being anointed by *Rolling Stone* as both one of 20 New Guitar Gods and one of the top 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time.

Born in Los Angeles on January 4, 1956, Cline and his twin brother, drummer Alex, formed a teenage rock band called Homogenized Goo, inspired by the groundbreaking psychedelic guitar work of Jimi Hendrix’s “Manic Depression,” Jeff Beck’s solo on The Yardbirds’ “Happenings Ten Years Time Ago,” George Harrison’s playing at the end of the Beatles “Strawberry Fields Forever” and Pete Townshend’s feedback squalls on “I Can See for Miles.” Later rock guitar influences for Nels included Steve Howe from Yes, Jan Akkerman from Focus and Roger McGuinn from The Byrds. “I just loved psychedelia — reverse guitar stuff, Indian-type drones, distortion and feedback. It all created a sense of the mystery and magic of sound that maybe set the stage for me to not just play straight rock my whole life.”
Electric Miles Davis, specifically *In a Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew*, *Live/Evil*, *On the Corner* and *Get Up With It*, would open the door for Cline to some new musical horizons, along with late period John Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders and Albert Ayler. Nels and his brother Alex would eventually come under the tutelage of such West Coast free jazz icons as multi-instrumentalist Vinny Golia and bassist-pianist-composer Eric Von Essen, who played duets with Cline on the guitarist's first recording, 1980's *Elegies*. There followed a series of recordings with New York avant-garde alto saxophonist Tim Berne (*The Five Year Plan*, *7X*, *Spectres*) and with Berne's mentor Julius Hemphill (1984's live *Georgia Blue*) before Cline hit a prolific streak in the ‘90s with a string of releases by the Nels Cline Trio. The guitarist's 1999 release, *Interstellar Space Revisited* (*The Music of John Coltrane*), his explosive duet with drummer Gregg Bendian, gained a lot of critical attention in the jazz world. He followed with a string of eight uncompromising releases through the 2000s for the Cryptogramophone label, including 2002's debut by the Nels Cline Singers, *Instrumentals*, and their 2004 follow-up, *The Giant Pin*, that put him on the avant-garde map.

Cline's profile was elevated to a whole other level after joining Wilco in 2004, subsequently appearing on 2005's *Kicking Television: Live in Chicago* in 2007's *Sky Blue Sky*, 2009's *Wilco (The Album)*, 2011's *The Whole Love*, 2014's *Alpha Mike Foxtrot*, 2015's *Star Wars*, 2016's *Schmilco* and 2019's *Ode to Joy*. For his ambitious 2016 Blue Note debut, *Lovers*, Nels defied all expectations by delivering a sumptuous chamber orchestra feast of mood music that was an unapologetically romantic paean to the Great American Songbook, inspired by his muses Bill Evans, Jim Hall, Gil Evans, Jimmy Giuffre, Sonic Youth and Henry Mancini. For his 2018 follow-up on Blue Note, *Currents, Constellations*, he pared it down to a quartet, dubbed The Nels Cline 4, and showcased a tight two-guitar interplay with his six-string partner Julian Lage on some heated collective improvisations across a wide range of moods. *Lovers*, was called “quietly ravishing” by the *New York Times*, “stunning” by *Downbeat* and “wildly inventive by *Rolling Stone*; while *Currents, Constellations*, was called “vibrant, adventurous...a skronking, shredding, shapeshifting good time” by *Stereogum*. Joined by his upstart crew of Skerik, Brian Marsella, Trevor Dunn, Scott Amendola, and Cyro Baptista, The Nels Cline Singers take things up a notch on *Share the Wealth*, his third Blue Note release.
Praised by the Washington Post for “captivating” performances that draw from its notable “meld of intellect, technique and emotions,” the Aizuri Quartet was awarded the Grand Prize and the CAG Management Prize at the 2018 M-Prize Chamber Arts Competition, along with top prizes at the 2017 Osaka International Chamber Music Competition in Japan, and the 2015 Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition in London. The Quartet’s debut album, Blueprinting, featuring new works written for the Aizuri Quartet by five American composers, was released by New Amsterdam Records and nominated for a 2019 Grammy Award.

Through its engaging and thought-provoking programs, branded by the New York Times as “genuinely exciting” and “imaginative,” the quartet has garnered critical acclaim for bringing “a technical bravado and emotional power” to bold new commissions, and for its “flawless” (San Diego Union-Tribune) performances of the great masterpieces of the past.

The Quartet has performed extensively throughout North America, as well as in Europe, Japan, Mexico, Chile, Costa Rica, and Abu Dhabi, and has commissioned and premiered new works by Pulitzer Prize-winner Caroline Shaw, Lembit Beecher, Paul Wiancko, Yevgeniy Sharlat, Gabriella Smith, Rene Orth, Michi Wiancko, and Alyssa Weinberg. Recent highlights include performances at Lincoln Center, San Antonio Chamber Music Society, National Gallery, Dallas Chamber Music Society, the Kennedy Center and a special performance of John Adams’ Absolute Jest with the Milwaukee Symphony.

The quartet has been combining four distinctive musical personalities into a unique collective since 2012. Aizuri Quartet draws its name from “aizuri-e,” a style of predominantly blue Japanese woodblock printing that is noted for its vibrancy and incredible detail. They are currently based in New York City.
LINER NOTES BY DOUGLAS J. CUOMO

This piece is inspired by an ancient Buddhist practice called The Seven Limbs. Both the piece and the practice are in seven sections: Prostration; Offering; Confession & Purification; Rejoicing; Requesting the Turning of the Wheel of Dharma; Beseeching the Buddhas Not to Pass Away; and Dedication.

This practice has a lot of words (which are usually chanted) while this music has none. However the purpose of the words is to take you to a place beyond words, and that space is somewhere that music can live. As I was composing I was going after the feel of the Seven Limbs - setting the text without using words.

Seven Limbs is about exploring your mind and facing what's there. Stillness, turmoil, suppleness, resistance, euphoria, high drama. I tried to make the music like a dream, like looking inward to a new terrain. The score requires musicians who are not only virtuosic, but also fearlessly willing to excavate deeply, and then show us what they've found. This perfectly describes the high (and high-wire) artistry of Nels Cline and the Aizuri Quartet. I wrote the music especially for them.

Miles Davis wrote, “If you put a musician in a place where they have to do something different from what they do all the time... that's where great art happens”

I’ve written a fair amount of music that combines a performer improvising with other performers whose parts are fully notated. Each time, I try to build a landscape that is slightly unfamiliar for everyone — where the ground is always shifting a bit in unexpected ways. I want them to be able to do what they do best, but in a slightly different context than they are used to. Here we have Nels playing some written music, but most of the time improvising within predetermined parameters with his wildly inventive guitar playing and use of electronic effects. The Aizuri, with their classically-based and forward thinking musical outlook, play music that is notated in the traditional fashion. For the musicians this requires a supple alertness and philosophical openness to whatever the moment brings. Not coincidentally, this also happens to be the optimal state-of-being for meditation, and for that matter for life in general.

Seven Limbs presents a kaleidoscopic array of sounds and moods, evoking (for me at least) different subtle levels of mind, moments of meditative tranquility, battles with inner demons, the circle of karma, and sudden, profound bolts of clarity. Like the mind, this music is by turns wild and unruly, calm and single-pointed.

I’ll mention a few places particularly: the string quartet playing with a restrained but vibrating intensity during the slow section at the end of the first movement, Prostration (Part III); Nels's use of electronic effects to create a hypnotic trance that leads into a delicate pizzicato off-kilter dance from the quartet to end the fourth movement, Rejoicing (Part II); Nels's delicate solo acoustic guitar reading of the song that begins the fifth movement, Requesting, and his inspired improvisation that follows; the guitar, at times approaching pure
noise, but a sublime noise, over the unrelenting drive of the Aizuri that builds to the climactic frenzy of the sixth movement, Beseeching (Part III); the ghostly high solo violin line that leads into crystalline guitar chords at the top of the last movement, Dedication (Part I); and, at the very end of the entire piece (Part IV), the guitar all alone, playing an exquisitely slow single-note melody, like a single bell being struck in the far distance.

I should also mention that this music was written and recorded during the height of Covid time in the United States. Getting everyone together to safely rehearse and record was a big undertaking, made possible by a lot of effort from a lot of people. But that difficulty made the jewel-like time when we were all together in one room making music that much more magical and precious. And inevitably, shot through that pure joy was the awareness of the losses we'd all lived through, and of the tremendous suffering and hardship afflicting so many people throughout every corner of the world. It was joy and sorrow mixing together. It was music. It was life.

Seven Limbs is dedicated with love to the memory of my mother, Sylvia Cuomo, to the many others who were taken before their time by Covid-19, and to all those who suffered so much loss and heartbreak as a result of the pandemic.

– Douglas J. Cuomo

This piece is inspired by an ancient Buddhist purification ceremony called The Seven Limbs. It’s part of a meditation practice I do every day. The practice has lots of words; the piece has none. The feel of this ceremony is what I kept going to as I composed, and then at some point I realized I was setting text without using words.

For me Seven Limbs is a dream-like piece; I can look inward to a new terrain and find out what’s there. Stillness, turmoil, suppleness, euphoria, high drama. I wrote it for Nels Cline and the Aizuri Quartet because, for composers, to write for great players is another kind of dream. Together, we offer you our dream, in the hope it makes some connection with you.

– D.J.C.
seven limbs

featuring Nels Cline and the Aizuri Quartet

Douglas J. Cuomo

Nels Cline
guitar, electronics
Aizuri Quartet
Emma Frucht
violin
Miho Saegusa
violin
Ayane Kozasa
viola
Karen Ouzounian
cello

Prostration
1. Part I (3:24)
2. Part II (2:56)
3. Part III (4:14)

Offering
4. Part I (1:09)
5. Part II (3:34)
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