

# THE KNELLS

New York-based classical composer explores rockier territories and three-part harmonies.

**YOU KNOW THE** feeling when you've got a tune buzzing around in your head? It's like an itch you can't easily scratch. So imagine the frustration of being a classical composer but hearing tunes of a decidedly rockier nature that are unlikely to go down too well in the New York contemporary classical music scene in which you work. What to do?

Faced with that dilemma, composer and guitarist Andrew McKenna Lee put a band together and, in 2010, The Knells sounded out for the first time.

"The real motivation for it was to do something different that got back to my rock roots a little bit," says the Brooklyn-based player, who first started playing guitar as a 12-year-old after listening to Led Zeppelin.

When The Knells' self-titled debut album arrived in 2013, *Prog* magazine declared it to be a "starkly beautiful and wholly remarkable debut." What made The Knells stand apart from other groups incorporating elements of classical and rock music within their compositions was the use of three-part vocal harmonies. These would perform McKenna Lee's striking melodies that weaved between ominous grooves and shifting textures. "It was pretty out-there," he laughs.

With the just-released follow-up, *Knells II*, the composer admits he has toned down some of the more astringent vocal parts that characterised much of the debut. "I would say that with that record I wanted to take a step in the direction of making the music more accessible, for lack of a better word."

Locking in deeper with fellow guitarist Paul Orbell, there's a harder, almost metallic edge in places, and a looser feel in which the group explore dynamics and contrasting textures. "When Paul first joined the band I was pretty uptight about him playing the parts as written. For this one, we've worked on the parts together. I'm really happy with the way the guitars turned out on the second record."

The Knells' unique signature sound still emanates from the beautifully written, sweet and sour, harmony vocals performed by Nina Berman (soprano), Charlotte Mundy (mezzo-soprano) and Blythe Gaisert (contralto). "They sing together as a single unit that works together all the time rather than as three separate singers," observes McKenna Lee who, perhaps surprisingly, cites The Mamas And The Papas, CSNY and The Supremes as diverse influences in his approach to writing for the vocals.

Playing live, meanwhile, has garnered good reactions, though it hasn't been without its problems. "It's a big band and everyone is really busy," he explains. Trying to get us all into one place to rehearse and perform is a real challenge as well as the logistical and financial concerns."

Though juggling his time between teaching, playing solo concerts and working on commissions, he recently added stop-motion animation to his list of skills, creating the band's *Poltergeist* video. "Stravinsky said that your best ideas come to you when you're working. You just have to be ready to pick it up and run with it when it does." **SS**



## LINE-UP

**Nina Berman** (soprano), **Charlotte Mundy** (mezzo-soprano), **Blythe Gaisert** (contralto), **Paul Orbell** (guitar), **Andrew McKenna Lee** (guitar), **Jude Traxler** (Rhodes, electronics), **Jeff Gretz** (drums), **Joseph Higgins** (bass)

## SOUNDS LIKE

Medieval polyphony colliding with prog and psych

## CURRENT RELEASE

*Knells II* is out now via Still Sound Music

## WEBSITE

[www.theknells.com](http://www.theknells.com)



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The Knells, with Andrew McKenna Lee front and centre.

