



[School of Music](#) › [News](#) › [2025](#) › [Audiovisual Project Plumbs Emotional Depths](#)

January 27, 2025

Audiovisual Project Plumbs Emotional Depths

By Dan Fernandez Email (<mailto:fernandez@cmu.edu>)

Media Inquiries

Dan Fernandez

- [Email \(mailto:fernandez@cmu.edu\)](mailto:fernandez@cmu.edu)
- [412-268-4921](tel:412-268-4921)

Vivid moving images play across a large screen behind the solo cellist. The video elements tell a story of family roots, cultural conflict, rejection, loss and acceptance – a story as personal as it is universal. Accompanied by the haunting sounds of live and pre-recorded cello playing that has been enhanced and altered to achieve a wide range of aural

impressions, Carnegie Mellon Prof. Freida Abtan's composition *My Heart Is a River* is a unique and immersive experience that puts both the performer and the audience in the midst of an affecting and unusual feast for the senses.

The seed of Prof. Abtan's hour-long presentation was planted through a collaboration with international star cellist Seth Parker Woods who was interested in new works for cello that expanded the landscape of instrumental performance to become part of his touring solo multimedia production *Difficult Grace*. The piece was commissioned by the Seattle Symphony and the first act was presented in February 2020 at Octave 9: Raisbeck Music Center at Benroya Hall, that orchestra's 360-degree audiovisual projection performance space, with a later 2023 production adding two more acts.

The creative process began with improvisation workshops between Abtan and Woods that explored both the musical and narrative elements of the piece. The other acts were based on similar workshops with cellists Meaghan Burke and Simon Cummings (the latter a CMU graduate and founder of Pittsburgh's cello rock band *Cello Fury*). Abtan then worked from the resulting recordings to create new musical structures, using spectral processing techniques in order to manipulate, stretch, compress, and transmogrify the timbral qualities of the recorded sound into transformed soundscapes with a wide range of tones and emotional qualities.

Abtan sees a similarity between this technique and the ways that our personal histories color our experiences by defining how we make meaning from them. She remarks, "Our perception of the world is always being mediated and altered by personal narrative and events that linger in our subconscious. In this music, spectral processing lets the cello voice qualities from other hidden sounds that haunt the composition and define its emotional expression." In performance, the digitally altered music is deconstructed for Woods to play live alongside the more processed sounds, immersed in lush narrative elements projected around him that seem to emanate from his music.

In *My Heart is a River*, Abtan intentionally plays with our perception of agency, saying, "There's a tension between the realspace performance and the representation of the performer in the video and music. It's a little like we are experiencing someone's memories with their own subjectivity rather than our own. It's really beautiful."



The emotional narrative of the work follows Abtan's family's journey to a new continent and recalls cultural conflict and the experience of rejection as a child. This new extended production of *My Heart Is a River*, funded in part by the College of Fine Arts' Fund for Research and Creativity and the Frank-Ratcheye STUDIO for Creative Inquiry, includes two new acts exploring the emotions surrounding the loss of a parent, as well as queerness and self-acceptance.

Abtan says, "Music works differently within audiovisual composition. Compared to visual imagery, we have no memory for what happens in it. And yet all the emotion we experience comes from the music. All the sense we make of the world comes from the music."

The CMU School of Music's presentation of *My Heart Is a River* with Seth Parker Woods will take place on February 7, 2025 in Kresge Theatre in the College of Fine Arts building.

[Livestream](#)[Visit](#)[Apply](#)[Contact Us](#)

School of Music
Carnegie Mellon University
5000 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

© 2026 Carnegie Mellon University