

SPHINX VIRTUOSI

THIS IS AMERICA



SUNDAY, MARCH 14 • 3 P.M.

PROGRAM

Xavier Foley (b. 1994) – “Ev’ry Voice”

Jessie Montgomery (b. 1981) – Source Code

Antonín Dvořák (1873–1904) – String Quartet No. 12 in F major, Op. 96, “American”, IV. Finale

Andrea Casarrubios (b. 1988) – SEVEN

Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990) arr. Jannina Norporth (b. 1982) – “America”

Michael Abels (b. 1962) – Delights and Dances

Ev’ry Voice

Xavier Foley (b. 1994)

This work is an homage and pays tribute to the Black National Anthem. “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was first written as a poem by James Weldon Johnson. Johnson was an American writer and civil rights activist, who also led the NAACP. Its first performance was in celebration of President Lincoln’s birthday, on February 12, 1900, in Jacksonville, FL, performed by a group of schoolchildren. The poem was set to music by Johnson’s brother, John Rosamond Johnson, and as a complete work, adopted by the NAACP as its official anthem. We often say that music is the soundtrack of our history and our lives. Today, we know “Lift Every Voice and Sing” as the soundtrack of the African American Civil Rights Movement. Xavier Foley, a brilliant bassist and composer, the winner of the Avery Fisher Career Grant and a Sphinx Competition Laureate, created two separate versions of a work “Lift Ev’ry Voice,” commissioned by the Sphinx Organization. One of the versions is set for the Sphinx Virtuosi, while the second incorporates use of Sphinx’s professional vocal ensemble, Exigence. This piece was created in 2020 as a special feature under Sphinx’s program umbrella of “Land of the Free,” which illuminates the wealth of musical talent among American composers. Appearing now as part of our “This is America” digital program, this work has become a beloved standalone. The inspiration for the commission came at a time when the ideals of unity were invoked amidst uncertainty, tragedy and hope. In his music, Foley brings out the sonority and virtuosity of the string instruments to feature the familiar melodic material, while uncovering new timbres and sounds, almost symbolically encouraging all of us to look and listen anew, beyond the isolation of the global pandemic and the racial and cultural divide in our country. Today’s soundtrack for the hopeful times ahead are ushered in by Foley’s new tribute to a treasured piece of the American historical and musical heritage.

Source Code

Jessie Montgomery (b. 1981)

Whenever possible, we love to collaborate with and play music by our colleagues and friends. We feel that their voices resonate more deeply with the issues of current times, keeping our music fresh, relevant, and live. In this case, our own Jessie Montgomery, a violinist-composer extraordinaire, has toured with and led our ensemble many times. We felt that this piece pays tribute to a musical element that was the soundtrack of one of the most abhorrent periods of American history. We’ve asked her to share her inspiration behind this unique work. “The first

sketches of Source Code began as transcriptions of various sources from African American artists prominent during the peak of the Civil Rights era in the United States. I experimented by re-interpreting gestures, sentences...by choreographer Alvin Ailey, poets Langston Hughes and Rita Dove, and the great jazz songstress Ella Fitzgerald...Ultimately, this exercise of listening, re-imagining, and transcribing led me back to the black spiritual as a common musical source across all three genres. The spiritual is a significant part of the DNA of black folk music, and subsequently most (arguably all) American pop music forms that have developed to the present day..."

String Quartet No. 12 in F major, B. 179, Op. 96, "American", IV. Finale **Antonin Dvořák (1873 – 1904)**

In 1892 Dvořák served as artistic director and professor of composition at the National Conservatory of Music in America in New York City. He was appointed to this role at the request of the institution's president, Jeannette Thurber. His mission was to help study and formulate the American classical or art music. Ultimately, his writing indicates that he was rather enamored with the African-American spirituals, Native American melodies, and the unusual rhythmic richness inherent in the American tradition. He further believed in furthering these elements rather than encouraging the imitation or further of the European melodic and rhythmic foundation. Dvořák spent the summer of 1893 relaxing in a small farming community (300 residents) of Czech immigrants in Spillville, Iowa, where this work was born. The Kneisel Quartet gave the premiere in Boston on New Year's Day 1894 and in New York on January 12. Arguably the most popular of Dvořák's fourteen quartets, the American reflects his aim "to write something really melodious and simple" and undoubtedly, reflective of not only the melodies of his native land, drawing upon the nostalgia, but also, inspired by the music he heard in America. Specifically, the pentatonic melodies he employs throughout (in place of the chromatic preferences in the European music) certainly suggests an authentic connection to the latter. The fast, final movement is cheerful, celebratory, jubilant, and deeply reflective, at once.

SEVEN

Andrea Casarrubios (b. 1988)

SEVEN for solo cello (2020) is a tribute to the essential workers during the global COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to those who lost lives and suffered from the crisis. The piece ends with seven bell-like sounds, alluding to New York's daily 7pm tribute during the lockdown – the moment when New Yorkers clapped from their windows, connecting with each other and expressing appreciation for those on the front lines.

"America"

Leonard Bernstein (1918 – 1990), arranged by Jannina Norporth (b. 1982)

One of the greatest American musicians of the 20th century, Leonard Bernstein was both a prolific composer and a conductor. The Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, he wrote three symphonies and diverse concert works, and also made extensive contributions to musical theater, one of his great loves.

"America" is a song from the musical *West Side Story*, for which Stephen Sondheim wrote the lyrics. In the original stage version, Anita, the most important female character after Maria, praises America, while Rosalia, another Puerto Rican immigrant, supports Puerto Rico. The song, "America" highlights the positive qualities of America, ironically using a robust Hispanic musical style, replete with Latin style percussion, guitar and very complex cross-rhythms. When Rita Moreno played Anita in the 1961 film version, she reinforced her American sentiments, while Bernardo replied with criticisms, which could be read as anti-immigrant prejudice: "Life is all right in America/If you're all white in America." Subsequently some of the song's lyrics were removed.

Delights and Dances

Michael Abels (b. 1962)

Michael Abels, an African-American composer best known for combining classical music with African-American jazz, blues, bluegrass and ethnic genres, has gained widespread recognition for his orchestral music. *Delights and Dances*, commissioned by Sphinx, captivates listeners with witty, soulful, and infectiously rhythmic music. A *New York Times* review described the piece as "an energetic arrangement...which incorporates jazz, blues, bluegrass and Latin dance elements." *Delights and Dances* features quickly moving chord sequences and 16th note runs for the solo quartet, which are rhythmically varied by the insertion of triplet patterns that relax and slow down the pace. The introductory section begins slowly, Largo, molto rubato, with rhythmic freedom. The opening passage for solo cello sounds almost like a cadenza, then the solo viola plays the cello's ascending motive, and the two play a brief duet joined by the two solo violins. The orchestra enters, pizzicato, with short, detached, syncopated patterns. This section sounds like blues but is very rhythmic and has an optimistic feel. Each player in the solo group plays its own riff. The final section, "Bluegrassy" begins with a solo viola theme; soon all four soloists join in a spirited hoedown. Finally, the solo quartet and the orchestral strings play together for the spirited conclusion.