

Spectrums of America

Janani Sridhar, soprano & Alexander Woods, piano

Sunday, May 1, 2022 | 1:00 p.m.

St. Mary of the Lake Church

Sponsored by the St. Mary's Schola Cantorum

Preach Sister, Preach
Simone de Beauvoir
Mae West

Evan Mack

Munnaeru Vaalibaa
Di Tanjong Katong

arr. Alex Woods

Joy
Little Melody in E flat
Love, Let the Wind Cry... How I Adore Thee

Ricky Ian Gordon
Florence Price
Undine S. Moore

Cowboy Songs
Bucking Bronco
Lift Me Into Heaven Slowly
Billy the Kid

Libby Larsen

~Intermission~

Sophisticated Lady
By Strauss

Duke Ellington
George Gershwin

Stars and the Moon
I'll Be Here
Sweet Nothings in Spanish

Jason Robert Brown
Adam Gwon
Margaret Bonds

There Is a Balm in Gilead
Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit

arr. Damien Sneed

A note from the performers:

When Alex and I got together to program this recital, we knew immediately that we wanted to share music that we were passionate about, and to shine a light on composers that were often overlooked. This afternoon, you will hear music by American composers, and in particular living composers, female composers, and composers of color. This recital is a reflection of who Alex and I are, and the musical worlds we live in; you will experience music both within and outside of the classical canon. There will be jazz, musical theatre, a few melodies from my homeland arranged by Alex, and pieces that transcend the usual style and form of a traditional art song. Thank you for choosing to spend your afternoon with us. We hope you will enjoy this repertoire we are bubbling with excitement to share with you. -J.S.

*“I believe that a person’s taste in music tells you a lot about them.
In some cases, it tells you everything you need to know.”
-Leila Sales*

The first set of songs are written by a friend of mine, Evan Mack, and are from the song cycle, *Preach, Sister, Preach*, which comprises of fourteen movements, and draws from the words of strong, trailblazing, women. Evan was drawn to the quote by Simone de Beauvoir, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman,” and opens his cycle with it. The rest of his set draws from quotes by famous women about women, and his songs pay tribute to either the person, era, or extramusical references to those quotes. -J.S

Next, are two folk songs from my homeland, Singapore. I commissioned these arrangements, and worked on the soundscape of these pieces with my dear friend Alex. Singapore is a cultural hotpot, and we have four national languages: English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. Two of these languages are represented in the set.

“Di Tanjong Katong” is one of Singapore’s most well-known folk songs. This piece is in the Malay language, and paints a picture of Singapore during its “Kampung” days as a fishing village. The first verse tells the story of a lover pining for his beloved maiden who lives in the same village as him, and the last verse reminds us of the importance of having good character, because even when our flesh fades away, our character will always be remembered.

The second song, “Munnaeru Vaalibaa,” is a Tamil piece with lyrics by S. Jesudassan. The lyricist was a school teacher by profession, and he taught the Tamil language. The poetry of the song encourages the youths of today to keep progressing, and to lead the way, as they are the leaders of tomorrow, and countries will look to them for guidance in times of need. -J.S.

This next set explores happiness in a variety of forms: celebrating joy in the commonplace, smiling with a friend, or shouting your love from the mountaintops. All three selections owe their

origins to prominent black composers and poets of the mid-20th century: Langston Hughes, Florence Price, and Undine Moore.

“Joy” is the final song in Ricky Ian Gordon’s cycle *Genius Child*, composed for soprano Harolyn Blackwell and premiered in 1993. Each of the 10 songs sets a poem by Langston Hughes to evoke various scenes and characters in a city neighborhood. Gordon writes, “‘Joy’ ends the cycle the way I saw Harolyn [...] ending it, in an explosion of life and movement, celebration and Joy.”

We next hear Florence Price’s “Little Melody in E flat.” This jazzy, unassuming piano miniature offers a unique window into Price’s oeuvre. While she is often recognized for her orchestral works, sonatas, and art songs, Price was equally at home writing music in a popular style. One could imagine Price (or perhaps one of her piano students) performing “Little Melody” for a group of friends at a warm and cheerful soiree.

Undine S. Moore was a prominent music educator and composer in the mid-20th century. We end the set with her art song “Love Let the Wind Cry... How I Adore Thee.” The text is by Bliss Carman, who drew from the ancient Greek lyric love poetry of Sappho. Moore uses ample text painting in the voice and piano to render several evocative metaphors of love. -A.W.

Cowboy Songs is a three-movement song cycle by one of the most prolific living female American composers of today, Libby Larsen. Larsen is a Grammy award winner with over five hundred compositions in her repertoire. She co-founded the Minnesota Composers Forum, now known as the American Composer’s Forum, and served as the Artistic Director of the John Duffy Institute for New Opera from 2014-2020. During her tenure, she aided in the nurturing and production of new opera by American composers.

The first and third movement of *Cowboy Songs* are drawn from cowboy and cowgirl poetry of the Wild West. “Bucking Bronco” is set to text by Belle Starr, a notorious American outlaw, and “Billy the Kid” has an anonymous poet who tells the tale of yet another famous American outlaw. Both songs are in complete contrast to the middle movement which has a sultry, bluesy feel. -J.S.

“Sophisticated Lady” is a standard by Duke Ellington that gives us a glimpse into the world of vocal jazz. The song was first recorded in 1933 as an instrumental ballad, but lyricist Mitchell Parish added words later on. While Parish’s lyrics depict a romantically jaded socialite, Ellington was originally inspired by three of his elementary school teachers: cosmopolitan women who vacationed in Europe during the summer. -A.W.

We end this set with a cheeky piece by George and Ira Gershwin. The Gershwin brothers were of Jewish-Ukrainian ancestry, and a dream team in the world of jazz and musicals. Gershwin hits such as “Embraceable You,” “I Got Rhythm,” and “Nice Work If You Can Get It” are integral standards of the jazz canon. George Gershwin is also well-known for his jazz opera *Porgy and Bess* and his piano-orchestra work *Rhapsody in Blue*. In “By Strauss” from the musical *An*

American in Paris, the protagonist playfully mocks Gershwin for “pounding on tin,” while yearning for true music such as compositions by Strauss. -J.S.

Our next three selections delve into new and old sounds of musical theatre. Each song offers a unique story of romance: a futile search for connection through material consumerism, a heart-wrenching story of tragedy and healing, and a mildly comedic portrayal of love as a universal language.

Famous for his musicals *Parade*, *The Last Five Years*, *Songs for a New World*, and *Bridges of Madison County*, Jason Robert Brown has become a household name over the past three decades. In “Stars and the Moon,” we hear a more subdued side of Brown’s signature pop-rock style. The protagonist shares her flaws candidly, recounting how she rejected promises of love and adventure to hold out for someone who could make her rich and famous.

Adam Gwon is a composer and lyricist whose star has risen in more recent years. His hit debut musical *Ordinary Days* premiered in 2009 and has been produced in theatres around the world. Today’s selection, “I’ll Be Here,” is a storytelling song that recounts a narrative of tragic loss, love, and healing revolving around 9/11.

Ending with a change in mood and generation, we hear “Sweet Nothings in Spanish” by Margaret Bonds. A virtuoso pianist and gifted composer of many genres, Bonds wrote a considerable variety of vocal and instrumental music. The lighthearted “Sweet Nothings” comes from *Tropics After Dark*, an unfinished musical that Bonds worked on with Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps in the early 1940s. Manuscripts from the show are held at the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College Chicago. We offer our heartfelt thanks to coach, pianist, and friend, Mary Trotter, who first located the score for this afternoon’s selection. -A.W.

Our program concludes with a couple of jazz influenced spirituals by contemporary African American composer Damien Sneed. Sneed has worked with illustrious musicians including Aretha Franklin, Wynton Marsalis, Jessye Norman, and Stevie Wonder, to name a few. He was also a recipient of the Sphinx Medal of Excellence, an award presented to emerging Black and Latino leaders in classical music. His modern take on traditional spirituals is riveting, and I hope you enjoy listening to them as much as much as we enjoy presenting them to you. -J.S.

*“Music is the great uniter. An incredible force.
Something that people who differ on everything and anything else can have in common.”
-Sarah Dessen*



Raved as having the “loveliest of voices,” Singaporean soprano Janani Sridhar is equally at home in opera and on the concert stage. The first Singaporean to win the top prize at the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod, she has performed with renowned companies including Singapore Lyric Opera, Des Moines Metro Opera, Toledo Opera, Opera NEO, LOLA, Fort Worth Opera, and Salt Marsh Opera. Her operatic roles include Ortlinde (*Die Walküre*), Micaëla (*Carmen*), Alice (*Falstaff*), Rusalka (*Rusalka*), Nella (*Gianni Schicchi*), Musetta (*La Bohème*), Adina (*L’Elisir d’Amore*), Pamina (*Die Zauberflöte*), Violetta (*La Traviata*), and Antonia (*Les Contes d’Hoffmann*).

Janani’s international concert performances have included Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9, Schubert’s Mass No. 2, Mahler’s Symphony No. 8, Bach’s Cantata No. 140, Rutter’s *Gloria*, and Mahler’s Symphony No. 4. She has collaborated with orchestras in Asia, America, and Europe, including the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, Singapore Chinese Orchestra, Orchestra of the Music Makers, Toledo Symphony Orchestra, Stony Brook Baroque Players, Connecticut Virtuosi Chamber Orchestra, Salt Marsh Opera Orchestra, Des Moines Metro Opera Festival Orchestra, and Shreveport Symphony Orchestra.

A passionate proponent of contemporary music, Janani has premiered works by American and Singaporean composers. She had the honor of working with composers Jake Heggie and Libby Larsen, and was selected to be a part of Fort Worth Opera’s Frontiers festival which showcases new operatic works. At the festival, she had the pleasure of performing in *Behold the Man*, and *The Hatfield-McCoy Triptychs*. Janani also had the privilege of creating the role of the Manager in the world premiere of the crossover opera *Yeltsin in Texas!* by Evan Mack and Joshua McGuire.

Janani holds a Bachelor of Music from Oberlin Conservatory of Music, a Master of Music from Manhattan School of Music, and a Doctor of Musical Arts from Stony Brook University. She is pleased to be on faculty at the Hurley School of Music at Centenary College of Louisiana. Some of her 2022-2023 season performances include: her debut at Carnegie Hall in Poulenc’s *Gloria*, the role of Turan in the commission of *Threshold of Brightness* by Beth Morrison Projects, and a series of solo recitals in Louisiana, Texas, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. www.JananiSridhar.com



Alexander Woods is a pianist and music teacher living in the Twin Cities. A versatile and collaborative musician, his passions include art song, instrumental & chamber works, choral music, contemporary piano repertoire, and a variety of jazz and popular styles. He strives to maintain an innovative perspective in his performances, seeking out new and old works from diverse genres and composers.

Woods holds positions at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Borromeo Music Festival, and St. Mary of the Lake Catholic Church, and has performed in Switzerland, Italy, and throughout the United States. As a freelance accompanist and vocal coach in the greater Twin Cities, he has worked at the University of Minnesota, Gustavus Adolphus College, and several competitions, churches, and choral ensembles. Woods is also an active keyboardist in the Twin Cities pop music scene, having performed and recorded with bands in a variety of genres.

Woods earned a master’s degree in Collaborative Piano from the University of Minnesota, where he received the Rydell Fellowship in Accompanying & Coaching, and bachelor’s degrees in Music and Religious Studies from Pomona College (Claremont, CA). His primary teachers include Timothy Lovelace, Lydia Artymiw, Genevieve Lee, and Ming Tsu. www.alexanderwoodspiano.com