

AMERICAN VOICES – PROGRAM NOTES

**by Michael Manning (MM), Pamela Dellal (PD),
and Robert Gross (RG)**

What a new world, with new processes and new ideals, will do with the tractable and still unformed art of music; what will arise from the contact of this art with our unprecedented democracy — these are the questions of deepest import in our musical life in the United States.

So wrote the American composer and historian, Arthur Farwell, in his introduction to *Music in America*, published in 1914, at a time when “serious music” in the new world was a pale reflection of European trends, founded on European traditions. This was not lost on Farwell, who issued a warning and a challenge:

The chief danger which threatens the American composer is the tendency to accept and conform to the standards of the centers of conventional and fashionable musical culture...and to fail to study out the real nature and musical needs of the American people.

Prophetically, he concludes:

The new movement will call forth new and larger efforts on the part of American composers, who, with their present thorough assimilation of the various musical influences of the world, will lead the nation into a new and mature creative epoch.

When Farwell made his observations, American music of international renown was virtually synonymous with the Second New England School, a group of conventional Bostonian composers comprising John Knowles Paine, George Chadwick, Arthur Foote, Amy Beach, Edward MacDowell, and Horatio Parker – all European trained, each hidebound by European tradition. But on the periphery, the seeds of Farwell’s prophecy had already germinated in the persons of Charles Ives (Parker’s student), Carl Ruggles, and Henry Cowell – each pursuing a completely original style of composition, distinct from one another and departing radically from the European heritage. It can be argued that America’s distinctive music began with these composers and their artistic progeny. In the 20th century, America would become the dominant center of influence in music, applying to this realm of art the same spirit of innovation, individuality, and independence that characterized American business, military power, and social evolution.

The composers represented on tonight’s program are all from this “American century,” and the styles are representative of the eclecticism that came to define American music: we have the Ivesian eclecticism of Hollingsworth, the neo-Romantic tonalism of Samuel Barber, the droll, stylish cameos of Theodore Chanler, the neoclassic American ragtime of William Bolcom, and the bold jazz of Leonard Bernstein. And with our premiere of Robert Gross’s songs, we’re brought up-to-date with trends moving the hearts and minds of contemporary musicians and poets. (MM)

The Evangelist and the Artifact (1984)

JJ Hollingsworth is a composer, pianist, and impresario living in San Francisco. Her portfolio of compositions is broad and impressive, the earliest extant work being the 1984 suite, *Under the Blue Dome*, whose title evokes the empyrean grandeur of the sky in her native Colorado. *The Evangelist and the Artifact* is a short musical parable depicting her youthful encounter with a traveling preacher and her fascination with an arrowhead he gave her. One hears her turning the piece over and over in her hands, juxtaposed with the hymn “He Leadeth Me,” representing the peripatetic parson. The style of composition is very like that of Charles Ives, with variations of the hymn tune alternating with episodic interludes and sudden shifts of mood and texture. The piece ends with a musical analog to ellipsis.

The Graceful Ghost (1970)

William Bolcom is an American pianist and composer best known for his collaborations with his wife, mezzo-soprano Joan Morris. Together, they've recorded more than a dozen albums devoted to the rich, broad literature of the American Songbook - George and Ira Gershwin, Rodgers and Hart, Cole Porter, to name just three. As a composer, Bolcom has produced three operas, ten symphonies, several concerti, song cycles, and many works for piano solo, including the *12 New Etudes for Piano* for which he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. *The Grace Ghost Rag* is his most famous composition, and has been continuously in repertoire since it was written. The first of a collection, *Three Ghost Rags*, it's classic ragtime from the mold of Scott Joplin, albeit with a harmonic and formal sophistication undreamt of during the golden age of ragtime. (MM)

Canzone, Op. 38a (1961)

Samuel Barber is one of the most often performed American composers, one of the few, in fact, that has a universal classical “hit” in repertoire – the gorgeous *Adagio for Strings*. In the same generation as Aaron Copland, Barber's style is very different from Copland's and that related school of composers for whom “American music” truly emerged as an identifiable genre. Barber's music, like that of his elder peer Howard Hanson, is sometimes categorized as neo-Romantic, connoting a music that is more emotionally saturated, more invested in melody, and beholden to styles and forms typical of the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1963, Barber was awarded his second Pulitzer Prize for his *Piano Concerto, Op. 38*, the second movement of which is an exquisite *canzone* that the composer derived from an earlier, unpublished composition, *Elegy*, and later arranged as a short concert piece for flute and piano, the *Canzone, Op. 38a*. (MM)

Eight Epitaphs (1939, revised 1956)

Theodore Chanler was born in 1902 in Newport, Rhode Island, and began composing at the age of fifteen. His early music teachers included Hans Ebell (piano), Arthur Shepard (harmony) and Ernst Bloch (composition). In 1923 he continued his formal education in Oxford. During a visit to Paris he met Nadia Boulanger, with whom he studied for several years. He returned to the U.S. in 1931, and in 1934 moved to Boston where he briefly held the post of music critic for the Boston Herald. From 1945 to 1947 he taught at the Peabody Institute, after which he was invited to teach counterpoint, harmony and composition at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge MA for the 1947-48 academic year. Chanler's one opera, *The Pot of Fat*, based on a Grimm fairy tale, was a collaboration with the composer's sister, Hester Pickman, who wrote the libretto.

The *Epitaph* poems, by the English author Walter de la Mare, derive from the short story “Benighted” from the collection *Ding Dong Bell*, published in 1924. Introduced by two characters who find themselves wandering through a cemetery by night, the gravestone carvings speak for

themselves, presenting quirky, touching, and original personalities. Published in 1939, these songs have long been recognized as an important contribution to American art song. Chanler's gift for miniatures provides each song with an immediate, vivid, and varied setting, ranging from tenderness and tragedy to humor and impudence. According to the American composer Ned Rorem, "Chanler's genius of brevity was extreme. No one in history, not Dowland or Satie or Webern, ever more convincingly carried a hearer from doubt through heartbreak to resolution in a span of five bars." (PD)

Cantor Songs (2016)

What a pleasure it has been to set texts from Jeremy Cantor's excellent set of naturalist poetry *Wisteria from Seed*. As Robert Aquinas McNally writes of the collection, "Jeremy Cantor's poems strike chords at once tender and unsentimental. There is truth here, and a gentle music." Accordingly, I find Mr. Cantor's aesthetic very much suitable for my own gentle "unsentimentality." Likewise, I found the combination of voice, recorder and piano both challenging and intriguing a set of colors for which to write.

Partnership explores the partnership between the piano and recorder particularly, blending their colors together in rolling arabesques that are occasionally punctuated by heavier chords for emphasis. *Wisteria From Seed* speaks of growth, so there is a refrain in the recorder that continues to grow and evolve throughout the song. *Tamarind* explores an invented mode that is octatonic-like, but not quite. This particular invented mode was reminiscent to me of wild-growing tamarind for some reason, and of ghosts, which the poem mentions. *The Full Set* is perhaps the most far-reaching post-tonal example in the set, temporarily omitting the piano, and begins with an inversion canon that emphasizes soundworld-defining dissonances. However, the voice and recorder come together in harmony about halfway through. *Display Case* features a rather quick-paced pulse that represents the fastidious artist at work. Finally, *Why Don't You Finish Anything You Start?* ends the set on a more leisurely note, but even with slow-paced music there are repeated ideas that reflect the theme of persistence. (RG)

Symphonic Dances from West Side Story (1961)

Neither before nor since *West Side Story* opened in 1957 has so sophisticated a musical score been presented on Broadway. Arguably the greatest American piece yet written for the stage, it was the child of three legitimate American geniuses: composer Leonard Bernstein, choreographer Jerome Robbins, and lyricist Stephen Sondheim. The score is melodically rich and distinctly modern, its idiom primarily jazz. But beneath the cool exterior is the extremely well-wrought machinery of a master composer, one whose ability to sew the wildly varied moods and sentiments of a gritty tragedy into a seamless quilt stands with any other composer of the 20th century. In particular, the ingenious use of certain melodic intervals and the harmonies implied by them – which at once provide unifying formal structure and the seeds for an astonishing range of emotional and dramatic variations – recalls the operas of Benjamin Britten. And as with Britten, the richness of technical detail never dominates the listener's attention. Rather, it's the effect upon the listener's emotions and the propulsion of the drama that stay at the fore.

The popularity of the play led Bernstein to extract an orchestral suite from the score, something suitable for concert performances, and in 1961 he brought out the *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*. As the title suggests, the suite concentrates on the popular dance sequences that are distributed liberally throughout the play, and which provide some of its most exciting episodes. The only two segments that break from this model are the two heartbreaking songs – *Somewhere*, which is set in its entirety, and *I Have a Love*, which is incorporated into the work's finale. The present arrangement for solo piano was done by the Boston polymath Michael Hawley in 2001. (MM)

Dr. Robert Gross received his DMA in music composition at University of Southern California where he also received a graduate certificate in Scoring for Motion Pictures and Television, and was the first person to complete two graduate-level programs in music at USC simultaneously. He also received an MA in Music for Film, Television and Theatre from the University of Bristol in England; an MM in Music Composition from Rice University; and a BM in Music Composition from Oberlin Conservatory. He has taught graduate and undergraduate level music theory at Rice University, and is currently a graduate student in music therapy at Texas Woman's University. He was half of Blind Labyrinth with the late Kenneth Downey, an experimental electroacoustic music duo, whose CD *Blasted Light* was released on the Beauport Classical label in 2014. He has presented papers at the national Society for Music Theory conference, the Texas Society for Music Theory Conference, the West Coast Conference of Music Theory and Analysis, and both national and regional chapters of Society of Composers, Inc. His post-tonal analyses have been published in *Perspectives of New Music* and *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*, and his music therapy analyses published in *Qualitative Inquiries in Music Therapy*. Awards and honors include winner of University of Georgia Arch Composition Award for *Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments*; special recognition award, First Music Competition, New York Youth Symphony; winner of tri-annual Inter-American Music Awards Composition Competition, with publication of winning piece by C. F. Peters; twice Margaret Jory Grant from American Music Center; ASCAP Grants to Young Composers Honorable Mention; orchestra work *Halcyon Nights* chosen for Whitaker New Music Readings by American Composers Orchestra; twice ASCAP Victor Herbert Award winner; twice ASCAP Grants to Young Composers Finalist.

Jeremy Cantor's poems have appeared in *ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, published in conjunction with Oxford University Press), *Ithaca Lit*, *The Naugatuck River Review*, *Glassworks*, *Prelude*, *The Bicycle Review*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Poetalk*, and other journals. "Tearing Out the Blue Girls" was reprinted in *Canary*. Poems recently anthologized have been "Teaching by Example" in *Connoisseurs of Suffering: Poetry for The Journey to Meaning* (University Professors' Press), "Election Results, by State" and "Election Results, by County" in *On Writing in a Dark Time* (Kelson Books), and "Lengthwise," in *Beer, Wine and Spirits* (World Enough Writers).

He was a semi-finalist in the competition for the Dartmouth Poet in Residence at The Frost Place, a museum and nonprofit educational center for poetry located at Robert Frost's former home in Franconia, New Hampshire, and was a finalist for the Lascaux Prize in Poetry (for both his book *Wisteria from Seed* and for the poem "Her Husband Considers the Words of Picasso"). His poem "The Nietzsche Contrapositive," was awarded first prize in the *Grey Sparrow Journal's* Poetry and Flash Competition (judges: Mandi Casolo, Doug Holder, and Townsend Walker) and appeared in *Grey Sparrow's* annual, *Snow Jewel*.

Mr. Cantor's debut collection, *Wisteria From Seed*, with a foreword by Michael Manning, was published in 2015 by Kelsey Books. Mr. Manning has said of his work, "His erudition is not worn, but is subdued, enticingly veiled, and that very subduction becomes an effective, almost signatory characteristic of his poetry. Things emerge from Jeremy's work, their meaning disguised in the plain dress of moment-to-moment experience. He's mastered the stealth epiphany."