

CROSSING SEAS

Composers who crossed oceans to live and work, or are second-generation immigrants, make up the heart of our program. Interspersed between them are two sea-themed pieces, including Cordancia's second North American premiere of music by Julie Reisserová. Finally, we have the delightful winner of the Nico Toscano Young Musician Competition's senior division, Alex Gagne.

In their pieces we play today, Chinese American composers Huang Ruo and Chen Yi draw inspiration from the Kam ethnic minority, officially known in China as Dong. *Kgal Laox* or Grand Song is a general term for the choral music of Kam people, recognized by UNESCO as intangible global cultural heritage. This music is famous for its striking moments of multipart singing, distributed ensemble leadership, and for carrying Kam history and culture. In Chen's piece, further influences include mountain folksongs and her years of playing as concertmaster of a Beijing Opera orchestra. Like Bartok in his typical practice, these pieces do not use quotations but instead create new ideas based on traditional music.

In highlighting the immigration experience of Bartok, Huang, Chen, and Ayana Witter-Johnson's family, I hope you hear more of the colors and possibilities of an interconnected world.

Thank you for joining us,

Evan Meccarello, Artistic Director

PROGRAM

Duo Ye (1987) Chen Yi
(b. 1953)

Pastorale maritimo, Op. 4 (1933) Julie Reisserova
(1888-1938)
[North American première]

Concertino for horn and strings, Op. 45 (1933) Lars-Erik Larsson
(1908-1986)

Alex Gagne horn
Junior Division winner, 2025 Nico Toscano Young Musician Competition
Allegro moderato
Lento cantabile
Allegro vivace

Blush (2021) Ayanna Witter-Johnson
(b. 1985)

The Grand Song. Fanfare for Orchestra (2023) Huang Ruo
(b. 1976)

Seascape, Op. 53 (1958) Ruth Gipps
(1921-1999)

Hungarian Pictures (1931) Béla Bartók
(1881-1945)

An Evening in the Village
Bear Dance
Melody
Slightly Tipsy
Swineherd's Dance

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Chen Yi ~ *Duo Ye*

Chinese-born composer Chen Yi has achieved world-wide acclaim for her compositions that seek to meld the disparate music of East and West. As a child she studied violin, though with the advent of the Cultural Revolution, had to practice surreptitiously and with a mute. Although she gave up music when pressed into forced agricultural labor, she was later able to enter Beijing Conservatory (1977). She came to the U.S. in 1986 to study composition at Columbia, where she earned a DMA. Since 1998, she has been on faculty at the University of Missouri Kansas City. She is the recipient of numerous prestigious fellowships, awards, and prizes, and enjoys performances of her compositions all over the world.

Duo Ye was composed while Chen was a student in China. It blends the sonorities and colors of the European symphonic orchestra (she was influenced by Bartok, among others) with the scales and melodies of the East. *Duo Ye* is a traditional dance music form of the Dong ethnic group from the Guangxi Province in China. The lead singer extemporizes in music, words, and tempo, while others dance harmoniously in a circle with a bonfire set in the middle. After a trip to Guangxi, Chen wrote a piano solo piece *Duo Ye*, which won the Chinese National Composition Competition in 1985. On commission from the Central Philharmonic Orchestra of China, she rewrote the piece for orchestra and it has received warm reviews in the U.S. The composer dedicated the piece to JoAnn Falletta after she performed it at the Kennedy Center in 1992 to great acclaim.

Reisserová ~ *Pastorale Maritimo*

Today, the name of Julie Reisserová is virtually unknown, despite her key role in the dissemination of Czech culture in Western Europe between the two world wars. Her disappearance from the musical landscape is probably due to the lack of access to her few published scores, and to the fact that her music was banned from public performance in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic after 1949. On March 18 that year, her husband – the diplomat and Smetana scholar Jan Reisser, then ambassador to Brazil – announced that he could no longer serve the communist regime in Prague, resigned and asked the Brazilian government to grant him asylum.

Reisserová was born in Prague in a bourgeois family of amateur musicians and received a complete musical education. Besides studying piano, she was trained as a dramatic soprano. However, her deepest dream was to compose. She once stated that Josef Bohuslav Foerster accepted her as a private composition student in 1919 upon reading the overture for orchestra she wrote to Paul Claudel's play *Partage de midi*. If this is true, then she would have begun writing for orchestra at age 31 – quite late for most composers, but quite early for the

wife of a diplomat who did not expect to become a professional. Later, Reisserová carried on her studies in Paris with Albert Roussel.

Pastorale Maritimo, dedicated to Mme Albert Roussel, was her most critically acclaimed score and most popular orchestral work, performed in Europe many times during her lifetime. Considered a symphonic poem, it was composed or at least completed in the French coastal town of Varengeville-sur-Mer, and joins a number of maritime pieces produced in France in the early 20th century (e.g., Debussy's *La Mer*). Likely premiered in Belgrade in 1933, it was presented subsequently in Copenhagen, Prague, and on Radio-Wien. Yet it was the performance at the Vichy congress in 1935 -- enthusiastically received by audience and critics -- that established Reisserová on the European musical scene. Several more performances across Europe followed, to somewhat more mixed acclaim. Tonight's performance is the first time *Pastorale Maritimo* has been heard in North America.

-excerpted from text by Jean-Paul C. Montagnier

Larsson ~ Concertino for Horn and Strings

One of Sweden's most beloved composers, Lars-Erik Larsson was also a conductor, radio producer, and educator. The Swedish Broadcasting Corp. employed him as composer-in-residence, music producer, and conductor to provide music to accompany radio programs.

Between 1953 and 1957, Larsson composed a series of twelve concertinos, including the Concertino for Horn. Although he also composed neo-romantic, 12-tone, and serialist music, this series of concertinos is in the neoclassical style. A reaction to the excess of Romanticism and the havoc of the world wars, this style emphasizes balance, clarity, and structure.

Following the traditional concerto form, the Concertino for Horn comprises three movements: the first a sonata with sweeping musical lines and dramatic motifs; the second providing a slow, lyrical, and devastating contrast; and the third a fiery, energetic rondo that brings the themes of the preceding movements together. Throughout, Larsson incorporates the patterns of the harmonic series, the basis of sound production of all brass instruments. This series of intervals summons the sounds of the horn's earliest predecessors, such as hunting horns and alphorns.

The orchestra opens the concertino in a dark and tumultuous minor atmosphere, which lasts only a few seconds before the horn's first sounds shift the orchestra into its bright and hopeful major counterpart. Yet, as if the path ahead is unclear, the horn's long opening line quickly oscillates between the two until eventually landing in the grim minor mood of the beginning. The development of this movement introduces a sharp and militaristic motif, initiated by the horn but echoed by the orchestra. In contrast, the horn alone opens the second movement with a slow and lyrical melody that evokes the vastness and beauty of a Scandinavian landscape. However, the dark timbre of the low strings, dissonances,

intense tremolos, and aching lines of the horn in this movement all tell a more solemn story. The third movement begins with the rhythmic engine of the strings, followed shortly by the horn. Although interrupted by the many themes of the previous movements, this rondo section keeps returning, occurring four full times before the end. ~note by Alex Gagne

Ayanna Witter-Johnson ~ *Blush*

British-Jamaican singer, songwriter, cellist, and composer Ayanna Witter-Johnson is the rare exception to the rule that classical and alternative R&B music cannot successfully coexist. She graduated from Trinity Laban Conservatoire in London and the Manhattan School of Music, and has received commissions from diverse orchestral and chamber music ensembles. A performer of extraordinary versatility, her live shows are intimate journeys that chronicle her experience as a female artist in the 21st century. Because of her musical prowess, mesmerizing vocals, non-compromising lyrics, and ability to deftly reinterpret songs on the cello, Ayanna straddles both the classical and urban worlds effortlessly. She is the definition of eclectic soul.

Blush was commissioned for the Edinburgh International Festival in 2021. The 10-minute work imagines the sound world experienced by a young Caribbean woman in the early part of the 20th century attending her first dance, exploring the “ups and downs of young love.” As in many of her pieces, the work’s rhythms are inspired by Mento music – the early Jamaican folk tradition that blends African and European musical ideas.

Huang Ruo ~ *The Grand Song*

Chinese-American composer, conductor, and pianist Huang Ruo draws equal inspiration from Chinese ancient and folk music, Western avant-garde, experimental, noise, natural and processed sound, rock, and jazz to create a seamless, organic integration using a compositional technique he calls “dimensionalism.” His works often explore themes of cultural identity, history, and social justice and span orchestral, chamber works, opera, theatre, and dance, to cross-genre, multimedia installations, improvisation, folk rock, and film scores. *The Grand Song* is a fanfare for symphonic orchestra, commissioned by the Hawai’i Symphony Orchestra. It celebrates communal spirit with bold anthemic gestures. Another piece he wrote the same year (2023), *Tipping Point*, addresses the climate crisis.

He studied both traditional Chinese and western music at Shanghai Conservatory, and his further education was at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, and the Juilliard School (doctorate). He is currently on the composition faculty at the Mannes School of Music in New York.

Ruth Gipps ~ *Seascape*

Ruth Gipps was an English composer, oboist, pianist, conductor, and educator. Born into a musical family, she was a child prodigy, beginning piano lessons with her mother and making her first performance at age four. She performed one of her own compositions at age eight. She studied oboe, piano, and composition at the Royal College of Music, and at Durham University became the youngest British woman to earn a doctorate in music. At age 33, her distinguished performance career was cut short by a shoulder injury, so she then focused on conducting and composition. Among other ensembles, she founded the Chanticleer Orchestra in 1961, a professional ensemble which included in each of its programs a work by a living composer, often a premiere performance. In forming her own orchestras, she was able to build a thriving conducting career and circumvent the neglect of her own music by the BBC!

Seascape is thought to have been inspired during a trip to the coastal town of Broadstairs in Kent, where Gipps was giving lectures. About her stay, she said, "I spent the night in a hotel right on the beach. I could hear the sea. I always loved the sound of the sea and particularly storms." The piece was written for double wind quintet, with English horn instead of a second oboe, plus optional double bass. It was written for and premiered by the Portia Wind Ensemble - a group founded by Gipps and comprised entirely of women.

Bartók ~ *Hungarian Pictures*

Hungarian composer and pianist Béla Bartók was a founder of "comparative musicology," now known as ethnomusicology. He became one of the most influential composers of the early 20th century, developing a musical language that was an amalgam of tonalities, unorthodox scales, and atonal wanderings, and incorporating folk tunes of his eastern Europe homeland.

Poor health meant his childhood was relatively friendless, but his musical aptitude became apparent early and was encouraged by his parents. According to his mother, he could distinguish different dance rhythms she played on piano before he learned to speak complete sentences. By age four, he played 40 pieces on piano. By age nine, he was composing original pieces -- primarily short dances such as waltzes, mazurkas, and polkas that were the fashionable light music of the time, and he also enjoyed listening to Hungarian songs and csárdás repertoire of the Gypsy bands. By this time, exceeding his mother's piano skills, they moved several times to find better teachers and schooling, finally settling in Budapest. He became friends with Zoltán Kodály and the two collected, studied, and published folk tunes from across the country. In 1940, as Hungary slid towards fascism, Bartók emigrated and settled in New York where he obtained a job at Columbia University. He continued to compose

until his death in 1945, producing during this time some of his major works, notably *Concerto for Orchestra*.

Hungarian Pictures is a suite of pieces originally written for piano, and later orchestrated by Bartók. The first movement features various winds taking the solo lines, with pizzicato or chordal accompaniment. Bear Dance (second movement) according to the composer, gives the "impression of a bear dancing to the song of his leader and growling to the accompaniment of a drum." In Middle Ages Eastern Europe, a chained bear would be trained to dance for entertainment -- now illegal in Europe! The third movement, Melody, features a tune introduced by violins and eventually picked up and modified by the rest of the orchestra. The fourth movement's Slightly Tipsy feeling is provided by the acciaccatura decoration on nearly every note in the opening. The suite ends with the lively Swineherd's Dance, which is based on a folk tune collected by Bartók in 1907 in Tolna County.