



70th Concert Series 2023-24



FRIENDS *of* MUSIC

is pleased to present

Michelle Cann,
piano

Sunday, April 14, 2024. 3:00 pm.
Sleepy Hollow High School, Sleepy Hollow, New York



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In order to help sustain what one of our artists called this “legendary series,” we would welcome people who can join the volunteers listed above. Call us at 914-861-5080 or contact us on our website (see below); we can explore the possibilities together.

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Program

Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major, Op. 47

Frédéric Chopin
(1810-1849)

My Dungeon Shook: Three American Preludes

Lacrimosa
L'homme agenouillé

Joel Thompson
(b. 1988)

Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 22

Allegro marcato
Presto misterioso
Adagio molto appassionato
Finale: Ruvido ed ostinato

Alberto Ginastera
(1916-1981)

Intermission

Ballade for Piano

Nathan Gulla
(b. 1987)

A Deserted Plantation

Spiritual
Little Missy
Dance

William Grant Still
(1895-1978)

Mephisto Waltz No. 1, S. 514

Franz Liszt
(1811-1866)

Michelle Cann appears this afternoon by arrangement with The Curtis Institute of Music, 1726 Locust Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103.

Piano by Steinway.

Next concert

Sunday, April 28, 2024, at 3:00 pm. Sleepy Hollow High School, Sleepy Hollow, NY.

Isidore String Quartet

Program: “The Disappearance of Lisa Gherardini” by Dinuk Wijeratne; “umbra” by Aida Shirazi; selections from “The Art of Fugue” by Johann Sebastian Bach; String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 44, No. 3 by Felix Mendelssohn.

Program notes

Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major, Op. 47

Frédéric Chopin

Chopin focused his composing skills almost exclusively on the piano. Rather than favoring the sonata, he preferred less expansive forms such as the *étude*, *nocturne*, *mazurka*, and *polonaise*. He was the first composer to use the title *ballade* for a strictly instrumental piece. During a period of about ten years, he composed four large piano works to which he gave the name *Ballade*, each quite different from one another. All of them, however, are innovative, sizable, and difficult character works. Each uses a single theme throughout in a varied form, and each includes commanding virtuosic elements. For him, *ballade* meant a melancholy poetic masterpiece, a kind of epic narrative of great rhythmic freedom without clearly defined, predetermined formal interrelationships, its main sections set between an introduction and a closing coda.

Critics have long hypothesized that Chopin's inspiration to compose ballades came from his reading of a group of poems written by Adam Mickiewicz, a Polish poet who spent most of his life in political exile and whom Chopin met in Paris. A Mickiewicz poem, "Switezianka" or the fable known as Undine, has been associated with this particular ballade; it has given critics possibilities for musical interpretation based on literary associations. In the tale, Undine, a water nymph, can acquire a soul only if she marries a human being. Thus, she lures a knight to her lake and, after they fall in love, she marries him. Alas, he eventually deserts her for someone he loved before he encountered her; as a result, Undine must retreat to the water. In the end, her human lover returns to her, but she takes revenge on him by giving him the kiss of death.

Ballade No. 3 in A-flat Major, Op. 47, is written in a free, continuously-developing form, somewhat like a long, poetic narrative; almost all of it expands the two tiny musical ideas introduced in the first two measures. The style of Chopin's improvisation, consisting of spontaneous, simultaneous invention and performance, as it appears in **Ballade No. 3**, results from work that the composer carefully considered over a long period of time. He began it in 1840, and in the summer of 1841, he wrote from George Sand's country estate to a friend in Paris who was helping prepare it for publication, "I cannot polish it enough. For God's sake take care of my manuscript. I should go mad if I had to write these pages out again." [Adapted]

In this ballade, Chopin gives the main theme differing characteristics. It first takes a lyrical cast; then it later becomes heroic. The ballade has one contrasting episode; a long transition leads climactically to a restatement of the main theme.

My Dungeon Shook: Three American Preludes (mvts. II and III)

Joel Thompson

Joel Thompson is an Atlanta-based composer, conductor, pianist, and educator. Born in the Bahamas, he moved with his family to Houston when he was ten years old, thence to Atlanta, where he discovered classical music from listening to his parents' record collection. He earned a B.A. in Music and an M.M. in Choral Conducting from Emory University. He currently is completing a Ph.D. at Yale University's School of Music, and recently served as Composer-in-Residence for the New Haven Symphony.

Thompson has established his reputation with works that often include voices; many have been performed by orchestras, ensembles, and choruses across the United States. His opera, *The Snowy Day*, was premiered by the Houston Grand Opera in December 2021. With Valerie Coleman and Jessie Montgomery, he was one of three Black composers commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera in September 2021 to develop new works.

Thompson's **My Dungeon Shook** borrows its title from an essay included in James Baldwin's 1963 book *The Fire Next Time*, which explored racial injustices in the mid-20th-century United States. In that essay, written as a letter to his nephew, Baldwin outlines the abuse and harassment that his nephew will receive from the White world, but also articulates his hope and urges his nephew to defy the threat, telling him of the love that covers him, how the faith and strength of earlier generations willed him into existence despite the world's cruelty. Years after first reading it, the text gave Thompson solace during the summer of 2020, when Covid-19 and police brutality created parallel and deadly pandemics in America; at that time Thompson was in his first year of graduate school at Yale. For him, Baldwin's words could have been penned in 2020 during what he deemed the state-sanctioned murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery.

My Dungeon Shook: Three American Preludes was commissioned by pianist Benjamin Hopkins in 2022 with funding from the University of British Columbia's Public Scholars' Initiative. Hopkins premiered it on October 30, 2022, at the Yale School of Music.

The second prelude, *Lacrimosa*, takes its name from a part of the Requiem Mass, and refers to the weeping of the Virgin Mary at the death of her son on the Cross. The prelude features a theme in the piano's high register and another thematic line in the piano's lowest register. Thompson introduces a musical "spelling" of Ahmaud Arbery's name in an explosive, almost violent gesture of arpeggios that make up the climax. He also uses the initials GF in musical letters in this prelude as well as in the final one.

In the third prelude, *L'homme agenouillée* ("The Kneeling Man"), Thompson begins with *The Star-Spangled Banner* in an arrangement with jazz-infused harmonies. That melody dominates this prelude, and is woven with the motifs that the composer used in the first two preludes. Thompson's paraphrase of *The Star-Spangled Banner* ends, meaningfully, before its last word. The music evokes the image of police officer Derek Chauvin's knee on George Floyd's neck. At the prelude's end, the sound falls away, mirroring the way life, too, can slip away.

Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 22

Alberto Ginastera

Alberto Ginastera was educated as a musician in his native Argentina. As early as 1934, when he was just eighteen, he began to compose the music of his Op. 1, the ballet *Panambi*, which was first performed in concert in 1937. He came to the United States in 1945 for a long period of work and study. Later, when political differences with ruling regimes in his homeland periodically resulted in his dismissal from his teaching posts and other official positions, he spent much of his time in North America and Europe.

Ginastera's career was a fruitful one in which large works followed one another without interruption. He wrote operas and ballets, chamber music and choral compositions, several concertos and other orchestral works, but no symphonies. Through the years, his technique and style were developed, sharpened, and refined, while certain elements remained constant. The freedom of his harmonic structures, the suppleness of his rhythms, and the brilliance of his instrumental colors, for example, are plainly evident in the relatively austere medium of the string quartet, and they reach their high point in Ginastera's climactic dramatic *Cantata para América mágica, Op. 27*, for soprano and percussion (1960).

The first of Ginastera's three piano sonatas was commissioned by Pittsburgh's Carnegie Institute and Pennsylvania College for Women, and was first performed by Johanna Harris, a distinguished pianist of Canadian birth at the Carnegie Institute in 1952. Several major 20th century currents pass through this important work, currents as different as Central European twelve-tone serialism, Franco-American neo-classicism, and, most important of all, what the composer called "subjective nationalism," using "rhythms and motives whose expressive tension has a pronounced Argentine accent."

The first movement, *Allegro marcato*, is classically organized around two principal themes, one powerfully rhythmic and the other melodic. Next comes a hushed, twelve-tone scherzo, *Presto misterioso*, followed by a slow movement, *Adagio molto appassionato*, in a three-part song form in which the central section contrasts in character. This movement evokes guitar playing, and is quiet and almost contemplative. The brilliant finale is a classical rondo with a rhythmic main theme that alternates with contrasting episodes. Its general character is *Ruvido ed ostinato*, harsh (or rough); the finale as a whole creates a sense of perpetual motion.

---Notes provided by Susan Halpern

Ballade for Piano (commissioned by Michelle Cann)

Nathan Gulla

Nathan Gulla is an American composer and performer located outside of Philadelphia and Allentown, PA. He composes media and concert music through which he writes emotional scores that shape the drama and tell a story. His compositional focus has been primarily on video game music. He has been featured on several video game remix albums through Materia Collective, and has written arrangements for the University of Maryland and Washington Metro Symphony Orchestras. He also has performed with various ensembles in the area, such as the Allentown Symphony Orchestra.

Of this commission, Nathan Gulla writes, in part:

“Since receiving my Masters Degree in Piano Performance in 2013, my life has gone through many transitions, which included stepping away from the writing of serious pieces of concert music. Composing this piece felt like a triumphant return to this area of music-making, where I ultimately feel most at home.

“When Michelle and I first sat down to determine the direction of the piece, it became clear that it could – and even should – be quite difficult. A virtuosic display of how the piano can sound as a solo instrument, accompanied by the knowledge that it would reside in Michelle’s extremely capable hands. This led me to take my first set of inspirations from Frédéric Chopin, who I consider to be one of, if not *the*, greatest composers of piano music of all time. Few composers in history can match the singular focus that Chopin placed upon the piano as a solo instrument, which resulted in an entire library of exquisite works for it... His writing style is easily identifiable to the listener, and the term ‘poet’ is aptly given to him.

“Having given myself the monumental task of emulating the likes of Chopin, I began to consider how I would make the piece uniquely mine... Another composer who continues to be influential to me is Lee Hoiby (1926-2011). [Although] he primarily is known for his writing of opera and song, since he was, himself, a pianist, he wrote many instrumental works as well. I had performed his *Narrative for Piano* during my time in the Masters program, and was astounded at how much he was able to accomplish using a single two-note motive. He builds and develops upon this motive and reintroduces it in many and various places throughout the piece in such a way as to establish a sense of unity that ties everything together. I tried to do something similar with the **Ballade** and its initial melody.

“I had now given myself some criteria to work with, and decided somewhat early that I was composing a Ballade. A Ballade in music doesn’t necessarily conform to a particular design but is typically narrative and lyrical in style. This is consistent with my Chopin and Hoiby influences, and suits my favored way of writing as well. Additionally, the Ballades that Chopin wrote are considered by many to be the pinnacle of this accomplishments, and very often, pieces titled as such come with an expectation of virtuosity and showiness. Everything appeared to be by tying together compositionally. I hope the audience feels the same way upon hearing it!”

---note provided by Nathan Gulla

A Deserted Plantation

William Grant Still

William Grant Still grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he began studying music. When he was a pre-med student at Wilberforce University, he organized a string quartet and found music engaging more and more of his attention. He worked with W.C. Handy in Memphis for a while, studied theory and composition at Oberlin College, and toured as a member of the historic *Shuffle Along* orchestra with Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle. Following that, he continued his study of composition at the New England Conservatory.

When Still completed the score of his *Afro-American Symphony* in 1930, it was the first symphonic work written by a Black composer since the 18th century works of the French West Indian Joseph Boulogne Chevalier de Saint-George, and probably the first by a Black composer to be performed by a major orchestra. There is some historic irony in the fact that Saint-George worked in Paris, and Still’s symphony was published in London.

Still was the first major American Black composer to have an impact in the realm of concert music rather than in jazz per se; however, jazz, spirituals, and traditional hymns each made their mark on Still’s music, and he incorporates them.

The complete *A Deserted Plantation*, originally composed as a suite for orchestra, is little known today; the suite has nine sections, three movements of which were arranged for solo piano and published in 1936. The resulting piano piece, **A Deserted Plantation**, eloquently presents a picture of the Old American South.

In 1939 the composer’s wife, Vera Arvey, wrote about it: “It is a musical picture of the meditations of Uncle Josh, an old colored man who is the sole occupant of the dying plantation and who delights in dreaming of its past glory.” The setting of the work came from a poem, “The Deserted Plantation” by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), a Black poet whose poem was an inspiration for Still.

The first movement, *Spiritual*, adapts the hymn “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me,” which Liszt uses for his creation of variations in a blues style. The central slow movement, *Young Missy*, depicts a young woman just beginning to experience the joy and disappointments of love; she seems tentative, wary, yet willing to risk. Then *Dance* follows the jazz tradition of the dance music of Jelly Roll Morton and Fletcher Henderson; one can identify ragtime, stride, and blues within it.

Mephisto Waltz No. 1: The Dance in the Village Inn

Franz Liszt

In addition to composing his own original works, Liszt transcribed for piano a great deal of music composed for other performance media. He also found inspiration for piano works in literary sources. This work is one of the latter.

The legend of Faust was an important part of the German Romantic sensibility. Although Goethe’s version was a seminal telling of the tale, it was Nikolaus Lenau’s dramatic poem of 1836 entitled *Two Episodes from Lenau’s Faust* that inspired Liszt to compose a two-movement tone poem for orchestra. At the time he composed it, he set the second part, *The Dance in the Village Inn*, for piano and gave it the title **Mephisto Waltz No. 1**.

Mephisto Waltz No. 1, musical story-telling at its finest, follows the plot line of the Faust legend quite faithfully, picturing a scene in which the diabolical Mephistopheles, disguised as a hunter, arrives with young Faust at a country village tavern where the peasants are celebrating a wedding. After the rustic opening of the music, two main themes become transformed into various diabolic expressions. While Faust makes advances to a beautiful, black-eyed girl by way of Liszt’s light, romantic themes, Mephistopheles plays a magical waltz that enchants the crowd. Faust and the girl dance after Mephistopheles, following him through the meadow and into the forest. The sound of the putative violin fades as the lovers, lost to the world, listen to a nightingale’s serenade and the distant, diabolical laughter of Mephistopheles.

The popularity of the **Mephisto Waltz** became so great that between 1880 and 1885 he wrote three sequels to it, which he called **Mephisto Waltzes Nos. 2 to 4**. He also wrote a **Mephisto Polka**.

--- notes provided by Susan Halpern

About the Artist

Michelle Cann has become one of the most sought-after pianists of her generation. She made her debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 2021, and recently has performed concertos with The Cleveland Orchestra, the National Symphony Orchestra, the Orquestra Sinfônica Municipal de São Paulo, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and the symphony orchestras of Atlanta, Baltimore, and Cincinnati.

Recognized as a leading interpreter of the piano music of Florence B. Price, Cann performed the New York City premiere of Price’s *Piano Concerto in One Movement* in July 2016; her recording of the concerto with the New York Youth Symphony won a 2023 Grammy Award for Best Orchestral Performance.

Cann was the recipient of the 2022 Sphinx Medal of Excellence, the highest honor bestowed by the Sphinx Organization. She also received the Cleveland Institute of Music’s 2022 Alumni Achievement Award and the 2022 Andrew Wolf Chamber Music Award. She just was appointed the inaugural Christel DeHaan Artistic Partner of the American Pianists Association. In that capacity she now oversees all aspects of the Association’s awards competition, including the nomination process, jury selection, and concert programming.

A celebrated chamber musician, Cann has collaborated with leading artists including the Catalyst, Dover, and Juilliard string quartets, violinists Timothy and Nikki Chooi, and cellist Thomas Mesa. She has appeared as co-host and collaborative pianist with NPR’s *From The Top*. Her numerous media appearances include PBS Great Performances *Now Hear This* and *Living the Classical Life*.

Cann holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in piano performance from the Cleveland Institute of Music and an Artist’s Diploma from the Curtis Institute of Music. She joined the Curtis piano faculty in 2020 as the inaugural Eleanor Sokoloff Chair in Piano Studies. She joined the piano faculty of the Manhattan School of Music in 2023.

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