

# Sphinx Virtuosi: American Form/s

Feb 22 / Cobb Great Hall

Josh Jones, Percussion

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Scott Joplin  
(arr. Jannina Norpoth) (1868-1917)  
Overture from *Treemonisha* †

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)  
Selections from *Four Novelletten*, Op. 52  
I. Allegro Moderato  
III. Valse, Andante con Moto

Derrick Skye (b. 1982)  
American Mirror: Part One\*\*

INTERMISSION

Curtis Stewart (b. 1986)  
Drill for Prepared Drumset and Strings\*

Josh Jones, percussion

Juantio Becenti (b. 1983)

Hané (Story)\*\*

Teresa Carreño (1853-1917)  
Serenade for Strings  
Finale, Tempo di Marcia

Levi Taylor (b. 1980)

Daydreaming (A Fantasy on Scott Joplin)\*‡

\* - Commissioned by The Sphinx Organization

\*\* - Arranged for Sphinx Virtuosi by the composer

† - From Treemonisha A Musical Reimagining  
commissioned by Volcano Theatre Libretto Leah-Simone  
Bowe, Cheryl A. Davis; Co-arranger/orchestrators Jessie  
Montgomery and Jannina Norpoth. String orchestra a  
version commissioned by The Sphinx Organization for  
Sphinx Virtuosi

‡ - Daydreaming (A Fantasy on Scott Joplin) was  
commissioned with a gift from the Keith and Renata  
Ward Emerging Composer Fund.

Sphinx Virtuosi are represented by MKI Artists: 70 S  
Winooski Ave. #318, Burlington, VT 05401

## ROSTER

### FIRST VIOLINS

Alex Gonzalez, Concertmaster

Clayton Penrose-Whitmore

Patricia Quintero Garcia

Annelle K. Gregory

### SECOND VIOLINS

Meredith Riley, Principal

Maïthéna Girault

Rainel Joubert

Caitlin Edwards

### VIOLA

Celia Hatton, Principal

Robert Alvarado Switala

Kayla Cabrera

Edwardo Rios

### CELLO

Eri Snowden-Rodriguez, Principal

Quenton Blache

Lindsey Sharpe

Diana Flores

## PERCUSSION

Josh Jones

## TOUR MANAGERS

Ally Price

Aaron Vaughn

## SPHINX VIRTUOSI

The Sphinx Virtuosi is a dynamic and inspiring professional self-conducted chamber orchestra and serves as the flagship performing entity of the Sphinx Organization, the leading nonprofit dedicated to transforming lives through the power of the arts. Comprised of 18 accomplished Black and Latino artists who reflect the highest level of musicianship in America, a critical aim of the Sphinx Virtuosi is to evolve the breadth and impact of classical music through artistic excellence, pioneering programming, and impassioned community engagement. Its members serve as cultural ambassadors for audiences and communities around the United States and abroad.

Since 2004, the Sphinx Virtuosi's concerts have been presented by leading arts organizations, including annual return visits to Carnegie Hall as an established highlight of the fall season. Frequently selling out venues, the ensemble has garnered effusive accolades, including from *The New York Times*, which has described the group

as "top-notch ... more essential at this moment than ever ... a vibrant, assured performance." Their debut album, *Songs for Our Times*, was released on Deutsche Grammophon in July 2023 and represents the rich history of the Sphinx Organization, and the vibrant future of classical music by centering the artistry of extraordinary composers and artistic visionaries.

In an effort to expand its repertoire and engage new audiences, the ensemble commissions new works annually. Commissions have included major new works from Michael Abels, Terence Blanchard, Valerie Coleman, Xavier Foley, Ricardo Herz, Jimmy Lopez, Jessie Montgomery, Daniel Bernard Roumain, and Carlos Simon. Outside of the classical realm, its musicians have also worked with leading international artists such as Beyoncé and Jay-Z and made high-profile appearances, including on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and the broadcast of the 2022 GRAMMY Awards.

[www.sphinxmusic.org/sphinx-virtuosi](http://www.sphinxmusic.org/sphinx-virtuosi)

## **JOSH JONES, percussion**

A native of Chicago, Illinois, Josh Jones started hitting things at age two and received his first drum set at age three. Josh began his formal studies in percussion with the Percussion Scholarship Program under the direction of Chicago Symphony member Patricia Dash, and

Chicago Lyric Opera member Douglas Waddell. He earned his bachelor's in music from DePaul School of Music and was the orchestra fellow of both the Detroit and Pittsburgh symphonies. In 2022, Josh joined the Grant Park Festival Orchestra as Principal Percussionist. Josh has been featured at Carnegie Hall, on radio and television, and had two short documentaries made about his musical development and experience. He also authored a percussion method book series, "Spatial Studies for Hitting Things," and writes musical and philosophical blogs on his website, [drummojo.com](http://drummojo.com). Josh really enjoys giving back to the community as well as mentoring young musicians and traveling.

## **American Form/s**

American Form/s is a musical tapestry depicting the many sounds of American classical music. Vibrant, varied, storied, and new, the self-conducted string orchestra Sphinx Virtuosi takes audiences on a journey through classically-framed infusions of soul, bluegrass, jazz, blues, and elements of rag. Works range from reimagining's of Joplin's joyous landscapes to the complex rhythms of Curtis Stewart and brilliant influences of immigrant composers like Teresa Carreño. Experience the intricate harmonies and world influences of Derrick Skye's writing, as well as modern interpretations of soul-stirring spirituals, and more in this program carefully and collaboratively curated to

celebrate the richness of the American musical landscape.

## PROGRAM NOTES

Scott Joplin, arr. Jannina Norpoth (1868-1917)  
Overture, *Treemonisha*, Op. 84

In 1911, Scott Joplin used his life savings to register a copy of his beloved opera, *Treemonisha*, with the Library of Congress. Ahead of its time, the work combined classical form and operatic vocal stylings with the genre he is notably famous for, *Ragtime*. Despite several revivals many decades after his death and a 1976 Pulitzer Prize, Joplin never saw the work published or performed during his lifetime.

The Overture performed by Sphinx Virtuosi is an excerpt from a contemporary re-imagining commissioned by Toronto based experimental theater company Volcano. This newly realized adaptation brought together an international creative team of black women in homage to the opera's namesake and protagonist *Treemonisha*, a young black woman who leads her community through conflict and turmoil.

Volcano's version features an updated libretto and storyline from acclaimed playwright and broadcaster Leah-Simone Bowen along with Emmy-nominated co-



librettist Cheryl A. Davis. The Co-arrangers/orchestrators are Grammy-winning composer Jessie Montgomery, and two-time Grammy nominee Jannina Norpoth.

The Overture depicts a plantation near Texarkana, Arkansas in the year 1864. A young, enslaved woman named Priscilla flees with her newborn baby. Desperate and pursued by her enslavers, she knocks on the doors of nearby houses for help to no avail. She places the baby inside a hollow tree, hiding a small bag of luck within the child's clothing. Moments later, Priscilla is shot and killed. The infant is found and adopted by Monisha and Ned who name her Treemonisha and raise her as their own. The overture concludes with the entrance of adult Treemonisha, twenty years later on her wedding day, sitting peacefully reading beneath the very tree her mother left her under with hopes for her survival.

Volcano's *Treemonisha* received its debut in 2023 at the Luminato Festival in Toronto. The work premiered to critical acclaim and was subsequently named one of the year's best performances by *The New York Times*. It received six nominations at the Canadian Dora Awards—one in every eligible category. The full opera receives its American debut this coming May 2025, at Harris Theater in Chicago (with a few Sphinx Alumni in the ensemble).

© Jannina Norpoth

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Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)

Selections from *Four Novelletten*, Op. 52, Mvt I and Mvt III

*I. Allegro Moderato*

*III. Valse, Andante con Moto*

Dive into the rich, melodic world of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor with selections from his *Four Novelletten*, Op. 52. These charming movements for strings are a testament to his talent for eloquently blending lush harmonies well-suited for the string medium.

Coleridge-Taylor crafted this piece with a deep understanding of the instrument, allowing the solo violin to shine in moments of virtuosic brilliance while seamlessly weaving in the full ensemble to create a powerful, unified sound. The *Novelletten* were dedicated to Ethel Barns, an English pianist, composer, and violinist who brought Coleridge-Taylor's works to life.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was a trailblazer in more ways than one. Born to a white English mother and a Sierra Leonean father, he grew up in his grandfather's household under the care of his single mother. His exceptional musical talent was evident from a young age, leading to a scholarship at the Royal Conservatory. It was here that he began to explore his heritage, and the

broader concept of Pan-Africanism, which inspired him to delve into the history of Africans in America, a passion that notably influenced his writing.

In addition to his composing, Coleridge-Taylor led the London Handel Society in the early 1900s and taught composition at both the Guildhall School of Music and Trinity College of Music. Though his life was tragically cut short at just 37, his remarkable contributions to the classical music world continue to resonate, inspiring new generations and ensuring his legacy endures.

Prepare to be captivated by the timeless beauty and emotional depth of Coleridge-Taylor's *Four Novelletten*, where every note tells a story, and every movement evokes introspection.

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## Derrick Skye (b. 1982) American Mirror: Part One

*American Mirror* reflects on the coming together of cultures in our society which consists of many generations and descendants of refugees, immigrants, and enslaved people, and how intercultural collaborations are essential to the well-being of American society. Melodically, the piece draws from West African,

North African, and Eastern European vocal techniques and ornamentations, in addition to modal scales. Underneath these melodies, *American Mirror* uses open harmonies commonly found in Appalachian folk music, and also includes drones, an accompaniment practice found in many musical cultures.

© *Derrick Skye*

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## Curtis Stewart (b. 1986) Drill for Prepared Drumset and Strings

The roar of burnt tire.  
The heat, much better than stale apartment air.  
We sit pointedly in new outside dining, waiting for the next bang, the next explosion, the squads.  
Pop Smoke revelation. Inwood. Washington heights.  
Memories drilled into personality. Wait.

During the pandemic, the phenomenon of outside dining swept New York. Being outside was much respite from being stuck in our crowded Inwood apartment. We would sit on Broadway and let the chaos of the outside world soothe our restless souls, including the muscular roars of passing motorcycles and the wide cadence of "Drill music" up and down Broadway. I associate this music

with outside, with release, despite its intricate, violent and chaotic outer layer.

This work for prepared drum set and strings is my “summer music,” my “hunter’s call,” my “field recording.”

What happens when we bring that outside music, inside, into our concert halls and onto our stages. When the outside becomes the inside, how will it ring in our walls?

© *Curtis Stewart*

**Juanito Becenti (b. 1983)**

**Hané (Story)**

“It’s really strange. I just had that desire, almost since I can remember,” Juantio Becenti recalled in an interview for the *Navajo Times*. Of Diné (Navajo) descent, Becenti grew up in Aneth, Utah, near the Four Corners, Navajo Nation. As a child he would stay late at school to practice on the piano and took lessons from a teacher who traveled to give him instruction. Driven to absorb all he could, he would order CDs and scores for study, eventually moving toward composing around age 12. By age 15, Becenti received his first commission from the Moab Music Festival. Since then, he has been commissioned by artists Dawn Avery (North American Indian Cello Project), Raven Chacon (Native American

Composers Apprenticeship Program), Michael Barrett (New York Festival of Song), amongst others, and had his works performed by the St. Petersburg String Quartet, Chatter, and the Claremont Trio at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

*Hané* (Story) has a special place in Becenti's heart, as it was composed during a summer he spent at the Walden School for Young Musicians in New Hampshire, which he attended on full scholarship, when he was 17 years old. Since then, Becenti has been largely self-taught to preserve and express the intuitive nature of his individual compositional style.

© *Sphinx Virtuosi*

## **Teresa Carreño (1853-1917)**

### ***Serenade for Strings, Finale, Tempo di Marcia***

Teresa Carreño, born in Caracas, Venezuela in 1853, was a prodigy nurtured in a deeply musical family. Her father, Manuel Antonio Carreño, was not only a politician but also a musician, and her mother, Clorinda García de Sena y Toro, came from a lineage of musicians, setting the stage for Carreño's development. Her father served in various governmental roles in Caracas, where an unstable political climate ultimately led the family to flee to the United States in 1862. At just nine years old,

Carreño performed for President Abraham Lincoln at the White House. Over her illustrious career, she performed with prestigious ensembles, including the Berlin Philharmonic, and composed over 80 works, significantly contributing to the musical landscape alongside contemporaries like Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann.

Composed in 1895 while residing in the idyllic Austrian village of Pertisau, Carreño's Serenade for Strings reflects her deep emotional expression and compositional skill. The fourth movement, a vibrant and joyful march, transports listeners to the lush, mountainous landscapes of the Tyrol region. The movement's rhythmic vigor and bright melodies evoke the spirit of a festive procession, perhaps symbolizing a connection between the vibrant life of her Venezuelan homeland and the serene Austrian setting. Despite its brilliance, this work remains underrepresented in the canon, and Carreño's contributions as a composer deserve much greater recognition.

© *Bill Neri*

**Levi Taylor (b. 1980)**  
**Daydreaming (A Fantasy on Scott Joplin)**

For *Daydreaming (A Fantasy On Scott Joplin)* I had the wonderful task to put to music my adoration and

curiosities of Joplin and his music, while maintaining freedom of expression and exploration on my own sonic musings. This is where the piece derives its title, as I enjoyed ruminating on Joplin and then letting my imagination soar from the inspiration.

Right away the listener will notice a few nods towards Joplin's music: The opening brings us in with a glimpse of *The Entertainer* followed by light rhythmic movements inspired by Joplin's fun and syncopated rhythms. Included are also a few "odd" notes here and there along with energetic countermelodies that aim to bring the listener closer to Joplin's style.

From there the piece begins to unfold more into my own personal musings on how Joplin's music inspires me, while occasionally dipping back to remind the listener where the inspiration comes from. Different sections evoke different general feelings around Joplin's music. One moment the piece will reflect on the exquisite and playful sound of some of Joplin's music, while in the next it will explore some of the more intimate and robust qualities, I've enjoyed especially in pieces such as his opera, *Treemonisha*. Throughout all of the various moments of "daydreaming" in this piece, there remained one consistent ambition: To embody the bold, ambitious, and authentic expression that I find in all of Joplin's music.



© *Levi Taylor*