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BANKS BJERKEN

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STEVEN BANKS, SAXOPHONE & XAK BJERKEN, PIANO

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2024 | 3:00 PM



Stephen Banks appears by arrangement with
Young Concert Artists, Inc.
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Steven Banks, *saxophone*
Xak Bjerken, *piano*

STEVEN BANKS

As a performer and composer, saxophonist Steven Banks (b. 1993) is establishing himself as a compelling and charismatic soloist and in 2022, he was awarded the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant and was a chosen artist for WQXR’s Artist Propulsion Lab. He was the first saxophonist to be awarded First Prize at the Young Concert Artists Susan Wadsworth International Auditions.

Banks has appeared with The Cleveland Orchestra, Montreal Symphony, Utah Symphony, Colorado Symphony, Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra and Aspen Festival Orchestra. In recital, he has appeared across the USA at the San Francisco Symphony’s Spotlight Series at Davies Hall, Merkin Hall, The Kennedy Center, The Kravis Center and Festival Napa Valley with his collaborative partner, pianist Xak Bjerken. A keen chamber musician, Banks has appeared at Spoleto Festival USA, Chamber Music Chicago and the Aspen Music Festival, and will be the first artist-in-residence of the Skaneateles Festival in the 2023-2024 season. He has collaborated with the Borromeo and St. Lawrence string quartets and will work with the Dover and Verona quartets in the coming seasons. He is a founding member of the Kenari Quartet, an all-saxophone ensemble that performs regularly together offering inspiring and uplifting compositions and arrangements. As baritone saxophonist of Kenari, Steven won First Prize at the inaugural M-Prize Chamber Arts Competition and has garnered two silver medals from the Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition. Their album, *French Saxophone Quartets*, was released in 2016 on the Naxos label.

As a composer, Banks has been commissioned by such organizations as Young Concert Artists, WQXR’s Artist Propulsion Lab, Latitude 49, Yale University’s Project 14 Initiative and Northwestern University’s Saxophone Ensemble.

Banks serves as Saxophone and Chamber Music Faculty and Artist-in-Residence at the Cleveland Institute of Music. He was previously Assistant Professor of Saxophone at both Ithaca College and the Baldwin Wallace Conservatory, and held the Jackie McLean Fellowship at the University of Hartford.

PIANO & FRIENDS

XAK BJERKEN

Pianist Xak Bjerken has appeared with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Spoleto Festival Orchestra, Thailand Philharmonic Orchestra, the Schoenberg Ensemble, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic in Disney Hall. He has performed at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Glinka Hall in St. Petersburg, the Konzerthaus in Berlin, and for many years performed throughout the US as a member of the Los Angeles Piano Quartet. He has held chamber music residencies at the Tanglewood Music Center, Spoleto Festival, and Olympic Music Festival. He is the director of Ensemble X, a new music ensemble at Cornell, and has served on the faculty of Kneisel Hall, the Eastern Music Festival, and at the Chamber Music Conference at Bennington College. Bjerken has worked closely with composers György Kurtag, Sofia Gubaidulina, Steven Stucky, and George Benjamin, and has premiered piano concertos by Stephen Hartke, Elizabeth Ogonek, and Jesse Jones, a recording of which was released by Naxos in 2021. He released his first solo recording on CRI in 2001, and has since recorded for Koch International, Chandos, Albany Records, Artona, and has recently released his third recording for Open G Records, presenting solo and chamber works by Steven Stucky.

Xak Bjerken is Professor of Music at Cornell University where he co-directs Mayfest, an international chamber music festival with his wife, pianist Miri Yampolsky. He studied with Aube Tzerko at the University of California at Los Angeles and received his Master's and Doctoral degrees from the Peabody Conservatory as a student of and teaching assistant to Leon Fleisher. Xak is the proud father of Misha (bassist), Anna (singer), and Maya (athlete and stargazer).

This appearance of Steven Banks is sponsored by the generous contribution of Dagmar Cushing.

PROGRAM

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (1835-1921)

Oboe Sonata in D Major, Op. 166

Andantino
Ad libitum – Allegretto – Ad libitum
Molto allegro

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

Fantasiestücke, Op. 73

Zart und mit Ausdruck
Lebhaft, leicht
Rasch und mit Feuer

PAUL CRESTON (1906-1985)

Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 19

With vigor
With tranquility
With gaiety

INTERMISSION

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

Ma Mère l'Oye

Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant. Lent
Petit Poucet. Très modéré
Laideronnette, Impératrice des pagodes. Mouvement de marche
Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bête. Mouvement de valse modéré
Le jardin féerique. Lent et grave

STEVEN BANKS (B.1993)

Come As You Are
Lift My Eyes
Times of the Storm
Strength of My Life
Lift My Hands

THE FRENCH COMPOSER, teacher, and piano virtuoso Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) enjoyed a productive career that spanned nearly eight decades. Remarkable in his stylistic stability, Saint-Saëns suffered the criticism of his colleagues, who heard his unchangingly refined and civilized compositions as belonging to Old France.

Although isolated in his later years, this lifelong lover of animals took solace in both his work and his Paris zoo visits to “three gazelles who had become friends.” Saint-Saëns completed ten sonatas, the first as a six-year-old prodigy and the final three at age eighty-six, his last year of life. He decided to explore sonorities less familiar to him late in his career and in 1921 wrote three works for wind instruments, the first of which is his Opus 166 for oboe and piano.

Always obsessed with clarity and order, Saint-Saëns crafted Opus 166 as a lean, spare work reflecting his recent preoccupation with his predecessor Rameau. The incisive Andantino is varied by a flowing section in E-flat major at its center. Meditative oboe recitatives frame the triple-time Allegretto, which unfolds like a gigue. The rapid third movement features virtuoso passages for the oboe. The sonata was sketched in Algiers and completed in Paris, where it was premiered by its dedicatee, Louis Bas.

SCHUMANN’S COMPOSITIONAL world expanded the year he married his beloved Clara Wieck. Previously he had composed only for piano, his own instrument, but after 1840 he eagerly explored different sonorities. He conceived his Opus 73 *Fantasiestücke* (1849) for clarinet and piano but on the manuscript he suggested the cello as an alternative to the wind instrument. The original title of *Soiréestücke* (Evening Pieces) rather than *Fantasy Pieces* hints that Schumann viewed these attractive miniatures as nocturnes, or brief episodes to evoke the mood of evening.

Although Schumann’s mental condition had deteriorated by 1849, his rate of composition increased, perhaps a symptom of the manic phase of his bipolar disease. Nevertheless the *Fantasiestücke*, composed within three days and later edited by Clara, develop with clarity and balance.

The practical requirements of the clarinet in A are considered, for each of the movements is centered on A major or A minor. (Sadly for cellists, Clara later destroyed Robert’s second and final set of *Fantasy Pieces* for cello and piano because she thought they revealed weakened abilities.)

Each of these warmly romantic character pieces requires sensitive attention to nuance and subtle shifts of phrasing. The first of the set, “Sweet and with expression,” is a lyrical song written in the traditional ABA “song form.” This moves without pause into the second movement, “Spirited and light,” developed with playful triplet rhythms and varied by a chromatic middle section. A coda marked “more and more tranquil” concludes the movement. The final piece, “Impetuous and with fire,” is a restless Allegro con brio propelled by energetic accents and varied by a legato contrasting subject.

Notes for the Saint-Saëns and Schumann by Nancy Monsman

PAUL CRESTON, originally born as Guiseppe Guttoveggio in 1906 to Italian immigrant parents, adopted his new name, “Creston,” in part due to a high school nickname, “Cress,” which was inspired by a character he portrayed in a school play. From an early age, Creston displayed a strong sense of individualism, pursuing a diverse range of studies with great enthusiasm. This characteristic likely contributed to his ability to traverse various musical styles, including the Second Viennese School, Minimalism, and the Avant-Garde, all while maintaining his distinctive voice as a composer. Central to Creston’s musical aesthetic was a profound emphasis on rhythm, a subject he delved into deeply, even authoring two academic books on the topic. Notably, Creston expanded the repertoire for lesser-recognized instruments such as the marimba, accordion, and, notably, the saxophone.

One of his enduring compositions, the Sonata for Eb Alto Saxophone and Piano, was composed between 1937 and 1940 for the renowned American virtuoso Cecil Leeson. This work has since become a cornerstone of classical saxophone repertoire.

THE ORIGINS OF THE BELOVED figure known as Mother Goose are shrouded in mystery, with several nations claiming her as their own. Whether depicted as a goose or an English countrywoman, Mother Goose has been a central character in tales of advice and folklore since the 16th century. Charles Perrault's 1695 collection of fairy tales, titled "Histoires ou contes du temps passé" and subtitled "Tales of Mother Goose," played a significant role in solidifying her presence. In 1729, Robert Samber's English translation further expanded her reach. While her origins remain a topic of debate, Mother Goose's rhymes and tales have left an indelible mark on Western childhoods.

In 1908, the renowned French composer Maurice Ravel embarked on a creative journey inspired by Mother Goose. This imaginative suite for piano, originally composed for four hands, aimed to captivate the hearts of children, especially Mimi and Jean Godebski, close friends' offspring who were taking piano lessons. Ravel's desire was to conjure the poetry of childhood through these compositions, leading him to simplify his style and embrace clarity. His biographers noted that Ravel's upbringing, marked by a love for childhood's pure and uncluttered emotional world and a fascination with small-scale curiosities, contributed to his attraction to Mother Goose. The suite unfolds in a series of enchanting movements, each drawing from a different fairy tale.

Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant: Lent (Pavane of Sleeping Beauty)

Petit Poucet: Très modéré (Little Tom Thumb / Hop-o'-My-Thumb)

Laideronnette, impératrice des pagodes: Mouvt de marche (Little Ugly Girl, Empress of the Pagodas)

Les entretiens de la belle et de la bête: Mouvt de valse très modéré (Conversation of Beauty and the Beast)

Le jardin féérique: Lent et grave (The Fairy Garden)

FROM STEVEN BANKS:

For several years, I have wanted to write a piece that was dedicated to my immediate family (my mother and three sisters) and the influence of my upbringing on my understanding of music and life in general. It seemed obvious to me that this piece needed to take influence from African-American church music in some way. When I think back to my childhood, and especially the beginnings of my journey in music, the church is at the center of so much. We were regular church-goers, my grandfather was a pastor in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church, and the church provided us with an incredible community that was very important to my family in the good times and the bad. The church also taught me about the transformative and awesome power of music.

In an effort to honor both my family and the church, I decided to write a four-movement work in which each movement would be dedicated to a different family member and take inspiration from their favorite Negro spiritual or sacred song. My mother chose I Still Have Joy. My three sisters, Kharmah, Jennifer, and Ashley, chose His Eye is On the Sparrow, My Lord, What a Morning, and Wade in the Water, respectively. Additionally, I chose to write this piece for tenor saxophone as it was the instrument that I specialized on for my first few years of playing. My church family will largely remember me as playing hymns on the tenor saxophone during our services. Below, I've listed the movement titles along with the song that they draw inspiration from.

1. Lift My Eyes (My Lord, What A Morning)
2. Times of the Storm (Wade in the Water)
3. Strength of My Life (His Eye Is On the Sparrow)
4. Lift My Hands (I Still Have Joy)

When interpreted through the lens of classical music, these movements are configured in a way that is intended to align with a slightly deviant four-movement sonata form that composers like Schumann, Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich, and many others used in several of their works. In this form, the first movement is an allegro, the second movement is a scherzo or dance, the third movement is an adagio, and the last movement is another fast one, perhaps with a dance feel or including a theme and variations. Come As You Are was conceived of with this in mind, but is not rigidly connected to it.

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Evening Series	Special Concert	Commissions
Jerusalem Quartet Wednesday, October 11, 2023 7:30 p.m.	Accordo Sunday, September 24, 2023 3:00 p.m.	George Tsontakis <i>Portraits of El Greco, Book II</i> Accordo Sunday, September 24, 2023 3:00 p.m. Arizona Premiere
Michael Stephen Brown, piano Wednesday, November 8, 2023 7:30 p.m.	Tucson Winter Chamber Music Festival	Leilehua Lanzilotti <i>abupua'a</i> Argus Quartet January 17, 2024 Arizona Premiere
Isidore String Quartet Wednesday, December 6, 2023 7:30 p.m.	Winter Festival 2024 March 3–10, 2024 Peter Rejto, <i>Artistic Director</i>	Pierre Jalbert <i>Quintet for Clarinet and Strings</i> Dover Quartet March 10, 2024 World Premiere
Argus Quartet Wednesday, January 17, 2024 7:30 p.m.	Dover Quartet Joel Link, <i>violin</i> Bryan Lee, <i>violin</i> Julianne Lee, <i>viola</i> Camden Shaw, <i>cello</i>	<i>Tickets online or at the box office.</i>
Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center Wednesday, January 31, 2024 7:30 p.m.	Edward Arron, <i>cello</i> Jennifer Frautschi, <i>violin</i> Romie de Guise-Langlois, <i>clarinet</i>	<i>For program and artist information, please visit arizonachambermusic.org.</i>
Juilliard String Quartet Wednesday, February 7, 2024 7:30 p.m.	Bernadette Harvey, <i>piano</i> Jeewon Park, <i>piano</i> Masumi Per Rostad, <i>viola</i> Randall Scarlata, <i>baritone</i> Axel Strauss, <i>violin</i>	
Fauré Quartett Wednesday, March 27, 2024 7:30 p.m.		
Piano & Friends	<i>If you are interested in sponsoring a concert or a musician, please contact Cathy Anderson in the box office or at arizonachambermusic.org.</i>	
Alexander Malofeev, piano Sunday, October 22, 2023 3:00 p.m.	<i>If you are interested in sponsoring a commissioned work, please contact Cathy Anderson at office@arizonachambermusic.org</i>	
Nikki Chooi, violin Timothy Chooi, violin Sunday, January 7, 2024 3:00 p.m.	<i>As all are aware, sustaining the legacy of Jean-Paul Bierny is important as he single-handedly expended a tireless energy and endless generosity on Arizona Friends of Chamber Music's behalf. Thus, thanks to the generosity of our long-term supporter, eddy Hodak, he is offering complementary student tickets to the first ten students that come to any AFCM concert. Apply through the box office by sending an email to cathyanderson@arizonachambermusic.org or calling 520-577-3769.</i>	
Steven Banks, saxophone Xak Bjerken, piano Sunday, February 18, 2024 3:00 p.m.		

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
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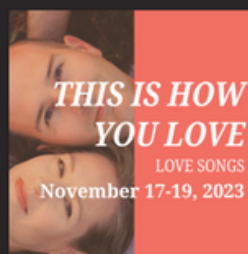


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October 7 & 8 **Gershwin:** Overture to *Funny Face*
Boyer: *Rhapsody in Red, White & Blue*, with pianist Jeffrey Biegel
Rosauro: Concerto for Marimba and Orchestra, with Dorothy Vanek
Youth Concerto winner, Campbell Stewart (marimba)
Gershwin: *Porgy and Bess* "A Symphonic Picture"
arranged by Robert Russell Bennett

November 11 & 12 **Lalo:** *Le roi d'Ys* Overture
Various: Arias and duets from operas, with Renata Vari,
Diana Peralta and Alonso Sicairos
Strauss: *Serenade*, Op. 7
Tchaikovsky: *Romeo and Juliet* Overture

February 10 & 11 **Fernandez:** *Batuque* from *Reisado do Pastoreio*
Coleridge-Taylor: Violin Concerto, Op. 80, with violinist Carissa Powe
Walker: *Lyric for Strings*
Stravinsky: Violin Concerto in D Major (movement 1), with
Dorothy Vanek Youth Concerto winner, Rachel Gardner (violin)
Still: *Symphony No. 1 (Afro-American Symphony)*

March 16 & 17 **Asia:** *Gateways*
Dvořák: Cello Concerto Op. 104, with cellist Zuill Bailey
Dvořák: *Symphony No. 7* Op. 70

April 27 & 28 **Guest conductor Giovanni Pompeo**
Verdi: Overture to *I Vespri Siciliani*
Kalman: *Hudson* Concerto, with pianist Alexander Frey
Rósa: *Spellbound* Concerto, with pianist Alexander Frey
Sibelius: *Symphony No. 5*, Op. 72

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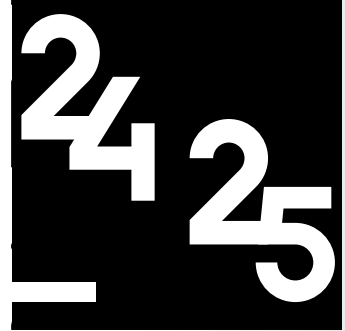
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