

conspirare

Craig Hella Johnson + A COMPANY OF VOICES

Vocal Revelations: A SoundBreak in Two Parts March 19, 2026 at 2pm at the Blanton Museum of Art

Part One

The Road Home (*excerpt*)
The Lost Words Blessing

In Flanders
Ten Thousand Miles Away
Dear Someone
Rainbow Connection
His Eye is on the Sparrow
Bright Morning Stars
Ad Astra

Stephen Paulus
Karine Polwart, Julie Fowlis, and Seckou
Keita, arr. Craig Hella Johnson
Ivor Gurney
J. B. Geoghegan
David Rawlings and Gillian Welch
Paul Williams and Kenneth Ascher
Civilla D. Martin and Charles H. Gabriel
Alan and Elizabeth Lomax
Jacob Narverud

Tenor Trio: Nicholas A. Flott (also on ukelele), Mark Istratie & Ross Tarpley

Part Two

I. We are bigger than the sum of our own individual parts

One Voice
Listen

Ruth Moody
Reena Esmail

II: Let love and peace be our guiding light.

Lao Rahal Soti
Myr, Zaraz
Love

Samih Choukeir; arr. Shireen Abu-Khader
Joan Szymko
Tara Mack

III: Be a bright light in this world.

The Parting Glass
Morning Light
Come, Bright Spirit

Traditional, arr. The Wailin' Jennys
Sarah Quartel
Gay Kahkonen

*Quartet: Katrina Saporsantos and Jennifer Wang, Soprano
Courtney Aguilar and Krystina Speegle, Mezzo-soprano
Program curated and prepared by Katrina Saporsantos*

Joseph Choi, pianist

PROGRAM NOTES, TEXTS, and TRANSLATIONS

Part One

This brief concert explores themes of belonging and finding one's way in the world. It traces a narrative arc beginning with a question from poet Michael Dennis Browne's "The Road Home," set to music by Stephen Paulus:

"Tell me, where is the road
I can call my own,
That I left, that I lost,
So long ago?
All these years I have wandered,
Oh, when will I know
There's a way, there's a road
That will lead me home?"

The music then begins with a kind of invocation, where we are blessed into the created world and invited to bear witness and participate compassionately. The human story then unfolds as we experience distance and longing; we navigate the journey with the help of hope, faith, or the cosmos; then we finally arrive — changed, lifted, home, closing with a jubilant call to look upward. Along the way, three soloists carry the heart of the journey — grief for a beloved home left behind, the ache of separation across vast distance, and the quiet comfort of feeling watched over. The trio pieces frame and carry these moments, building from wonder through yearning to hard-won joy. The through line is simple: no matter how long or difficult the road, something is always guiding us forward — guiding us home.

-Ross Tarpley

In Flanders

I'm homesick for my hills again - / To see above the Severn plain
Unscabbarded against the sky / The blue high blade of Cotswold lie;
The giant clouds go royally/ By jagged Malvern with a train / Of shadows.

Where the land is low / Like a huge imprisoning O
I hear a heart that's sound and high, / I hear the heart within me cry:
"I'm homesick for my hills again -Cotswold or Malvern, sun or rain! / My hills again!"

- Song by David Rawlings and Gillian Welch

Dear Someone

I wanna go all over the world and start living free
I know that there's somebody who is waiting for me
I'll build a boat, steady and true / As soon as it's done
I'm gonna sail along in a dream of my dear someone
One little star smiling tonight / Knows where you are
Stay, little star, steady, and bright / To guide me afar
Rush, little wind, over the deep / For now, I've begun
Hurry and take me straight into the arms / Of my dear someone
Hurry and take me into the arms / Of my dear someone
- Song by David Rawlings and Gillian Welch

Ten Thousand Miles Away

Sing I for a brave and a gallant barque, for a stiff and a rattling breeze,
A bully crew and a captain true, to carry me o'er the seas.
To carry me o'er the seas, m y boys, to my true love so gay,
Who went on a trip on a government ship, ten thousand miles away.
Oh, blow ye winds, hi oh! A-roaming I will go.
I'll stay no more on England's shore, so let the music play.
I'll start by the morning train to cross the raging main,
For I'm on the road to my own true love, ten thousand miles away.
My true love, she was handsome. My true love, she was young.
Her eyes were blue as the violet's hue, and silvery was the sound of her tongue.
And silvery was the sound of her tongue, m y boys, and while I sing this lay,
She's a-doing of the grand in a far-off land, ten thousand miles away.
Oh, blow y e winds, hi oh! A-roaming I will go.
I'll stay no more on England's shore, so let the music play.
I'll start by the morning train, to cross the raging main,
For I'm on the road to m y own true love, ten thousand miles away.

Part Two

One Voice

This is the sound of one voice / One spirit one voice.
The sound of one who makes a choice.
This is the sound of one voice, / This is the sound of one voice.

This is the sound of voices two, / The sound of me singing with you,
Helping each other to make it through,
This is the sound of voices two, / This is the sound of voices two.

This is the sound of voices three, / Singing together in harmony,
Surrendering to the mystery, / This is the sound of voices three,

This is the sound of voices three. / This is the sound of all of us,
Singing with love and the will to trust, / Leave the rest behind, it'll turn to dust,
This is the sound of all of us, / This is the sound of all of us.

This is the sound of one voice, / One people, one voice
A song for every one of us, / This is the sound of one voice,
This is the sound of one voice.

- Ruth Moody

Program Note: Written by Ruth Moody of the Canadian folk band The Wailin' Jennys, the hymn-like song "One Voice" was born out of a musician jam while in the kitchen, backstage, at a camping festival. Someone would start a song, then others would join in. Inspired by all of this, and in an attempt to answer the questions "What can we do to make this world a better place? How can we connect with each other?", Moody at two in the morning, churned out the lyrics to one of the songs that would become this anthem of unity. It is about coming together, joining our voices in song, in love, and in peace.

Listen

Listen, listen / Listen to the sound of your breathing,
Listen to the waves it makes. / Listen to your voice as you're singing
Listen to the space it takes. / Listen to your heart as it's beating
Listen as your soul awakes. / 'Cause one act of love, I know, for sure, is to listen.
Listen to the voices inside you / Guiding you to being whole.
Listen to the people who see you / They will help you hold your soul.
Listen to the ones that oppose you / They can even play a role.
'Cause one act of love, I know for sure is to listen / Time is fleeting,
There's just so long we remain / So listen deeply
For you might never have that moment / to listen again.
Every act of love is a mirror / Showing us our purest light
Every act of love is a pathway / Into one another's lives
Every act of love is essential / To build a world that survives.
And that first act of love, I know, for sure, is to listen. / Listen, listen

- Reena Esmail based on a quote of Brian Palmer

Program Note: Reena Esmail is an Indian-American composer who works in both Indian and Western classical music spaces, and brings those two worlds together in her compositions. When Reena was working with Urban Voices Project, a choir on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles, she met a man named Brian Palmer who used to say "One act of love, I know for sure, is to listen." Brian passed away tragically a few years later, and Reena wrote this piece as she tried to grapple with his loss. In this piece, she reminds us to listen not only to ourselves but also to one another—no matter how easy or difficult it is,

whether we agree with something or not—because we never know when this chance to do so will be gone forever.

Lao Rahal Soti

If my voice departs, your throats (i.e. voices) will not
I look unto tomorrow and my heart is with you
If the singer goes (dies), the songs will remain
bringing together the broken and suffering hearts
- Samih Choukeir

Program Note: Shireen Abu-Khader is a Palestinian Jordanian Canadian composer, arranger, conductor, and music educator who, through her organization Dozan World, introduces to the international community the music of the beloved Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq) region. She first heard Lao Rahal Soti, the protest song by Samih Choukeir, during her work in Ramallah in 1998. The song originally had a fast but march-like feel, yet the melody and the lyrics registered in her mind like a calm, quiet, meditative moment; the words, especially, resonated deeply with her beliefs. With this in mind, she created an arrangement that was quieter and more hopeful. She personally dedicates this song to the Palestinian ongoing struggle for freedom and dignity, and hopes that the haunting melody of this song opens a space for those who have felt marginalized due to socio-political situations to be heard.

Myr, Zaraz

Myr, Zaraz
Peace, Now.
- Ukrainian for “Peace, Now”

Program Note: Joan Szymko is widely regarded as an outstanding composer of choral music in America today. During the last week of March 2022 when she was in the middle of concert week preparations, she suddenly found herself pondering the concert she was about to conduct and the growing fragility of democracy around the world, epitomized by the assault on Ukraine. It is her hope for both singer and listener to hold grief close to our hearts and feel solidarity with the people in Ukraine and all those suffering anywhere in the world.

Love

“The moment we choose to love, we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others. That action is the testimony of love as the practice of freedom.”
- bell hooks

Program Note by the composer: When I worked as Director of the Education for Liberation Network, we published a social justice plan book for educators. One of my jobs was to find a quote from a social justice activist, artist or thinker for each week. Some quotes particularly resonated with me, and years later I decided to write a set of pieces based on some of my favorite quotes.

Each piece in *Virtues of Resistance* explores a different virtue that inspires us to become activists or that we may experience within struggle—Faith, Anger, Courage, Community, Love and Joy. And each quote tells a story that challenges us, affirms us or inspires us to keep going.

Love sets a quote by activist, philosopher and feminist bell hooks. Even when we are protesting, demanding, shouting, boycotting, our actions should always be grounded in love—love for ourselves, love for each other and even love for the human potential of those who are causing harm. Love in the face of oppression is a radical act.

– Tara Mack

The Parting Glass

Oh all the money that e'er I spent, / I have spent it in good company
And all the harm e'er I've done, / Alas, it was to none but me.
And all I've done for want of wit / To mem'ry now I can't recall,
So fill to me the parting glass / Good night and joy be to you all
Oh all the comrades that e'er I've had / Are sorry for my going away,
And all the sweethearts that e'er I've had / Would wish me one more day to stay.
But since it fell into my lot / That I should rise and you should not,
I'll gently rise and I'll softly call / "Goodnight, and joy be with you all,
Goodnight, and joy be with you all."

- Ruth Moody

Program Note: "The Parting Glass" is a traditional Irish and Scottish song frequently sung at the end of gatherings to bid guests farewell. Deeply rooted in Celtic culture, the lyrics of the song is a loving goodbye rooted in fond memories, love, nostalgia.

Morning Light

It's a long road we travel on this walk that we take,
It's a path of adventure that leads us away.
Yet a place travels with us, if it's what we believe,
Where we gather the strength for the journey we lead.
There is home in the beauty of a warm autumn day,
When the breeze in the maples blows trouble away,
There is home in the voices of the people you love,
When they call out your name it's like sun from above.

Call me glad, call me wise, / It will not be surprising,
When in the night I may say, / I'll be home again.
For when shadows are gone and the sun finds me here,
I will dance in the light of the morning.
There is home the melody of a grandmother's song,
How the voice of a legacy can lead you along.
There is home in the purpose of the ones come before,
It may call, it may guide, I will follow once more.
When the dark evening starts to settle around,
through the shadows a glimmer of hope can be found.
When you see it, hold onto it, It is where you belong,
Look around, look inside, you are never far from home.

- Sarah Quartel

Program Note: Morning Light sets an optimistic text by the composer about home and finding your way. Inspired by American folk songs, its captivating melody and warm harmonies serve as a welcome reminder for the close of our concert: to connect with our roots.

Come, Bright Spirit

The night is still. / The night is silent. / All the world is fast asleep.
The night is still. / The night is silent. / Come Bright Spirit, wake the night.
Bring us your light. / Bright Spirit come, illuminate the night,
Make the world alive with your light.
Bright Spirit come, awake the day! / Bright Spirit sweep away the shadows!
Open our eyes and let us see the world alight! / Bright Spirit come to us this day,
To liberate us from the darkness! / Open our hearts and let us feel ourselves alive!
Open up our eyes, / Open up our arms, / Open up our minds, / Open up our hearts!
Bright Spirit come, / Bright Spirit come, Shine!

- Gay Kahkonen

Program Note: Gay Kahkonen is a composer and flutist from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and is a proud member of the LGBTQIA+ community. She earned her B.Mus. from Oberlin Conservatory where she also studied theater and dance. Kahkonen's compositions are performed nationwide and abroad and are published by ALRY Publications. Come Bright Spirit, winner of Inversion Ensemble's 2025 Sandra Fivecoat Memorial Composition Contest, was originally written to celebrate the Winter Solstice and the return of the sun's light to the Earth. However, it may be interpreted as a call on the Light in each of us to shine forth in times of darkness and tribulation.

Part Two program notes written by Katrina Saporsantos unless otherwise cited.

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