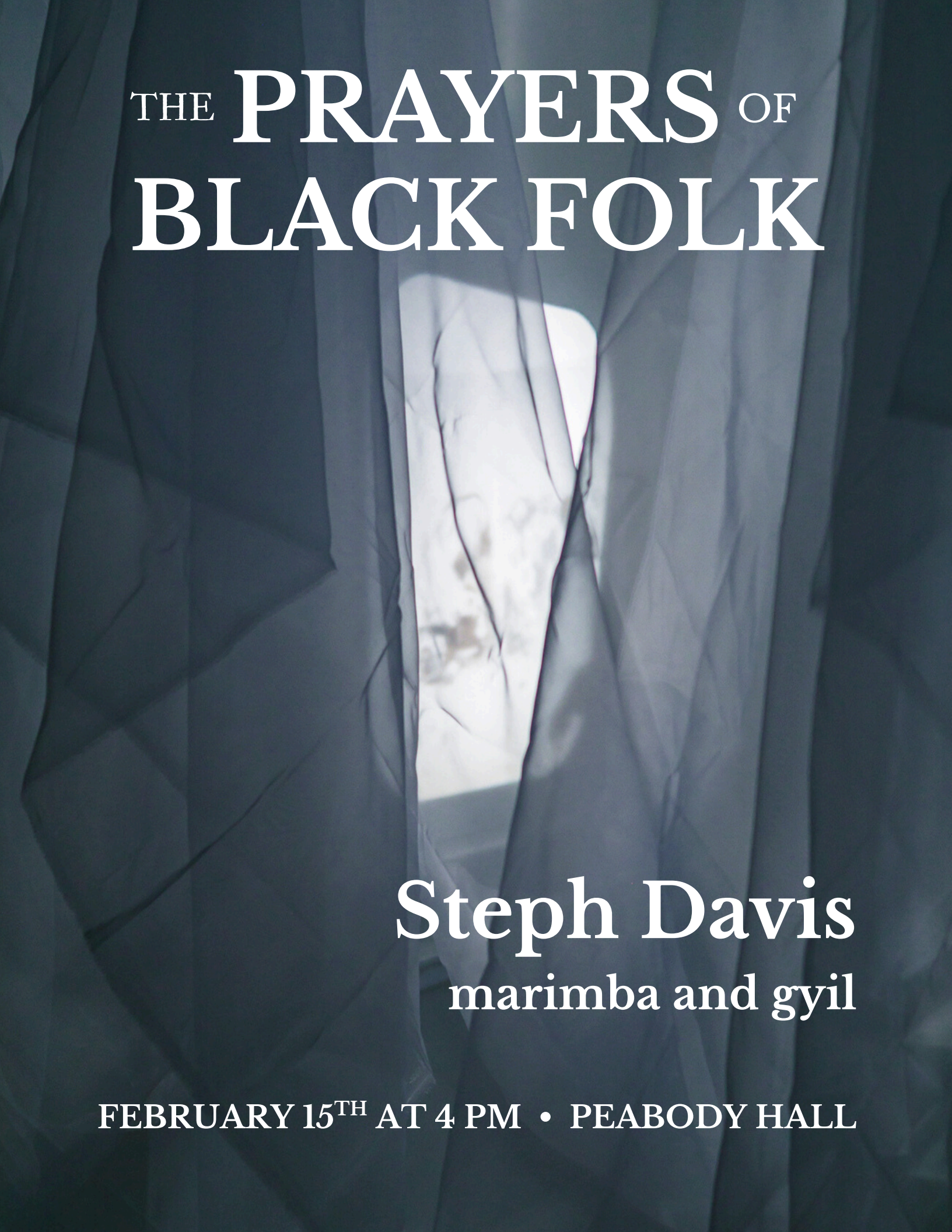

THE PRAYERS OF BLACK FOLK

Steph Davis

marimba and gyil

FEBRUARY 15TH AT 4 PM • PEABODY HALL

PROGRAM

Kpil Kpala — Traditional Lobi Gyil Song

Fer Bare Kona Jeno — Kakraba Lobi**

Kpar Kpo Naah — Kakraba Lobi**

Guun — Kakraba Lobi**

Remember, Marimba — Errollyn Wallen

Banyere Yo — Traditional Lobi Gyil Song

Deep River — Traditional African American Spiritual*

Mother's Sacrifice — L. Viola Kinney*

Sonata in E minor — Florence B. Price*

Ganda Yina — Traditional Lobi Gyil Song

Dusk — Nkeiru Okoye*

Lullaby — Isak Roux*

I go to prepare a place for you — Steph Dvais

Banda Jel — Kakraba Lobi**

Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing — J. Rosamond Johnson*

*= Arranged or Adapted by Steph Davis
**= Arranged by Valerie Dee Naranjo

ABOUT STEPH DAVIS

Steph Davis is a marimbist, gyil player, Africana studies scholar, and cultural activist. Rooted in the culture and sounds of the African diaspora, Davis' performances are sonic portraits of Black lineage, love, resilience, hope, grief, truth. Their anthropological approach to programming explores Black historiographies and uses music to inspire truth-telling and collective liberation.

Sought after for their "crisp, controlled" sound and "bright humanity and expressive depth" (The Washington Post), Davis has performed hundreds of concerts across the United States as a marimba soloist and chamber musician. Encompassing classical, sacred, and contemporary music across the African continent and diaspora, and Western European classical music, Davis' practice pushes the boundaries of genre while centering African-descended people and cultures. Through his arrangements, commissions, and compositions, Davis has contributed over 30 works by Black composers to the marimba's solo and chamber repertoire. Recent highlights include solo concerts presented by Celebrity Series of Boston and Ashmont Hill Chamber Music and interdisciplinary collaborations with dancers, poets, and playwrites. Their current projects include recording their debut solo marimba album and a writing a book of marimba arrangements and adaptations of music from the African diaspora. Davis proudly endorses Marimba One instruments and malletsas a Marimba One Premier Artist.

As an educator, Davis is a teaching artist with Castle of our Skins, a Black arts institution, and an instructor of music theory at the Boston Conservatory. He is a sought-after lecturer and writer about music, having written music curriula with Castle of our Skins and program notes for Boston Modern Opera Project and Boston Conservatory. Davis has led educational residencies at the Boston Children's Chorus and Boston Children's Museum and has presented performances and masterclasses on marimba and vibraphone at the University of Central Florida, University of Massachusetts Amherst, The Center of Mallet Percussion Research at Kutztown University, and the Network for Diversity in Concert Percussion.

Davis has enjoyed residencies at Avaloch Farm Music Institute, Boston Center for the Arts, and the Goethe-Institut Boston, and fellowships with Antenna Cloud Farm and Music for Food. Their work has been supported by the New England Foundation for the Arts, Massachusetts Cultural Council, City of

ABOUT STEPH DAVIS CONT.

Boston Arts and Culture, and Cambridge Arts Council.

Davis received his Master of Music in marimba performance from Boston Conservatory at Berklee, where he studied with Nancy Zeltsman. He also holds a Bachelor of Music in percussion performance from the Conservatory. Other areas of study include African American history, ethnomusicology, music of the African diaspora, and Africana philosophy. Davis currently studies gyil with gyil master SK Kakraba and serves on the boards of directors of Castle of our Skins.

Davis resides on unceded land of the Neponset band of the Massachusett tribe, bordertown Dorchester, Boston, MA.

https://www.stephdavismusic.com/

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The Prayers of Black Folk is a solo marimba and gyil concert that translates the hopes and dreams of Africans in America through sound. Weaving together traditional and art music of the Dagara and Lobi people (Northern Ghana) and Afro-Americans in the United States and Europe, this program honors "the dreamers who always wanted more than they had — and who did more than just hold on to life, but expanded its possibilities and preserved its beauty." (*The Black Utopians: Searching for Paradise and the Promised Land in America,* Aaaron Robertson)

In her essay, "Venus in Two Acts," Saidiyah Hartman coins the term "critical fabulation," and describes it as such:

"Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive? By advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling. The conditional temporality of "what could have been," according to Lisa Lowe, "symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science and the matters absent, entangled and unavailable by its methods." The intention here isn't anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of [musical storytelling]. The method guiding this [performance] practice is best described as critical fabulation. "Fabula" denotes the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative. A fabula, according to Mieke Bal, is "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused and experienced by actors. An event is a transition from one state to another. Actors are agents that perform actions. (They are not necessarily human.) To act is to cause or experience and event." By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have

ABOUT THE PROGRAM CONT.

attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or migh t have been done. By throwing into crisis “what happened when” and by exploiting the “transparency of sources” as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe “the resistance of the object,” if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity.

The intent of this practice is not to give voice to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance. It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive.”

This work engages Hartman’s concept of critical fabulation to search for a particular voice — the voice of the enslaved who might have prayed for the gyil. Gyil player Valerie Naranojo notes that “to the communities who center their musical activity around the gyil, the funeral is the most important rite of passage, and the most important reason that the gyil exists. For these peoples (Lobi and Dagara), the sound vibration of the gyil carries the life force of the deceased from this world to the other world, therefore the gyil is the central focus of the entire ceremony.”

There are horrific scenes of violence during enslavement, where enslaved Africans were not permitterd to care for their dead — *The Buzzard Lope*, a traditional Gullah-Geechee dance is one way the enslaved used music and movement to engage in communal expression of, processing, and healing from the horrors of enslavement. The dance mimics the diving motions of a buzzard feasting on a dead body. Under the cruel command of the overseer, the rest of the enslaved were forced to continue working when the buzzards began to gather and then started to swoop down. The reality of this violence is particularly cruel when one considers its infliction on a people who came from rich, sacred funeral traditions and had elaborate ways of caring for their dead.

In these moments, did someone pray for, long for, call out for the gyil? How might have the enslaved documented their experiences on the xylophone, as

ABOUT THE PROGRAM CONT.

the Gullah-Geechee documented theirs in *The Buzzard Lope*, as we all did in spirituals? *The Prayers of Black Folk* asks these questions; combines the past, present, and future, stirs them together until they are permeable, attempting to paint the fullest picture of the dreams and prayers of generations of Africans in America.

PROGRAM NOTES

Kpil Kpala
Traditional Birifor Funeral Song
This song often begins a Daarkpen song cycle (Daarkpen is the Birifor funeral repertoire). The song protects the space and prepares the community for expressions of intense sorrow, grief, and celebration of life.

Fer Bare Kona Jeno
Composed by Kakraba Lobi
“Gyil music finds its home among the Lobi and Dagara nations, renowned for their respect of tradition and of their outstanding musicianship. All gyil songs derive from the spoken or sung word, and those words usually teach one of life’s lessons: In this case ‘Take care not to play favorites among those close to you.’” - Valerie Dee Naranjo

Kpar Kpa Naah
Composed by Kakraba Lobi
This lullaby is from the middle movement of a Darkepy song collection. “Darkpey is the specific style of gyil songs for the funeral of a man of leadership age, either in his household, community, or region. To the communities who center their musical activity around the gyil, the funeral is the most important rite of passage, and the most important reason that the gyil exists. For these peoples (Lobi and Dagara), the sound vibration of the gyil carries the life force of the deceased from this world to the other world, therefore the gyil is the central focus of the entire ceremony.” - Valerie Dee Naranjo

Guun (Sacred Music of West Africa)
Composed by Kakraba Lobi
“Guun (pronounced “GOON”) is one of the most spiritually captivating and technically challenging styles of Kakraba Lobi’s repertoire. Guun is ancient funeral music from Ghana and Burkina Faso. 9 movements describe the life of

PROGRAM NOTES CONT.

a person after they have passed. Kakraba Lobi and Valerie Naranjo transcribed this music for the Western marimba in the 2000s. In 2007, Kakraba placed his seal of approval on Valerie's arrangement of his signature Guun, commenting that this music could 'bring different people to the same understanding.'

While traditionally Guun's rhythmic base is asymmetrical, its melodies and left-hand lines hearken to many familiar Cuban and North American popular styles. The music continues without pause, traditionally so that people can dance continually. Movements 1 and 2 are set in an R&B/contemporary style; movement 3 in the classical style." - Valerie Naranjo

Remember, Marimba
Composed by Errollyn Wallen
Wallen writes, "Before starting this piece, I spent some time considering the history of the marimba. I decided to try to imagine-and to try to capture-some of the secrets and ghosts of this marvelous instrument's origins. The piece typifies my love of rhythmic and melodic patterns that weave together in often asymmetric ways, all the time keeping in mind the centuries' journey of wood. Towards the end of Remember, Marimba, I take and extend a theme (played on the marimba) from the second movement of my Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra, thus continuing the notion of memory and recollection to the history of my own music."

Banyere Yo
Traditional Lobi Gyil Song
A musical portrayal of a blind man who got so drunk that he could not find his way home. This song is typically played at weddings and festivals where pito, a local spirit, is had.

Deep River
Traditional African American Spiritual
"One of the most exhilarating, expressive and inspiring forms of African American music—beloved by people of all religious persuasions despite its exclusive lyrical adherence to the tenets of Christian belief and storytelling—is gospel, whose predecessor is the spiritual. The earliest form of African American religious music, the spiritual, also called Negro spiritual, comprises two forms—folk and concert. The folk spiritual is a form of improvised music, spontaneously created by individuals and groups. The concert spiritual, also

PROGRAM NOTES CONT.

known as arranged spirituals, evolved in schools created to educate the enslaved after emancipation. The spiritual draws from African music and European psalms and hymns, and from African-derived secular sources, including work songs, field calls and protest songs. It was sung in both religious and secular settings, including as the enslaved worked the plantation fields.

Folk spirituals are spontaneously created and performed in a repetitive, improvised style. The most common song structures are the call-and-response and repetitive choruses . The call-and-response is an alternating exchange between the soloist and the other singers. The soloist improvises a line to which the other singers respond, usually by repeating the same phrase. Group singing is performed with slight deviations from the melody line, rather than in unison or harmony. Song interpretation incorporates the interjections of moans, cries, hollers, etc., and changing vocal timbres. Singing is accompanied by handclapping and foot-stomping.

The texts of folk spirituals drew from various sources, which the enslaved interpreted though the lens of their daily experience. Mixing native African words and African American dialect, songs might touch on biblical themes, the daily experiences of the enslaved, the desire for freedom and deliverance, protest, suffering and other topics. Biblical stories from the Old Testament and the book of Revelations from the New Testament, for example, provide thematic material for the majority of folk spirituals. In their songs, the enslaved recreated stories about the oppressed Hebrew people, the cruel Egyptians, the Red Sea, and the land of Canaan to reflect their oppression, their treatment by whites, and their desire for freedom respectively. The stories about Daniel, Jacob, Moses, Gabriel, Jesus, Jonah, Paul and Silas, Mary and Martha, among others gave the enslaved courage, strength, and determination to endure worldly hardship with the promise of a better life in Heaven.

Folk spirituals also provided a forum for slaves to protest their bondage and criticize their masters: Before I'd be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free. Some of the songs, such as "Steal Away," "Deep River," and "Go Down Moses," used a double entendre to reference the desire for freedom. The coded text disguised the details for plans that assisted slaves in securing that freedom.

Deep River

PROGRAM NOTES CONT.

Deep River, my home is over Jordan
Deep River, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.
Oh, don't you want to go to that gospel feast?
That promised land, where all is peace?

If the folk spiritual, the earliest form of African American religious music, was the music of the enslaved, then the arranged spiritual of post-Civil War African Americans was its offspring. Since the 1800s, spirituals have been central to the lives of African Americans. The folk spiritual served various functions—religious, cultural, social, political, and historical—but was largely sung in a non-public, somewhat sequestered environment: the enslaved singing among and for themselves. The concert version, however, was created for performance on the concert stage by choral groups, solo singers, solo instrumentalists and instrumental ensembles. The audience now included whites as well as African Americans and extended to European royalty.

At Fisk University, founded in 1866 in Nashville, Tennessee, the white treasurer, George White, organized the Fisk Jubilee Singers to raise money for the school. The Jubilee Singers initially performed both the standard European repertory and concert versions of folk spirituals. Responding to the preferences of white audiences, White centered the group's performances around spirituals. The Fisk Jubilee Singers were the first to popularize the choral arrangement of spirituals. Their successful concerts, presented throughout the nation and world beginning in 1871, inspired the subsequent formation of similar groups at Hampton Institute in Virginia and other Black colleges.

At the turn of the century, a core group of Black composers sought to create a Nationalist school of composition by drawing inspiration and using elements from folk spirituals and other African-derived folk forms. They include the choral works of R. Nathaniel Dett (1866–1949), such as "Listen to the Lambs" (1914), and the oratorio "The Chariot Jubilee" (1919), and the instrumental compositions of Harry T. Burleigh (1866–1949), "Six Plantation Melodies for Violin and Piano" (1901); Afro-British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912), such as "Twenty-Four Negro Melodies Transcribed for Piano" (1905); and Clarence Cameron White (1880–1960), such as "Bandanna Sketches: Four Negro Spirituals" (1918) for violin and piano. The instrumental versions often mimic the timbre, melodic and rhythmic qualities of the folk aesthetic."

PROGRAM NOTES CONT.

Obtained from:
https://timeline.carnegiehall.org/genres/folk-spiritual
https://timeline.carnegiehall.org/genres/concert-spiritual

Mother's Sacrifice
Composed by L. Viiola Kinney

Born on April 30, 1890, L. Viola Kinney was a composer, pianist, and teacher active during the first half of the twentieth century.

Born Lady Viola Kinney in Sedalia, Missouri, she was one of the five children of Patrick and Lillian Kinney. Her father was a cook, and her mother worked in the shops of the Missouri Pacific Railroad. Kinney studied music at Western University in Quindaro, Kansas. There, she participated in the harmony class and the choral society under Robert G. Jackson, music department director.

After she had completed her college education, she moved back to Sedalia, where, in 1911, she began a 35-year career as a music and English teacher at the segregated secondary school, Lincoln High School. She became head of the school's music department and gave piano recitals in Sedalia and surrounding towns. She had married Frederick Ferguson, an undertaker, in 1918, but the couple separated in 1925. After the separation, Kinney lived in her widowed mother's house and reverted to her maiden name.

L. Viola Kinney died in 1945 and was buried in Crown Hill Cemetery in Sedalia. Her composition for solo piano, "Mother's Sacrifice," is the only score that has been found. However, she registered the copyrights for at least two other compositions: "Show Me," set to a text by Fredericka Douglass Perry (1941), and "Time Out for Love" (1943). Kinney dedicated "Mother's Sacrifice" to her mother.

Sonata in E minor: II. "Andante"
Composed by Florence B. Price
"Florence Beatrice Smith Price was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1887. Her family was part of the city's small but flourishing middle-class community of skilled and well-educated Blacks; her father was one of the country's first Black dentists and her mother a businesswoman, accomplished singer, and pianist who gave her daughter piano lessons from a young age. In elementary school

PROGRAM NOTES CONT.

Price studied music with Charlotte Andrews Stephens, an influential Black Oberlin College-trained teacher who also taught composer William Grant Still. She also took organ lessons and began composing, selling her first composition to a publisher by age 11. During Reconstruction, Little Rock had been a place of relative opportunity for Black Americans, but by the time Price finished high school at the age of 14, the hard-won social and political advancements of the late nineteenth century were being curtailed through the establishment of Jim Crow laws that legalized racial segregation and removed fundamental human rights from Black citizens. In 1903, Price left Little Rock to enter the prestigious New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, a college that accepted Black students and championed new American music and composers at a time when German Romanticism was still dominant.

Despite her clear potential to pursue a compositional career, when Price graduated she felt compelled to return to the South. From 1906 to 1910 she taught music at Black colleges in Little Rock before taking on the position of Head of the Music Department at Clark University in Atlanta. After returning to Little Rock in 1912 to marry an attorney and start a family she resumed composing, concentrating on small pedagogical pieces for children, many of which feature characteristic African American dance rhythms and melodic elements. She became increasingly ambitious in her compositional goals, successfully entering her works in several competitions, pursuing publication, and spending the summers of 1926 and 1927 studying at the Chicago Musical College.

In 1927, racial atrocities and threats to her family forced them to relocate from Little Rock to Chicago, and it was here that Price's life as a composer flourished. The first Black member of both the Chicago Club of Women Organists and the Musicians Club of Women, Price was also active in the National Association of Negro Musicians. After divorcing her husband in 1931, she supported herself and her daughters by teaching, performing as an organist for silent movies, and composing 110 Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Concert Music, 1900-1960 songs for radio commercials. Her breakthrough came in 1932 when her “Symphony in E minor” won first prize in the orchestral, band, and choral music category of the Rodman Wanamaker Competition, and in the following year it became the first major composition by an African American woman to be premiered by an American symphony orchestra. Price’s “Sonata in E Minor” also won First Prize in the 1932 Rodman Wanamaker music contest,

PROGRAM NOTES CONT.

the same year her Symphony in E Minor won overall honors. The second movement of the piano sonata, titled “Andante,” is often referred to as the “spiritual movement” due to its folk-inspired melody.”
- “Culture and Craft in Florence Price’s Piano Sonata in E minor,” Horace J, Maxile, Jr.

Ganda Yina
Traditional Lobi Gyil Song
Ganda Yina translates to “the strong man is out.” It is a traditional funeral song played for the passing of the breadwinner of a family, whose passing brings much sorrow to the community. - SK Kakraba

Dusk
Composed by Nkeiru Okoye
‘The second movement of African Sketches for Piano — a four-movement suite — Dusk was written after the passing of Noel DaCosta, Okoye’s mentor and friend for a decade. This music is soulful, spiritual, and reflective, reflecting the spirituality of her departed teacher.

Nkeiru Okoye is a composer, pianist, and conductor who recieved her degrees from Oberlin College and Rutgers University and studied under composers such as Noel DaCosta and Ronald Senator. She was the recipient of a Ford-Mellon Foundation grant for ground-breaking research on Black women composers, through which she authored A Finding Aid for the Works of Black Women Composers and began a collection of works by Black women composers for the Oberlin College Conservatory Library. She has been Protégé Composer for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra’s African-American Compsoers Symposium. Okoye’s compositions are written for orchestra, chamber ensemble, and piano, and are a collage of American, West African, and European musical traditions.” - William H. Chapman Nyaho

Lullaby
Composed by Isak Roux
“This is a simple, pentatonic cradle song that features the melodic structure of typical Zulu folk songs (South Africa).” - William H. Chapman Nyaho

I go to prepare a place for you
Composed by Steph Davis

PROGRAM NOTES CONT.

Inspired by the last words spoken by abolitionist Harriet Tubman, “I go to prepare a place for you” was created while imagining and remembering the world of Harriet Tubman — the ground she traveled, the battles she fought, and the perseverance and spiritual fortitude she embodied and inspired.

Out of the spacious beginning of the piece emerges a programmatic communicated through contrast between the low and high registers of the marimba, signifyin[G]footnote the slave society/economy of Antebellum U.S. and the self-emancipation of Black Americans, respectively. From this contrast, a story of persistence, collective action, faith, escape and expedition, confrontation, and legacy is told. Throughout this story, bright and dreamy textures represent Tubman’s visions in which she convened with the divine; a long and winding melody played over an ominous, bell-tolling bass line represents the escape routes that Tubman and her passengers traveled, which stretched from southern plantations to free northern cities; a quotation of the traditional African American spiritual “Deep River” recalls what it was like to dream about a home over Jordan, a metaphor for crossing over into freedom.

Banda Jel
Composed by Kakraba Lobi
“Kakraba Left his home at an early age. Being younger and smaller in stature than most independent men, he was routinely disrespected and defrauded. History tells that he named himself “Banda Jel” (Lizard Egg9), which has a very thick shell of a rubbery quality, You cannot cut it — it falls away. You cannot stomp it — it rolls away. If you throw it at a wall it bounces back to you. Kakraba was never ready to give up or shrink from adversity. This “self portrait” depicts the gentleness, vivaciousness, sense of humor, and drive needeed to realize a dream.” - Valerie Dee Naranjo

Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing
Composed by J. Rosamond Johnson
“Often referred to as "The Black National Anthem," Lift Every Voice and Sing was a hymn written as a poem by NAACP leader James Weldon Johnson in 1900. His brother, John Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954), composed the music for the lyrics. A choir of 500 schoolchildren at the segregated Stanton School, where James Weldon Johnson was principal, first performed the song in public in Jacksonville, Florida to celebrate President Abraham Lincoln's birthday.

PROGRAM NOTES CONT.

At the turn of the 20th century, Johnson's lyrics eloquently captured the solemnyet hopeful appeal for the liberty of Black Americans. Set against the religious invocation of God and the promise of freedom, the song was later adopted by NAACP and prominently used as a rallying cry during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s."

Obtained from: https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/lift-every-voice-and-sing

STEPH DAVIS 2025/26

SEASON AT A GLANCE

SOLO PERFORMANCES

Saturday, October 4, 2025 | Arnold Arboretum
Friday, October 24, 2025 | Roxbury Community College
Monday, January 19, 2026 | Boston Children's Museum
Sunday, February 15, 2026 | Peabody Hall

CHAMBER MUSIC

Thursday, October 23, 2025 | St. Augustine's
Sunday, March 22, 2026 | Strand Theater
Saturday, April 18, 2026 | Pickman Hall
Thursday, May 14, 2026 | Roxbury Public Library

CASTLE OF OUR SKINS EDU-TAINMENT RECITALS

Thursday, February 19, 2026 | Rose Conservatory
Tuesday, March 17, 2026 | Hurley K-8 School
Saturday, April 18, 2026 | Roxbury Public Library
Thursday, April 23, 2026 | Rose Conservatory