



Lawrence Brownlee Tenor
Kevin J. Miller Piano

FROM LAWRENCE BROWNLEE

Rising

Dear Friends,

These past years have been a trial, both for humanity as a whole and the African American population here in the United States. But through all these many challenges we have faced, I have also seen moments of strength, inspiration, hope, and great beauty. It is those themes of uplift, elevation, and rebirth that we have tried to focus on with this new project *Rising*, taking poems from the giants of the Harlem Renaissance, and working with some of today's most talented African American composers, to create something that speaks not just to our struggles, but also to our triumphs.

Wednesday, March 8, 2023 at 7:30PM • Richardson Auditorium, Alexander Hall

Lawrence Brownlee Tenor
Kevin J. Miller Piano

RISING

ROBERT OWENS (1925–2017)

Desire, Op. 13 (1975)

Desire

Dream

Juliet

Man

JEREMIAH EVANS (b. 1978)

“April Rain Song”

“Lost Illusions”

“Southern Mansion”

ROBERT OWENS

Silver Rain, Op. 11 (1958)

In Time of Silver Rain

Fulfillment

Night Song

Silence

Carolina Cabin

Songs

Sleep

MARGARET BONDS (1913–1972)

Songs of the Seasons (1955)

Poème d'automne

Winter Moon

Young Love in Spring

Summer Storm

INTERMISSION

CARLOS SIMON (b. 1986)

Vocalise I (2021)

JASMINE BARNES (b. 1992)

“Peace”

“Invocation”

BRANDON SPENCER (b. 1992)

“I Know My Soul”

“The Dance of Love”

CARLOS SIMON

Vocalise II (2021)

DAMIEN L. SNEED (b. 1979)

“Beauty That Is Never Old”

“The Gift to Sing”

“To America”

SHAWN E. OKPEBHOLO (b. 1981)

Romance

CARLOS SIMON

Vocalise III (2021)

JOEL THOMPSON (b. 1988)

“Supplication”

“Compensation”

“My People”



About the Program

By Lucy Caplan © 2023 • Program Annotator

Lucy Caplan is a Lecturer on History and Literature at Harvard University. In 2016 she received the Rubin Prize for Music Criticism.

The Harlem Renaissance—a term typically used to describe the New York-based flourishing of African American arts and letters in the 1920s and 1930s—is something of a misnomer. While Harlem was an epicenter of Black cultural life during this era, the phenomenon was global in scope, with vibrant artistic communities springing up in cities from Chicago to Paris, Havana to Manila. And while there was no doubt a new (or revitalized) energy bubbling up around Black culture and its relationship to social change, the movement was also but one of innumerable eras in which Black artists and intellectuals have crafted art which speaks to their contemporary conditions and dreams of a better world.

“At the heart of the program are poets. Their vivid words attune us not only to the major conceptual themes of Black self-determination, resistance, and beauty, but also to the panoply of literary forms and techniques that its writers used.”

This evening's program both harkens back to the moment of the Harlem Renaissance and illuminates its connections to more expansive creative and historical lineages. Focused on newly composed settings of texts written a century ago, it knits past and present together. At the heart of the program are poets, whose works and biographies are explored in the notes below. Their vivid words attune us not only to the movement's major conceptual themes of Black self-determination, resistance, and beauty, but also to the panoply of literary forms and techniques that its writers used, from hyper-traditional sonnets to modern, blues-inflected verses. Through these varied texts—from James Weldon Johnson's romantic, classically structured “Beauty That Is Never Old” to Arna Bontemps's haunting, evocative “Southern Mansion”—the richness of the Renaissance can be heard.

Robert Owens *Desire*

Born in Texas and raised in California, Robert Owens spent most of his life as an expatriate in Europe, where he lived for more than fifty years. A multitalented pianist, actor, and composer, he was particularly drawn to art song, setting the poetry of figures including Countee Cullen, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman. Like so many composers, he embraced the musical vitality of Langston Hughes's poems. When the two men met in 1958, Hughes encouraged Owens to set poems from his 1947 collection *Fields of Wonder*. The song cycles *Desire* and *Silver Rain* do just that.

The four songs of *Desire* compress layers of emotional intensity into brief, impressionistic pieces. The title song progresses from a passionate opening cry to a vulnerable, questioning conclusion, while “Dream” evokes the mystery of its text—“Last night I dreamt / This most strange dream”—by way of a vocal line that wanders chromatically within a limited vocal range. “Juliet” is infused with an anguished energy, then “Man” relaxes into ballad-like serenity.

“In time of silver rain” is a reverent exploration of natural beauty, its phrases winding continuously upward. “Fulfillment” has a more theatrical bent, with the vocalist luxuriating in melismatic gestures and leaping up to the highest parts of the register. “Night Song” is peacefully meditative, a fitting predecessor to the gentle warmth of “Silence.” The pace picks up in the jolly “Carolina Cabin,” which is followed by the lushly textured “Songs.” The cycle ends, fittingly, with “Sleep,” bringing us finally from the cycle’s opening images of the vast natural world to an intimate domestic scene.

Jeremiah Evans *April Rain Song*; *Lost Illusions*; *Southern Mansion*

This set of songs takes up the work of three of the Harlem Renaissance’s most vital poets. The eclectic, genre-spanning Langston Hughes, who wrote poetry, short stories, and opera libretti alongside journalism and essays, was an adventurous writer who sought to translate the rhythms and feelings of jazz and blues into poetic form. “April Rain Song” originally appeared in 1921 in the *Brownies’ Book*, a children’s magazine published by the NAACP. Delightfully evocative, it uses repeated phrases to mirror the steady fall of raindrops.

Georgia Douglas Johnson was a similarly multifaceted writer, today remembered best for her work as a playwright and her cultivation of a literary salon for Black writers at her home in Washington, D.C. “Lost Illusions” appeared in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, an anthology edited by James Weldon Johnson. Lamenting

the disappearance of the “veils of my youth,” the speaker subtly links the personal to the political: the phrase recalls W.E.B. Du Bois’s famous image of the “veil” as a means of understanding American racism, a force motivated by exclusion which also affords African Americans a unique vantage point from which to perceive the world.

The haunted racial past of the United States is addressed more explicitly in Arna Bontemps’s “Southern Mansion.” Born in Louisiana, Bontemps later lived in Los Angeles, Harlem, and Washington, D.C., enjoying a varied literary career. Much of his poetry continued to address Southern themes. In this poem, the superficially glamorous space of a mansion is unsettled by “dead men” and the “chains of bondmen,” persistent reminders of the violence of enslavement.

Margaret Bonds *Songs of the Seasons*

Growing up within a lively artistic community in Chicago—her mother, Estella, was a well-known pianist, and the family hosted musical get-togethers, featuring celebrities like Roland Hayes, in their living room—Margaret Bonds became immersed in African American musical life. She discovered the poetry of Langston Hughes at a moment of great need: Facing the everyday indignities of racism while a college student, she came across Hughes’s poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in a library and found it profoundly affirming. The two met in 1936 and developed a close friendship; she later recalled that they “were like brother and sister.”

Bonds set many of Hughes’s poems to music over the years, including the four that comprise the cycle *Songs of the Seasons*. “Poème d’automne,” composed when Bonds was just 21 years old, sets the scene with burnished, minor-key sonorities; the vocalist lingers on the flatted blue notes that recur throughout its angular phrases. “Winter Moon” is a sliver of a song, barely a minute long. The piano’s low ostinato and the singer’s repeated pitches create an eerie atmosphere. “Young Love in Spring,” composed nearly two decades after the cycle’s first two songs, is playfully romantic, with expansive phrases that remain in the upper reaches of the voice’s register. In the densely chromatic, rollicking “Summer Storm,” syncopated rhythms and jazzy harmonies express both the pattering of the rain and “the wonder of being in love.”

Jasmine Barnes Peace; *Invocation*

“Peace” first appeared in Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *Bronze: A Book of Verse* (1922), the author’s second collection of poetry. In an introduction to the collection, Johnson describes her work as “the child of a bitter earth-wound,” in which she is able to “sing out, and of, my sorrow.” “Peace” offers a faith that the world’s many sorrows, from

injustice to war, will someday fall away, the “night of strife” giving way to “sweet charity” and “brotherhood.”

Claude McKay’s “Invocation” wrestles with the relationship between past and present, pondering the role of an “Ancestral Spirit”—here associated with an African creative past—in the context of “modern Time.” This theme motivated much of McKay’s writing. An adventurous writer who once described himself as a “vagabond with a purpose,” McKay traveled across the globe in search of both artistic inspiration and like-minded political radicals. A key Harlem Renaissance figure, he spent little actual time in Harlem, preferring instead to travel the world. Born in Sunny Ville, Jamaica in 1889, McKay first visited the United States in 1912, and he also lived in Holland, Belgium, France, the Soviet Union, and Morocco.

Brandon Spencer | *I Know My Soul; The Dance of Love*

In “I Know My Soul,” Claude McKay turns inward, seeking and finding self-affirmation. While this project is incomplete—“the sign may not be fully read,” he muses—it serves a crucial purpose, allowing the speaker to find beauty and meaning within the “narcotic thought” of self-knowledge, even in a world that might otherwise deny him those qualities. Many scholars have interpreted the poem as referencing McKay’s status as a Black queer man in a world hostile to multiple aspects of his identity.

Countee Cullen’s ecstatic “The Dance of Love” was inspired by the novel *Batouala*, by the French writer René Maran. A celebrated poet of the era, Cullen was key to the social and intellectual worlds of the Harlem Renaissance. As a poet, he was interested in universal themes and skeptical of aesthetic frameworks that pigeonholed Black poets by pandering to the expectations of white audiences. As he wrote in the introduction to an anthology he edited, *Caroling Dusk*, “The attempt to corral the outbursts of the ebony muse into some definite mold to which all poetry by Negroes will conform seems altogether futile and aside from the facts.”

Damien Sneed | *Beauty That Is Never Old; The Gift to Sing; To America*

These three poems were written by the profoundly multifaceted James Weldon Johnson, a diplomat, author, lawyer, writer, musician, political activist, and more, who was central to both the artistic and political dimensions of the Harlem Renaissance. With his brother, composer J. Rosamond Johnson, he wrote “Lift Every Voice and Sing”; the two also wrote an array of songs and operettas. He published numerous collections of poetry, and his modernist novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, is a classic of early-twentieth-century American literature. As president of the

NAACP beginning in 1920, he led campaigns for civil rights and racial justice.

These three texts first appeared in *Fifty Years and Other Poems* (1917), Johnson's first full-length poetry collection. Written to commemorate the passage of half a century since Emancipation, the collection explores a range of styles and forms, from dialect poetry rooted in vernacular speech to canonical forms like the sonnet. The first two, which take up the ostensibly universal topics of beauty and song, demonstrate Johnson's embrace of conventional poetic forms. "To America" has a more politicized cast; it addresses the reader directly to determine what the next fifty years will bring for African Americans. Will they be seen by their fellow citizens as "men or things"? Will oppression persist, or might justice yet prevail?

Shawn E. Okpebholo Romance

Claude McKay's poetry collection *Harlem Shadows* (1922) made a splash on the literary scene, garnering praise from both general readers and fellow poets: Georgia Douglas Johnson called it "vital and living," while James Weldon Johnson noted that with its publication, McKay "has risen like a new and flaming star on the horizon." One of the collection's hallmarks is its breadth, ranging from politically charged rhetoric to vivid urban scenes. "Romance" takes up another of the collection's major themes: love and intimacy.

Joel Thompson Supplication; Compensation; My People

Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr. died of tuberculosis in 1919, prior to what most scholars consider the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. Just 24 years old, he had already written a number of plays and poems. "Supplication" appeared posthumously, in James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. Powerful in its brevity, it makes a plea for peace, its speaker seeking nothing more than "rest and quiet."

Paul Laurence Dunbar, too, predated and anticipated the Harlem Renaissance. The best-known African American poet of the late nineteenth century, he became famous for his use of dialect—even though this technique featured in only some of his work. "Compensation" uses a formal vocabulary befitting the seriousness of its subjects: failure, beauty, and death.

The somber mood of Cotter's and Dunbar's poetry explodes into joy and laughter in Langston Hughes's "My People." A loving paean to the "dream-singers" and "story-tellers," "cooks" and "waiters," who are part of Hughes's community, the poem spills buoyantly from line to line, as if no traditional form can contain its exuberance.

About THE ARTISTS



LAWRENCE BROWNLEE, Tenor

Lawrence Brownlee is a leading figure in opera, both as a singer on the world's top stages and as a voice for activism and diversity in the industry. With an ever-increasing presence in opera, recital, and concerts, Lawrence Brownlee has cemented his place as one of the top artists in classical music. He is a regular guest at the world's most important opera houses including the Metropolitan Opera, Teatro alla Scala, Royal Opera House-Covent Garden, Bayerische Staatsoper, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Opéra national de Paris, Gran Teatre del Liceu, Teatro Real, Opernhaus Zürich, and Wiener Staatsoper. He is a fixture at the world's top recital venues including Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall, and the Kennedy Center. His concert performances include collaborations with The Cleveland Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, The Philadelphia Orchestra, The San Francisco Symphony, Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, and the festivals of Baden-Baden and Salzburg.

In the 2022-23 season, Mr. Brownlee performed a program with longtime friend, collaborator, and fellow Rossini expert Michael Spyres titled, "Amici e Rivali" at the Theatre des Champs-Élysées in January 2023. In addition to Princeton, "Rising" will be performed at Carnegie Hall, the Kimmel Center (Philadelphia), Calderwood Studio at GBH Boston, and the Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts at Emory University. He just made his role debut as Rodrigo in Rossini's *Otello* as part of

Opera Philadelphia's Festival O22 in September 2022. In November, Brownlee returned to Lyric Opera of Chicago for the title role of *Le comte Ory*, and as Elvino in Bellini's *La Sonnambula* at Teatro Real in Madrid in December. Brownlee performed one of his signature Rossini roles as Count Almaviva in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden in February 2023. Brownlee's season ends with his return to the Metropolitan Opera as Tamino in a new production of *Die Zauberflöte*.

In spring 2021, Brownlee joined The Juilliard School as a Distinguished Visiting Faculty Member. He serves as artistic advisor for Opera Philadelphia, where his responsibilities include increasing and expanding audience diversity, advocating for new works, and liaising with the General Director from the perspective of a performing artist. Mr. Brownlee also serves as an Ambassador for Lyric Opera of Chicago's Lyric Unlimited and is an Ambassador for Opera for Peace.

Amidst the challenges of COVID-19, Brownlee emerged as a pivotal voice in classical music's shift toward digital programming and the resurgence of conversations around racial justice. A passionate advocate for diversity initiatives, Mr. Brownlee works with companies and engages civic organizations in the cities he visits to create programs and experiences seeking to expand opera audiences. His critically acclaimed solo recital program *Cycles of My Being*, a song cycle that centers on the black male experience in America today, has toured extensively, including performances at Opera Philadelphia, Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, and virtual broadcasts throughout 2020.

In May 2020, Brownlee launched "The Sitdown with LB," a weekly Facebook Live series exploring the experience of being an African American opera singer. In 2021 Brownlee expanded the series to include a segment titled "Inside the Industry" where he shifted the focus to a behind-the-scenes look at the opera industry, speaking with leaders such as Diane Zola (Metropolitan Opera), Francesca Zambello (Glimmerglass and Washington National Opera), and Anthony Tommasini (*The New York Times*). Since April 2020 he has also hosted the video series "Coffee and a Song," in which he invites artist friends to perform interpretations of art-songs from the intimacy of their own homes.

Brownlee is the fourth of six children and first discovered music when he learned to play bass, drums, and piano at his family's church in Hubbard, Ohio. He was awarded a Master of Music degree from Indiana University and went on to win a Grand Prize in the 2001 Metropolitan Opera National Council auditions. Brownlee is a winner of numerous awards and distinctions, including "Male Singer of the Year" (2017

International Opera Awards), the Kennedy Center's Marian Anderson Award, and the Opera News Award (2021). In October 2019, he had the distinct honor of singing at Jessye Norman's funeral in her hometown of Augusta, Georgia. Lawrence Brownlee made his Princeton University Concerts recital debut in 2018. We are thrilled to welcome him back to our stage.

KEVIN J. MILLER, Piano

American pianist and collaborator Kevin J. Miller is acclaimed for his dynamically artful performances. In addition to collaborating with Lawrence Brownlee, recent collaborations include recitals with countertenor John Holiday at the Kennedy Center and The Barbican in London, Joseph Calleja and Nadine Sierra at the Supreme Court of the United States, as well as an appearance with Mr. Calleja on NPR's Tiny Desk Concert series. Mr. Miller prepared soprano Jessye Norman for performances of Laura Karpman's production of *Ask Your Mama*, which was performed at Carnegie Hall. He also collaborated with the acclaimed countertenor, David Daniels, in a recital at the Glimmerglass Festival. He can be heard on piano on the recording *Been in da Storm So Long*, which features baritone Kenneth Overton.

A native of New York City, he was a student at the Boys Choir of Harlem. Beginning his musical studies at the age of 8, Mr. Miller was a featured soprano soloist—most notably in Vivaldi's *Gloria* and Lake George Opera Association's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While a student at the Boys Choir of Harlem, he studied piano with the late conductor and pianist Warren Wilson. It was also during these years that Mr. Miller began his work as an accompanist, having accompanied the choir on its tours of Europe, Israel, Austria, and Japan.

Mr. Miller studied at the Mannes College of Music, where he received a Bachelor of Music degree in Piano. He continued his studies at the University of Michigan School of Music where he received both a Master of Music degree and the Artist Diploma in Collaborative Piano under the tutelage of Martin Katz. In addition to his formal studies, Mr. Miller has been a participant in some of the country's most prestigious festivals and young artist apprenticeships that include The Tanglewood Institute of Music, Aspen Summer Music Festival, The Cleveland Art Song Festival, San Francisco Opera's Merola Opera Program, Washington National Opera's Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program, and the Glimmerglass Festival. Upon completion of his apprenticeship at the Glimmerglass Festival, he was invited to serve as a vocal coach at the Glimmerglass Festival. This concert marks Mr. Miller's Princeton University Concerts debut.

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22/23

SEASON



JESS GILLAM
Saxophone

CONCERT CLASSICS

Thursday, October 13 | 7:30PM

GENEVA LEWIS* Violin
AUDREY VARDANEGA* Piano

Thursday, November 3 | 7:30PM

BRENTANO STRING QUARTET

Sunday, November 20 | 3PM

VIKINGUR ÓLAFSSON* Piano

Pre-concert talk by Professor Scott Burnham at 2PM

Thursday, February 16 | 7:30PM

ALEXI KENNEY Violin

Wednesday, March 8 | 7:30PM

LAWRENCE BROWNLEE Tenor
KEVIN J. MILLER* Piano

Thursday, March 30 | 7:30PM

JUPITER ENSEMBLE*

Thursday, April 6 | 7:30PM

ALINA IBRAGIMOVA* Violin
CÉDRIC TIBERGHEN* Piano

Thursday, April 27 | 7:30PM

EMERSON & CALIDORE STRING QUARTETS

PERFORMANCES UP CLOSE

Wednesday, October 26 | 6PM & 9PM

JESS GILLAM Saxophone
THOMAS WEAVER* Piano

Tuesday, December 13 | 6PM & 9PM

tenTHING BRASS ENSEMBLE*

Sunday, March 26 | 3PM & 6PM

CHIAROSCURO STRING QUARTET*

Wednesday, April 12 | 6PM & 9PM

CÉCILE McLORIN SALVANT* Vocals
SULLIVAN FORTNER* Piano

RICHARDSON CHAMBER PLAYERS

Sunday, November 13 & Sunday, March 5 | 3PM

SPECIAL EVENTS

Wednesday, February 1 | 7:30PM

JOYCE DiDONATO Mezzo-soprano
IL POMO d'ORO* Orchestra

Tuesday, February 21 | 7:30PM

MITSUKO UCHIDA Piano

HEALING WITH MUSIC

Thursday, September 29 | 7:30PM

INTRODUCING CLEMENCY BURTON-HILL
Exploring music's role in brain injury recovery

Wednesday, November 9 | 7:30PM

JOSHUA ROMAN Cello
Living with Long COVID as a musician

Thursday, February 9 | 7:30PM

FRED HERSCH* Piano
Exploring music's role after an AIDS-related coma

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Featuring The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

Saturday, October 22 | 1PM

MEET THE MUSIC, for ages 6–12

Saturday, May 20 | 1PM & 3PM

CMS KIDS, for neurodiverse audiences ages 3–6

AT THE MOVIES

Tuesday, October 11 | 7:30PM

FALLING FOR STRADIVARI

Wednesday, February 8 | 7:30PM

THE BALLAD OF FRED HERSCH

LIVE MUSIC MEDITATION

Matthew Weiner, Meditation Instruction

Thursday, September 29 | 12:30PM

ALEXI KENNEY Violin

Wednesday, October 26 | 12:30PM

JESS GILLAM Saxophone

Thursday, February 9 | 12:30PM

FRED HERSCH Piano

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