



# SPHINX VIRTUOSI

**Afa Dworkin**

*Artistic Director*

UMS Digital Presentation

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Virtual Grid Performances and recorded in

Various Locations

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Sphinx Virtuosi appears by arrangement with MKI Artists.

**PROGRAM**

***This is America***

*Xavier Foley*

**Ev'ry Voice**

*Jessie Montgomery*

**Source Code**

*Antonín Dvořák*

**String Quartet in F major, B. 179, Op. 96 (Excerpt)**

Finale: Vivace ma non troppo

*Andrea Casarrubios*

**SEVEN**

Tommy Mesa, *Cello*

*Leonard Bernstein,*

*Arr. Jannina Norporth*

**West Side Story (Excerpt)**

America

*Michael Abels*

**Delights and Dances**

## PROGRAM

Drawing inspiration from the most promising voices of today, Sphinx Virtuosi seek to lift the many voices within their communities. Despite the physical isolation imposed upon the pandemic, Sphinx Virtuosi are unified through a shared commitment to social impact through expression. Sphinx Virtuosi are inspired by the music of Michael Abels, one of today's most versatile composers, with his work spanning the cinema and symphonies, alike. The sounds of Jessie Montgomery's *Source Code* redefine our canon of tomorrow. Opening with a new work by Xavier Foley, *Ev'ry Voice*, Sphinx Virtuosi seek to find new ways to lift the voices of Black and brown communities through the lens of Black and brown musicians. Though the artists are separated by distances and time, Sphinx Virtuosi collaborate to share their voices with a purpose to unifying their greater communities during these challenging yet transformative times.

## EV'RY VOICE

Xavier Foley

*Born 1994 in Marietta, GA*

UMS premiere: This piece has never been performed on a UMS concert.

This work is an homage and pays tribute to the Black National Anthem. "Lift Every Voice and Sing" was first written as a poem by James Weldon Johnson. Johnson was an American writer and civil rights activist, who also led the NAACP. Its first performance was in celebration of President Lincoln's birthday, on February 12, 1900, in Jacksonville, FL, performed by a group of schoolchildren. The poem was set to music by Johnson's brother, John Rosamond Johnson, and as a complete work, adopted by the NAACP as its official anthem. We often say that music is the soundtrack of our history and our lives. Today, we know "Lift Every Voice and Sing" as the soundtrack of the Civil Rights Movement. Xavier Foley, a bassist and composer, the winner of the Avery Fisher Career Grant, and a Sphinx Competition Laureate, created two separate versions of a work "Lift Ev'ry Voice," commissioned by the Sphinx Organization. One of the versions is set for the Sphinx Virtuosi, while the second incorporates use of Sphinx's professional vocal ensemble, Exigence. This piece was created in 2020 as a special feature under Sphinx's program umbrella "Land of the Free," which illuminates the wealth of musical talent among American composers. Appearing now as part of this *This is America* program, the work has become a beloved standalone. The inspiration for the commission came at a time when the ideals of unity were invoked amidst uncertainty, tragedy, and hope. In his music, Mr. Foley brings out the sonority and virtuosity of the string instruments to feature the familiar melodic material, while uncovering new timbres and sounds, almost symbolically encouraging all of us to look and listen anew, beyond the isolation of the global pandemic and the racial and cultural divide in our country. Today's soundtrack for the hopeful times ahead are ushered in by Mr. Foley's tribute to a treasured piece of the American historical and musical heritage.

## SOURCE CODE

Jessie Montgomery  
*Born 1981 in New York*

UMS premiere: This piece has never been performed on a UMS concert.

Whenever possible, it is pleasurable to collaborate with and play music by colleagues and friends. Their voices resonate more deeply with the issues of current times, keeping music fresh, relevant, and live. In this case, Jessie Montgomery, a violinist-composer extraordinaire, has toured with and led Sphinx ensembles many times. This piece pays tribute to a musical element that was the soundtrack of one of the most abhorrent periods of American history. In the composer's words:

The first sketches of *Source Code* began as transcriptions of various sources from African American artists prominent during the peak of the Civil Rights era in the US. I experimented by re-interpreting gestures, sentences...by choreographer Alvin Ailey, poets Langston Hughes and Rita Dove, and the great jazz songstress Ella Fitzgerald. Ultimately, this exercise of listening, re-imagining, and transcribing led me back to the black spiritual as a common musical source across all three genres. The spiritual is a significant part of the DNA of Black folk music, and subsequently most — arguably all — American pop music forms that have developed to the present day.

**STRING QUARTET IN F MAJOR, B. 179, OP. 96 (“AMERICAN”)  
(EXCERPT)**

Antonín Dvořák

*Born September 8, 1841 in Nelahozeves, Czech Republic*

*Died May 1, 1904 in Prague*

UMS premiere: Kneisel Quartette; January 1904 in University Hall.

In 1892 Dvořák served as artistic director and professor of composition at the National Conservatory of Music in America in New York City. He was appointed to this role at the request of the institution’s president, Jeannette Thurber. His mission was to help study and formulate the American classical or art music. Ultimately, his writing indicates that he was rather enamored with the African American spirituals, Native American melodies, and the unusual rhythmic richness inherent in the American tradition. He believed in furthering these elements rather than encouraging the imitation of the European melodic and rhythmic foundation. Dvořák spent the summer of 1893 relaxing in a small farming community (300 residents) of Czech immigrants in Spillville, Iowa, where this work was born. The Kneisel Quartet gave the premiere in Boston on New Year’s Day 1894 and in New York on January 12. Arguably the most popular of Dvořák’s 14 quartets, the “American” reflects his aim “to write something really melodious and simple” and undoubtedly, reflective of not only the melodies of his native land, drawing upon the nostalgia, but also, inspired by the music he heard in America. Specifically, the pentatonic melodies he employs throughout (in place of the chromatic preferences in European music) certainly suggests a connection to the latter. The fast final movement is cheerful, celebratory, jubilant, and deeply reflective, all at once.

## **SEVEN**

Andrea Casarrubios  
*Born 1988 in Spain*

UMS Premiere: This piece has never been performed on a UMS concert.

*SEVEN* (2020), for solo cello, is a tribute to the essential workers during the global COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to those who lost lives and suffered from the crisis. The piece ends with seven bell-like sounds, alluding to New York City's daily 7:00 PM tribute during the lockdown: the moment when New Yorkers clapped from their windows, connecting with each other and expressing appreciation for those on the front lines.

## WEST SIDE STORY (EXCERPT)

Leonard Bernstein

*Born August 25, 1918 in Lawrence, MA*

*Died October 14, 1990 in New York City*

Arr. Jannina Norporth

UMS Premiere: Selections from *West Side Story*, including “America,” Boston Pops Tour Orchestra, conducted by Arthur Fiedler; February 1962 at Hill Auditorium.

One of the greatest American musicians of the 20th century, Leonard Bernstein was both a prolific composer and a conductor. The music director of the New York Philharmonic, he wrote three symphonies and diverse concert works, and made extensive contributions to musical theater, one of his great passions.

“America” is a song from the musical *West Side Story*, for which Stephen Sondheim wrote the lyrics. In the original stage version, Anita, the most important female character after Maria, praises America, while Rosalia, another Puerto Rican immigrant, supports Puerto Rico. The song “America” highlights the positive qualities of America, ironically using a robust Hispanic musical style, replete with Latin percussion, guitar, and complex cross-rhythms. When Rita Moreno played Anita in the 1961 film version, she reinforced her American sentiments, while Bernardo replied with criticisms, which could be read as anti-immigrant prejudice: “Life is alright in America/If you’re all white in America.”

## DELIGHTS AND DANCES

Michael Abels

*Born October 8, 1962 in Phoenix, Arizona*

UMS premiere: Sphinx Virtuosi; October 2017 in Rackham Auditorium.

Michael Abels, an African American composer best known for combining classical music with African American jazz, blues, bluegrass, and ethnic genres, has gained widespread recognition for his orchestral music. *Delights and Dances*, commissioned by Sphinx, captivates listeners with witty, soulful, and infectious rhythmic music. *Delights and Dances* features quickly moving chord sequences and 16th-note runs for the solo quartet, which are rhythmically varied by the insertion of triplet patterns that relax and slow down the pace. The introductory section begins slowly, *largo*, *molto rubato*, with rhythmic freedom. The opening passage for solo cello sounds almost like a cadenza, then the solo viola plays the cello's ascending motive, and the two play a brief duet joined by the two solo violins. The orchestra enters, *pizzicato*, with short, detached, syncopated patterns. This section sounds like blues, but is very rhythmic and has an optimistic feel. Each player in the solo group plays its own riff. The final section, "Bluegrassy," begins with a solo viola theme; soon all four soloists join in a spirited hoedown. Finally, the solo quartet and the orchestral strings play together for the spirited conclusion.

*Program notes courtesy of The Sphinx Organization.*

## ARTISTS

Since its founding in 2004, **Sphinx Virtuosi** has defined itself as the most diverse professional chamber orchestra in the country. The dynamism in this ensemble's approach to music making offers an experience of unmatched vibrancy for seasoned and new audiences alike. Comprised of 18 of the nation's top Black and Latinx classical soloists, these artists tour annually as cultural ambassadors to communities far and wide.

This unique self-conducted ensemble earned rave reviews from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Sun Times*, and beyond. Since their Carnegie debut in 2004, Sphinx Virtuosi have returned to Carnegie Hall annually from 2006 performing to sold-out halls and earning outstanding reviews. At once a bridge between communities of color and the classical music establishment, Sphinx Virtuosi continue to garner critical acclaim during their annual national tours to many of the leading venues around the country. Inspired by Sphinx's overarching mission of transforming lives through the power of diversity in the arts, the Sphinx Virtuosi works to advance the social impact of music upon our greater society. Dedicated to new music, the ensemble has pioneered the discovery of gems by composers of color, with the aim of expanding the canon and amplifying new and important voices. Collaborations with composers including Michael Abels, Kareem Roustom, Jimmy López, Gabriela Lena Frank, Jessie Montgomery, Daniel Bernard Roumain, Terence Blanchard, and Xavier Foley are among many exciting highlights. Masterworks by Shostakovich, Bartók, Schubert, Jennifer Higdon, John Adams, Bach, and Mozart are often woven into the carefully curated programs,

which combine risk, exploration, and homage. They have collaborated with Denyce Graves, Sweet Honey in The Rock, Joshua Bell, Pinchas Zukerman, Chicago Children's Choir, and Damien Sneed.

As individual artists, Sphinx Virtuosi have performed as soloists with America's major orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, Cleveland, Detroit, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestras. Members also hold professional orchestral positions, and several have been named Laureates of other prestigious international competitions, including the Queen Elizabeth and Yehudi Menuhin. Roster members are graduates of the nation's top music schools, including Juilliard, Curtis, Eastman, and Cleveland Institute of Music. The Sphinx Virtuosi's first recording was released on the White Pine label and features music of Mendelssohn, Sibelius, Gabriela Lena Frank, and George Walker. Sphinx Virtuosi are passionate about empowering the next generation of artists and audiences, and as such, enjoy building interactive, bi-lingual (English/Spanish) programs and working with schools in underrepresented communities.

## UMS ARCHIVES

UMS has a long history with the Sphinx Organization which goes back to its founding in 1996. Over the years, UMS has co-presented the Sphinx Chamber Orchestra with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in Detroit's Orchestra Hall, collaborated on annual youth performances tied to the annual Sphinx Competition, showcased Sphinx chamber ensembles such as the Sphinx Quartet at the 2005 Ford Honors Program celebrating the Guarneri Quartet, and shared a remarkable number of board leaders and volunteers. This digital presentation marks the **Sphinx Virtuosi's** third performance under UMS auspices, following its UMS debut in September 2015 at Rackham Auditorium.