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MEAD WITTER SCHOOL OF MUSIC



UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN – MADISON

*A Celebration of Female Composers  
of the 19th, 20th, and 21st Centuries*

*Jessica Johnson, piano*

Mills Hall  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Mead Witter School of Music

Friday, March 8, 2019  
8:00 PM  
Mills Hall

# Program

Dreaming, Op. 15, No. 3 (1892)  
The Currents (2012)

Amy Beach (1867-1944)  
Sarah Kirkland Snider (b. 1973)

Romance in e-flat minor, Op. 11, No. 1(1839)  
Bolts of Loving Thunder (2013)

Clara Schumann (1819-1896)  
Missy Mazzoli (b. 1980)

## Intermission

Azuretta (2000)  
Troubled Water (1967)  
from *Spiritual Suite for Piano*

Regina Harris Baiocchi (b. 1956)  
Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)

Rêverie per pianoforte (1964)  
Preludes for Piano (2002)  
*I. a solitary figure at water's edge...*  
*II. a storm approaches land...*  
*III. Swing Set*

Germaine Tailleferre (1892-1983)  
Elena Ruehr (b. 1963)

## Program Notes

*The Currents* (2012) was commissioned by the American Pianists Association for its Classical Fellowship Awards. Piano was my first instrument and musical passion, so a solo piano commission for a competition initially intimidated me. I know the literature well—how deeply and imaginatively the instrument has been explored, how difficult it is to invent new ways to challenge the pianist. There is an idea that a piece written for a competition should do this, that it should invent new technical demands and showcase pyrotechnical dazzle. When I was younger, I wrote some piano music that consciously strove for virtuosity, but these days I'm more interested in getting at what is most peculiarly personal and in need of expression. So when I was asked to write this piece, I decided my contribution would be something that challenged the pianist to be at their most expressive, poetic, and lyrical, something that would reward a sharp attention to detail and sensitivity to pacing and narrative. Of course, the fact that it was for a competition never fully left my mind, so the piece does require a formidable technique, but my hope is that *The Currents* allows the performer to focus on storytelling as well—skills that, to my mind, are just as essential to becoming an unforgettable pianist. The title of the piece, and the overall emotional impetus, was inspired by a larger cycle of poems, *Unremembered*, by poet Nathaniel Bellows, which I set a few years ago. The cycle is about memory, innocence, and the ways we cope with an unpredictable world. The line from which I drew the title reads "But like the hidden current/somewhere undersea/you caused the most upheaval on the other side of me." (Sarah Kirkland Snider)

*Bolts of Loving Thunder* was composed in 2013 for pianist Emanuel Ax. When Manny asked me to write a piece that would appear on a program of works by Brahms, I immediately thought back to my experiences as a young pianist. I have clear memories of crashing sloppily but enthusiastically through the Rhapsodies and Intermezzi, and knew I wanted to create a

work based on this romantic, stormy idea of Brahms, complete with hand crossings and dense layers of chords. I also felt that there needed to be a touch of the exuberant, floating melodies typical of young, "pre-beard" Brahms. Brahms' "F-A-F" motive (shorthand for "frei aber froh" or "free by happy") gradually breaks through the surface of this work, frenetically bubbling out in the final section. The title comes for a line in John Ashbery's poem *Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape*.

*Bolts of Loving Thunder* was commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gustavo Dudamel, music director; Symphony Center Presents, Chicago; Cal Performances, University of California, Berkeley; and Carnegie Hall. (Missy Mazzoli)

*Azuretta* ("Little Girl Blue") is my musical reaction to a debilitating stroke Dr. Hale Smith suffered in 2000 AD. It was unbearable to witness my mentor, friend and master composer rendered mute and paralyzed. Hale was such a vibrant man who loved to talk, hold court; and he had the goods to do so. Unfortunately, Hale subsisted in a mute, paralyzed state until he passed 24 November 2009. Fortunately, Hale's incredibly legacy speaks for him and itself. (Regina Harris Baiocchi)

*Preludes for Piano* (2002) (I. a solitary figure at water's edge...; II. a storm approaches land...) These first two preludes are descriptive and were written in homage to the Debussy Preludes, with the titles at the end. They were inspired by the landscape of my childhood, along the shores of Lake Superior in Northern Michigan. (III. Swing Set) This virtuosic prelude uses a twelve-tone row in a playful way, first outlining it as a swinging bass line with counter rhythms, and later occurring as shorter 4-5 note subsets that recall stylistic periods as diverse as minimalism and romantic piano music. (Elena Ruehr)



**Jessica Johnson** serves on the piano faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as Professor of Piano and Piano Pedagogy, where in 2006, she was the recipient of UW-Madison's prestigious Emil Steiger Distinguished Teaching Award for excellence in teaching. Johnson frequently commissions and programs contemporary solo and chamber works, regularly performing with *Sole Nero*, a piano and percussion duo with Anthony Di Sanza, percussion. An advocate for the adoption of the Donison-Steinbuhler (DS) Standard, offering alternatively sized piano keyboards, her upcoming recording project features new works by female composers performed on the DS5.5™ ("7/8") keyboard.

Johnson has given workshops and presentations at the European Piano Teachers Association International Conference, World Piano Pedagogy Conference, ISME, MTNA, Performing Arts Medicine Association (PAMA), National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy (NCKP), Portland International Piano Festival, as well as held residencies at major universities and colleges throughout North America, Europe and China. Johnson has articles published in *American Music Teacher*, *Piano Journal of the European Piano Teachers Association*, *Clavier Companion*, and *Piano Pedagogy Forum*. She is a three-time winner of *American Music Teacher's* Article of the Year Award.

A devoted teacher, Johnson's students have secured teaching positions in the U.S., Canada, Europe and Asia. Passionate about community engagement and arts outreach, she serves as Director of *Piano Pioneers*, a program that brings high quality piano instruction to low-income community members and high-risk youth in Wisconsin.

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