

BIOGRAPHIES

Cassatt String Quartet

The Cassatt String Quartet was the first quartet chosen for Juilliard's Young Artists Quartet Program. Since then, they have performed at New York's Alice Tully Hall, and Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, Tanglewood Music Theater, the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, Theatre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, and the Beijing Central Conservatory in China. At the Library of Congress, the Cassatt performed on the library's matched quartet of Stradivarius instruments, and they performed the three complete Beethoven Quartet cycles at the University at Buffalo.

The Cassatt has been heard on NPR's Performance Today, Boston's WGBH, and New York's WQXR and WNYC. They have over forty recordings and were named three times to Alex Ross' 10 best classical recordings of the year in *The New Yorker*. The quartet is named for the celebrated American impressionist painter Mary Cassatt.

Narek Arutyunian, clarinet

Clarinetist Narek Arutyunian, who "reaches passionate depths with seemingly effortless technical prowess and beguiling sensitivity" (*Washington Post*), won first prize at the Young Concert Artists Auditions. He has performed extensively in the U.S., Australia, Asia, and Europe in venues such as the Kennedy Center, Merkin Hall, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the Louvre, and Palazzo del Principe in Genoa. As a soloist he has appeared with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, the Boston Pops, Riverside Symphony, Prague Radio Symphony, Kaliningrad Philharmonic, Moscow Virtuosi, and Moscow State Symphony; and he recorded Weber's *Concertino* with the New Russia State Symphony. He has participated at Tanglewood, Marlboro, Krzyzowa in Poland, and Germany's Usedomer Musikfestival; and he performed as clarinetist and Klezmer soloist for *Fiddler on the Roof* in a Yiddish off-Broadway production. Born in Armenia, Narek's family moved to Moscow at age 3. He is a graduate of Juilliard (B.A.) and Manhattan School of Music (M.A.), studying with Charles Neidich.

Haim Avitsur, trombone

Trombonist Haim Avitsur, Associate Professor of Trombone at the Hartt School, has premiered over 100 new pieces, encompassing a broad range of styles from solo trombone to chamber music and orchestra. Mr. Avitsur is also on the Classical Trombone faculty at Manhattan School of Music, NYC and an adjunct low brass faculty member at the Aaron Copland School of Music, Queens College, New York. Haim Avitsur's recordings are available on iTunes, Amazon, Spotify, and YouTube.

Ilana Davidson, soprano

Soprano Ilana Davidson's repertoire includes opera, concert, and recital repertoire from the Renaissance and Baroque to the 20th and 21st centuries. Her performances have included William Bolcom's *Songs Of Innocence and of Experience* conducted by Leonard

Slatkin at Carnegie Hall which earned four Grammy Awards. Ms. Davidson has performed with the Staatsoper Stuttgart, Florida Grand Opera, Nationale Reisopera, Vlaamse Opera, Opera Company of Philadelphia, Berkshire Choral Festival, Harrisburg Symphony, Duke Chapel, Bellingham Music Festival, Nieuw Sinfonietta Amsterdam, Krenek Festival Vienna, Innsbruck Early Music Festival and the Schwetzingen Festspiele.

Heather Johnson, mezzo-soprano

Mezzo-soprano, Heather Johnson, hailed by *Opera News* as "a dramatic singer in the truest sense", has received critical acclaim for her work both on the opera and concert stage. Recent engagements include Jan Arnold in *Everest* with Austin Opera, Despina in *Così fan Tutte* with Mill City Summer Opera, Dinah in Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti* with Boston Lyric Opera, Laura in *Luisa Miller* at the Metropolitan Opera, La Musica, La Messaggera, and La Speranza in the U.S. stage premiere of Respighi's realization of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* with Chautauqua Opera, *Les nuits d'été* with Minnesota Orchestra, the title role in Rossini's *Tancredi* with Baltimore Concert Opera and Opera Southwest, Jo in Mark Adamo's *Little Women* with Madison Opera, Baba the Turk in *The Rake's Progress*, and the title role of Jack Beeson's *Lizzie Borden* both with Boston Lyric Opera. In 2013, Ms. Johnson made her house debut at the Metropolitan Opera as a Flower Maiden in *Parsifal*. Ms. Johnson performed in the world premieres of *The Long Walk* by Jeremy Howard Beck with Opera Saratoga, Adamo's *Becoming Santa Claus* with The Dallas Opera, and *Fierce Grace: Jeannette Rankin*, a song cycle commissioned by OPERA America and performed at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Alexandra Joan, pianist

Praised for her vibrant interpretations, the French-Romanian pianist Alexandra Joan is an active soloist and sought-after chamber player who performs extensively in Europe and in the United States. She has appeared at major venues and festivals in Europe, Israel, and the United States, including Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall, Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center, Bargemusic, The Greene Space, La Roque d'Anthéron Festival, Colmar International Festival, and Tel Hai.

Jewish Theological Seminary

JTS is a preeminent institution of Jewish higher education, training thoughtful, innovative leaders—rabbis, cantors, educators, lay leaders, and scholars—who strengthen our communities with a vision of Judaism that is deeply grounded in the Jewish past and thoroughly engaged with contemporary society. JTS also provides high-caliber lifelong learning and professional development to our alumni, adult learners, and Jewish communities throughout North America. Through its Library, JTS preserves and makes accessible to students and scholars throughout the world the greatest collection of Judaica in the Western Hemisphere.

THE LIBRARY AND THE H.L. MILLER CANTORIAL SCHOOL of
THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
present

REACHING FOR THE HEAVENS: THE MUSIC OF COMPOSER GERALD COHEN

TUESDAY, MAY 10, 2022, 7:30 P.M. ET

FEATURING
Cassatt String Quartet
Alexandra Joan
Ilana Davidson
Heather Johnson
Narek Arutyunian
Haim Avitsur

The Jewish Theological Seminary
3080 Broadway (at 122nd Street), New York City



PROGRAM

Cassatt String Quartet:
Muneko Otani, violin
Jennifer Leshnow, violin
Rosemary Nelis, viola
Gwen Krosnick, cello

Alexandra Joan, piano
Ilana Davidson, soprano
Heather Johnson, mezzo-soprano
Narek Arutyunian, clarinet
Haim Avitsur, trombone



Sea of Reeds for solo piano (2020) (World Premiere)

1. Hariu Ladonai
2. Adonai Ro'i
3. Dodi Li Vaani Lo
4. Y'varech'cha
5. Dayeinu

Amid the Alien Corn (2019) for soprano, mezzo-soprano and piano (Text by E. Louise Beach) (World Premiere)

Voyagers (2017) for clarinet and string quartet

1. Cavatina
2. Bhairavi
3. Galliard
4. Beyond the Heliosphere

Preludes and Debka (2001) for trombone and string quartet



The program will run 1.5 hours without intermission.

GERALD COHEN, COMPOSER



Gerald Cohen is an assistant professor at the H. L. Miller Cantorial School of The Jewish Theological Seminary, on the faculty of Hebrew Union College, and has been cantor at Shaarei Tikvah (Scarsdale, New York) for 35 years. As a composer, he has been

praised for his “linguistic fluidity and melodic gift,” creating music that “reveals a very personal modernism that . . . offers great emotional rewards” (*Gramophone Magazine*).

His opera, **Steal a Pencil for Me**, based on a true concentration camp love story, had its world premiere production by Opera Colorado in January 2018; Opera Colorado will be producing a studio recording of the opera, to be recorded in June 2022. Cohen’s earlier opera **Sarah and Hagar**, based on the story from the book of Genesis, has been performed in concert form. Cohen is a noted synagogue cantor and baritone; his experience as a singer informs his dramatic, lyrical compositions. Cohen’s best-known work, his “shimmering setting” (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*) of *Psalm 23*, has received thousands of performances from synagogues and churches to Carnegie Hall and the Vatican. Among his recent chamber music works are **Playing for our Lives** and **Voyagers**; these compositions, composed for the Cassatt String Quartet, will be the centerpieces of an album of Cohen’s music to be released on innova Recordings in 2022.

Recognition of Cohen’s body of work includes commissioning grants from Meet the Composer, National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, American Composers Forum, residencies including those at Copland House, the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, and American Lyric Theater, as well as Cantors Assembly’s Max Wohlberg Award for distinguished achievement in the field of Jewish composition, and the Hallel V’Zimrah Award from the Zamir Choral Foundation. Cohen received a BA in music from Yale and a DMA in music composition from Columbia.

His compositions have been published by Oxford University Press, G. Schirmer / AMP and Transcontinental Music. Gerald is managed by Black Tea Music, www.blackteamusic.com.

All compositions on this program are published by Gerald Cohen Music: www.geraldcohenmusic.com.

PROGRAM NOTES FROM GERALD COHEN

I am honored and moved to have this concert of my music presented as part of the opening season at this beautiful new auditorium of The Jewish Theological Seminary. Special thanks to these wonderful musicians, many of whom have performed my music with such vibrancy and love over many years. And deep thanks to David Kraemer, professor of Talmud and Rabbinics and the Joseph J. and Dora Abbell Librarian, and Cantor Nancy Abramson, director of the H.L. Miller Cantorial School, for their efforts in bringing this concert—originally scheduled for the spring of 2020—to fruition this evening.

Sea of Reeds is a set of arrangements of five of my Jewish liturgical songs; the original version of these arrangements were written for the Grmeta Ensemble, (Vasko Dukovski, clarinet; Ismail Lumanovski, clarinet; Alexandra Joan, piano) with a premiere by them in New York City in November 2009. It was a delight to write these arrangements for clarinet duo and piano, and to re-imagine these songs transformed into instrumental chamber music that stand on their own, freed from their original vocal and textual aspects. This new solo piano arrangement was written in 2020 for pianist Alexandra Joan, who had played them so beautifully in their chamber version. Alex recorded a video version of the pieces in 2021; this evening is the concert world premiere.

“Hariu Ladonai” is a setting of the joyous Psalm 100, a psalm of thanksgiving which asks all the earth to give a “shout of joy” in praise of God. “Adonai Ro’i Lo Echsar” is based on Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd” which is often used as a consolation for those in mourning. “Dodi Li Vaani Lo,” originally for chorus, is a setting of selections from the Song of Songs, the Biblical poem celebrating romantic and physical love. “Y’varech’cha” comes from a song—originally written for the birth of our child—using the words said as a blessing from parents to children at the beginning of the Sabbath celebration. “Dayeinu,” also from a choral piece, is based on one of the most famous sections of the Passover Haggadah—a song of thanks to God for deliverance from slavery to freedom.

The piece in its version for two clarinets and piano has been recorded by the Grmeta Ensemble on *SEA OF REEDS* (Navona Records), an album of my chamber music compositions featuring the clarinet.

Amid the Alien Corn (Ruth and Naomi) is a setting of a poem by E. Louise Beach, based on the first chapter of the biblical Book of Ruth. Naomi is returning to the land of Judah after living in Moab, having left Judah 10 years before because of a famine there. In that time she has seen her two sons marry Moabite women, and then experienced the death of her husband and both sons. She plans to return to Judah alone, but her daughter-in-law Ruth expresses her love and loyalty for Naomi and her people, and persists in her requests to leave her native land and accompany Naomi to Judah.

Ethel Beach, in her poem, expands on the spare biblical text, focusing on the two women and deepening their emotional relationship as they experience this crucial moment in their lives. As a composer, I cherished the opportunity to create, in this short dramatic and lyrical scene, vocal characters for these two strong and empathetic women.

Amid the Alien Corn was commissioned by E. Louise Beach, and dedicated to her mother, and to her daughters. The premiere was to have occurred at JTS in 2020, with the same wonderful performers, but like so many other

musical events, was delayed because of the pandemic. I am so happy to finally have the premiere of the piece this evening.

Voyagers, for clarinet and string quartet, is a tribute to the two Voyager spacecraft on the 40th anniversary of their launch, and of the music sent to accompany them on their journey out of the solar system. The piece, written as a linking of music, science and visual art, was commissioned by and written for the Cassatt Quartet and clarinetist Vasko Dukovski. It had its premiere at the Hayden Planetarium of the American Museum of Natural History in 2017, with astronomical visualizations created by Carter Emmart, director of Astrovisualization at the Planetarium.

When the Cassatt Quartet asked me to write a piece based on the theme of ‘voyages’ for a planned concert, I recalled that the two Voyager spacecraft—launched in the late 1970s, explorers of the outer planets, and now journeying beyond the edge of our solar system—were each launched with a ‘Golden Record’, the brainchild of Carl Sagan, containing recordings of selections of Earth’s music, along with photos and sounds of human life. This was sent as a message, to any extra-terrestrial civilization that might find the record, to convey the essence of human life on Earth.

The 30-minute piece focuses on several of the pieces that were part of the Golden Record, weaving them together in a composition that celebrates humanity’s quest to explore the universe, and the power of music to express the rich emotional and cultural world of human beings. The creators of the Golden Record chose a very idiosyncratic selection of pieces from around the world, and in turn I chose several of these pieces—a late Beethoven quartet, a North Indian vocal raga, and a Renaissance dance—as the main source material for this composition about music and exploration.

Preludes and Debka, for trombone and string quartet, was composed in 2001 for Haim Avitsur and the Degas String Quartet, and was given its premiere by them in Syracuse and NYC. Writing for this unusual combination was a wonderful challenge—one of working out ways for the trombone and strings to make real chamber music together. A “debka” is a Middle Eastern dance, used in both Arab and Israeli communities—the dance and its music is, as in the last section of this piece, normally in the form of a theme and variations. I found this melody in an anthology of Sephardic music when I was beginning the composition of the piece, and it jumped out as being a wonderful theme for the trombone and strings to explore.

The piece grows from a quiet mysterious opening, highlighting an echoing, moody statement, and then a related idea in sharper, repeated notes; this leads to a scherzo-like section where the melody is traded between the trombone and strings; then a slow, tender duet between the trombone and first violin, which after a trombone cadenza, leads to the variations on the debka melody—mostly lively and playful, eventually becoming rather wild as it brings back the opening material in a new character, and then ending with a reprise of the debka theme.

Voyagers and *Preludes and Debka* were recorded in February 2022 by clarinetist Narek Arutyunian, trombonist Colin Williams, and the Cassatt String Quartet in February 2022 in this wonderful auditorium, produced by Judith Sherman. The piece will be part of an album of my music, also titled *Voyagers*, to be released by innova Recordings later this year.