

AMERICAN PIANO MUSIC

SUMMER MOON

VOLUME 4

20 COMPOSITIONS | 20 AMERICAN COMPOSERS | 1931-2023

Corte Swearingen, piano

LINER NOTES

ABOUT THE ALBUM

Twenty voices. One American piano.

With this fourth volume, the American Piano Music series takes a new direction.

The first three albums were built around seven composers, with three works by each. Beginning here, I wanted to cast the net much wider: twenty compositions by twenty different American composers. The result is less a collection of individual portraits than a journey across the extraordinary range of American piano music itself.

The music spans more than ninety years, from Bix Beiderbecke's *Flashes*, written in 1931, to Michael Torke's *Chancel* from 2023. Along the way are works rooted in ragtime, jazz, spirituals, folk music, minimalism, modern classical traditions, and forms inherited from nineteenth-century Europe and transformed by American composers into something distinctly their own.

Some of these composers - Philip Glass, Leonard Bernstein, Samuel Barber, Florence Price - have become central figures in American music. Others remain known primarily to specialists or within particular musical communities. That contrast is part of what interests me. I have never thought of American piano music as a single tradition. It is a collection of traditions, constantly overlapping and influencing one another.

There are intimate miniatures here alongside virtuoso showpieces; music written for children's theater alongside works drawn from African American spirituals; contemporary ragtime beside freely improvised jazz. What connects them is simply that each piece, for one reason or another, made me want to sit down at the piano and play it.

I hope this album encourages listeners to make some discoveries of their own.

TRACK OVERVIEW

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01 Wax Paper Dance

Donald Ashwander | 1967

Donald Ashwander wrote *Wax Paper Dance* for The Paper Bag Players, the innovative children's theater company founded in New York in 1958. The original stage action was wonderfully simple: dancers pulled long streamers from boxes of wax paper, creating lines, loops, circles, and curves as they moved.

Knowing that image makes the music almost impossible not to visualize.

Ashwander had an unusual gift for writing music that sounds spontaneous and playful while remaining beautifully constructed. *Wax Paper Dance* skips and darts across the keyboard with the syncopated energy that runs through so much of his piano music. The rhythms seem to tumble over one another, suggesting movement that is slightly unpredictable but never chaotic.

It is a small piece, but it captures something essential about Ashwander: his humor, his theatrical imagination, and his ability to find music in the ordinary details of American life.

02 Prelude

George Walker | 1945

George Walker wrote his *Prelude* very early in his career and performed it at his celebrated 1945 Town Hall debut in New York. More than fifty years later, Walker would become the first Black composer to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Music, but this brief work already reveals the extraordinary control and seriousness of purpose that would characterize his mature music.

The *Prelude* begins quietly, with a searching, almost vocal quality. Its lines move independently through the texture, creating a sense of conversation beneath the surface. The harmony is rich but restrained, and the music seems continually to hover between stillness and unease.

As the piece grows more intense, the texture thickens and the emotional temperature rises before the opening atmosphere gradually returns. Nothing is overstated. Walker allows the tension to accumulate naturally and then withdraw.

I find the ending particularly beautiful. The music does not arrive at a grand resolution; instead, it seems simply to settle into itself. In only a few minutes, Walker creates a remarkably complete emotional world.

03 Bordeaux Concert, Part XI

Keith Jarrett | 2016

Keith Jarrett occupies a fascinating place on this album because Bordeaux Concert, Part XI was never 'composed' in the conventional sense.

On July 6, 2016, Jarrett walked onto the stage of the Auditorium de l'Opera National de Bordeaux with no predetermined program. What followed was an entirely improvised solo concert divided into thirteen sections. Part XI emerged spontaneously that evening and disappeared just as quickly, preserved only because the performance was recorded.

That sense of discovery is central to Jarrett's solo concerts. He does not improvise around a pre-existing tune; he creates the music itself in real time.

Of the thirteen Bordeaux improvisations, Part XI is one of the most immediately lyrical. There is a haunting simplicity to it - a melody that seems to reveal itself gradually, surrounded by harmonies that feel both familiar and elusive.

Transcribing and performing music that began as improvisation presents an interesting paradox. What was created once, in a single unrepeatable moment, becomes something that another pianist can now study, interpret, and recreate.

04 Sunlight & Shadow

Tom Brier | 2012

For nearly three decades, Tom Brier maintained a remarkable personal tradition: beginning in 1987, he tried to compose at least one ragtime waltz every year. Among the many pieces that grew from that practice, Sunlight & Shadow became one of his favorites.

It is easy to hear why.

The title perfectly captures the character of the music. Much of the piece seems warm and open, with graceful melodies moving through a gently lilting ragtime-waltz rhythm. Yet darker harmonies continually pass across the surface. Even when the music appears cheerful, there is often something wistful underneath it.

That mixture gives Sunlight & Shadow its unusual emotional power. Brier never needs to push the music toward overt sadness; the melancholy simply seems to exist within the beauty of the melodies themselves.

It is one of the qualities I most admire in Brier's music. Beneath his formidable command of ragtime is a composer capable of remarkable tenderness.

05 Blue Bird

Valerie Capers | 1976

Valerie Capers's *Portraits in Jazz* is a collection of twelve piano pieces, each inspired by a major jazz musician or singer. *Blue Bird* pays tribute to Charlie 'Bird' Parker, one of the defining figures of bebop.

Capers does not simply quote Parker. Instead, she recreates something of his musical language at the piano.

The piece is built around a chromatic twelve-bar blues, but the melodic lines move with the quickness and unpredictability of bebop improvisation. Phrases dart across the beat while left-hand chords frequently land on unexpected offbeats. The result has a wonderfully airborne quality - as though the music is continually trying to escape the bar lines.

What makes the piece especially effective is its economy. In only a few pages, Capers captures something unmistakable about Parker: the speed of thought, the rhythmic agility, and the sense that a melodic line might change direction at any instant.

It is a miniature portrait, but a remarkably vivid one.

06 Ragtime Blackbird

Galen Wilkes | 2016

Galen Wilkes describes *Ragtime Blackbird* as a classic rag written in the tradition of the many 'avian rags' that appeared during ragtime's early years. Its inspiration is the red-winged blackbird, a familiar sight from Wilkes's childhood near the Pattagansett River in Connecticut.

The music belongs unmistakably to the classic ragtime tradition. Its rhythms are crisp, its melodies elegant, and its structure recalls the carefully crafted rags of the early twentieth century.

I learned something important about the piece directly from Galen.

When I first began working on it, I instinctively swung the eighth notes. I sent him a recording of what I was doing, and he quickly pointed out that the piece should be played with straight eighths in the classic ragtime style.

At first I had to resist my natural tendency to swing the rhythm. But he was right. Once I stopped trying to make the music behave like jazz, the character of the piece became much clearer. The strict rhythm gives the writing a wonderful precision and allows the elegance of Wilkes's melodies and inner voices to come through.

Sometimes interpretation means discovering what not to do.

07 Summer Moon

Florence Price | 1938

Florence Price's *Summer Moon* creates an atmosphere almost from its first notes.

Written in 1938, the piece unfolds slowly and quietly, with a sense of suspended time. The harmonies seem illuminated from within, shifting in subtle ways as the melody drifts above them. There is something unmistakably nocturnal about the music, although Price never resorts to obvious musical scene-painting.

Instead, she creates the feeling of looking at something familiar transformed by moonlight.

Price's harmonic language here is particularly beautiful. Classical lyricism mingles naturally with colors that suggest jazz and blues, while certain passages have an almost impressionistic transparency. None of these influences feels borrowed. They have become part of Price's own musical vocabulary.

For decades, *Summer Moon* remained one of the countless works by Price that existed largely outside the standard repertoire. Its rediscovery is a reminder of how much American music is still waiting to be heard.

Of all the works on this album, this is one I find myself returning to simply for the beauty of its sound.

08 The Valley of the Bones

Margaret Bonds | *Spiritual Suite*

Margaret Bonds's *Spiritual Suite* grew from her lifelong love of African American spirituals. As a young musician, Bonds remembered hearing singers such as Marian Anderson and Roland Hayes conclude their concerts with spirituals and wanting comparable music that she could perform at the piano.

The Valley of the Bones, the suite's opening movement, is based on the spiritual *Dry Bones*.

Bonds transforms the familiar material rather than simply arranging it. The music begins almost starkly, its fragmented gestures suggesting the skeletal imagery of the title. Gradually the texture becomes more animated. Rhythms gather momentum, melodies begin to move more freely, and what initially seems barren starts to feel increasingly alive.

The biblical imagery behind *Dry Bones* - bones awakening and rising again - gives the movement an obvious dramatic arc, and Bonds reinforces it through rhythm, harmony, blues, gospel, and the traditions of the concert piano.

The result is music that feels simultaneously ancient and modern, sacred and theatrical.

It also makes a powerful case for what Bonds did so brilliantly throughout her career: bringing Black musical traditions into the concert hall without stripping them of their identity.

09

Lamb Chop

Larisa Migachyov | 2012

Ragtime never really disappeared.

Long after its commercial heyday had passed, composers continued writing new rags - not as nostalgic reproductions, but because the form still offered enormous possibilities for melody, harmony, rhythm, and invention.

Larisa Migachyov is one of the most distinctive contemporary voices in that tradition. Her catalog is filled with wonderfully playful titles - Lemon Slice Rag, Chicken Fried Steak, Flaming Cabbage Rag, and many others - but behind the humor is an exceptional gift for melody.

Lamb Chop is one of her most lyrical pieces.

The rag was dedicated to Patricia Lamb Conn, daughter of Joseph Lamb, one of the great composers of classic ragtime. The title is an affectionate play on the family name, but the musical connection runs deeper. Like Joseph Lamb's finest rags, Lamb Chop has a poetic quality that transcends the mechanics of syncopation.

What attracts me most to the piece is its warmth. There is humor in the title, but the music itself is remarkably sincere - graceful, expressive, and at times quietly touching.

10

Etude No. 5

Philip Glass | 1994

Philip Glass began writing his piano etudes partly because he wanted music that would challenge and expand his own abilities at the keyboard. What eventually emerged was a collection of twenty pieces that has become one of the most widely performed bodies of contemporary piano music.

Etude No. 5 is among the most hypnotic.

Like much of Glass's music, it is built from repeated patterns. But repetition here does not mean stasis. Small changes in harmony, register, texture, and emphasis continually alter the emotional character of the music. A figure that initially seems neutral can sound entirely different several measures later simply because of what has happened around it.

The difficulty for the pianist is not primarily about speed or virtuoso display. It is about control: maintaining the pulse, shaping long spans of repeated material, and allowing the music to evolve without forcing it.

Played too mechanically, the piece can become an exercise. Given time and space to breathe, it becomes something much more interesting - a slowly changing landscape in which the smallest harmonic shift can feel enormous.

11 Flashes

Bix Beiderbecke | 1931

Bix Beiderbecke is remembered primarily as one of the great jazz cornetists of the 1920s, but he also left behind a tiny and extraordinary body of piano music.

Flashes was written in 1931, the final year of his life. It belongs to a group of piano pieces that includes *In a Mist*, *Candlelights*, and *In the Dark* - works that reveal a musical imagination quite different from what one might expect from a jazz musician of the period.

There is jazz in *Flashes*, certainly, but also something almost impressionistic. Harmonies shimmer and dissolve. Melodies appear briefly and disappear. Sudden bursts of motion interrupt quieter passages, making the title seem especially appropriate: ideas arrive like flashes of light.

I first heard the piece in 1987 while studying at the University of Illinois, when faculty pianist Tony Caramia performed it. I remember immediately recognizing that I was hearing something unusual.

Nearly four decades later, I still feel the same way. *Flashes* occupies its own strange corner of American piano music - part jazz, part modernism, and entirely Bix Beiderbecke.

12 Streets of Laredo

Roy Harris | 1946

Roy Harris was fascinated by the idea of creating concert music from the folk traditions of the United States. His *American Ballads* take familiar songs and place them within a harmonic language that is unmistakably twentieth-century.

Streets of Laredo draws upon one of the best-known cowboy ballads in American music.

Harris allows the tune to remain recognizable, but the harmonies surrounding it subtly change the way we hear it. What might otherwise sound like a simple folk melody takes on a darker and more spacious character. There are moments when the music seems almost empty, as though the tune were being heard across a great distance.

That spaciousness is one of Harris's most distinctive qualities. His music often evokes the enormous scale of the American landscape without resorting to obvious imitation.

Here, the familiar cowboy song becomes less a piece of Americana than a meditation on memory, loneliness, and distance.

13 Golden Hours

Max Morath | 1966

Max Morath played an important role in keeping ragtime alive during the years before the major ragtime revival of the 1970s. He was not only a pianist and entertainer but also a composer and historian with a deep understanding of the music's past.

Golden Hours, written in 1966, is one of his finest compositions.

The piece looks backward affectionately toward classic ragtime and toward publisher John Stark and his circle, but Morath does not simply imitate the early composers. He begins bending the rules, shifting unexpectedly between groups of two and three beats and allowing the rhythmic structure itself to become part of the fun.

For this recording, I also depart slightly from the printed score.

My interpretation was influenced by pianist Tony Caramia, from whom I first heard a number of pieces that eventually became part of my own American repertoire. Near the end, I reprise earlier material in D major and allow the piece to disappear quietly rather than ending with a conventional flourish.

It is my own small tribute within Morath's larger tribute - a reminder that musical traditions remain alive partly because each performer leaves something of themselves behind.

14 After the Concert

Samuel Barber | late 1960s

The title After the Concert immediately suggests a particular state of mind: the room has emptied, the applause has ended, and what remains is the private emotional residue of the performance.

Whether Barber intended such a literal image or not, the title fits the music beautifully.

The piece resembles a slightly dislocated mazurka. Its gestures recall the elegance of nineteenth-century piano music, but the harmonies belong unmistakably to Barber's world. Phrases hesitate. Dissonances linger. The music often seems to begin a thought and then withdraw from it.

There is a melancholy here that I find especially moving because Barber never exaggerates it. The piece is quiet, restrained, and emotionally ambiguous.

Barber wrote some of the most intensely lyrical American music of the twentieth century, yet After the Concert achieves its effect through understatement. It feels less like a public statement than a private reflection - the kind of music that might begin only after everyone else has gone home.

15 Spiritual

William Grant Still | from *A Deserted Plantation*, 1933

William Grant Still originally conceived *A Deserted Plantation* for orchestra in 1933 and later adapted portions of it for solo piano. The work was inspired by Paul Laurence Dunbar's poetry and by the image of an elderly man, Uncle Josh, living alone on a decaying plantation and remembering an earlier world.

The piano version distills the larger work into three movements: *Spiritual*, *Young Missy*, and *Dance*.

Spiritual opens the suite with music of striking simplicity. Still understood the spiritual not merely as source material but as a living musical language - one he had known since childhood, when his grandmother sang spirituals to him.

The melody unfolds with dignity, surrounded by harmonies that subtly expand its expressive range. Still does not attempt to transform the spiritual into something more 'classical.' Instead, he allows the two traditions to coexist.

That ability - to bring African American musical idioms into concert music without erasing their character - is central to Still's importance as a composer.

There is both sadness and strength in this piece, and its simplicity is deceptive. Beneath the surface lies an entire history.

16 Speed Limit Rag

Aaron Jay Kernis | 2001

Aaron Jay Kernis is not a composer generally associated with ragtime, which is precisely what makes *Speed Limit Rag* so much fun.

Written in 2001, the piece approaches the genre from the outside. Kernis understands its rhythmic vocabulary, but he treats it with the freedom of a contemporary composer who feels no obligation to follow the traditional rules.

The result is fast, witty, and slightly eccentric.

Its compound meter gives the music an unusual bounce, and there are moments that remind me of the urbane novelty piano tradition of Billy Mayerl as well as the rhythmic sparkle of Gershwin. Yet the piece never sounds like an imitation of either.

Instead, Kernis seems to be enjoying the possibilities of ragtime - taking its syncopations, gestures, and sheer theatrical energy and viewing them through a twenty-first-century lens.

Among the rags on this album, it may be the one least interested in behaving like a rag. That is a large part of its charm.

17 Barcarolle No. 1

Ned Rorem | 1949

Ned Rorem composed his three Barcarolles in Morocco in 1949, early in a career that would eventually make him one of America's most distinguished composers of vocal and chamber music.

The traditional barcarolle is a boat song, its gently rocking rhythm associated with Venetian gondoliers. Chopin transformed the form into one of the great Romantic piano works, and generations of composers continued to reinterpret it.

Rorem's Barcarolle No. 1 belongs to that tradition while sounding entirely of its own time.

A flowing accompaniment creates the gentle rocking motion one expects, but the harmony continually shifts beneath the melody. Major and minor colors blur together. Moments of tranquility are touched by dissonance, giving the music a faint sense of unease even at its most serene.

What I love about the piece is that it never tries to become larger than it is. Rorem trusted melody. He could write music of enormous sophistication while allowing it to remain graceful, intimate, and immediately beautiful.

This is one of those pieces that seems to say more by refusing to say too much.

18 For Felicia Montealegre

Leonard Bernstein | 1948

Leonard Bernstein wrote dozens of short piano pieces commemorating people who mattered to him. Collectively known as the Anniversaries, they form something like a musical diary stretching across much of his life.

For Felicia Montealegre opens the Four Anniversaries of 1948 and honors the actress who would later become Bernstein's wife.

This is not the exuberant Bernstein of *West Side Story* or *Candide*. The music is intimate, restrained, and exceptionally tender.

A quiet melody unfolds over harmonies that seem continually to hesitate between certainty and longing. There are characteristic Bernstein fingerprints in the harmony and rhythm, but everything is softened. The piece feels almost private, as though we are overhearing something not originally intended for a large audience.

That intimacy is what makes the Anniversaries so fascinating. Bernstein, one of the most public musicians of the twentieth century, repeatedly returned to the piano to create miniature portraits of the people around him.

For Felicia Montealegre is among the loveliest of them - a musical portrait created with affection rather than spectacle.

19 Chancel

Michael Torke | 2023

Michael Torke's *Chancel* comes from *Sessions, 3 A.M.*, a 2023 collection of fifteen short piano pieces whose titles are drawn from architectural features associated largely with churches and other monumental buildings: Nave, Narthex, Chancel, Transept, Apse, Clerestory, and others.

Despite those architectural titles, the music does not attempt to portray buildings literally.

Instead, Torke creates spaces.

Chancel unfolds through clear textures, repeating patterns, and an immediately memorable melodic language. The harmony changes gradually, allowing the listener to inhabit one sound before moving into the next. There is a calmness to the piece that feels neither sentimental nor static.

Torke has always had an unusual gift for writing contemporary music that communicates directly without sacrificing individuality. Here, simplicity becomes part of the design.

After traveling through more than ninety years of American piano music on this album, *Chancel* offers a glimpse of where the tradition continues to go: melodic, accessible, quietly modern, and still capable of finding new possibilities within the sound of a single piano.

20 The Ragtime Hurricane

Glenn Jenks | 1986

There was really only one way this album could end.

Glenn Jenks's *The Ragtime Hurricane* is the final movement of his *A Ragtime Trilogy*, following *French Lace* and *Desperation Tango*. It belongs to the tradition of the novelty rag - the spectacular, technically ferocious branch of ragtime that flourished during the 1920s.

Jenks pushes that tradition almost to absurdity.

The music barely gives the pianist a moment to recover. Rapid passagework races across the keyboard, syncopations collide with one another, and the final strain introduces a driving sixteenth-note walking bass beneath increasingly extravagant writing above it.

Yet difficulty alone is never the point.

Jenks understood that virtuosity works best when the audience feels the danger. *The Ragtime Hurricane* is designed to sound as though the entire performance might come off the rails at any moment - even though everything is carefully constructed.

That combination of craftsmanship, humor, danger, and sheer exuberance is pure Glenn Jenks.

It also makes a fitting conclusion to this album. After twenty composers and more than ninety years of American piano music, there is no quiet fade into the distance.

The hurricane simply arrives.