

# UNCSA

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## **JOURNEY: MY AMERICAN STORY**

**Sept. 24 at 3 p.m.**

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WATSON HALL

**Joshua Conyers**

BARITONE

**Nancy Johnston**

PIANO

PRESENTED BY

**UNCSA**

**Brian Cole**

CHANCELLOR

**Saxton Rose**

SCHOOL OF MUSIC, DEAN



## PROGRAM NOTES

“Journey: My American Story” reflects on my life as a Black man and musician in America. This journey starts with an omnipotent song cycle “Two Black Churches” by Shawn E. Okpebholo. Grammy-nominated artist Shawn E. Okpebholo is a critically acclaimed and award-winning composer. His music is described as devastatingly beautiful, fresh, fearless, affecting, lyrical, complex, singular, searing, dreamy and powerful. The first movement, “Ballad of Birmingham,” is a narrative account of the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, from the perspectives of the mother of one victim and her child. Stylistically, the first movement juxtaposes 1960s Black gospel with contemporary art song. The second movement, “The Rain,” reflects the shooting at Mother Emanuel AME Church in 2015.

“The Rain” is a beautifully haunting metaphor for racism and the inability of Black people in America to stay afloat, a consequence of the flood of injustice and the weight of oppression. In this composition, the number nine is significant, symbolizing the nine people who perished in the 2015 shooting at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. These pieces represent the trauma of racism and the lived experience of Black people in modern-day society.

“Two Black Churches” is dedicated to the four girls who lost their lives in the 1963 Birmingham Church bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church: Addie Mae Collins (age 14), Carol Denise McNair (age 11), Carole Robertson (age 14) and Cynthia Wesley (age 14). “Two Black Churches” is also dedicated to the nine men and women who lost their lives in the 2015 Charleston church shooting at Mother Emanuel AME Church: Sharonda Coleman- Singleton (age 45), Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd (age 54), Susie Jackson (age 87), Ethel Lee Lance (age 70), Depayne Middleton-Doctor (age 49), Clementa C. Pinckney (age 41), Tywanza Sanders (age 26), Daniel L. Simmons (age 74) and Myra Thompson (age 59).

Virgil Thomson’s “A Prayer to Saint Catherine” and Samuel Barber’s “Dover Beach” portray my journey as a musician in American institutions and my understanding of the standard repertoire in the classical canon. These composers were instrumental in developing the American sound in classical music, and they have been described as modernists, neo-Romantics, neoclassicists, and composers of persistent and long-lasting acclaim. My first church job was given to me by my first voice teacher, Robert Brown, when I was in high school. It was a Unitarian church, and in my first week, a colleague was assigned to sing “A Prayer to Saint Catherine.” The song is wistfully conversational, and I remember being moved to tears by my colleague’s simple, straightforward and self-effacing performance of it, which seems just right for the charming but heartfelt text.

## PROGRAM NOTES

The poem “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold shifts literally and symbolically from the present to Sophocles on the Aegean to medieval Europe and back to the present. The auditory and visual images are dramatic, mimetic and didactic. Exploring the dark terror that lies beneath his happiness in love, the speaker resolves to love. The exigencies of history and the nexus between lovers are the poem’s real issues. That lovers may be “true to one another” is a precarious notion: love in the modern city momentarily gives peace, but nothing else in postmedieval society reflects or confirms the faithfulness of lovers. Devoid of love and light, the world is a maze of confusion left by “retreating” faith. These two pieces represent my educational experience as a young adult. These composers and this style of music were my American classical music experience in the classroom

Charles Ives was an American modernist composer who was among the first to engage in a systematic program of experimental music, using techniques such as polytonality, polyrhythm, tone clusters, aleatory elements and quarter tones. His experimentation foreshadowed many musical innovations that were later more widely adopted during the 20th century, making him often regarded as the leading American composer of art music of that era. Ives’s song “General William Booth Enters into Heaven” strikes a chord with my upbringing in the church. My grandmother Gwendolyn raised us in the Pentecostal church, and I’ve always had a sense of religion and spirituality. As a teenager, I sought out my own sense of faith and joined the Salvation Army. Ives composed the song in 1914, based on Vachel Lindsay’s poem. The poem is a dramatic and vivid depiction of General William Booth (the founder of the Salvation Army) as he leads an army of desolate souls into Heaven. At the end of the poem, Jesus heals these souls, and they all march together into Heaven. Ives’s setting of the text illustrates his appropriation of America’s vernacular music into his own music. These musical quotes are combined with diatonic, whole-tone, and chromatic scales, as well as triadic, quartal/quintal and secundal harmonies, leading us to the two qualities that are at the core of Ives’s music: the acceptance of life as it is and the attempt to discover unity within chaos.

This journey brings me to a place of embracing my Blackness and accepting the beauty and history of my people. Florence Price was an American classical composer, pianist, organist and music teacher. Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, Price was educated at the New England Conservatory of Music and was active in Chicago from 1927 until her death in 1953. She is noted as the first African American woman to be recognized as a symphonic composer, and the first to have a composition played by a major orchestra. Price composed over 300 works, including four symphonies, four concertos, choral works, art songs, chamber music and music for solo instruments. Francis Hall Johnson was an American composer and arranger of African American spiritual music. These

## **PROGRAM NOTES**

art songs and spirituals are a calling to my ancestors who lived through the atrocity of 400 years of American enslavement and oppression. As a Black man in America, it is my duty to bring these incredible pieces to the forefront of the classical canon and perform the uplifting words of my ancestors that kept them living through the darkest times in American history.

# JOURNEY: MY AMERICAN STORY

Two Black Churches..... Shawn Okpebholo  
(b. 1981)

Ballad of Birmingham  
The Rain

Mostly About Love ..... Virgil Thomson  
(1896-1989)

A Prayer to Saint Catherine

General William Booth Enters into Heaven ..... Charles Ives  
(1874-1954)

## INTERMISSION

Dover Beach, Op. 3..... Samuel Barber  
(1910-1981)

Songs About Night..... Florence Price  
(1887-1953)

My Dream  
Song to the Dark Virgin  
Night

African American Spirituals ..... Hall Johnson  
(1888-1970)

Ain't Got Time to Die  
Witness  
Ride On, King Jesus

## BIOGRAPHIES

### JOSHUA CONYERS

Grammy-nominated baritone Joshua Conyers has garnered critical acclaim throughout his career. Opera News has praised his “deliciously honeyed baritone that would seduce anyone.” The New York Times commended his “sonorous baritone” that “wheedled and seduced,” while The Washington Post hailed his “show-stealing” performances. A native of Bronx, New York, Conyers is known for his captivating stage presence and is recognized as one of today’s promising dramatic voices.

In the busy 2022-2023 season, Conyers is set to return to the Washington National Opera as The Reverend in Jeanine Tesori’s “Blue.” He will also join the Lyric Opera of Chicago for the world premiere production of “Factotum” by Will Liverman, DJ King Rico and Rajendra Ramoon Maharaj. His debut with the English National Opera as Policeman/Congregant 3 in Tesori’s “Blue” is highly anticipated. Additionally, he will portray Reginald in Anthony Davis’ “X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X” at Opera Omaha, a role he has also performed with Detroit Opera and Odyssey Opera, where he also recorded the role. On the concert platform, Conyers will appear as the bass soloist in Handel’s “Messiah” with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra.

In the 2021-2022 season, Conyers joined Seattle Opera for “Blue,” performed as Count Capulet in “Roméo et Juliette” with the Boston Lyric Opera, participated in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony with the Memphis Symphony Orchestra and took part in “Carmina Burana” with the Cecilia Chorus of NYC at Carnegie Hall. His 2020-2021 season included performances as Eustis in “Le maréchal ferrant” with Opera Lafayette, Sprecher in “Die Zauberflöte” with Aspen Opera Theater, Tonio in “Pagliacci” at The Atlanta Opera, where he also portrayed Tiger Brown in “The Threepenny Opera” and covered the role of Kaiser Overall in “Der Kaiser von Atlantis.” The 2019-2020 season saw Conyers’ return to the Cafritz Young Artists of Washington National Opera, where he performed as the First Priest in “The Magic Flute” and was set to perform as John Sorel in “The Consul,” cover the Reverend in Tesori’s “Blue,” and sing Jim while covering Jake in “Porgy and Bess.” In the 2018-2019 season, Conyers took on roles such as Giorgio Germont in “La traviata,” the British Major in “Silent Night,” Donkey in “The Lion, the Unicorn, and Me,” and Zaretsky in “Eugene Onegin,” all with Washington National Opera.

Equally active in contemporary opera, Conyers performed the role of Jason in the world premiere of Matt Boehler’s “75 Miles” and portrayed Uncle Wesley in Carlos Simon’s “Night Trip” for Washington National Opera’s American Opera Initiative. Additionally, he covered the roles of Mr. Umeya in the American premiere of Huang Ruo’s “Dr. Sun Yat-Sen” in Mandarin Chinese and Walt Whitman in the world premiere of Theodore Morrison’s “Oscar,” both with the Santa Fe Opera.

## **BIOGRAPHIES**

As a concert artist, Conyers made his Carnegie Hall debut in 2018 as the baritone soloist, performing Mozart's "Regina Cœli," K. 276, Vaughan Williams' "Serenade to Music," Beethoven's "Choral Fantasy," and Mark Hayes' "Te Deum" under the baton of distinguished composer and arranger Mark Hayes with MidAmerica Productions. He also made his debut at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 2018 as the baritone soloist, performing the Duruflé Requiem with Manhattan Concert Productions under the baton of conductor Anton Armstrong. In 2019, Conyers was a soloist with the National Symphony Orchestra, performing with world-renowned maestro Gianandrea Noseda and singer-songwriter Ben Folds. He was also a guest artist at Opera Wilmington/UNC Wilmington annual Opera Symposium, in celebration of Caterina Jarboro, in conjunction with Black History Month, where he served as a recitalist and presented a masterclass. Conyers opened the 2017-18 season in a gala performance with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. His additional concert and oratorio credits include Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," Handel's "Messiah," Brahms' "Deutsches Requiem," Gabriel Fauré's "Requiem," Vaughan Williams' "Dona nobis pacem" and Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana."

Conyers boasts numerous vocal competition and award credits, including Metropolitan Opera National Council District Winner (2010, 2011, 2015 and 2019), Metropolitan Opera National Council Regional Encouragement Award Winner, Catherine Filene Shouse Career Grant Award Winner, Annapolis Opera Top Prize Winner, Career Bridges Grant Award Winner, S. Livingston Mather Scholar Competition Top Winner, the Charlotte Opera Guild Competition Top Prize Winner and the Heafner/Williams Vocal Competition Top Prize Winner. He has also participated in the training programs of Wolf Trap Opera, The Glimmerglass Festival, Des Moines Metro Opera and Santa Fe Opera. Conyers currently serves on the voice faculty at the Eastman School of Music, holding a Bachelor of Music and Professional Artist Certificate from UNCSA, where he continues to work with Marilyn Taylor.

## **NANCY JOHNSTON**

Nancy Johnston holds degrees in vocal coaching and accompanying from Indiana University and the University of Illinois, where she studied under the guidance of John Wustman. She currently serves as the principal keyboardist for the Winston-Salem Symphony, the Greensboro Symphony and Piedmont Opera Theatre.

Johnston's summer residencies encompass a diverse range of musical experiences, including Des Moines Metro Opera, the Saugatuck Chamber Music Festival, the Meadowmount School of Music, the American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz, Austria, and the Illuminations Festival in Manteo, North Carolina. Her tenure as a member of the piano staff at UNCSA dates back to 1983 and made her Weill Recital Hall debut in 1985.



# UNCSA MANIFESTO

## We Believe

**ARTISTS** enrich our culture, enlighten our society, lift our spirits and feed our souls.

Integrative **ART EDUCATION** from an early age sparks a lifetime of creative thinking, powerful self-expression and innovative problem solving.

Rigorous **ARTISTIC TRAINING** empowers our students and graduates to engage our communities, advance local and global creative industries, and inspire the world.

**ART ORGANIZATIONS** improve the quality of life and place in big cities and small communities, transforming them from merely livable to truly lovable.

**UNC SCHOOL OF THE ARTS** nurtures the talent, hones the craft, and develops the unique voices of emerging artists. We realize the full potential of exceptionally creative and passionate students to do their best work and become their best selves.

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## THE SCHOOL OF MUSIC

The School of Music gives talented young artists the opportunity to perfect their musical talent and prepare for life as professional musicians. Our training includes both private instruction and public performance experience, including more than 150 recitals and concerts presented each year. This performance experience, combined with career development opportunities and studies in music theory, literature and style, provides the ultimate training to help young musicians grow as both artists and professionals.

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## **DEAN'S CIRCLES**

The Dean's Circles support each of the five arts schools at UNCSA — Dance, Design & Production, Drama, Filmmaking and Music. Dean's Circle members support the school of their choosing with an annual gift of \$5,000 or more in support of discretionary funds, scholarships or other fundraising priorities. Members enjoy special events and opportunities to interact with the school's dean, faculty and students. If you are interested in joining one or more UNCSA Dean's Circles, please contact Shannon Wright, Director of Development for Leadership Annual & Family Giving, at [wrightsh@uncsa.edu](mailto:wrightsh@uncsa.edu) or 336-770-1427.

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## **THE ASSOCIATES**

The Associates, UNCSA's volunteer organization, invites you to join them. For more information about the organization and volunteer opportunities, visit [www.uncsa.edu/associates](http://www.uncsa.edu/associates) or email them at [UNCSAassociatesportal@uncsa.edu](mailto:UNCSAassociatesportal@uncsa.edu).



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**Musical Portraits: Tadeu Coelho,  
Oskar Espina Ruiz and  
Dmitri Vorobiev in Recital**  
**Sept. 26 at 7:30 p.m.**

WATSON HALL

Camille Saint-Saëns' Tarantelle for flute, clarinet and piano is the brilliant opener to this trio program, presented by three Music faculty artists, that includes works by living composers Valerie Coleman, Gabriela Lena Frank, Russell Peterson and Guillaume Connesson.

**UNCSA Symphony Orchestra in Concert**  
**Sept. 30 at 7:30 p.m.**

STEVENS CENTER

The UNCSA Symphony Orchestra, under the leadership of alumnus and newly appointed music director Robert Franz, opens the season with composition faculty Jared Miller's thundering and ethereal ode to planet Earth, "Under Sea, Above Sky," composed for the National Youth Orchestra of Canada.

**Imani Winds in Concert**  
**Oct. 3 at 7:30 p.m.**

WATSON HALL

Universally hailed as one of the finest and most innovative wind quintets on the music scene today, Imani Winds presents a program that shows off their dynamic playing, adventurous programming, and commitment to presenting exciting new voices along with classical masters of the jazz world.