

# CONCEPTUAL BY DESIGN

CURTIS FACULTY AND  
ALUMNI RELEASE  
INNOVATIVE ALBUMS  
LINKED BY THEMES  
OF PROTEST,  
PRESERVATION, AND  
CONNECTION

BY RYAN LATHAN



WHETHER IT'S THE Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, Kendrick Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, Sufjan Stevens' *Illinois*, or even Woody Guthrie's seminal 1940 folk classic, *Dust Bowl Ballads*, the concept album has been a signifier of grand musical ambitions for decades. But conceptual projects have deep roots in classical music, too, from song cycles of the 13th century (Martin Codax's *Cantigas de Amigo*) to collections of German lieder and French chanson from the 19th. All are typically unified by a cohesive storyline or centered on a particular cultural, political, or philosophical theme. In the spirit of this tradition come three exceptional new recordings by Curtis faculty and alumni, giving a 21st-century spin on the concept album.

On June 14, Grammy Award-winning ensemble Imani Winds, Curtis' first-ever faculty wind quintet, and virtuosic steel pannist and composer Andy Akiho, released the world premiere recording of their mesmerizing 2022 work, *BeLoning*. Inspired by the pounding protests of shivering immigrant detainees banging on the walls and windows of Brooklyn's Metropolitan Detention Center during a winter 2019 power outage, this hypnotically angular, rhythmically complex, 30-minute chamber work speaks to the universality of humanity and utilizes actual audio footage from the protest (the words are shot into and out of a vacuum chamber) as it unfolds across seven parts. The ensemble has received funding from the National Endowment for the Arts to present five performances of *BeLoning* in prisons, detention centers, or juvenile facilities across the following two seasons.

Workshopped at New York's Riker's Island, a facility long embroiled in controversy due to overcrowding, inhumane living conditions, violence among inmates and staff, and inadequate mental and medical care, the project's overarching goal, says Imani Winds oboist Toyin Spellman-Diaz, "is to penetrate walls of places of detention and incarceration across the country with positive musical intent, and to highlight, empower, and uplift people who have been incarcerated."

She continues: "It's pretty difficult to get the paperwork and logistics done to go into a prison and perform a concert, but we have had extraordinarily inspiring experiences behind the walls of the prisons every time we have gone. Music really



can break down walls!”

With *Beyond the Years: Unpublished Songs of Florence Price*, internationally acclaimed soprano Karen Slack (Opera ’02) joins forces with Michelle Cann (Piano ’13, ArtistYear ’15), Curtis’ Eleanor Sokoloff Chair in Piano Studies and a leading interpreter of Price’s music. Produced by Azica Record’s Alan Bise and ONEcomposer, an organization that celebrates and amplifies the voices of underrepresented and historically excluded musicians, the album features 19 unpublished songs by Price set to poetry by writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Lord Byron, and Theodore Roosevelt biographer Hermann Hagedorn (but a sliver of the 300-plus works Price composed), including 16 world premiere recordings. Since the 2009 discovery of a major cache of nearly 300 unpublished manuscripts hidden in an Illinois summer home attic, Price (1887–1953) has been the subject of a significant revival and reappraisal in concert halls and on recordings. While her three surviving symphonies and several concertos have drawn considerable interest, her exquisite songs are still not as widely known and are mostly unpublished.

“Labor of love is an understatement. It is an absolute honor to be one of the first singers to record many of these pieces,” says Ms. Slack. “I chose the title *Beyond the Years* because, personally, I believe they transcend time. My biggest wish is that [they] are published by 2025, made available to every musician who is interested in the works of Price, and that they become a part of the American art song canon. *Beyond the Years* is advocacy for Florence Price, who was kept out of her rightful place among the great composers because she was a Black woman.”

“It is so important to change the narrative—the whole idea that this music is other, that this is for Black History Month or a special project,” says Ms. Cann. “It lives right next to Schumann or Tchaikovsky. Now you’re starting to see [Price’s work] being

programmed by many orchestras, by many different pianists of all genders, of all races. That, to me, is success. It’s when we are now just seeing this music as great music that everybody should enjoy, everybody should play, consume, and learn about—this is how she becomes part of history in the way she deserves to be.”

Another recent concept album, titled *Memoir*, released on July 18, brings together an assemblage of Curtis luminaries: Grammy-winning composer and composition faculty member Steven Mackey; the celebrated Dover Quartet, Curtis’ Penelope P. Watkins Ensemble in Residence; and the electrifying arx duo—comprised of percussionists Mari Yoshinaga (Timpani and Percussion ’12) and Garrett Arney. Recalling Igor Stravinsky’s *L’histoire du soldat* at times yet existing in its own unique musical and theatrical world, this poignant, genre-blurring work is a 75-minute portrait of Mr. Mackey’s mother based on her unpublished memoir.

“The challenge for me as a composer was to provide a musical language that would be sympathetic to my mother’s guileless reflections while being true to my current musical preoccupations and aspirations—something lyrical and expressively direct but still quirky and with surprises,” notes Mr. Mackey. “I was particularly interested in playing with the counterpoint between diegetic sounds—train whistles, mimeograph machines, etc.—and the more abstract music tracing an internal psychological and emotional arc. Woven into this dialogue are references to some of the music she loved to sing.”

“*Memoir* is an undertaking logistically,” adds Dover cellist Camden Shaw (String Quartet ’14, Cello ’11, ’10), “with so many percussive elements to be transported or sourced and also an immense amount of preparation on the part of the narrator [performed by actor Natalie Christa Rakes]. We have already had immensely powerful experiences playing the piece live. Audiences really connect with the common humanity of the protagonist, and essentially what is the most important story of all—an ordinary human life, from beginning to end.” ●