



Scan this code to sign up for Chanticleer's newsletter

Program Notes

This season, we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the independence of the United States of America by revisiting Chanticleer's 2002 album, *Our American Journey*. In April 2025, this album was inducted into the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress, which describes it as "inclusive in its celebration of the varied spirits and history of America." We carry on today where we left off, continuing the voyage and filling in some missing gaps along the way. We showcase the diverse voices, songs, harmonies, and rhythms of our shared musical heritage, exploring how those voices influenced each other and how they impact the present day.

We begin our journey with "**The Un-Covered Wagon**" by Brent Michael Davids. The 1923 silent film, *The Covered Wagon*, follows the journey of an 1848 wagon train traveling across America. Told from the perspective of the pioneers, the film is a romanticized portrayal of their courage. These settlers certainly endured many hardships, but their story is not the only one we should hear. "The Un-Covered Wagon," which Davids wrote for Chanticleer in 2002, challenges the notion that pioneers spread across an uninhabited landscape. Davids writes, "As I thought about time and space, and the differences in American Indian life in this regard, I was struck by how one-sided this American expansion is, not only for the old era of black-and-white film, but in today's America, too." Davids (Mohican/Munsee-Lenape) describes himself as "a professional composer, and a music warrior for native equity and parity, especially in concert music where there is little Indigenous influence." He is one of America's most celebrated composers, with works commissioned and performed by many of America's top organizations and ensembles throughout his 50-year compositional career. In 2006, the National Endowment for the Arts named Davids among the nation's most cherished choral composers in its project "American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius." In 2015, the prestigious Indian Summer Music Festival awarded Davids its Lifetime Achievement Award.

Indigenous American attitudes towards music are very different from those brought over by European settlers in the 1500s. Brent Michael Davids points out that "Indigenous cultures see music like giving birth, so that each new song event is a new creation. The song being sung might be a time-honored song, but when performed it is newly reborn; it is not considered the same song." In contrast, a classical European perspective generally favors a written tradition, with notated music preserving a melody and intent for each successive performance. Thus, we find the earliest evidence of European Renaissance and Baroque polyphony in the New World in manuscripts from colonial Spain. Choirbooks with Latin motets and Mass settings to accompany Catholic liturgies have been found in Missions and Cathedrals from Mexico to California. Although details of his life are scant, it is likely that the 17th-century composer Juan de Lienas was a Native American who grew up in the Catholic church. His works survive in two manuscripts from Mexico City: the *Newberry Choirbooks*, which contain compositions in a florid,

polychoral style, and the *Codex del Convento del Carmen*, in which we find the more reserved, *stile antico*, four-voice “**Lamentatio in Coena Domini**.”

Born in Málaga, Spain, Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla moved to Puebla, Mexico in the early 1620s, where he eventually became *maestro de capilla* at the Puebla Cathedral. The Cathedral provided him with instrumentalists, choristers, and resources on par with any Continental establishment, and Padilla’s hundreds of extant works, like his polychoral motet “**Deus in Adiutorium Meum Intende**,” demonstrate a talent and ambition that rival any of his contemporaries.

One hundred years after Padilla and Lienas, the English colonies in North America began to develop their own distinct choral sound. Protestant colonists wanted little to do with Latin motets. In fact, Puritans banned choral music altogether from their church services. The surviving repertoire of the thirteen original American colonies comes to us from New England hymnals and songbooks written in the mid to late 1700s. The composers writing at this time, often referred to collectively as the First New England School, or Yankee Tunsmiths, were largely self-taught. William Billings, perhaps the most recognizable name from this tradition, was the first American to publish a book of entirely original compositions, *The New England Psalm Singer*, with a frontispiece engraved by none other than Paul Revere (1770). The part-writing in these early works, with titles derived from locations or people, like “**Kittery**,” often disregards rules of formal counterpoint, featuring plenty of parallel perfect intervals and irregular doublings and spacings.

This early American style came to be adopted by other singing communities throughout the new nation. Because of their simplicity and pedagogical nature, many of those first New England tunes were adopted into the burgeoning shape note singing tradition of the early 19th century. In an effort to spread music literacy, shape note tunebooks, like *The Sacred Harp* (1844), use distinct noteheads for each movable “do” solfège syllable. Thus, instead of memorizing 12 different keys and all their nuances, an amateur singer using a shape note tunebook needs only to memorize a handful of symbols in order to participate in choral singing. Alexander Johnson published his collection of shape note tunes, *The Tennessee Harmony*, which includes the song “**Jefferson**,” in 1818.

These early American shape note songbooks are primarily the product of White publishers and composers, even though the tradition of African American shape note singing dates back to at least the 1870s. It wasn’t until 1934 that Judge J. Jackson self-published *The Colored Sacred Harp*, a collection of 77 shape note songs written by Black composers, including “**My Home Above**.”

Another type of American early music was developing in Black communities at the same time as shape note singing and Protestant hymnody: the African American spiritual. The origins of the spiritual are hard to pinpoint; firsthand accounts from formerly enslaved people describe the spiritual as “the progeny of the Black collective rather than the individual composer” (Burnim, *African American Music*, 50). What is certain is that this art form coalesced at the end of the 18th century as a unique synthesis of African musical styles and Christian themes and traditions.

It is clear from firsthand descriptions that there existed a distinct African musical repertory in the Americas independent of White and European customs. This repertory, and its performance practices, shaped and changed the concurrently developing American Protestant hymn tradition. In 1801, for example, Richard Allen compiled a new hymn book for his independent African Methodist Episcopal (AME) congregation. While some tunes in this book came from the standard Methodist hymnal, Allen

wrote and changed many texts, added choruses, and likely composed some of the melodies himself. His goal “was to generate congregational participation and assure freedom of worship for his members” (Burnim, *African American Music*, 57). In “**Happy Shore**,” a new commission for Chanticleer’s 2025-2026 season, Trevor Weston takes a fresh look at this early American musical landscape. “My goal,” he writes, “was not to compose a new spiritual,” but instead to create “a choral work that imagines the transformation of a Western European Protestant hymn with traditional African American vocal and choral traditions. [...] After choosing an Allen hymn text, I composed my own 19th-century Protestant hymn, then generated material considering the musical characteristics of spirituals and other African American religious choral music. Text from the original hymn is adapted and altered to reflect the more active, hortative nature of traditional African American choral music. I have always been fascinated by the Church Moans and the Long Meter Hymn singing in African American choral traditions. Both performance practices influence parts of ‘Happy Shore.’” Dr. Weston is the chair of the music department at Drew University, where he teaches theory and composition.

We conclude the first half of our program with two African American spirituals, which act as the culmination of our journey through American early music. “**There is a Balm in Gilead**,” arranged by Music Director Emeritus Joseph H. Jennings, describes the healing grace of salvation through the love of Jesus. In 2014, Jennings was the first recipient of Chorus America’s Brazeal Wayne Dennard Award, acknowledging his contribution to the African American choral tradition. His 25-year tenure with Chanticleer as singer and Music Director transformed the group, and his gospel and spiritual arrangements became integral to Chanticleer’s identity. We are honored to maintain and continue that legacy today.

“**Wade in the Water**” is a not-so-coded instruction for escaping enslaved people to leave the road and move into the water to avoid sniffering dogs and slave catchers. The arranger, Stephen M. Murphy, is a graduate of Oakwood University, where he studied with Jason Max Ferdinand, and Middle Tennessee State University, where he studied with former Take 6 baritone Cedric Dent. Murphy writes that, in this arrangement, his “desire was to capture the urgency in the message of this song. A starting point for me in which to achieve this was to provide a more rhythmic driven aspect than I had prior been used to hearing. In addition, as a lover of vocal jazz, [...] I embarked on an endeavor to lift the text off of the paper by experimenting with, and incorporating, expanded harmonies throughout the piece.”

Classical American choral music found its footing in the 20th century, with many composers drawing inspiration from traditions and sounds of the past. Composer and critic Virgil Thomson often wove hymn tunes and American folk songs into his orchestral music. Thomson first set the shape note tune “**My Shepherd Will Supply My Need**” as an orchestral accompaniment for *The River*, a film sponsored by the U.S. Government and intended to raise awareness for the erosion of topsoil along the Mississippi River due to farming and timber practices in the 1930s.

Randall Thompson wrote his famous “**Alleluia**” in 1940 for the opening of the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood. As the story goes, Thompson did not deliver the score until just 45 minutes before its inaugural performance. But the reception was warm, and his “Alleluia” has been performed at the Center’s opening every summer since. The music, however, is not as joyful as the title and its origins would lead one to expect. Thompson was writing just as France fell to Nazi Germany, and the weight of the war is apparent in his music. He later explained that “the music in my particular ‘Alleluia’ cannot be

made to sound joyous [...] here it is comparable to the Book of Job, where it is written, ‘The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.’”

American classical choral music followed the shape of American society into the 21st century by continually pushing the boundaries of form, style, and subject matter. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, we commissioned the Chicago-based composer Ayanna Woods to write us a piece that touched on some of our shared experiences during that time. The text for “**close[r], now**” is an erasure poem created by Woods. The source material is an L.A. Times editorial from March 2020 detailing the reasons why theaters and the performing arts should “close, now.” Woods restructured and resampled the article to create a new text full of questioning and yearning. She closes the piece with an imperative for the world: “come back to life.” Ayanna Woods is a GRAMMY® Award-winning performer, composer, and bandleader from Chicago. Her music explores the spaces between acoustic and electronic, traditional and esoteric, wildly improvisational and mathematically rigorous.

Chen Yi’s “**I Hear the Siren’s Call**” showcases the composer’s unique blend of Chinese and Western musical traditions. She uses nonsense syllables and other sound effects to create a cinematic seascape. Born in Guangzhou, China, and studying violin and piano from an early age, Chen Yi spent two years in labor camps during the Cultural Revolution before immigrating to America in 1986. Since 1998, Dr. Chen Yi has been the Lorena Cravens/Millsap/Missouri Distinguished Professor at the Conservatory of Music and Dance at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. She is one of America’s most beloved composers, having been a recipient of the prestigious Charles Ives Living Award and elected to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences in 2005 and the American Academy of Arts & Letters in 2019. In 2020, she was elected an honorary member of the International Society for Contemporary Music – only its fourth female honorary member since the Society’s founding in 1922. A former composer-in-residence for Chanticleer, she wrote “I Hear the Siren’s Call” in 2012 for the ensemble’s 35th season.

In “**Hee-oo-oom-ha**,” American composer Toby Twining challenges our preconceptions about singing with extended vocal techniques like vocal fry, yodeling, and rhythmic panting. He combines these striking sounds with polyrhythms, mixed meters, and open harmonies to create a joyful celebration of song. Raised in Texas with family roots in country-swing and gospel, Twining has moved from playing in rock and jazz bands, to singing Renaissance motets, to performing and composing experimental music. He moved to New York City in 1987, initially writing for modern dance choreographers who wanted the sounds of a new choral music. His group, Toby Twining Music, recorded many of his compositions on the albums *Shaman* (Sony Classics 1994), *Chrysalid Requiem* and *Eurydice* (Cantaloupe Music 2002, 2011). His music has been performed and recorded internationally by solo artists and groups including the National Youth Choir of Great Britain, Young People’s Chorus of NYC, and Roomful of Teeth. He is the recipient of Guggenheim and Pew fellowships and a Foundation for Contemporary Arts 2013 Grants to Artists award. Twining lives in the Shenandoah Valley, where he works with student dancers, actors and musicians at James Madison University.

The remainder of our program explores American popular music in many forms, from folksongs (“**American Folksong Medley**,” “**I’ll Fly Away**”), to protest songs (“**If I Had a Hammer**”), to the Great American Songbook (“**The Trolley Song**”), to musical theater (“**Home**”), to parlor songs (“**Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair**”), to bluegrass (“**Calling My Children Home**”), to country (“**Lovesick Blues**”). Also

included are songs written or arranged by first or second-generation immigrants, who help to keep our American cultural fabric rich and vibrant (“**Blue Skies**,” “**Paraiso Soñado**,” “**Brahmamokate**”).

Program notes by Tim Keeler