

**Ray Chen Plays Barber - Notes on the Program**  
**By Aaron Grad**

*intimacies, interruptions* [2023]

**BALDWIN GIANG**

Born 1992 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
Currently resides in Louisville, Kentucky

*With his impeccable sense of craft and visceral embrace of instrumental color, Baldwin Giang writes music that seems to win every prize and award it encounters. He comes to the Louisville Orchestra Creator Corps fresh off a year in Rome thanks to the prestigious Samuel Barber Rome Prize, and before that he used a Fulbright Fellowship to study in Taipei. He is also a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago, after earning degrees from Yale and the University of Michigan. Giang wrote the following program note for intimacies, interruptions, which he originally composed in 2023 for the Aspen Music Festival Conducting Academy Orchestra.*

*intimacies, interruptions* is inspired by the furtive moments that exist only within the cracks and fissures of today's hyper-fast and fragmented life-world. In the age of oversaturation and instant gratification, sitting down and sharing a traditional concert hall ritual can open the door to a surprisingly radical kind of intimacy.

Threads of lyricism are strewn throughout this work, but they are often presented alongside a shifting cornucopia of orchestral color. A rich diversity of musical material and techniques of ensemble coordination create the tensions and contradictions that shape one level of this work. As these contrasting musical materials collide with and interrupt each other, the resonances they leave behind trace subtle, ephemeral connections that may be even more alluring to the listener than the work's energetic surface. Through this work, I invite the audience to contemplate how moments of intimacy can take on new richness after they are interrupted.

-Baldwin Giang

*Against/Sharp* [2020]

**BRITTANY GREEN**

Born 1991 in Raleigh, North Carolina  
Currently resides in Louisville, Kentucky

*Brittany Green brings a sharp focus on social justice to her wide-ranging work as a composer, performer and educator, which has garnered support from many of the biggest institutions in contemporary music, including the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the ASCAP Foundation, New Music USA, the American Composers Orchestra and Alarm Will Sound. She comes to the Louisville Orchestra Creator Corps by way of North*

*Carolina, where she is a Ph.D candidate at Duke University. Green joined the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra as narrator for an online performance of Against/Sharp in 2021, reciting her own original text that takes inspiration from a quote by Zora Neale Hurston: “I feel most colored when thrown against a sharp, white background.” Green wrote the following program note.*

Against/Sharp is sound ethnography, drawing parallels between intersectionality’s world-building project and acoustemology’s sound as place-making project, marking music composition as a site of social critique. Through the practice of analogic sonification, Against/Sharp displays the resistive, creative, and “against the grain” praxes of disidentification and oppositional gaze in real time.

Written for chamber orchestra and narrator, the piece utilizes text written by the composer. The registral, dynamic, temporal, and instrumental forces of the work reclaim the sonic, temporal, and intellectual space of the Western Classical concert hall, for the resistive praxes of those who have been historically marginalized, disenfranchised, and ignored by this space. The musical material of the work utilizes polyrhythmic, circling, unfolding, and collapsing gestures to sonify the reworking, disruptive, and inventive work of disidentification and oppositional gaze. The piece ends with a dissonant note atop a padded cluster chord, signifying the possibility of a new sound world, representing the countermemory work of oppositional gaze.

The temporal space of the work grounds it in the bodies of those who enact these praxes. Dedicated to Black women and queer people of color who have lost their lives violently as a result of their intersecting identities, the piece is 4 minutes and 8 seconds long, representing the 48 Black women who have been murdered by police from 2015-2020. 32 seconds of silence are dispersed throughout the piece in honor of the 32 trans and gender non-conforming lives that were violently taken in 2020, many of which were the lives of people of color.

-Brittany Green

## **Violin Concerto, Op. 14 [1939]**

### **SAMUEL BARBER**

Born March 9, 1910 in West Chester, Pennsylvania

Died January 23, 1981 in New York, New York

A child prodigy from a musical family, Samuel Barber enrolled in the founding class at Philadelphia’s Curtis Institute of Music at the age of 14. He was already on his way to broad success in the field when a radio broadcast in 1938—a performance of his devastatingly sad Adagio for Strings, conducted by Arturo Toscanini—catapulted the 28-year-old into international stardom. Commissions soon came pouring in, including one from a soap tycoon, Samuel Fels, who had taken one of Barber’s old Curtis classmates

under his wing, the Russian-born violinist Iso Briselli. Fels gave Barber a \$500 advance to write a Violin Concerto, which he began in Switzerland in the summer of 1939.

The outbreak of war forced Barber to interrupt the concerto and head home to the United States, but he was able to deliver the first two movements in time for his October deadline. Unfortunately the violinist (or really his teacher) was not impressed, complaining that it was not virtuosic enough. Taking the feedback to heart, Barber made a point of incorporating “brilliant technique” in the perpetual motion finale, which he delivered two months before the planned premiere.

What happened next, according to a biography of Barber published in 1954, is that Briselli rejected the concerto on the grounds that the finale was unplayable. To prove him wrong, Barber gave the part to a violin student at Curtis, and a few hours later they gave a triumphant private reading with Barber on the piano. That student got the honor of giving the first performance in 1940 with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra, and within a year the concerto was bringing down the house in Carnegie Hall and claiming its place as the first and only American contribution to the repertoire that can stand in the company of the great violin masterpieces by Beethoven, Brahms and Mendelssohn.

The opening movement is lyrical and understated, with the soloist entering right on the first downbeat with a heartfelt theme. The other distinctive melody (characterized by its rhythmic snap) appears only in the orchestra until the soloist finally takes it up in a throbbing coda. In the central *Andante* movement, the melodious oboe solo that prefaces the violinist’s entrance is perhaps the greatest concerto melody *not* written for a soloist since Brahms penned a similar oboe solo in the slow movement of his own Violin Concerto. The perpetual motion finale is a dazzling *tour de force*, not just for its rapid figurations but also for its seamless construction and ceaseless variety in the musical material. An accelerated coda has the white-knuckled intensity of a gymnast’s final dismount.

***I Ask My Mother to Sing*** [2022, rev. 2023]

## **OSWALD HUỠNH**

Born 1997 in Portland, Oregon

Currently resides in Louisville, Kentucky

*Oswald Huynh leans on his background as a bassoonist to understand the intricacies of the orchestra, but it is really his approach to integrating his Vietnamese heritage into Western art music that has crystallized his musical voice. As he explained in an interview with the online magazine I Care If You Listen, “I think when a lot of people first start incorporating aspects of their heritage into their music, it’s a very tough thing to find your own lane, and not sound like you’re a 20th-century white composer learning about gamelan for the first time. But through the process of learning more about my heritage, I realized that the Vietnamese aspect of my music is something that just came naturally to me. And as I moved away from the idea of the ‘Composer Masters’ and went through my*

*own decolonization process, that resistance went away.” He wrote the following program note for I Ask My Mother to Sing, which was commissioned by Alarm Will Sound for the 2022 Mizzou International Composers Festival.*

The title of this piece, *I Ask My Mother to Sing*, is after a poem of the same name by Li-Young Lee. In the poem, he references the songs his mother and grandmother would sing from their homeland. As I was conceptualizing this piece, I considered the music and sounds that brought me the most comfort and built the work around these ideas: a Vietnamese folk tune, the melancholy of Vietnamese lullabies, and a simple major-second gesture. The music evokes the mixed emotions that I associate with comfort: contentment, nostalgia, amusement, and, at times, apprehension.

-Oswald Huynh

### ***Renaissance (Concerto for Orchestra)* [2024]**

#### **VALERIE COLEMAN**

Born September 3, 1970 in Louisville, Kentucky  
Currently resides in New York City

Valerie Coleman was born in Louisville’s West End neighborhood, where her musical life began with experiments on her family’s electric keyboard and the possibilities of stacking layers of sounds by recording back and forth between two cassette recorders. Her exposure to classical music came from listening to KUOL, and she took up the flute as a fourth grader, joining her school’s band. With the help of mentors including our own principal flutist Kathy Karr, Coleman was able to enroll as a flute and composition major at Boston University, followed by a Master’s Degree from the Mannes School of Music in New York.

Coleman’s earliest claim to fame came as the founder and flutist of Imani Winds, a woodwind quintet consisting entirely of BIPOC musicians, with a mission to shine a light on underrepresented composers. Her own stature as a composer has grown steadily to the point that she is now attracting commissions from the highest levels of the classical music industry. Her concerto for orchestra, *Renaissance*, was commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra and premiered by them at Carnegie Hall.

Coleman describes *Renaissance* as a series of orchestral poems centered on the Great Migration, which brought millions of Black southerners to the north in search of new opportunities. She links her music to paintings by Jacob Lawrence, who captured the Black experience in vibrant canvases, most famously in the *Migration Series* from 1941. Images from that set and a subsequent *War Series* (based on Lawrence’s experiences during World War II in a segregated Coast Guard regiment) correspond to musical moments, starting with Lawrence’s war painting of a beachhead being stormed, which conveys, in Coleman’s words, “a sense of shock and devastation, as if the impact of bombs and missiles are still ringing in one’s ears. The trumpet solo that follows it is

wailing, functioning as both a narrative of grief but also a message of resilience and survival.”

Later in the first movement, titled *American Odyssey*, a gradual thickening of the texture corresponds to Coleman’s vision of her “ancestors humming a repetitive phrase as they till the soil in fields building into a single chorus of full throated dissension and prayer. Raw guts and heartstrings of spirituals of will, survival, and even worship.” There are other sounds that evoke labor camps, car horns, industrial machines, and a final shout section inspired by the dots and dashes of Morse code.

In the second movement, *Portraits*, Coleman confronts the race riots and house bombings that targeted Black families across the north and Midwest. A sustained note from the violas links directly to the third movement, *Cotton Club Juba*, which pays tribute to the music and dance that flourished in Black enclaves, especially in Harlem, where the Cotton Club (a whites-only establishment that booked top Black performers) helped launch the careers of Duke Ellington, Josephine Baker and so many other performing artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance. “Juba” in the title references a Black dance style full of body percussion that developed in time of slavery; musically, Coleman touches on an offspring of that dance tradition, the Charleston, an amalgam of styles that encapsulates the enormous reach of Black culture as it flowed out of the American south, through northern hubs of creativity and innovation, and onward to the rest of the world.

### **The LO Down**

Kathy Karr, principal flute

Valerie Coleman was my flute student when she was in high school. She would come to her flute lessons, and she would always have some kind of composition that she wanted me to either play or look at, but I’m embarrassed to say that I really never paid much attention to her writing music. She was very excited about her compositions, but I always insisted that we play flute scales!

We’ve kept in touch and I’ve followed her career, and I am so proud to see her so successful and adding all these amazing accomplishments to her resume. I’m not surprised, because when she did play her flute in her lessons in high school, she was incredibly talented and hardworking. She was passionate about playing, and she was always prepared. She had an inquisitive, curious mind, and she wanted to learn everything.

As a composer, she absolutely knows the instruments. Being a performer herself, she’s up close and personal with all of them, especially the woodwinds. She wants us to enjoy playing it, and so it’s challenging, yet doable for us. One thing I’m a little jealous of is all the parts in *Renaissance* for alto flute, which gets played by the third flutist. The color of the alto flute is very mellow, and it gives me a sense of calm when I hear it. I think the audience is going to go, “Wow, what instrument is that?” It’s a beautiful color.

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