

Sunday, October 5, 2025

SPHINX VIRTUOSI: Visions of Peace with Sterling Elliott, cello

La Bella Cubana (1910)

José White Lafitte (1836 – 1918)

Impressions (2008)

Jessie Montgomery

- II. Fusion, Dança Brasileira
- IV. Precision, Perpetual Motion

Chemiluminescence[‡] (2025)

Clarice Assad

**Suite for Violin or Cello and
String Orchestra[†] (1943)**

William Grant Still (1895 – 1978),
arr. Randall Goosby

- I. African dancer
- II. Mother and Child
- III. Gamin

with Sterling Elliott, cello

INTERMISSION

Visions of Peace^{} (2025)**

Quenton Blache

**Piano Sonata No. 7 in B-flat major,
Op. 83 "Stalingrad"^{**} (1942)**

Sergei Prokofiev (1891 – 1953),
arr. Rubén Rengel

- I. Allegro inquieto
- II. Andante caloroso
- III. Precipitato

Concerto for Strings, Op. 33 (1966)

Alberto Ginastera (1916 – 1983)

- IV. Finale

^{*}Commissioned by the Sphinx Organization

^{**}Co-commissioned by the Sphinx Organization, Carnegie Hall, and New World Symphony

[†]Commissioned with a gift from the Keith and Renata Ward Emerging Composer Fund;
co-commissioned by the Sphinx Organization and New World Symphony

[‡]Co-commissioned by the Sphinx Organization, the New York Philharmonic, and Bravo! Vail

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Sphinx Virtuosi are represented by MKI Artists: 70 S Winooski Ave. #318, Burlington, VT 05401

ISABELLA
SEWART GARDNER
MUSEUM

NOTE FROM THE CURATOR

We are thrilled to welcome the Sphinx Virtuosi for their yearly visit to Calderwood Hall. Two things mark this as a particularly special visit: Cellist Sterling Elliott, who played his Gardner debut last season, returns as a guest soloist; and Sphinx is playing two new commissions from Jessie Montgomery and Quenton Blache.

—George Steel, *Abrams Curator of Music*

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

In a unique convergence of musical voices, *Visions of Peace* beckons us into a realm where music becomes an emissary of peace and unity. On this journey, we hope to lift every voice and remember our complex history while looking toward our shared journey to a brighter tomorrow.

We explore peace while remembering the conflict of past and present and recognizing the repeated history and the resilience of the human spirit. From William Grant Still, celebrated as the “Dean of African American Composers,” to José White Lafitte’s stirring Cuban melodies, every note resonates with our collective aspirations for harmony and understanding without borders. This is a collection of new voices—those that have already shaped our canon and those that we hope will continue to be celebrated long after our time together.

As Alberto Ginastera’s *Concerto for Strings* takes us toward a triumphant crescendo, you will join us in a jubilant celebration of the human spirit’s indomitable resilience and our unwavering commitment to the pursuit of peace. We reflect on themes of war, anguish, and loss through Rubén Rengel’s setting of Prokofiev’s “Stalingrad” Sonata. Jessie Montgomery’s music helps us transcend boundaries and borders, while our vision for

shared humanity is brought together through Quenton Blache’s title composition.

La Bella Cubana

José White Lafitte

Afro-Cuban composer and violin virtuoso José White Lafitte embodied the spirit of cultural exchange in the 19th century. Born in Matanzas, Cuba, to a French father and Afro-Cuban mother, White rose to international acclaim after winning the 1856 First Grand Prize at the Paris Conservatory. He went on to direct the Imperial Conservatory in Rio de Janeiro and dazzled audiences across Europe and the Americas, performing on the famed 1737 “Swansong” Stradivari violin.

Among his many works, *La Bella Cubana* (“The Beautiful Cuban Woman”) has become one of his most beloved. Written as a habanera for two violins and piano, it blends elegance with the rhythmic vitality of Cuban dance traditions. In this string orchestra arrangement, lyrical melodies are shared throughout the ensemble, while the contrasting middle section bursts with syncopated energy.

White’s music offers more than beauty alone—it reflects the resilience of cultural identity, the grace of shared traditions, and the possibility of harmony across borders. *La Bella Cubana* becomes not just a dance, but a vision of peace through sound. —Bill Neri

Selections from Impressions

Clarice Assad

Clarice Assad’s intention was not merely to compose music but to create a vivid musical portrait celebrating the individuality, spirit, and unique flair of each musician within the New Century Chamber Orchestra, for whom this work was originally commissioned. The music reflects their first interactions with the composer herself.

The suite is full of intriguing vignettes, sounds, and sensory landscapes. We have chosen

these selections that spoke especially poignantly to our program content and theme. Fusion, Dança Brasileira transports listeners to the lively streets of Assad's Brazilian homeland, capturing its irresistible rhythms and celebratory essence. The composer integrates lively Brazilian rhythms—hints of choro, samba, and salon dances—within a string ensemble context, merging classical textures with the rhythmic vitality of her homeland. The Sphinx Virtuosi spent time in Brazil in 2022 and came away deeply inspired by the country's music and people. This choice is, in part, an homage, as well as a celebration of the work itself.

Perpetual Motion presents numerous virtuosic opportunities for the ensemble to showcase its range. The upper strings drive a relentless *moto-perpetuo* rhythm, while the lower strings layer discrete melodic ideas that eventually converge in a brilliant mutual finale. Fiery and exhilarating, we felt that the character of this movement also reflects the ethos of the Sphinx Virtuosi: our commitment to unity and our collective perpetual quest for artistic excellence.

Impressions is a celebration of the vibrancy of sound, color, and spirit. On our journey toward peace, moving forward together as one, this music resonates with the constant resolve that this suite showcases in sound and form.
—Afa S. Dworkin

Chemiluminescence

Jessie Montgomery

"Chemiluminescence" is the scientific term to describe any chemical reaction that produces light from a non-light source, such as a firefly rubbing its wings to produce a glow; or bioluminescence along the ocean's edge; or the light produced from a cracked glow stick. The light produced can present varied qualities, such as infrared, visible, or ultraviolet.

As a composer, interpreting light sources and their resulting reflections and hues is an endless field of potential sound exploration. I used my

impressions on this idea to create harmonies, colors, and blends I feel are unique to the string orchestra with its ability to bend and shift timbres in an instant.

The piece is in three distinct sections, each of which interprets light, agitation, reaction, and frenetic interplay in its orchestration. This piece represents my continued interest in finding a correlation between music and the natural world. —Jessie Montgomery

Suite for Violin or Cello and String Orchestra

William Grant Still, arr. Randall Goosby

William Grant Still was the first Black composer I ever came to know, and his music continues to bring a sense of identity and purpose to my work as a classical musician. Still's Suite for Violin and Piano is a powerful testament to the richness, resilience, and unwavering spirit of Black culture. Each movement was inspired by a sculpture created during the Harlem Renaissance, and each one depicts a unique facet of the Black experience. Looking back on how much this piece has meant to me in various stages of my life, I am deeply honored to have had the opportunity to arrange this incredible work for Solo Violin/Cello and String Orchestra.

The first movement is inspired by Richmond Barthé's sculpture *African Dancer*, through which Barthé aimed to portray the spirituality of our people. The movement begins with a powerful, unified declamation of power and presence, which quickly gives way to the rolling rhythms and accentuated steps of an African dance. Eventually, the dance shifts to a more mellow mood, marked by a soulful, singing melody in the solo part and swinging accompaniment in the orchestra. The dance then returns, vigorously carrying us through the end of the movement.

The second movement, *Mother and Child*, is the heart and soul of this piece, and is inspired by the work of Sargent Johnson.

The relationship between mother and child is integral to the experience of every human being who has ever lived. This was especially true for Sargent Johnson, who had lost both of his parents by the age of 15. Grant Still captured the heartache of Sargent Johnson's experience, and yet still found a way to infuse the music with the tenderness of a loving mother, as well as the innocence of a child. The lyricism and sensitivity of this music always leaves me thinking of my mother and all the love she poured into my siblings and me.

The final movement is derived from Augusta Savage's sculpture *Gamin*, depicting a mischievous young boy (specifically, Savage's nephew Ellis Ford) roaming the streets of Harlem. Grant Still, taking a page out of the book of blues and jazz, conjures up vivid imagery of a bustling city and a young boy taking it all in. There is so much joy and humor in this music, and I wanted to reflect that in the orchestra part. You will hear pops of pizzicato throughout the ensemble, as well as some jabs of call and response between the solo part and principal players that I hope will leave a smile on your face! —Randall Goosby

Visions of Peace

Quenton Blache

"Study the past if you would define the future." —Confucius

This enigmatic counsel anchors the profound duality that pillars *Visions of Peace*.

The journey begins through a solitary voice's contemplation of our shared history, entreating us to reflect as the sage did millennia ago. Its melodious question ripples through the ensemble, burgeoning, until a hymn-like prayer, the heart of the work, comes forth. This anthem for a better world is heralded by serene harmonic slides in the double basses, hope and spirit made into sound.

In accelerating bursts of vitality, Baroque-era motifs echo our past and oppose the lush, modal harmony of the prayer. This duality

crests as the call is answered: A vision of peace materializes, utopian and exaltant. As Blache reflects that peace is more mosaic than clear glass, the epilogue offers wishes of solace, and a final "amen" rings.

Quenton Blache is an African-American composer and cellist whose work has earned critical acclaim across the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Recent highlights include *Habari Gani*, a virtuosic miniature recorded by the Sphinx Virtuosi for Deutsche Grammophon, and *of wind and rain*, featured on Gautier Capuçon's Warner Classics release *Gaïa*. His prolific compositional output further extends beyond the concert stage to scoring numerous films and documentaries. A decorated performer, Blache has appeared globally as a soloist and chamber musician and can be heard on major film scores, including *Moana 2* and *Sinners*, as well as live performances with artists ranging from WizKid and T-Pain to the 2025 GRAMMY® Awards. He holds a master's degree in Screen Scoring from the University of Southern California, a minor in Chinese, and aspires to achieve the National Master title in chess. —Maïthéna Girault

Piano Sonata No. 7 in B-flat major, Op. 83 "Stalingrad"

Sergei Prokofiev, arr. Rubén Rengel

In the middle of World War II, the Soviet city of Stalingrad became the site of one of history's most brutal and decisive battles. It marked the furthest advance of Nazi forces into Soviet territory—and the moment when that tide began to turn. Bearing the name of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union's most powerful and polarizing leader, Stalingrad carried immense symbolic weight. By the time the Red Army emerged victorious in the winter of 1943, the city had come to embody not only resilience and sacrifice, but also the staggering human cost of war.

Sergei Prokofiev, one of the Soviet Union's most celebrated composers, was living through this same period of upheaval. Having

returned permanently to the USSR in 1936 after years abroad, he navigated a complex role: a world-renowned artist whose music was both championed and scrutinized under the watchful eye of Soviet cultural authorities. Stalin's regime demanded that music uphold socialist ideals and be accessible to the masses; Works deemed too formalist, dissonant, or Western-influenced risked censorship or worse. Prokofiev's skill lay in balancing official expectations with his own fiercely individual voice—creating works that could satisfy the state while still speaking in his distinctive, modern idiom.

During the war years, Prokofiev composed three piano sonatas—Nos. 6, 7, and 8—which later came to be known collectively as the “War Sonatas.” The label was applied after the fact, but these works bear unmistakable traces of the times: jagged rhythms, violent contrasts, and moments of fragile lyricism, as if beauty and brutality were locked in a single, unbreakable embrace.

The Seventh Sonata, completed in 1942 and dedicated to the memory of Prokofiev's friends who had perished in the war, is perhaps the most harrowing of the three. Its opening movement bristles with anxiety and jagged energy, propelled forward by asymmetric rhythms and an almost mechanical sense of inevitability. The central *Andante caloroso* offers a brief, aching reprieve—a vision of warmth and humanity—before the finale bursts in with relentless drive. Marked *Precipitato*, this final movement is a tour de force of propulsive rhythm and percussive power, often interpreted as both an expression of Soviet defiance and a musical embodiment of the chaos and urgency of wartime survival.

In this performance, violinist and arranger Rubén Rengel—a member of the Sphinx Organization's extended family of artists—reimagines the sonata for an 18-member, self-conducted string orchestra. Rengel is no stranger to bold transformations: His previous arrangement of Beethoven's “Bridgetower”

Sonata (originally for violin and piano), which was recorded by Sphinx Virtuosi on its debut studio album, brought new symphonic depth to a cornerstone of the violin repertoire.

Presented under the theme *Visions of Peace*, this performance invites listeners to confront a paradox: how a work born of destruction and conflict can, decades later, serve as a reminder of resilience, solidarity, and the enduring human longing for peace. Prokofiev's Seventh Sonata does not offer easy comfort—instead, it challenges us to listen to the sounds of war and imagine, all the more vividly, the peace that must follow. —Bill Neri

Concerto for Strings, Op. 33: IV. Finale Alberto Ginastera

Alberto Ginastera (1916–1983) was the leading Argentinian composer of the 20th century and was deeply involved in championing and developing his nation's musical life. His creative corpus spans many genres: operas, ballets, orchestral works, concertos, cantatas, chamber works, and music for theater and film, with much of his early output drawing inspiration from Argentina's rich folk music traditions. In 1962, the Rockefeller Foundation appointed him Founding Director of the Latin American Center for Advanced Musical Studies in Buenos Aires, and his lifetime of creative achievement earned him honorary doctorates from Yale and Temple universities, as well as the UNESCO International Music Council Music Prize. In 1969, finding himself out of sympathy with the prevailing climate in Argentina (he was twice ejected from his academic posts because of his protests against the repressive regime), Ginastera left the country, settling in Geneva.

Among Ginastera's most important chamber works is his Neo-expressionist String Quartet No. 2, composed in 1958. Premiered by the Juilliard String Quartet at the first Inter-American Music Festival in Washington, D.C., it was hailed by critics as the festival's artistic

apogee. Though inspired by Béla Bartók in his synthesis of Argentinian idioms and shifting rhythmic patterns, the Second Quartet was committed to paper as Ginastera ventured into modern techniques such as polytonality, microtones, and serialism.

In 1965, Ginastera orchestrated the quartet into the virtuosic *Concerto per Corde*, Op. 33 (Concerto for Strings), premiered the following year by the Philadelphia Orchestra. The “Finale furioso” featured in this concert is a relentless, fierce movement of perpetual motion, blazing with rhythmic verve and masterfully crafted for the string instruments that drive its obsessive, wild dance.
—Maithéna Girault

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Sphinx Virtuosi

VIOLIN 1

Alex Gonzalez
(Concertmaster)
Alejandra Switala
Annelle Gregory
Sandro Leal-Santiesteban

VIOLIN 2

Caitlin Edwards (Principal)
Maithéna Girault
Rainel Joubert
Samuel Frois

VIOLA

Celia Hatton (Principal)
Robert Switala
Edwardo Rios
Bill Neri

CELLO

Eri Snowden Rodriguez
(Principal)
Sterling Elliott
Diana Flores
Quenton Blache

BASS

Jonathan Colbert (Principal)
Christopher Johnson

TOUR MANAGERS

Ally Price
Aaron Vaughn

“[The performance] opened with a propulsive, richly hued interpretation . . . which demonstrated the ensemble’s polish and tonal allure.”—*New York Times*

Sphinx Virtuosi is a dynamic, self-conducted chamber orchestra and the flagship performing ensemble of the Sphinx Organization, the nation’s leading nonprofit dedicated to transforming the arts. Comprising 18 of the nation’s most accomplished professional string players, Sphinx Virtuosi is redefining classical music through artistic excellence, pioneering programming, and cultural leadership.

Recognized for their artistry and commanding presence, Sphinx Virtuosi has been praised by the *New York Times* as “top-notch . . . more essential at this moment than ever.”

The *Strad* lauds their “elegant ascent into the upper ranks of string orchestras,” a testament to their growing influence in the field. With performances that captivate audiences nationwide, their annual Carnegie Hall appearance has become a celebrated highlight of the fall season. Their critically acclaimed debut album, *Songs for Our Times* (Deutsche Grammophon), was hailed as “a knockout” by *Gramophone*, which praised their “consistently polished and passionate performances.”

Members of Sphinx Virtuosi are sought-after soloists, chamber musicians, and faculty members at top institutions. They have performed with major American orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, and the Philadelphia, Detroit, Atlanta, Seattle, and Pittsburgh symphony orchestras. Beyond the concert stage, they are artist-citizens, leading impactful community initiatives and fostering deep engagement with audiences worldwide.

Sphinx Virtuosi has collaborated with legendary artists such as Terence Blanchard, Denyce Graves, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Damien Sneed, Will Liverman, J’Nai Bridges, Abel Selaocoe, and Davóne Tines. They have also worked with cultural icons like Beyoncé and Jay-Z, with high-profile appearances on the *Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and the GRAMMY® Awards broadcast.

Learn more at www.sphinxmusic.org/sphinx-virtuosi.

Acclaimed for his stellar stage presence and joyous musicianship, cellist **Sterling Elliott** is a 2021 Avery Fisher Career Grant recipient and the winner of the Senior Division of the 2019 National Sphinx Competition. Already in his young career, he has appeared with major orchestras such as the Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Detroit

Symphony, and the Dallas Symphony, with noted conductors Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Thomas Wilkins, Jeffrey Kahane, Mei Ann Chen, and others.

In 2025–26 Sterling Elliott will make his debut with the Phoenix Symphony, Buffalo Philharmonic, BBC Scottish Symphony, and at the BBC Proms with Edwin Outwater. As featured soloist with the Sphinx Virtuosi, he will take part in a multi-city tour with performances at Carnegie Hall, Shriver Concert Series, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, the Gardner Museum, Schubert Club, and more. As a chamber musician, he continues his residency in the Bowers Program of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, appearing with CMSLC at Alice Tully Hall and on tour throughout the U.S., as well as trio performances with Anthony McGill and Gloria Chien.

Recent highlights include debut performances with the Atlanta, San Francisco, New Jersey, Columbus, Ann Arbor, and Grand Rapids symphonies, Minnesota Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Reno Philharmonic. Elliott has also made returns to Carnegie Hall with the Orchestra of St. Luke’s led by Louis Langrée and performances of the Beethoven Triple Concerto with Madison Symphony alongside Gil Shaham and Orli Shaham. He also performed the world premiere of a new orchestral version of John Corigliano’s *Phantasmagoria*, commissioned for him by a consortium of orchestras led by the Orlando Philharmonic and music director Eric Jacobsen.

As the YCAT-Music Masters Robey Artist with the London-based Young Classical Artists Trust (YCAT), he will tour New Zealand, in addition to appearances at Wigmore Hall, Hamburg’s Elbphilharmonie, Konzerthaus Berlin, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, and others. This season he also begins his tenure as a BBC New Generation Artist with radio appearances and more.

Sterling has a long history with the Sphinx Organization, where he won the 2014 Junior Division Competition, becoming the first alumnus from the Sphinx Performance Academy to win the Sphinx Competition. The following year he went on tour with the Sphinx Virtuosi before being awarded the Organization's Isaac Stern Award in 2016. Sterling received the Sphinx Medal of Excellence in 2024, the highest honor bestowed by the Sphinx Organization, awarded to artists who, early in their career, demonstrate artistic excellence, outstanding work ethic, a spirit of determination, and an ongoing commitment to leadership and their communities.

Born into a musical household, Sterling initially wanted to play the violin like his older brother and sister. After a bit of encouragement, he completed the Elliott Family String Quartet, an ensemble that enjoyed personalized arrangements of genres such as bluegrass, gospel, and funk music.

He is an ambassador of the Young Strings of America, a string sponsorship operated by Shar Music. He performs on a 1741 Gennaro Gagliano cello on loan through the Robert F. Smith Fine String Patron Program, in partnership with the Sphinx Organization.

UPCOMING PERFORMANCES:

**MIRANDA CUCKSON, VIOLIN WITH
BLAIR MCMILLEN, PIANO**
Sunday, October 19

**RACHEL BARTON PINE, VIOLIN
& VIOLA D'AMORE**
Sunday, October 26

**CLAIRE CHASE, FLUTES WITH
AISSLINN NOSKY, KATINKA KLEIJN,
& ALEX PEH**
Sunday, November 2

CLAYTON STEPHENSON, PIANO
Sunday, November 9

**SASHA COOKE, MEZZO-SOPRANO
WITH MYRA HUANG, PIANO**
Sunday, November 16

MICHELLE CANN, PIANO
Sunday, November 23

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum resides on the homelands of the Massachusetts Tribe, who belong to this place and continue to regard these lands and waters as sacred.

Music at the Gardner is supported by Nora McNeely Hurley / Manitou Fund. The Museum thanks its generous concert donors: The Coogan Concert in memory of Peter Weston Coogan; Fitzpatrick Family Concert; James Lawrence Memorial Concert; Alford P. Rudnick Memorial Concert; David Scudder in memory of his wife, Marie Louise Scudder; Wendy Shattuck Young Artist Concert; and Willona Sinclair Memorial Concert. The piano is dedicated as the Alex d'Arbeloff Steinway. The harpsichord was generously donated by Dr. Robert Barstow in memory of Marion Huse, and its care is endowed in memory of Dr. Barstow by The Barstow Fund. Music at the Gardner is also supported in part by Barbara and Amos Hostetter, Nicie and Jay Panetta, and the Massachusetts Cultural Council, which is supported by the state of Massachusetts and the National Endowment for the Arts.



Kindly turn off all electronic devices during the concert and refrain from any photography or filming in the hall. Also, please note the location of the emergency exit doors: across the hall from the doors through which you entered.