

# STEVEN BANKS

XAK BJERKEN & THE DOVER QUARTET



*Cries, Sighs, and Dreams*

## Steven Banks

<sup>1</sup> Surrender<sup>§</sup>

## Camille Saint-Saëns

Oboe Sonata in D Major, Op.166

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<sup>2</sup> *Andantino*

<sup>3</sup> *Ad libitum-Allegretto*

*-Ad libitum*

<sup>4</sup> *Molto Allegro*

## Paul Creston

Sonata for Eb Alto Saxophone  
and Piano, Op.19<sup>§</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *With Vigor*

<sup>6</sup> *With Tranquility*

<sup>§</sup> *Steven Banks & Xak Bjerken /*

<sup>\*</sup> *Steven Banks & The Dover Quartet*

<sup>7</sup> *With Gaiety*

## Steven Banks

<sup>8</sup> *Cries, Sighs, and Dreams\**

## Steven Banks

*Come As You Are*<sup>§</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Lift My Eyes*

<sup>10</sup> *Times of the Storm*

<sup>11</sup> *Strength of My Life*

<sup>12</sup> *Lift My Hands*

## Carlos Simon

<sup>13</sup> *hear them*<sup>§</sup>

IL PIRATA RECORDS™

*When Adolphe Sax, inventor of the saxophone, first arrived in Paris in summer 1842, he invited composer Hector Berlioz to inspect a prototype of his new instrument. Berlioz was impressed, writing, “It cries, sighs, and dreams. It possesses a crescendo and can gradually diminish its sound until it is only an echo of an echo—until its sound becomes crepuscular.” A few years later, he repeated his praise of the instrument, writing in Le Journal des débats, “I know of no other instrument that possesses this particular capacity to reach the outer limits of audible sound.” These words were immediately imprinted on my heart upon first reading them. I feel deeply grateful to Berlioz for conveying how I have always thought of my instrument and its ability to express the deepest outpourings of the soul.*

*The album name, Cries, Sighs, and Dreams, refers to the wide array of expressive and sonic realms that I was hoping to depict with my instruments. From Saint-Saens’ elegant Oboe Sonata in D Major to the ancestral shrieks of warning in Carlos Simon’s hear them, the versatility of the saxophone family is on full display. You will hear the soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone saxophones explored thoroughly and pushed to inhabit the “outer limits of audible sound.” It is my hope that listeners come away with a newfound appreciation of these instruments, just as Berlioz did after his first experiences hearing it.*

*The album title also refers to the compositions themselves. Composing is such an intimate and vulnerable process through which we often share some aspect of our inner world with others in the form of music. The works of Paul Creston, Carlos Simon, Camille Saint-Saens, and myself can be thought of as the “cries, sighs, and dreams” of our hearts and minds. We share moments of joy, anguish, spiritual inquiry, reflection, and more. The great jazz saxophonist and composer John Coltrane beautifully conveyed how composers of all styles of music connect with the world when he said “my music is the spiritual expression of what I am – my faith, my knowledge, my being... When you begin to see the possibilities of music, you desire to do something really good for people, to help humanity free itself from its hangups ... I want to speak to their souls.”*

*My mission as an artist has two equally important components. One is to broaden the public perception of the saxophone and its expressive capabilities by establishing it as a central part of the sound of classical music in the 21st century. The other is to engage with higher levels of consciousness and connection through classical music. Cries, Sighs, and Dreams represents a significant landmark for me as a saxophonist and composer toward both of these goals.*

**STEVEN BANKS**

## STEVEN BANKS

Hailed by the Washington Post as “the saxophone’s best friend, fiercest advocate and primary virtuoso in the classical realm,” performer and composer Steven Banks strives to bring his instrument to the heart of the classical world. He commissions and writes music that expands the repertoire for saxophone, introducing audiences to new possibilities for artistic expression. Banks is a devoted and intentional supporter of diverse voices in the future of classical music. His work on stage and on the page prompted *Seen and Heard International* to write, “Banks has the potential to be one of the transformational musicians of the 21st century.”

This season Banks will bring his “charismatic confidence, technical flawlessness, adventurous phrasing, [and] unbelievably sweet tones” (*Seen and Heard*) to debut performances with the St. Louis, Indianapolis, Oregon, and Montréal symphony orchestras. In Europe, he makes debut appearances with the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, BBC Symphony at the Barbican, Deutsche Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, and BBC National Orchestra of Wales. In recent seasons, he has made impressive debuts and built

lasting relationships with the Cleveland Orchestra, Seattle Symphony, Pittsburgh Symphony, Boston Symphony Orchestra, New World Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, Aspen Festival Orchestra, and the symphony orchestras of Cincinnati, Utah, San Diego, and Detroit. He enjoys collaborating with conductors including Xian Zhang, Manfred Honeck, Stéphane Dénève, Rafael Payare, Peter Oundjian, Ruth Reinhardt, and Miguel Harth-Bedoya.

Banks is committed to establishing the saxophone as a vital voice in classical music by commissioning works that showcase its expressive capabilities. This season, he premieres Joan Tower’s poignant new concerto “Love Returns” at the Colorado Music Festival, with additional consortium performances by the National Symphony Orchestra Washington, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, and Toronto Symphony among others. Billy Childs’ “Diaspora”, written for Banks and commissioned by Young Concert Artists and ten orchestras—the largest consortium ever for a saxophone work—marks a major milestone in his mission. His growing list of recent premieres includes Carlos Simon’s “hear them”, Augusta Read Thomas’ “Haemosu’s Celestial Chariot Ride”, Christopher Theofanidis’ “Visions of the Hereafter”, and many others.

In recital, Banks appears with pianist Xak Bjerken at prestigious series including Cal Performances, Chamber Music Northwest, Davies Hall, Merkin Hall, The Kennedy Center, The Kravis Center, Festival Napa Valley and Chamber Music Sedona. As a chamber musician, he enjoys deep collaborations with the Miró Quartet and Verona Quartet, joining both ensembles for tours of newly co-created programmes. Banks is a founding member of the award-winning all-saxophone ensemble Kenari Quartet.

Described as “colourful and continuously fascinating” (*The Boston Musical Intelligencer*), Steven Banks’ compositions are increasingly in demand, reflecting his rising profile as a composer. He has been commissioned by Young Concert Artists and the chamber music festivals of Tulsa, Tucson, Bridgehampton, and Chamber Music North West. His recent works include “Reflections and Exaltations”, “Come What May”, and *Cries, Sighs and Dreams* all scored for saxophone and string quartet, and “Begin Again” for baritone saxophone, cello, piano, and meditation guide. His solo works “Through My Mother’s Eyes” (commissioned by Chicago Symphony for Hilary Hahn) and

“Fantasy on Recurring Daydreams” (premiered by pianist Zhu Wang) have received critical acclaim. His saxophone and piano works, including “Come As You Are”, are among the most performed pieces by saxophonists worldwide.

As part of his ongoing advocacy for diversity and inclusion, Steven Banks is excited to launch the “Come As You Are” project this season—a innovative community engagement initiative in partnership with orchestras, designed to increase representation in the concert hall through vibrant community performances and affordable ticket access. In addition, Banks spoke at TEDxNorthwesternU about overcoming institutional prejudices in the industry. He also co-created the Learning to Listen roundtable to explore the nuances of the Black experience in classical music, as well as Illuminate!, a conversation series on education, activism, and the LGBTQIA+ community in classical music, created in partnership with the Sphinx Organization.

Banks is proud to be the first saxophonist to receive a prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant and earn First Prize at the Young Concert Artists Susan Wadsworth International Auditions. Banks serves as Saxophone

and Chamber Music Faculty and Artist-in-Residence at the Cleveland Institute of Music. He has previously held teaching positions at Ithaca College, Baldwin Wallace Conservatory, and the University of Hartford. Banks studied with Taimur Sullivan, Otis Murphy Jr., and Galvin Crisp, earning degrees from Indiana University’s Jacobs School of Music and Northwestern University’s Bienen School of Music. Banks is an endorsing artist for Conn-Selmer instruments and D’Addario Woodwinds.

#### XAK BJERKEN

Pianist Xak Bjerken has appeared with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Spoleto Festival Orchestra, Thailand Philharmonic Orchestra, the Schoenberg Ensemble, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic in Disney Hall. He has performed at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Glinka Hall in St. Petersburg, the Konzerthaus in Berlin, and for many years performed throughout the US as a member of the Los Angeles Piano Quartet. He has held chamber music residencies at the Tanglewood Music Center, Spoleto Festival, and Olympic Music Festival. He is the Director of Ensemble X, a new music ensemble at Cornell, and

has served on the faculty of Kneisel Hall, the Eastern Music Festival, and at the Chamber Music Conference at Bennington College. Bjerken has worked closely with composers György Kurtag, Sofia Gubaidulina, Steven Stucky, and George Benjamin, and has premiered piano concertos by Stephen Hartke, Elizabeth Ogonek, and Jesse Jones, a recording of which was released by Naxos in 2021. He released his first solo recording on CRI in 2001, and has since recorded for Koch International, Chandos, Albany Records, Artona, and has recently released his third recording for Open G Records, presenting solo and chamber works by Steven Stucky.

Xak Bjerken is Professor of Music at Cornell University where he co-directs Mayfest, an international chamber music festival with his wife, pianist Miri Yampolsky. He studied with Aube Tzerko at the University of California at Los Angeles and received his Master’s and Doctoral degrees from the Peabody Conservatory as a student of and teaching assistant to Leon Fleisher. Xak is the proud father of Misha (bassist), Anna (singer), and Maya (athlete and stargazer).

## THE DOVER QUARTET

Named one of the greatest string quartets of the last 100 years by BBC Music Magazine and “the next Guarneri Quartet” by the Chicago Tribune, the two-time GRAMMY-nominated Dover Quartet is one of the world’s most in-demand chamber ensembles. The group’s awards include a stunning sweep of all prizes at the 2013 Banff International String Quartet Competition, grand and first prizes at the Fischhoff Chamber Music Competition, and prizes at the Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition. Its honors include the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant, Chamber Music America’s Cleveland Quartet Award, and Lincoln Center’s Hunt Family Award. The members are on faculty at the renowned Curtis Institute of Music.

The Dover Quartet’s 2025-26 season features collaborative performances with preeminent artists including Marc-André Hamelin and Edgar Meyer, and performances in internationally renowned venues from Carnegie Hall to Kennedy Center to Konzerthaus Berlin. The quartet’s most recent commission is from Jerod Impichchaachaaha’ Tate, a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation and a leading composer of American Indian

classical music. His new piece, Abokkoli’ Talooowa’ (Woodland Songs), is featured on Woodland Songs, the group’s most recent album, which also includes Tate’s new string-quartet orchestration of Rattle Songs by the Indigenous singer Pura Fé, originally for her a cappella vocal group Ulali. Dvořák’s “American” Quartet, a classic of the repertoire, completes the album, released in August 2025 on the Curtis Studio label.

Recent collaborators of the ensemble include Leif Ove Andsnes, Emanuel Ax, Inon Barnatan, Ray Chen, Anthony McGill, the Pavel Haas Quartet, Roomful of Teeth, and Davóne Tines. The quartet has also recently premiered works by Mason Bates, Steven Mackey, Marc Neikrug, and Chris Rogerson.

The Dover Quartet’s highly acclaimed three-volume recording, Beethoven Complete String Quartets (Cedille Records), was hailed as “meticulously balanced, technically clean-as-a-whistle and intonationally immaculate” (The Strad). Other discography highlights are Encores (Brooklyn Classical), a recording of 10 popular movements from the string quartet repertoire; The Schumann Quartets (Azica Records), which was nominated for a GRAMMY for Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance; Voices of Defiance: 1943,

1944, 1945 (Cedille Records); and an all-Mozart debut recording (Cedille Records), featuring Michael Tree, the late, long-time violist of the Guarneri Quartet. The quartet’s recording of Steven Mackey’s theatrical-musical work Memoir was released on Bridge Records in 2024.

The Dover Quartet draws from the lineage of the distinguished Guarneri, Cleveland, and Vermeer quartets. Its members studied at Curtis Institute of Music, Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music, New England Conservatory, and Conservatoire Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris. They were mentored extensively by Shmuel Ashkenasi, James Dunham, Norman Fischer, Kenneth Goldsmith, Joseph Silverstein, Arnold Steinhardt, Michael Tree, and Peter Wiley. The Dover Quartet was formed at Curtis in 2008; its name pays tribute to Dover Beach by fellow Curtis alumnus Samuel Barber.