



FOR THE YOUNG ARTIST

SEAN CHEN PLAYS THE WORKS OF
MICHAEL GLENN WILLIAMS

WHIRLPOOLS, RINGTONES, AND POEMS FOR PIANO

THE MUSIC OF MICHAEL GLENN WILLIAMS

SEAN CHEN, PIANO

Composers who play the piano may feel a thrill on hearing their work in the hands of another first class interpreter. Chopin was so captivated by Liszt's performance of his Etudes that he said he wished he could "steal" the approach. (He couldn't—there was only one Liszt.) From Robert Schumann to Thomas Ades, pianist/composers have enjoyed working with gifted artists who demonstrate a special affinity for their creations.

The current recording continues that tradition. Composer Michael Glenn Williams is a trained pianist. His friend and colleague, concert virtuoso Sean Chen, is one of the most compelling pianists of the younger generation, and the two men have known each other for a decade.

"I met Sean when he was 14," remembers Michael. "He was performing one of my favorite pieces, Ravel's *Alborado del Gracioso*, and I had never heard it more beautifully done." From that day on, he began lending support to the budding piano star who marked 2013 by winning the prestigious American Pianists Association DeHaan Classical Fellow Award, followed by the Crystal Award (third prize) at the Van Cliburn Piano Competition, where his

performance of Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto dazzled with its imagination and dramatic sweep.

The compositions presented here represent what Michael Williams describes as his "melody-centric" style. "As a teenager I wrote impressionistic pieces," he explains, "but always melodically based. Then I was trained to write academic music—everything from set theory to electronic music. Over the course of time I migrated back to the style I have today." To a listener's comment that much of it seems cinematic, he reveals that he has done some film scores: "mostly for friends like Jeff Rona and Cliff Martinez."

The programmatic aspect of these works—"I love that Debussy put titles at the ends of his pieces," says Michael—makes them "accessible even for people who may not be attracted to classical music," states Sean. "Character is very important in these pieces, and each one comes with a different sound world. Some of these are for the young artist, yet they are not always easy. Because Michael plays piano—he's played Chopin and Debussy—the music fits the hands well. Yet even the easy ones have their challenges."

Indeed, for this composer, who has been called “the American Prokofiev,” color, sound and character are essential elements. His *Oceanic Overture*, which consists of orchestrations of three of the pieces in the second volume of his collection *For the Young Artist*—“Oceanic Whirlpool,” “Aria,” and “Ghost Galleon”—was nominated for the American Prize in Orchestra Composition, and, says Sean Chen, when playing them on piano “I had the orchestra sound in my mind.”

That focus on what Debussy referred to as “the alchemy of sound” is evident in all the works offered here. From *Tone Poems, Volume 2* for example, there is “The Last Night,” a tender, romantic piece with shifting phrase lengths reminiscent of Brahms, “Gift From the Past,” a sarabande that, for Michael, conjures up Debussy’s use of the ancient Mixolydian mode, and “Childhood’s End,” where colors are generated through chromatic (the smallest steps on the keyboard) sequences. Storytelling is also in abundance in Michael’s music. “Mountain Meadow”—like a breeze blowing through the weeds—contains a reference to the Appalachian folk tune “Sweet Betsy from Pike.” It is ardently played. As the melody is overlaid with Copland-esque chords it builds into something suggesting a big brass band. “The lyric to that song,” reports Michael, “is, ‘Oh do you remember sweet Betsy from Pike, she crossed the great mountain with her lover, Ike.’ I went to the Aspen Music Festival,” he says, “and took a tour into the mountains. That was the feeling I tried to capture.”

For the Young Artist, Volume 1 holds many treats, like “Greek Dance,” a party scene with little bluesy, syncopated surprises and zither-like tremolos. “Jeff Rona scored a Steven Spielberg-produced television show called *High Incident* that featured a scene

in a Greek restaurant where a food fight took place, but the musicians just kept playing. I had that in mind,” explains Michael.

From that same volume comes *The Breeze on the Prairie*, inspired by Debussy’s *What the West Wind Saw*. The Impressionist flow of notes, mixed musical modes and sense of mystery is enhanced by Sean Chen’s playing, in which pointillistic clarity and shaded dynamics bring a lyrical cohesiveness to the compositional idea. *Baboon Rag* features a ragtime device known as “stop time.” “I played piano for a television series called *Chicago Hope*,” says the composer, “and wrote some of the cues. This was used for a scene in a mental ward.”

“The Skeleton Saloon,” a work haunted by clashing modes and quick mood changes, is an homage to composer William Bolcom whose “ghost rags” have become mainstays of the contemporary repertoire.

Volume 2 of *For the Young Artist* contains more examples of the composer’s imaginative imagery. “Rusty Razor” brings to mind a Pixar character shaving his beard; attentive listeners may discover the song *What Do You Do with a Drunken Sailor?* at the heart of its buoyant texture. “Grand Phoenix” is Debussy-like in the way it conveys giant structures rising out of the depths. The composer says he was trying to depict the great Firebird. And “Black Widow Waltz” brings out Michael’s “Tim Burton” side. “I pictured black widows dancing around,” he confesses. “The grace note bleeps signal the moment when they slice the heads off their mates.” The musical score is filled with commentary, à la Erik Satie: it is peppered with phrases like “fat army ants,” “attack on the nest!” and “charge!”

Ringtones is perhaps the most virtuosic music in the group. Each one offers its own set of challenges. In the first, Michael displays a technique he has experimented with since his college days: “playing weird notes very quietly in one hand with loud notes in the other, to create a sense of strange harmonics. I got it from Ives. I love this effect, and keep the blues part in there as a way of grounding the music.” Number three was written as a quick encore for Sean to play; the pianist admits “it’s really hard.” The seventh, like a child’s music box rhapsodizing, is floating and mysterious, except for the humorous element of having a real, commonly used ringtone embedded in the music (the fourth has one as well). The eighth hints at the composer’s former practice of writing chorales in the style of Stravinsky. The ninth, which calls to mind the popular song *If Ever I Would Leave You*, is based on the divisions of a Latin drum kit—the left hand is one of the drums. “Sean was playing this a little too straight,” reveals Michael, “so I told him to put on his lounge hat.”

The tenth Ringtone suggests the atmosphere of Ravel’s *Trio*, with the 4/4 meter broken up into unusual groups—2 + 3 + 3—and features an unusual use of grace notes. The twelfth is influenced by such Prog-Rock groups as Gentle Giant and Yes. The thirteenth is reminiscent of Ravel’s *Bolero*. “It’s kind of like an alarm clock,” says Michael. “Some ringtones are steady.” The last piece is a rhythmic mashup, with complicated rhythms like 5 against 4, very difficult to execute.

Throughout the recording, a strong sympathetic bond between composer and pianist is evident. “I really enjoyed working on these pieces,” says Sean Chen, “especially because of Michael Williams’s sense of how to write for the keyboard, as well as his

ability to instill a variety of characters in everything he composes.” For Williams, the admiration is mutual. “Sean has such a magical elixir of tenderness, creativity, clarity, joy, ease, and a kind of pure musicality, almost an innocence,” he marvels. “His tone is always rich and balanced, and he never overplays. He is the perfect choice for premiering the *For the Young Artist* collections. His unjaded, exuberant performances are stunning.”

The overall effect of these works is of a composer with a wide imagination—and a commitment to reach out to a wide audience—and a pianist with the skill and musicality to bring these ideas to life. It’s a collaboration that clearly works—and leaves us with a sense of anticipation for what might be next.

—Stuart Isacoff, award-winning writer, pianist, composer, and lecturer

SEAN CHEN

2013 DeHaan Classical Fellow of the American Pianists Association

“Summoning every device the modern grand’s 88 keys can expend, Chen delivered as near an orchestral version of [La Valse] as is possible to conceive...Chen’s keyboard sparkled.” - NUVO

Pianist Sean Chen is being hailed as a rising star with a “million-volt smile” and a “formidable set of fingers” (*Dallas Morning News*). In 2013 Chen won the American Pianists Association’s DeHaan Classical Fellowship, one of the most lucrative and significant prizes available to an American pianist; he also won Third Prize at the 14th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, becoming the first American to reach the finals since 1997. He received Second Prize at the 2011 Seoul International Music Competition, Third Prize at the 2013 Morocco Philharmony International Piano Competition, Best Performance of an American Work at the 2009 Cleveland International Piano Competition, and he was a semifinalist at the 2012 Leeds International Piano Competition.

The 25-year-old American pianist has appeared as soloist with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra under Gerard Schwarz, Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra under Leonard Slatkin, Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra, Suwon City Philharmonic, New West Symphony, and the Juilliard Orchestra. Highlights of his 2013–14 season include return invitations with Indianapolis and Fort Worth, performances at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and Jordan Hall in



2013 Cliburn Crystal Award Winner
Sean Chen (credit: Ellen Appel-Mike
Moreland/The Cliburn)

Boston, and recital and concerto appearances across the United States and Europe. He has performed new works by Lisa Bielawa, Michael Williams, Nicco Athens, Michael Gilbertson, and Reinaldo Moya, among others. Chen's releases include live recordings from the Cliburn competition and a solo recording on the Steinway label as part of his American Pianists Association prize.

Born in 1988 in Margate FL, Chen grew up in the Los Angeles area of Oak Park CA. His impressive achievements before college included receiving an NFAA ARTSweek award, a prize at the California International Young Artist Competition, the Los Angeles Music Center's Spotlight Award, the Evelyn Vonar Storrs Scholarship, and the Glenn Miller Scholarship. These honors combined with his extraordinary intellect facilitated offers of acceptance by MIT, Harvard, and the Juilliard School; choosing to study music, Chen earned his Bachelor's and Master's degrees at Juilliard, where he won the 2010 Gina Bachauer Piano Competition, the 2010 Munz Scholarship, and first prize at the 2008 Juilliard Concerto Competition. While attending Juilliard, Chen was the recipient of a notable third-party scholarship: the 2010 Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowship for New Americans.

Chen is currently pursuing his Artist Diploma at the Yale School of Music as a George W. Miles Fellowship recipient. He is studying with Hung-Kuan Chen and Tema Blackstone, and his former teachers include Jerome Lowenthal, Matti Raekallio, and Edward Francis. Chen's performances have been broadcast live on From the Top, American Public Media's *Performance Today*, WQXR (New York), WGBH (Boston), and WFYI (Indianapolis). The webcast of his April 2013 performance of Bartók's Piano Concerto

No. 2 with the Indianapolis Symphony – which, according to International Piano, “blazed with color and excitement” – can be viewed at AmericanPianists.org.

When not at the piano, Chen enjoys tinkering with computers and composing. In the coming seasons, he will be performing under the management of the American Pianists Association, touring the U.S. and presenting recitals worldwide.

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MICHAEL GLENN WILLIAMS

“Man of many musics - symphonic, choir, electronic, pop, free jazz, you-name it. He has tried on all these hats, and all of them seem to fit.”

- Alan Rich

Michael Glenn Williams' music and piano performance is featured on productions such as the “Chicago Hope;” “Wicker Park,” “The Limey,” “King of the Hill,” “Younger and Younger,” “House of Yes,” “Through the Door,” and “Wonderland.” His concert transcriptions of video game music are featured in the game “Crabs and Penguins” from Coke®, and performed by the Video Games Live orchestra.

His music has been recorded by internationally famous pianists such as Sean Chen, Roberto Prosseda, Gabriele Baldocchi, and Enrico Pompili. His jazz group “1 40 4 20” has released two albums: *Jazz Trespassers* and *Wet*, to critical acclaim.

Williams is well known in the computer industry as an expert in operating system design, system hardware design, and computer chip functional design. He served full time as Principal Architect for Nokia's Enterprise Solutions division. He was the author of the music, MIDI sequencing, typesetting and printing program SuperScore, and consulted on the design of the original music font for general use “Sonata” with Adobe Systems. His name appears in many patents, and in two IEEE international computer standards.



As an arts administrator Williams served as President of the Thousand Oaks Philharmonic, and concert producer for Who's Afraid of Opera, The Chopin Project, and record producer for AIX Media, Stradivarius, Pocket Jazz Records, and Coke®.

Williams has served as director of music, conductor, accompanist and organist for numerous orchestras, churches, temples, colleges, and master classes in Southern California. As an accomplished classical pianist, Michael Williams was named an "International Piano Master" by the International Piano Academy of Lake Como. He twice won the Northridge Chamber Music award, and has premiered many works for piano as a new music evangelist.

He taught music composition at UCLA extension and teaches piano and composition privately. He studied composition and piano performance at California State University Northridge and at the Eastman School of Music, where he won the Howard Hanson Prize for orchestral composition. He is active member of AMC (American Music Center <http://www.amc.net/>) CMS (College Music Society <http://www.music.org/>) NACUSA (National Association of Composers USA <http://www.music-usa.org/nacusa-la/>) and SCI (Society of Composers <http://www.societyofcomposers.org/>)

www.michaelglennwilliams.com



Ring Tones

1	RING TONE I	1:12
2	RING TONE II	0:40
3	RING TONE III	0:37
4	RING TONE IV	1:07
5	RING TONE V	1:45
6	RING TONE VI	1:17
7	RING TONE VII	2:08
8	RING TONE VIII	1:58
9	RING TONE IX	1:48
10	RING TONE X	2:12
11	RING TONE XI	1:55
12	RING TONE XII	3:36
13	RING TONE XIII	0:51
14	RING TONE XIV	1:24

Tone Poems, volume 2

15	THE LAST NIGHT	3:24
16	GIFT FROM THE PAST	2:33
17	CHILDHOODS END	3:04
18	MOUNTAIN MEADOW	3:28

For The Young Artist, volume 1

19	GREEK DANCE	2:20
20	FORGOTTEN WALTZ	1:43
21	RAISING UP THE FORT	0:55
22	CRACK THE WHEAT, GRIND THE FLOUR	0:48
23	LULLABY	1:52
24	PEACE LIKE A RIVER	1:23
25	THE BREEZE ON THE PRAIRIE	1:32
26	CHASE ACROSS THE PRAIRIE	0:53
27	BABOON RAG	1:07
28	THE SKELETON SALOON	1:51
29	ALBUM LEAF NO 1	2:50

For the Young Artist, volume 2

30	OCEANIC WHIRLPOOL	2:07
31	RUSTY RAZOR	1:11
32	SWING TILL YOUR TOES TOUCH THE CLOUDS	1:30
33	TRAPPED INSIDE A DOLL	2:16
34	ARIA	2:43
35	GRAND PHOENIX	2:34
36	PROCESSION FOR THE FALLEN HEROES	4:30
37	BLACK WIDOW WALTZ	2:20
38	GHOST GALLEON	3:09

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Producers Joseph Patrych, Michael Glenn Williams
Recording, Editing, & Mastering Joseph Patrych
Assistant Editor Andrea Daly

Piano Technician Kenneth A. Farnum, Jr
Piano Hamburg Steinway CD 147

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Executive Producer Bob Lord
Product Manager Jeff LeRoy
Additional Mastering Shaun Michaud
Art Direction & Production Brett Picknell
Graphic Designer Ryan Harrison
A&R Jon McCormack
PR Coordinator Ariel Oxaal

info@navonarecords.com
www.navonarecords.com
223 Lafayette Road
North Hampton NH 03862

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