

American pianist **SPENCER MYER** has been lauded for "superb playing" and "poised, alert musicianship" by the Boston Globe, and labeled "definitely a man to watch" by London's The Independent. He has been soloist with The Cleveland Orchestra, the Cape Town and Johannesburg Philharmonics, the Indianapolis, New Haven and Phoenix Symphony Orchestras and Beijing's China National Symphony, collaborating with conductors Michael Christie, Robert Franz, Bernhard Gueller, Jahja Ling, Kevin Rhodes, Gerald Steichen, Thomas Wilkins and Victor Yampolsky. His 2005 tour of South Africa included a performance of Beethoven's five piano concerti with the Chamber Orchestra of South Africa, followed by four subsequent tours. An in-demand chamber musician, he has appeared at the Lev Aronson Legacy Festival with cellists Lynn Harrell, Brian Thornton, Ralph Kirshbaum and Amit Peled, and enjoys a recurring partnership with the Miami String Quartet at the Kent/Blossom Music Festival. Other artistic partners include clarinetist David Shifrin, soprano Nicole Cabell, and the Jupiter and Pacifica String Quartets.



Spencer Myer's career was launched with three important prizes: First Prize in the 2004

UNISA International Piano Competition in South Africa, the 2006 Christel DeHaan Classical Fellowship from the American Pianists Association and the Gold Medal from the 2008 New Orleans International Piano Competition. He was a member of Astral Artists' performance roster from 2003-2010.

A graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory, The Juilliard School and Stony Brook University, he is currently Artist-Teacher of Piano and Collaborative Piano at Boston's Longy School of Music of Bard College. His debut CD — music of Busoni, Copland, Debussy and Kohs — was released in 2007 to critical acclaim by Fanfare and Gramophone magazines. This recording marks his first collaboration with the Steinway & Sons label.

Spencer Myer is a Steinway Artist.



Piano pieces based on dance-oriented genres have long been with us, from Mozart's minuets, Schubert's marches, Chopin's polonaises and mazurkas to waltzes by the thousand. To this list we can add a genre that emerged in late 19th century America, stemming from the jigs, marches and cakewalks played by African-American bands. The syncopated rhythms were characteristic of what eventually came to be called ragtime, and would soon find their way into notated sheet music. In turn, Scott Joplin's best-selling 1899 *Maple Leaf Rag* became the archetype for the classic multi-thematic piano rag that flourished during the 20th century's first decades.

Ragtime's popular appeal ultimately gave way to the jazz and popular song forms that prevailed as radio and recordings gradually replaced the piano as the family home entertainment center. Yet the genre still attracted devotees, making a serious comeback in the early 1970s after the publication of Joplin's collected works and the appearance of George Roy Hill's film *The Sting*, which prominently featured Joplin's music.

Meanwhile, another ragtime revival had been stirring about. In 1967, William Bolcom was a 29-year old faculty member at Queens College CUNY, and had just discovered Joplin and other turn-of-the-century ragtime practitioners through his teaching colleague and noted ragtime scholar Rudi Blesh. Bolcom began to experiment with his own rags, sharing them with other like-minded composers. Bolcom recalled how, at a certain point, he and the late composer/pianist William Albright would send each other rags by mail like chess problems.

The present program reveals a judicious scope of Bolcom's eclectic bent, inventive powers and idiomatic keyboard prowess. Bolcom's three "Ghost Rags" begin with his best known and most widely performed work, *Graceful Ghost*, composed in memory of his father. *The Poltergeist*, Bolcom writes, explores nearly every "frozen" appoggiatura and substitution in the harmonic book, (while) Paul Jacobs called *Dream Shadows* a 'white telephone rag,' one that would not sound out of place in a Joan Crawford movie-drama.

The *Three Classical Rags* mark Bolcom's first efforts in the genre: *Glad Rag* was inspired by Joplin's opera "Treemonisha", *Epitaph for Louis Chauvin* evokes the wistful lyricism of this composer's only published rag *Heliotrope Bouquet*, while the set's third piece, *Incineratorag*, features deft harmonic sleights-of-hand and subtle inner voices. Whether by coincidence or intention, the loping, bluesy qualities of *Fields of Flowers* evoke the keyboard style of their dedicatee, composer/pianist and former Grateful Dead sideman Tom Constanten.

By contrast, *Knockout* incorporates specifically marked knocking on high and low pitched wood, plus inventive use of the middle sostenuto pedal. *The Brooklyn Dodge* may be named in memory of the long-departed Ebbets Field, yet its subtitle "A James P. Johnson Stride" reflects the left hand writing's sophistication and athleticism (stride is a kind of younger first cousin to ragtime). A different brand of extroversion and exuberance, inspired in part by composer James Scott, characterizes *Raggin' Rudi*, written for the aforementioned Rudi Blesh. Imagine the improbable marriage of a classic Joplin rag with the mixed meters of "America" from Leoanrd Bernstein's West Side Story, and you've got Bolcom's *Estella: Rag Latino*.

The four pieces comprising the suite *The Garden of Eden* depict The Fall in ragtime terms. Bolcom relates the perky dance strains of *Old Adam* to the once-popular Chris Smith hit song "Ballin' the Jack." Note the fanciful harmonic twists in *The Eternal Feminine*'s third theme, and the elegant cakewalking nonchalance in the finale *Through Eden's Gates*. However, it is in the third piece, *The Serpent's Kiss* (subtitled "Rag Fantasy"), where Bolcom synthesizes past and present in a wild virtuosic tour-de-force.

Looking back on his ragtime heyday, Bolcom recalled that "it was all delightful for us (playing these new-old pieces in concert elicited warm responses from audiences), but I think we all felt the real impetus from our picking up a dropped thread of our emerging American tradition." Bolcom not only picked up this thread, but ran away with it. Just as his one-time teacher Darius Milhaud incorporated Latin-American music into his compositions, Bolcom's embrace of ragtime opened just the right doors to pursue, develop and internalize a powerfully original voice that would organically interweave American popular music cultures into the fabric of concert music for decades to come.



Tracks 1–6 and 8–15 were recorded May 5–8, 2015 at Sono Luminus Studios, Boyce, VA.

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Photos of Spencer Myer: Roberto Araujo (portrait), Simeon Pratt (hands)

William Bolcom

PIANO RAGS

Spencer Myer, piano

Bolcom's embrace of ragtime opened just the right doors to pursue, develop and internalize a powerfully original voice that would organically interweave American popular music cultures into the fabric of concert music for decades to come.

- 1 Ghost Rags: I. The Graceful Ghost Rag 4:35
- 2 Classic Rags: I. Glad Rag 3:46
- 3 Raggin' Rudi 3:31
- 4 Fields of Flowers 3:43
- 5 Epithalamium 3:58
- 6 Ghost Rags: II. Poltergeist 3:55
- 7 Classic Rags: II. Epitaph for Louis Chauvin 5:13
- 8 The Garden of Eden: I. Old Adam 2:56
- 9 The Garden of Eden: II. The Eternal Feminine 5:16
- 10 The Garden of Eden: III. The Serpent's Kiss 6:03
- 11 The Garden of Eden: IV. Through Eden's Gates 4:43
- 12 Knockout: A Rag 4:03
- 13 Ghost Rags: III. Dream Shadows 6:29
- 14 Classic Rags: III. Incineratorag 3:33
- 15 Estela: Rag Latino 5:08
- 16 The Brooklyn Dodge (A James P. Johnson Stride) 4:52 Playing time 71:44



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