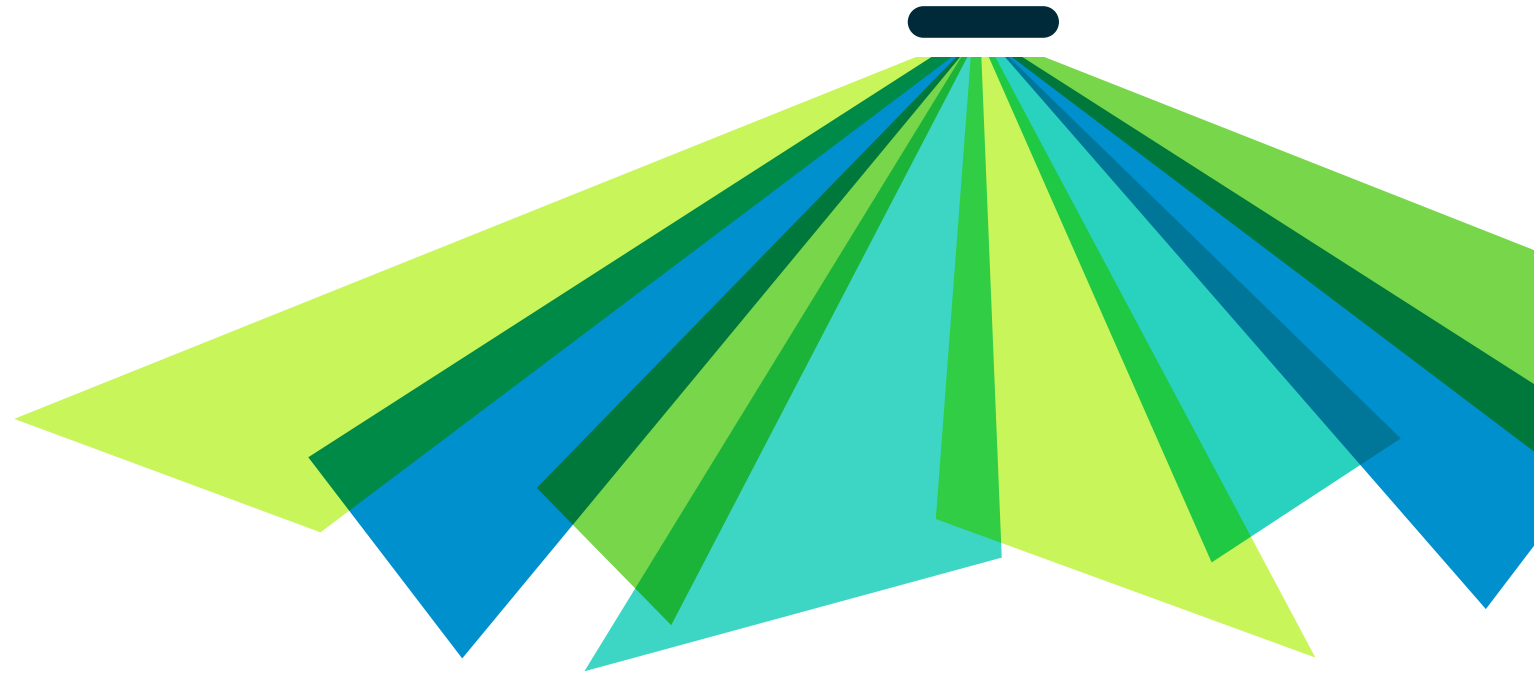




LIVE FROM THE
ASPEN MUSIC
FESTIVAL
AND SCHOOL

**CONTEMPORARY
VOICES**

Sarah Gibson

Lotta Wennäkoski

Samuel Adams

Christopher Stark

About the AMFS

Founded in 1949, the Aspen Music Festival and School is regarded as one of the top classical music festivals in the United States, which each summer presents hundreds of public concerts, master classes, lectures, and other celebratory and enriching performances in its spectacular mountain-town venues. The AMFS showcases the world's top artists and is also a training ground for hundreds of emerging professional musicians who are inspired and mentored by today's great musical minds.

Learn more about the AMFS and its programs at aspenmusicfestival.com.



Aspen Contemporary Ensemble

The Aspen Contemporary Ensemble (ACE) is an elite group that appears regularly throughout the summer at the Aspen Music Festival and School playing the energetic and challenging new chamber music of the world's leading artists. The ensemble also provides concert performances of new works composed in Aspen by young artists enrolled in the Susan and Ford Schumann Center for Composition Studies. These performances are an essential element in the training of composers, who must experience their compositions firsthand with a live ensemble to complete the act of creation.

Conductor Timothy Weiss directs the ACE ensemble and program and is a professor and director of the Contemporary Music Ensemble at Oberlin. He is the 2025 recipient of the Ditson Conductor's Award in recognition of his exceptional commitment to the performance of works by American composers. In 2024, his premiere recording of the orchestral works of Missy Mazzoli with the Arctic Philharmonic earned a GRAMMY nomination.

Sarah Gibson
(1986-2024)

Lotta
Wennäkoski
(b. 1970)

SOAK STAIN (2023)

Donald Crockett *conductor*
Aspen Contemporary Ensemble

Recorded July 12, 2025

1 Soak Stain 10:37

HELE (2018)

Timothy Weiss *conductor*
Aspen Contemporary Ensemble

Recorded July 19, 2025

2 Hele 11:59

Samuel Adams

(b. 1985)

FIRST WORK (2025)

(World Premiere, AMFS co-commission)

Timothy Weiss *conductor*

Aspen Contemporary Ensemble

Recorded August 16, 2025

- | | | |
|----------|------------------------------------|------|
| 3 | I. Makebelieve | 7:54 |
| 4 | II. The First Word | 6:45 |
| 5 | III. The Universe as Primal Scream | 9:48 |

Christopher Stark

(b. 1980)

PREHISTORIC SONGS AND DANCES THAT NEVER EXISTED (2025)

(World Premiere, AMFS co-commission)

Timothy Weiss *conductor*

Aspen Contemporary Ensemble

Recorded August 23, 2025

- | | | |
|-----------|-----------------------|------|
| 6 | I. Counting Dance | 3:25 |
| 7 | II. Drought Song | 3:55 |
| 8 | III. Warning Dance | 2:01 |
| 9 | IV. Healing Song | 5:14 |
| 10 | V. Resurrection Dance | 3:27 |

Sarah Gibson

Soak Stain

Visual art was central to Sarah Gibson's musical world. Her mother was a self-taught visual artist, and arts and crafts were all around her as a child alongside the rickety old piano that formed the launchpad of her life in music. "Much of my music is inspired by visual art," she explained to BMI in 2018. "Whenever I have writer's block, I go to an art museum. I love reading the placards that museums post next to the artwork and very often my titles come from these museum descriptions or quotes found in the descriptions by the artist. . . . I'm drawn to bright colors, so often the titles reflect artwork that is vibrant and bold." For instance, her orchestral piece *warp & weft* draws on Miriam Schapiro's concepts of feminist collage; *to make this mountain taller* uses Aristide Maillo's sculpture *La Montagne* as a metaphor for women's strength; and *I prefer living in color* takes David Hockney's massive landscape *Snails Space* as inspiration for an ode to her home in Los Angeles.

Soak Stain derives its title and imagery from the work of mid-twentieth-century abstract expressionist painter Helen Frankenthaler. After seeing Jackson Pollock's drip paintings and observing him at work, Frankenthaler was determined to find her own way to work with can-

vases on the floor. So she started diluting her paints until she could pour them out of coffee cans onto a flat canvas and allow the paint to be absorbed into the fibers. Sometimes she would tilt the canvas or push the paint with brushes or rollers to give specific shapes to the resulting pools of paint. But often she would just let gravity, capillary action, and what she described as "well-ordered collisions" determine where and how the colors moved. She called this technique "soak-stain."

"In Frankenthaler's paintings," Gibson writes, "this technique allows one to see colors competing and blending with contiguous rivals. I love this approach and the way it provides structured blocks of color in Frankenthaler's works and leaves amoeba-like and uneven edges as various colors meet." To invoke that sensation, Gibson creates a few large blocks of diaphanous timbres that gradually (or abruptly) collide, each marked by a particular evocative sound. At the beginning, she piles string harmonics around buzzing percussion and melodic figures that twist, echo, and dissolve. Later, she pairs different string harmonics and vibraphone with low, flutter-tongued piccolo (an evocative, eerie grouping) to nearly stop time. At the center of the piece are two long quasi-minimalist buildups full of unison lines and swarms of sixteenth notes. These three moods twirl and intertwine, sometimes shifting with clearly defined edges, some-

times dissolving seamlessly from one to the next. In her own words, she was trying to create “clear formal structures defined by liquid melodies and melting textures.”

Soak Stain is one of the final works Gibson completed before her tragic death due to cancer at age 38 in 2024.

— © DAN RUCCIA

Lotta Wennäkoski

Hele

Lotta Wennäkoski collects words. The Finnish composer is often inspired by languages—by words and the sounds that they make, and how unexpected connections can create new meanings. The word *hele*, Wennäkoski explains, comes from the Finnish word for an appoggiatura, an accented dissonant note that resolves downwards by step. But Wennäkoski also points to its proximity to another Finnish word:

“In Finnish, *hele* is a special word for appoggiatura, but it’s also very close to the adjective for ‘bright.’ That connection was interesting to me. Since appoggiaturas are already musical material, I wanted to see how I could develop that idea—what kind of texture might come out of it.”

Wennäkoski further discovered that in Estonian, *hele* means light, but in the sense of being gentle or pale, like a light blue, which she says “added yet another shade of meaning.” She was also attracted to the sound of the word, to how it “begins with that light, bright syllable” and how the syllables become their own rhythmic motive. Her chamber orchestra piece *Hele* translates these phonetic feelings into musical gesture and texture.

Wennäkoski punctuates her works with humor, often through what she calls “little tricks” of instrumentation. *Jong* (2012–13) pairs a juggler with a chamber orchestra playing egg slicers (which the composer invites us to view as “miniature harps”), while 2016’s guitar concerto *Susurrus* uses a plastic ruler to onomatopoeic effect. *Hele* melds the concepts of appoggiatura and brightness through the use of more unexpected instruments: slide and bird whistles.

For Wennäkoski, texture is more than orchestration; it is “the layering, the density” of musical ideas. *Hele* begins with quasi-unpitched murmurings from the ensemble that are quickly pierced with the unexpected sound of the slide whistle. Echoing this initial slide whistle effect, an ascending motif quickly spreads over the ensemble, creating a dense but ever-dancing texture. The work becomes increasingly frenetic before coming to a sudden standstill as the violins sound an eerie harmonic and

the clarinet begins a lyrical solo. The texture becomes sparser as woodwind, brass, and string sections emerge in turn, punctuated by brief rumblings of percussion.

As the music unfolds, its landscape suddenly fills with the sound of birdsong as members of the brass section substitute their instruments for bird whistles. From there the work alternates between a sense of stillness and the energy that marked its opening section; we hear the whistles jostling for attention, air as it moves through instruments, string harmonics, and the return of the original ascending gesture. The piece finally sputters to a stop, filling its space with unexpected sounds and potent silences.

Wennäkoski believes that music can reach “over and beyond itself” to express something larger about humanity—that a chord or a gesture might not mean much on its own, but in the context of a piece it can become evidence of what it means to exist. Through her music she strives to “create moments where things belong together, where a gesture has meaning. And those moments can reach beyond the notes.”

—© KAMILLA ARKU

Samuel Adams

First Work

First Work, a song cycle by Samuel Adams, features three poems by three different poets which bridge the scarcely conceivable proliferation of time and space over eons and the minutiae of living from moment to moment.

The very different approaches of the poets—Pádraig Ó Tuama, Malachi Black, and Tracy K. Smith—only add to this sense of zooming in and out of our reality. The first—Ó Tuama’s poem *Makebelieve*—rewrites the Old Testament creation story, professing that “on the first day / god made / something up.” In the long build up to the singer’s entry, Adams’s musical universe creates itself, beginning with a tiny bang and then a big one, followed by a gradual but unrelenting expansion. When the voice enters, that growth resets and the scale shifts from the cosmological to the geological. Then it guides the reader from “sex and / beasts and breaths and rabies” and “swarming things that swarm / inside the dirt” to “eventually, us, / with all our viruses, laments and curiosities.”

Ó Tuama is a theologian as well as a poet, and has been active in Ireland’s reconciliation processes. Discussing this poem, he says, “Religion is—or should be—free to change too, or to wrap itself around the delight and devastation of the human condition.” Adams gives the

ending of Ó Tuama's poem a hard-won and not entirely settled peace.

Black's *The First Word* references the more abstract creation story of the New Testament, the opening of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word." In contrast to the first, this poem holds us from the start at a moment of the closest human interaction, and Adams follows suit; a single melody is the basis for most of the movement, binding the voice, ensemble, and listener together. Adams breaks away from the melody only for the crucial line: "not yes, or you, or hawk, or love; just look," as if setting the music, too, in italics.

In Smith's *The Universe as Primal Scream*, a neighbor's twin infants are "screaming like the Dawn of Man." Smith imagines the sound heralding "a door opening onto the roiling infinity of space"; the song reverses course, leading us from the human to the empyrean. Matching the poem's more conversational tone, Adams's music moves flexibly between its different moods and thoughts, ending as if in the middle of a thought.

"The world's an incredibly messy, difficult place," says Adams. "And if I can create something that sheds a little bit of light, or creates a little bit of clarity for a listener . . . that's really what I'm after." In *First Work*, this clarity comes not from simplicity but from complexity: a mu-

sical thread that leads us out of the anger and rubble of untold millennia. — © JOEL RUST

Christopher Stark

Prehistoric Songs and Dances That Never Existed

When Christopher Stark was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome in 2022–23, he found himself hanging out with archeologists. He was immediately struck by "how creative they were and how often they relied on their (extremely educated) imaginations to fill in the missing bits and pieces of their enigmatic puzzles." He had assumed that "you'd have to defend [every little factual claim] within an inch of its life in some kind of academic court of law"; he was surprised to learn that wasn't the case. It was an inspiring alternative for the creative process, a way for Stark to reimagine his approach to composition after many years of working on commission. Moreover, using deductive and empirical methods to craft narrative from fragmentary materials connects Stark with twentieth-century Modernists whose approach to spirituality in music was also based on empirical experience.

In the piece, Stark casts himself as a musical archeologist from the distant future who has come upon a set of five random sonic artifacts from our time, stripped of all their original context and their meaning for their “prehistoric” users/creators. He then reconstructs, with an educated imagination, what the “folk music” of such “fictional lost civilizations” might have been like. These “reconstructions” unfold in an alternating series of songs and dances. In the latter, Stark lets the logic of the beat dictate the way a given fragment develops, leaning into syncopated, additive processes. In the former, he lets the flexible, improvisatory potential of melodies and the looser spaces they provide dictate how the material unfurls.

Stark claims he’s not “creating” this music, just “discovering” it. That distinction contains profound implications for a world where “creativity” and “originality” are often considered intrinsic requirements for musical value. Stark notes that, paradoxically, those expectations themselves can be mundane; he calls the assumption of a certain mode of creative profundity “boring,” “unproductive in a way that I don’t think helps me make good work.” “I think this feeling of discovery feels more mutable, like things can change,” he continues. “Why don’t I find this great sound and just chase it rather than having this idea that I’m going to impose upon it and lessen it in some way with my ego or my concept?”

He’s also quick to point out that he’s not making “fake indigenous music or something like that.” “I am thinking about where this music comes from,” he says. “Does it come from bird sounds? Does it come from warning signals? Does it come from our heartbeats? There is something kind of human about it.” This excitement, and the flexibility of scientific inquiry, brought him to an idiosyncratic curiosity. Or, in his own words, “I have this weird freedom to make it weird.” — © DAN RUCCIA

LIVE FROM THE ASPEN MUSIC FESTIVAL AND SCHOOL

Donald Crockett *conductor*

Timothy Weiss *conductor*

Aspen Contemporary Ensemble

Recording Supervisor Kyle Schick

Producer/Engineer Scott Burgess

Recorded in Harris Concert Hall, Aspen, Colorado

2025 Aspen Contemporary Ensemble

Violin

Laura Gamboa

Maya Irizarry Lambright

Viola

Felix Vesper

Cello

Miles Reed

Double Bass

Lukas Munsell

Flute/Piccolo

Antonina Styczen

Clarinet

Ian McEdwards

Percussion

Xin Yi Chong

Piano

Seth Schultheis

Additional Musicians

Jiho An *clarinet*

Sam Atlas *trumpet*

Emma Dell Mitchell *percussion*

Pin Kan *clarinet*

Heeyeon Kim *percussion*

Chai Lee *harp*

Choyi Lee *flute*

Zane Mallett *harp*

Andrew Nelson *bassoon*

Will Sempendorfer *oboe*

Melanie Spector *soprano*

Antonio Urrutia Mendoza *oboe*

Yuan Hong (Yolanda) Zheng *horn*

Qianbin Zhu *horn*