

The Juilliard School
and New York Festival of Song
present

Ports of Call

Chea Young Kang and **Deborah Love**, Sopranos
Maggie Renée and **Jasmin White**, Mezzo-Sopranos
Cesar Andres Parreño and **Santiago Pizarro**, Tenors
Kyle Miller and **Jarrett Porter**, Baritones
Joseph Parrish, Bass-Baritone

Steven Blier, Pianist, Arranger, and Artistic Director of NYFOS
Mary Birnbaum, Stage Director
Shawn Chang, Assistant Pianist
Jonathan Estabrooks, Video Producer

INTRO

BOB TELSON (b. 1949)
"Calling You" from *Bagdad Café*
Joseph Parrish

BRAZIL

ERNESTO JÚLIO DE NAZARETH (1863-1934)
Nenê
Chea Young Kang

SPAIN

JESÚS GURIDI (1886-1961)
"Mañanita de San Juan" from *Seis canciones castellanas*
Deborah Love

FRANCE

KURT WEILL (1900-50)
J'attends un navire
Jasmin White

AUSTRIA/CHINA

FRANZ LEHÁR (1870-1948)
"Immer nur lächeln" from *Das Land des Lächelns*
Cesar Andres Parreño

HOLLAND

JACQUES BREL (1929-78)
Amsterdam
Kyle Miller

SWEDEN

GUSTAF NORDQVIST (1886-1949)
Till havs
Santiago Pizarro

ISRAEL

CHAIM BARKANI (1923-2001)

Al telchi basadeh

Maggie Reneé

KOREA

TRADITIONAL

The Boat Song

Chea Young Kang

USA (NYC)

NED ROREM (b. 1923)

The Lordly Hudson

Jarrett Porter

HAROLD ARLEN (1905-86)

Let's Take a Walk Around the Block

Ensemble

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About This Program by Steven Blier

When it was time to settle on the theme for this year's NYFOS@Juilliard concert, we were still entertaining the hope that we'd be performing in the Peter J. Sharp Theater, either for a live audience or an army of cameras. But we had to be ready for Plan B: a series of music videos of the type we'd all been producing since the pandemic started. Searching for a flexible, resilient theme that could thrive in either medium, I remembered a NYFOS show, *Ports of Call*, that would answer our needs in either outcome. The program had a distinguished pedigree: four previous productions (Wolf Trap; Caramoor; San Francisco; and Orient, New York), each time with a different cast and a slightly altered playlist. It was ready for its fifth iteration.

The premise of the concert is simple; a trip around the world through song. At every stop we meet someone in transit—a wanderer, a sailor, a pilgrim, a traveler, someone on the prowl for love, someone on the prowl for enlightenment. The theme was especially apt this winter, when several of our cast members were still not in New York and others had only recently arrived back to school after long quarantines overseas. All of us were fantasizing about a world where we could roam without fear.

Director Mary Birnbaum and I had two goals in mind: to take advantage of the cast's diversity and to introduce the singers to new repertoire. Chea Young Kang offered us five gorgeous Korean songs to choose from and filmed one of them from a temple in Seoul; Joseph Parrish bowled me over with his jazz piano chops as he accompanied himself in "Calling You" from the movie *Bagdad Café*; Maggie Reneé wrapped her mezzo-soprano voice around an iconic Israeli song, "At telchi basadeh," with the authenticity of a born-and-bred sabra chanteuse; and Jarrett Porter, new to our city,

brought a special reverence to Ned Rorem's hymn to New York, "The Lordly Hudson." All five of them seemed to be in their wheelhouse.

Others entered uncharted waters. My original intention was to have our two tenors, Santiago Pizarro and César Parreño, sing songs from their native Peru and Ecuador. But I feared that would have becalmed the voyage in South America for too long. Instead, I offered Santiago his first Swedish song, the classic barn-burner "Till Havs" by one-hit wonder Gustav Nordqvist; for César, a rare aria from Lehár's *The Land of Smiles*, about an alienated Chinese prince on a state visit to Vienna. One man finds his true nature facing the turbulence of sea voyages while the other stoically weathers the isolation of being an outsider in a foreign culture. Both songs took my Latin tenors into new territory and proved to be superb showcases for their voices.

When I was a teenager, the Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel was famous enough to inspire a long-running off-Broadway musical revue, *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*. By now, when Brel is no longer alive and well and living anywhere, few of my students have heard of him. But to my surprise, Kyle Miller turned out to be a Brel devotee—though he'd never sung his music. We were both drawn to one of Brel's love songs, "Ne me quitte pas" (better known in America as "If You Go Away"), but we realized that "Amsterdam" was more appropriate to the theme—after all, it is about an actual port of call.

"Amsterdam" is a fierce piece of music, a relentless vocal challenge, and a difficult song to encompass on just a piano. The music moves in a slow accelerando and crescendo from beginning to end, which is daunting to coordinate when you can't record in the same room. Somehow Kyle and I pulled off this miracle of ensemble, attacking Brel's roaring *chanson* like a pair of lions.

If Jacques Brel was a teenage passion of mine, Kurt Weill's music informed my 20s and 30s, and songs from Spain and Latin America have become the obsession of my recent years. Choosing a Weill song was easy: "J'attends un navire" from *Marie Galante* checked all the boxes. The character has been kidnapped to Panama but longs to travel home to Bordeaux—a double travel theme. And Weill himself was in transit when he wrote it: Forced to flee from Nazi Germany, he took refuge in Paris before establishing himself as a leading light on Broadway. The song needs a colloquial lightness as well as serious vocal chops for the strenuous last page. It was perfect for mezzo-soprano Jasmin White, a Verdi singer in the making with a background in jazz.

"Nenê" has been a fixture of *Ports of Call* in every version of the program. The music is by one of Brazil's earliest musical icons, Ernesto Nazareth. Combining the grace of Chopin with the sexy swing of local dance rhythms in hundreds of tuneful piano pieces, he laid the foundation for Brazilian jazz. A handful of his tangos—among them "Nenê"—also have lyrics, turning his piano pieces into irresistible, if somewhat rangy, songs. This was Chea Young Kang's first foray into Portuguese, which she mastered from her apartment in South Korea. Her language coach, Zeuler Lima, was in St. Louis. Score one for FaceTime.

Basque composer Jesús Guridi provides our stopover in Spain: "Mañanita de San Juan" from his *Six Castilian Songs*. The narrator doesn't travel very far in this piece—just a saunter from her house down to the beach at the very beginning of summer. There the delights of music and love await her. Guridi wrote one of the loveliest melodies in the repertoire, and I had a hunch it would show soprano Deborah Love's opulent voice to good advantage. (I was right.)

We end with a reality check: "Let's Take a Walk Around the Block," by Harold Arlen and Ira Gershwin. The song was written during the Great Depression and the narrators don't have any money for travel—the best they can manage is a trip around the block. But they fantasize about all the foreign places they want to visit, on the wings of Arlen's propulsive music and Gershwin's charming lyric.

The song may be 87 years old, but it perfectly summed up our pent-up COVID-era desires—"I'll sit on your lap—all over the map!" The day will come when we can gather together in one room to belt out this song unmasked. Maybe we can even give one another a hug when it's done. May that day come soon.