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Roser Piano and Keyboard Alum Series

**For Comrades and Lovers: a celebration of the art songs
of Robert Spillman**

Adam Ewing, baritone

Allan Armstrong, piano

7:30 p.m., Friday, Sept. 6, 2024

Grusin Music Hall

PROGRAM

Four Poems of Raymond Carver

Happiness

Waiting

Looking for Work

Asia

Nine Poems of James Wright

A Blessing

Depressed by a Book...

To the Evening Star: Western Minnesota

Today I Was Happy, So I Made This Poem

In Fear of Harvests

Arriving in the Country Again

Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota

I Try to Waken and Greet the World Again

A Dream of Burial

For Comrades and Lovers—Nine Poems of Walt Whitman

These the Frailest Leaves of Me
O you whom I often and silently come
We Two Boys Together Clinging
When I peruse the conquer'd fame
A Glimpse
O Tan-faced Prairie Boy
As Toilsome I wander'd Virginia's Woods
What Think You I Take My Pen In Hand
No labor-saving machine

PROGRAM NOTES

The polymathic life of CU Boulder professor emeritus Robert Spillman is an evolving, marvelous creation. Bob has found incredible success as a pianist, conductor, teacher, scholar, forest ranger and in recent years, art song composer. 30 years ago he co-wrote the essential book on art song, *Poetry into Song: Performance and Analysis of Lieder*.

Franz Schubert wrote his first song for voice and piano at the age of 12 or 13. Spillman's burst of art song composition began at a later age by decades. Yet there were signs of early interest in the genre. Two works for bass trombone written in the late 1950's became important pieces in the brass world, the second presciently entitled *Two Songs*. In between these early compositions and the explosion of song in the 21st century is a lifetime steeped in the best music and literature.

The three song collections of this recital welcome us into the vast and generous world of Bob's imagination. Imagine pulling up a comfortable chair in Spillman's book-lined study. The music is informed by all the marvelous European predecessors in song, such as Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, Fauré and Debussy. Added to this background is a hefty amount of Americana, from glitzy Golden Age Hollywood music to the musical theater style of Sondheim.

Raymond Carver (1938-1988) is perhaps better known as a writer of short-stories rather than as a poet. His focus was often on the lives and plights of downtrodden characters with big dreams. Bob has set four poems that capture these sublime moments in the course of everyday life. The jauntiness of "Happiness" is contrasted with the comic mock-drama of "Waiting." This is followed by the dreamy French-impressionism inspired "Looking for Work". The collection concludes with the ecstatically wistful "Asia."

Staying in this luxuriant radiance of pastoral scenarios, the *Nine Poems of James Wright* (1927-1980) begins with the exact musical world of “Asia” but soon explores profound topics of landscape and inspiration. “Depressed by a Book … ” (of bad poetry) begins in a high camp, cabaret recitative. “In Fear of Harvests” is a pointillistic setting of severe intensity. “Lying in a Hammock” evokes a spirit of tango into the Southern Minnesota location, transposing Pine Island into l’isle joyeuse. The final song is a setting of “A Dream of Burial”, which captures the terrifying first two stanzas with agonizing chromaticism in the piano and chant-like, measured singing.

Despite his place in the pantheon of American poets, Walt Whitman is a relatively rare choice of text for art song composers. The density of language and the knotty structure of the poetry offers formidable challenges. *For Comrades and Lovers* explores some of the most exquisite and sensual poems of Whitman, forming an American song cycle that is the equal to such canonical works as Aaron Copland’s *12 Poems of Emily Dickinson* and Samuel Barber’s *Hermit Songs*.

Each song in *For Comrades and Lovers* is enigmatically dedicated to a set of initials. The first song refers explicitly to the vulnerability of the secret life of an artist and lover, a confessional theme that continues through the rest of the cycle. “We Two Boys Together Clinging” is a brash setting of humor and triumph. This is contrasted with the granitic, unrelenting majesty of “When I Peruse the Conquer’d Fame.” The accompaniment for “What I Think I Take My Pen In Hand” reminds us of the virtuosic piano prowess of Spillman. The majestic nautical and nocturnal imagery gives way to a secret passionate moment. The song cycle ends with a pessimistic meditation on Whitman’s lack of legacy to future generations, something unimaginable to us in the 21st century but quite plausible in 1867. The music swells into a brief triumphant rebuttal at the words stating that the poet leaves nothing to posterity, “but a few carols vibrating in the air I leave, for comrades and lovers.”

—Allan Armstrong

TEXTS

Four Poems of Raymond Carver

Happiness

So early it's still almost dark out.
I'm near the window with coffee,
and the usual early morning stuff
that passes for thought.
When I see the boy and his friend
walking up the road
to deliver the newspaper.
They wear caps and sweaters,
and one boy has a bag over his
shoulder.
They are so happy
they aren't saying anything, these
boys.
I think if they could, they would take
each other's arm.
It's early in the morning,
and they are doing this thing
together.
They come on, slowly.
The sky is taking on light,
though the moon still hangs pale
over the water.
Such beauty that for a minute
death and ambition, even love,
doesn't enter into this.
Happiness. It comes on
unexpectedly. And goes beyond,
really,
any early morning talk about it.

Waiting

Left off the highway and
down the hill. At the
bottom, hang another left.
Keep bearing left. The road
will make a Y. Left again.
There's a creek on the left.
Keep going. Just before
the road ends, there'll be
another road. Take it
and no other. Otherwise,
your life will be ruined
forever. There's a log house
with a shake roof, on the left.
It's not that house. It's
the next house, just over
a rise. The house
where trees are laden with
fruit. Where phlox, forsythia,
and marigold grow. It's
the house where the woman
stands in the doorway
wearing the sun in her hair. The one
who's been waiting
all this time.
The woman who loves you.
The one who can say,
"What's kept you?"

Looking for Work

I've always wanted brook trout
for breakfast.
Suddenly, I find a new path
to the waterfall.
I begin to hurry.
Wake up,
my wife says,
you're dreaming.
But when I try to rise,
the house tilts.
Who's dreaming?
It's noon, she says.
My new shoes wait by the door.
They are gleaming.

Asia

A few minutes ago, I stepped onto
the deck
of the house. From there I could see
and hear the water,
and everything that's happened to
me all these years.
It was hot and still. The tide was
out.
No birds sang. As I leaned against
the railing
a cobweb touched my forehead.
It caught in my hair. No one can
blame me that I turned
and went inside. There was no
wind. The sea

was dead calm. I hung the cobweb
from the lampshade.
Where I watch it shudder now and
then when my breath
touches it. A fine thread. Intricate.
Before long, before anyone realizes,
I'll be gone from here.

Nine Poems of James Wright

A Blessing

Just off the highway to Rochester,
Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the
grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian
ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the
willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into
the pasture
Where they have been grazing all
day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly
contain their happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They
love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young

tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer
one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to
caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a
girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I
would break
Into blossom.

Depressed by a Book of Bad Poetry, I Walk Toward an Unused Pasture and Invite the Insects to Join Me

Relieved, I let the book fall behind a
stone.
I climb a slight rise of grass.
I do not want to disturb the ants
Who are walking single file up the
fence post,
Carrying small white petals,
Casting shadows so frail that I can
see through them.
I close my eyes for a moment and
listen.
The old grasshoppers

Are tired, they leap heavily now,
Their thighs are burdened.
I want to hear them, they have clear
sounds to make.
Then lovely, far off, a dark cricket
begins
In the maple trees.

To the Evening Star: Western Minnesota

Under the water tower at the edge
of town
A huge Airedale ponders a long
ripple
In the grass fields beyond.
Miles off, a whole grove silently
Flies up into the darkness.
One light comes on in the sky,
One lamp on the prairie.

Beautiful daylight of the body, your
hands carry seashells.
West of this wide plain,
Animals wilder than ours
Come down from the green
mountains in the darkness.
Now they can see you, they know
The open meadows are safe.

Today I Was Happy, So I Made This Poem

As the plump squirrel scampers
Across the roof of the corncrib,
The moon suddenly stands up in the
darkness,
And I see that it is impossible to die.
Each moment of time is a mountain.
An eagle rejoices in the oak trees of
heaven,
Crying
This is what I wanted.

In Fear of Harvests

It has happened
Before: nearby,
The nostrils of slow horses
Breathe evenly,
And the brown bees drag their high
garlands, Heavily,
Toward hives of snow.

Arriving in the Country Again

The white house is silent.
My friends can't hear me yet.
The flicker who lives in the bare tree
at the
field's edge
Pecks once and is still for a long time.
I stand still in the late afternoon.
My face is turned away from the
sun.
A horse grazes in my long shadow.

Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota

Over my head, I see the bronze
butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty
house,
The cowbells follow one another
Into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two
pines,
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as the evening darkens
and comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking
for home.
I have wasted my life.

I Try to Waken and Greet the World Again

In a pine tree,
A few yards away from my window
sill,
A brilliant blue jay is springing up
and down, up and down,
On a branch.
I laugh, as I see him abandon
himself

To entire delight, for he knows as
well as I do
That the branch will not break.

A Dream of Burial

Nothing was left of me
But my right foot
And my left shoulder.
They lay white as the skein of a
spider floating
In a field of snow toward a dark
building
Tilted and strained by wind.
Inside the dream, I dreamed on.

A parade of old women
Sang softly above me,
Faint mosquitoes near still water.

So I waited, in my corridor.
I listened for the sea
To call me.
I knew that, somewhere outside, the
horse
Stood saddled, browsing in grass,
Waiting for me.

For Comrades and Lovers— Nine Poems of Walt Whitman

These the Frailest Leaves of Me
Here the frailest leaves of me, and
yet my strongest-lasting:
Here I shade and hide my
thoughts—I myself do not expose
them,
And yet they expose me more than
all my other poems.

O you whom I often and silently come

O you whom I often and silently
come where you are that I may be
with you,
As I walk by your side or sit near, or
remain in the same room with you,
Little you know the subtle electric
fire that for your sake is playing
within me.

We Two Boys Together Clinging

WE two boys together clinging,
One the other never leaving,
Up and down the roads going,
North and South excursions
making,
Power enjoying, elbows stretching,
fingers clutching,
Arm'd and fearless, eating, drinking,

sleeping, loving,
No law less than ourselves owning,
sailing, soldiering, thieving,
threatening,
Misers, menials, priests alarming, air
breathing, water drinking, on
the turf or the sea-beach dancing,
Cities wrenching, ease scorning,
statutes mocking, feebleness chas-
ing,
Fulfilling our foray.

When I peruse the conquer'd fame

When I peruse the conquer'd fame
of heroes and the victories
of mighty generals, I do not envy
the generals,
Nor the President in his Presidency,
nor the rich in his great
house,
But when I hear of the brotherhood
of lovers, how it was with
them,
How together through life, through
dangers, odium, unchanging,
long and long,
Through youth and through middle
and old age, how unfaltering,
how affectionate and faithful they
were,
Then I am pensive—I hastily walk
away fill'd with the bitterest
envy.

A Glimpse

A glimpse through an interstice
caught,
Of a crowd of workmen and drivers
in a bar-room around the stove late
of a winter night, and I unremark'd
seated in a corner,
Of a youth who loves me and whom
I love, silently approaching and
seating himself near, that he may
hold me by the hand,
A long while amid the noises of
coming and going, of drinking and
oath and smutty jest,
There we two, content, happy in
being together, speaking little,
perhaps not a word.

O Tan-faced Prairie Boy

O tan-faced prairie-boy,
Before you came to camp came
many a welcome gift,
Praises and presents came and
nourishing food, till at last among
the recruits,
You came, taciturn, with nothing to
give – we but look'd on each other,
When lo! more than all the gifts of
the world you gave me.

As Toilsome I wander'd

Virginia's Woods

As toilsome I wander'd Virginia's
woods,

To the music of rustling leaves
kick'd by my feet, (for 'twas
autumn,)

I mark'd at the foot of a tree the
grave of a soldier;

Mortally wounded he and buried
on the retreat, (easily all could
understand,)

The halt of a mid-day hour, when
up! no time to lose—yet this sign
left,

On a tablet scrawl'd and nail'd on
the tree by the grave,
Bold, cautious, true, and my loving
comrade.

Long, long I muse, then on my way
go wandering,
Many a changeful season to follow,
and many a scene of life,
Yet at times through changeful
season and scene, abrupt, alone, or
in the crowded street,
Comes before me the unknown
soldier's grave, comes the
inscription rude in Virginia's woods,
Bold, cautious, true, and my loving
comrade.

What Think You I Take My Pen

In Hand

What think you I take my pen in
hand to record?

The battle-ship, perfect-model'd,
majestic, that I saw pass the offing
to-day under full sail?

The splendors of the past day?

Or the splendor of the night that
envelopes me?

Or the vaunted glory and growth of
the great city spread around me?—
No;

But I record of two simple men I
saw to-day, on the pier, in the midst
of the crowd, parting the parting of
dear friends;

The one to remain hung on the
other's neck, and passionately
kiss'd him,

While the one to depart, tightly
prest the one to remain in his arms.

No labor-saving machine

No labor-saving machine,
Nor discovery have I made;
Nor will I be able to leave behind
me any wealthy bequest to found a
hospital or library,
Nor reminiscence of any deed of
courage, for America,
Nor literary success, nor intellect—
nor book for the book-shelf;
Only a few carols, vibrating through
the air, I leave,
For comrades and lovers.

PERSONNEL

Allan Armstrong, piano

Pianist and vocal coach Allan Armstrong is assistant professor of music in voice at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, where he specializes in art song literature and opera coaching. He serves as a faculty pianist/coach at the Tel Aviv Summer Opera program. Armstrong is also the official accompanist of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions for both the Colorado/Wyoming District and the Rocky Mountain Region.

From 2017 to 2020, he was visiting assistant professor in chamber and collaborative music at the Jacobs School. He was previously a member of the applied piano faculty at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, where he directed the nationally award-winning Bravo Opera Company. He has taught on the faculty of the Sherrill Milnes Savannah Voice Festival and the International Vocal Arts Institute.

In 2005, he coached and recorded the newly revised version of Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* under the direction of the composer's son, Peter Bartók. In 2010, Armstrong was a featured solo pianist in a recital of the complete solo piano works of Pulitzer Prize-winning composer David Del Tredici at New York University Steinhardt.

In 2019, he was chosen to participate in the acclaimed National Association of Teachers of Singing Intern Program at the New England Conservatory. In 2021 Armstrong received the Indiana University Trustees Award, in recognition of outstanding achievements in teaching.

Armstrong earned a Doctor of Musical Arts in collaborative piano from the University of Colorado Boulder, where he studied with Alexandra Nguyen and Margaret McDonald.

Adam Ewing, baritone

Lyric baritone Adam Ewing is an Assistant Professor of Voice at the College of Wooster in Ohio, and previously taught at Regis University in Denver. He holds graduate degrees from Indiana University (MM) and the University of Colorado at Boulder (DMA). Adam is particularly fond of art song, and has performed faculty recitals, concerts with Art Song Colorado and the Colorado Mahlerfest, and the Redstone Recital series at Casper College's Humanities Festival. In summer 2013, he was one of six singers chosen for the Fall Island Vocal Arts Seminar where he studied contemporary American art song with Stephanie Blythe and Alan Smith. He was a national finalist and Berton Coffin Award winner of the NATS Artist Awards in 2018. More recently, he participated in the Ukrainian Art Song Summer Institute in Toronto, Ontario.

Having lived in Colorado for 13 years, Adam has performed with many ensembles throughout the state, including the Colorado Symphony (Schaunard, *La Boheme*), Loveland Opera (Major General Stanley, *The Pirates of Penzance*), Central City Opera (Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo and the Bravest Girl in the World), Boulder Bach Festival, Baroque Chamber Orchestra of Colorado, Denver Early Music Consort, and Opera on Tap. He particularly enjoys premiering new works, and has participated in both full performances and staged readings with CU's New Opera Workshop and the Writing the Rockies Conference at Western Colorado University.

Adam has performed the baritone solos in Fauré's Requiem across the country. He has also sung the solos in *The Messiah*, both the Brahms and Duruflé Requiems, and Vaughan Williams' 5 Mystical Songs and *Dona nobis pacem*, which he performed at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon. In addition to singing, Adam is a pianist, vocal coach, conductor, and music director. He enjoys playing board games with friends and entertaining his two cats.

Robert Spillman, professor emeritus and composer

Robert Spillman, Professor Emeritus, was chair of the piano faculty and music director of the opera program at the University of Colorado Boulder. He studied at the Eastman School of Music, receiving a BM degree and Performers Certificate in piano, and an MA degree in music theory. He then studied with Artur Balsam and Sergius Kagan in New York City, and accompanied rehearsals and performances of *Porgy and Bess* at the New York City Opera Company with William Warfield, Veronica Tyler and Robert Guillaume. In 1964 he received a Fulbright Scholarship and moved with his family to Stuttgart, where he studied with Arno Erfurth (piano), Hermann Reutter (Lied), Hubert Giesen (accompanying) and Henk Badings (composition).

Shortly thereafter, he moved to West Berlin where he spent the next seven years. There he accompanied artists like Rita Streich, Barry McDaniel, Donald Grobe, James King, Lou Ann Wyckoff, Lucy Peacock, James Galway and Wolfgang Boettcher. He returned to the United States and joined the faculty at Eastman in 1973, where he coached opera and taught piano, accompanying and vocal literature.

Spillman spent numerous summers at the Chautauqua Institution as a student, accompanist and coach, and was co-director of the Opera Center at the Aspen Music Festival for many years. Activities as a member of the Artist Faculty of the Aspen Festival include teaching piano, opera and languages, performing frequently on chamber concerts and conducting opera presentations.

He has several compositions for brass published through Edition Musicus, including his Concerto for Bass Trombone, which has become a staple of the repertoire. His textbook *The Art of Accompanying*, was published by Schirmer Books in 1985, *Sightreading at the Keyboard* was published in 1990 and *Poetry Into Song* was published by Oxford University Press

in 1995. While on the faculty of the Eastman School of Music, Spillman remained active throughout the United States as accompanist for such artists as Jan DeGaetani, Sylvia Rosenberg, Yehuda Hanani, Paul Sperry, and Lucy Shelton and has performed as soloist with numerous orchestras. He is also busy as a clinician and teacher, working with both pianists and singers. His piano students have been honored with prizes in several national competitions, including two consecutive first prizes in the MTNA Collegiate Competition.

Spillman received the Robert L Stearns Award of the Alumni Association of the University of Colorado in 2004 in recognition of his service and career. In his retirement he remained active in volunteer work for the Open Space Programs of both Lafayette and the City of Boulder. He now resides at The Pearl on Boulder Creek.

Since his official retirement from CU Boulder, Spillman has been occasionally called back into active duty, replacing Professor Doris Lehnert when she was on leave, (Spring 2006) and Professor David Korevaar when he was on leave (Spring 2009). He also conducted several rehearsals and performances of the CU Opera in the Summer in 2006, and guest-taught several classes in the collaborative piano program. Appearances in his retirement years include a concert and master classes at Emory University in March 2007, a concert, including a world premiere, at Montclair State University in March 2006, adjudicating the artist finals at the MTNA Convention in Toronto, March 2007, adjudicating the Pramberger Competition in Denver, May 2007, and teaching guest master classes for Opera Colorado, May 2007-2010. In October 2012 he performed *Rhapsody in Blue* with the CU Boulder Symphonic Band and in a solo recital in Broomfield. In November of that year he was the accompanist for a touring production of Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti* in performances along the Front Range. Spillman has accompanied the singers competing in the Metropolitan Opera National Competition in

Denver for many years, and in 2013 added providing the same service for the Denver Lyric Opera Guild Competition.

In 2015 a concert at CU Boulder was dedicated entirely to some of Spillman's new vocal compositions. He was guest composer at UT Brownsville in 2016 and at Sam Houston University in 2017. In 2016 he recorded *Love Songs*, a cycle by Robert Aldrich, with mezzo Nicole Asel. Spillman's song cycles to poems of Jane Kenyon and Sara Teasdale were recorded by Soprano Emily Martin Mobberly and pianist Richard Masters in 2017.

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Current as of Aug. 20, 2024.

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