

**Lucas Meachem, Baritone, with Irina Meachem, Piano**  
New Orleans Friends of Music, Tuesday, May 19, 2026

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*PROGRAM*

<b>Old American Songs</b>	Aaron Copland (1900–1990)
1. The Boatmen’s Dance	
2. Zion’s Walls	
3. Long Time Ago	
4. At the River	
5. I Bought Me a Cat	
<b>Four Walt Whitman Songs</b>	Kurt Weill (1900–1950)
1. Beat! Beat! Drums (1942)	
2. O Captain! My Captain! (1941)	
3. Come Up from the Fields, Father (1947)	
4. Dirge for Two Veterans (1942)	
<i>Intermission</i>	
<b>A Question of Light</b>	Jake Heggie (b. 1961)
1. The Light of Coincidences (René Magritte)	
2. Eccentric Flint (Maya, A.D. 600–900)	
3. Yellow Flowers in a Vase (Gustave Caillebotte)	
4. Place de la Concorde (Piet Mondrian)	
5. El Hombre (Tamayo)	
6. Watch (Gerald Murphy)	
<b>A Poem</b>	Florence Price (1887–1953)
<b>An American in Paris</b>	George Gershwin (1898–1937) Arr. Maurice C. Whitney
	Irina Meachem, Piano
<b>Simple Song (from <i>Mass</i>)</b>	Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990)
<b>Grief</b>	William Grant Still (1895–1978)
<b>Shenandoah</b>	Traditional; Arr. by Steven White

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**PROGRAM NOTES**

*by Marc Loudon*

*Board Member Marc Loudon provides these program notes in advance of each concert. These contain more detail than those in the program.*

[Note: Performance links provided in these notes are generally available *YouTube* links that in some cases start with advertisements. You can skip the ads by clicking on the “Skip” message that will appear on the lower right of the video after a few seconds. You can avoid the ads completely by subscribing to YouTube Premium.]

Until his death in 1990, **Aaron Copland** was unquestionably the “dean of American composers.” The wide recognition and appreciation of his work by American concertgoers have been associated with the infusion of Americana into many of his works, such as *Rodeo*, *Fanfare for the Common Man*, *Appalachian Spring*, *Billy the Kid*, and *Lincoln Portrait*. The five **Old American Songs** fall into this category; many, if not all, of them will be familiar.

The complete *Old American Songs* comprise two sets of five, composed respectively in 1950 and 1952. The composer Benjamin Britten asked Copland to arrange a set of American folk tunes for his Music and Art Festival in Aldeburgh, England. Copland wrote five songs for male soloist and piano for the occasion: “The Boatmen’s Dance,” “The Dodger,” “Long Time Ago,” “Simple Gifts” and “I Bought Me a Cat.” The first set of Old American Songs was written in 1950 and premiered in June of that year by the famous tenor Peter Pears, with Britten at the piano. In 1951 the work premiered in America with Copland himself playing the piano and baritone William Warfield singing. Warfield would go on to become the singer most identified with the songs and spoke often on his collaborations with the composer. The songs were met with such success that Copland composed a second set in 1952 consisting of “The Little Horses,” “Zion’s Walls,” “The Golden Willow Tree,” “At the River” and “Ching-a-Ring Chaw.” The second set premiered in 1953, again with the Warfield/Copland pairing. Copland transcribed both sets for vocal soloist and orchestra in 1957, and many of the songs have been arranged for chorus and piano or chorus and orchestra.

“The Boatmen’s Dance” (from Set 1) is Copland’s arrangement of an original banjo melody by “Dixie” composer Daniel Decatur Emmett (1815-1904), which was published in Boston in 1843. “Zion’s Walls” (from Set 2) is based on a revivalist tune with words and music by John G. McCurry (1821–1886), a Georgia farmer, who published the song collection *The Social Harp*.



“I Bought Me a Cat” (Set 1) is from a traditional children’s nonsense song in the style of “Old Macdonald,” or the holiday carol “Twelve Days of Christmas,” in which narrator describes (and imitates) the various “animals” in his menagerie: cat, duck, goose, hen, pig, cow, horse, and his last (and presumably most treasured) purchase, his wife.

Copland used this song again in his opera, *The Tender Land*. Copland’s research in the Brown University Library unearthed the minstrel song “Long Time Ago” (Set 1), originally adapted in 1837 by George Pope Morris (1802–1864, lyrics) and Charles Edward Horn (music) from an anonymous tune. “At the River” (Set 2) is based on “Shall We Gather at the River,” a much-loved hymn dating from 1865 by the Reverend Robert Lowry (1826–1899), a hymn-writer and pastor of several churches in the northeastern United States. “At the River” was used in memorial concerts for both Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein.

Aaron Copland and his good friend “Lenny” Bernstein at a rehearsal.



**Kurt Weill** was a highly regarded and prolific composer in Germany who migrated with his wife Lenya to New York City in 1933 to escape religious persecution. He was naturalized in 1943. Even before he became an American citizen, Weill had proudly declared in a radio broadcast that he had “never felt as much at home in my native land as I have from the first moment in the United States...I have the feeling that most people who ever came to this country came for the same reasons which brought me here: fleeing from the hate, the oppression, the restlessness and troubles of the Old World to find freedom and happiness in a New World.” He was politically active, urging the United States’ entry into World War II. When Pearl Harbor was attacked in 1941, Weill reacted with the composition of his **Four Walt Whitman Songs**, in which he set to music Whitman’s

Civil War poems. The first, “Beat! Beat! Drums!” is martial and defiant; the second, a setting of Whitman’s famous poem, “O Captain! My Captain!” is touching and poignant, with gentle echoes of Mahler’s *Lieder*; and the last, “Dirge for Two Veterans,” is both bluesy and deeply moving. In 1947, Weill revisited Whitman with a setting of “Come Up from the Fields, Father.”

After coming to America, rather than continuing to write in the same late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century style that had characterized his earlier European compositions, Weill made a study of American popular and stage music. His American output contains individual songs and entire shows that not only became highly respected and admired but have been seen as seminal works in the development of the American musical. Among these were *Street Scene*, for which his score won the inaugural Tony Award in 1940 for “Best Original Score.” He is best known in the United States for his works in his new style, such as *Three Penny Opera*, written in 1928, and its song, “Mack the Knife,” made famous by Louis Armstrong and Bobby Darin as a jazz standard. Other well-known, and still popular, songs in Weill’s new style are “September” and “Speak Low.”

A Performance of Kurt Weill’s “O Captain My Captain” by Thomas Hampson

### [O Captain My Captain](#)



Composer **Jake Heggie’s** early musical career didn’t portend his eventual success as a composer. Upon graduating from UCLA, Heggie and Soprano Johana Harris, (his teacher and the widow of composer Roy Harris) toured as a duo. In 1989, Heggie developed focal dystonia, a neurological condition in his right hand that caused involuntary cramps and prevented him from performing. He pursued a career in public relations, working for the UCLA Center for the Art of Performance. He relocated to San Francisco and worked briefly as a

public relations writer for Cal Performances at Berkeley in 1993 before being hired by the San Francisco Opera as a Public Relations Associate. After being hired, Heggie began composing again, and the focal dystonia in his hand lessened to the extent that he could begin rehabilitating his piano playing. His job at San Francisco Opera allowed him the opportunity to interact with key collaborators—including singers, conductors and administrators—who might be interested in performing his music and collaborating on future compositions. In the fall of 1994, Heggie began a friendship with mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade when she starred in a world premiere at the SFO. On opening night, he decided to give her his composition *Three Folk Songs* as a gift, and when Heggie visited von Stade during intermission, she was playing the arrangements at the piano. She became an enthusiastic champion of his work and suggested that they begin performing together in recital. In 1995, with von Stade's encouragement, Heggie entered and won the Schirmer American Art Song Competition.

Lotfi Mansouri, then the General Director of San Francisco Opera, asked Heggie at a cocktail party if he had ever thought about writing an opera. The next day he called Heggie into his office. “I really thought it was going to be about a new press release so I brought my notepad,” Heggie later remembered. “[Mansouri] said, ‘We have an opening in the 2000 season, and I am going to send you to New York to talk with (playwright and librettist) Terrence McNally because we’ve wanted to work with him, and I think you two would really hit it off and could come up with something amazing.’ Everyone was stunned—no one more than I—that he was offering a guy on his PR staff the chance to write a full-length opera, when he could have his choice of any composer on the planet.”

At the close of the 1997 season, Heggie resigned from his position as the Public Relations Associate, and Mansouri named him the Chase Composer-in-Residence for San Francisco Opera, a two-year position created especially for him so that he could write *Dead Man Walking*, with a libretto by Terrence McNally. (The two-act opera was produced by New Orleans Opera in March 2016.) The creation of *Dead Man Walking* would launch Heggie’s international career as an opera composer.

**A Question of Light** is a song cycle by Heggie with poetry by Gene Scheer (b. 1958), best known as a contemporary opera librettist. Each song circumscribes one of a set of five paintings from the collection of the Dallas Art Museum. (The artist of each painting is given in parentheses in the program listing at the top of these notes.) The cycle was commissioned by the Dallas Opera for baritone Nathan Gunn in association with the Dallas Art Museum, and it was premiered by Gunn with the composer at the piano in 2011. Copyright restrictions don’t allow us to post images of these paintings, but they can be readily found, along with detailed descriptions, by searching each painting and/or artist on the Dallas Art Museum web site: <https://dma.org/search>.

The cycle is heavily visual, interpreting specific pieces of art, for which Heggie creates vivid, illustrative musical soundscapes. The poetry is less descriptive of each piece of art than it is suggestive. For example, in “Yellow Flowers in a Vase,” which shows a bouquet of yellow roses set on a marble table against a dark background, the flowers are shown full-blown, just at the moment when their lush, open petals have begun to drop. The painting suggests to the narrator a deeply personal, poignant story about being one of few survivors from a large group of soldiers, dealing with survivor's guilt.

The following link leads to a 2020 performance of *A Question of Light* by Michael Ailello at the Eastman School of Music

### [Performance of \*A Question of Light\*](#)



**Florence Price** was an American classical composer, pianist, organist, and music teacher. Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, Price was educated at the New England Conservatory of Music, where, like William Grant Still (see below) she studied with George Whitefield Chadwick. Just as Still abandoned the Jim Crow South and became part of the Harlem Renaissance, Price abandoned the Jim Crow South and moved north—in her case, to Chicago—and became part of the Chicago Black Renaissance. She was active in Chicago from 1927 until her death in 1953. Price was the first African American woman to be recognized as a symphonic composer, and the first to have a composition played by a major orchestra. Price composed over 300 works: four symphonies, four concertos, as well as choral works, art songs, chamber music, and music for solo instruments. Her substantial contributions as an organist were recently recognized in *The American Organist*, the official journal of the American Guild of Organists. In 2009, discovery of a substantial collection of her works and papers in the attic of her abandoned summer home led to a resurgence of interest in her compositions.

The following link leads to a performance of *A Poem* (from a collection of Price's works from the 1930s) by pianist Clark Bryan.

### [Performance of \*A Poem\* by Florence Price](#)

**George Gershwin** composed **An American in Paris** in 1928 as a jazz-permeated orchestral tone poem following a sojourn in Paris in 1926. (The orchestration included three taxi horns that Gershwin had brought back from Paris.) He had received a commission from the New York Philharmonic for a new work; contemplating his view of the Hudson River from his apartment in New York City, Gershwin remembered his homesickness for New York while he was in Paris, and this memory formed the germ of an idea for his new work. In a 1928, three months before the December premier, Gershwin said, "This new piece, really a rhapsodic ballet, is written very freely and is the most modern music I have yet attempted." He also gave a brief "program note" of the work: "The opening gay section is followed by a rich 'blues' with a strong rhythmic undercurrent. Our American—perhaps after strolling into a café and having a few drinks—has suddenly succumbed to a spasm of homesickness. The harmony here is both more intense and simpler than in the preceding pages. This 'blues' rises to a climax followed by a coda in which the spirit of the music returns to the vivacity and bubbling exuberance of the opening part with its impressions of Paris. Apparently the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has drowned his spell of the blues and once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life. At the conclusion, the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant."

The piano transcription on this program was crafted by Maurice C. Whitney (1909–1984), who was a public-school and community college music educator in upstate New York. Whitney was honored by his alma mater Ithaca College for outstanding work in music education, and he received a New York State Teacher of the Year Award as well as an honorary doctorate from Elmira College.

**Leonard Bernstein** composed *Mass*, a new musical-theatre work, with lyrics by Bernstein and Stephen Schwartz, at the request of Jacqueline Kennedy for the 1971 opening of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington DC; Bernstein was a great admirer of the President. **Simple Song** is one of the best-known and most enduring works from *Mass*, with its enchanting lyrics that begin, *Sing God a simple song; make it up as you go along, Lauda, Laudé*, somewhat suggestive of Psalm 96. In the middle section of the song, Psalm 121 is quoted: *I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills...*”

**William Grant Still** was an American composer of nearly two hundred works, including five symphonies, four ballets, nine operas, and more than thirty choral works, art songs, chamber music, and solo works. Born in Mississippi and raised in Little Rock, his mother wanted him to go to medical school, so Still pursued a Bachelor of Science degree program at Wilberforce University, a historically black college in Ohio. He conducted the university band, learned to play various instruments, and started to compose and to perform orchestrations. He left Wilberforce without graduation. Using a small amount of money left to him by his father, he began studying at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. Still worked for the school assisting the janitor, and at a few small jobs outside of the school, but struggled financially. When a professor asked him why he wasn't studying composition, Still replied that he simply couldn't afford to. When this became known, George Whitfield Andrews (1861–1932) taught composition to Still without charge. He also was able to study privately with the modern French composer Edgard Varèse and the American composer George Whitefield Chadwick (1854–1931, New England Conservatory). Because of his close association and collaboration with prominent African American literary and cultural figures, Still is considered to be part of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement of African American artists and musicians (among others), who had left the Jim Crow South in the 1920s and 1930s and settled in New York. Still became the first African American to conduct a major symphony orchestra in the deep South when he conducted a concert of the New Orleans Philharmonic Orchestra in 1955.



William Grant Still's art song *Grief* (originally titled *Weeping Angel*) was composed in 1953. With text by LeRoy V. Brant (1890–1969, founder of the San Jose Municipal Chorus), this poignant piece was inspired by a statue of a weeping angel and is recognized as one of Still's popular art songs.

The following link leads to a performance of *Grief* by Brian Sussman of *Heartland Sings* in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

[Performance of \*Grief\* by William Grant Still](#)