



Deutsche Grammophon Releases Sphinx Virtuosi's Debut Album, *Songs for Our Times*

The Self-Led All-Black and Latinx Touring
Ensemble of the Sphinx Organization

Performing Music by Jessie Montgomery,
Valerie Coleman, Michael Abels, Ricardo
Herz, Carlos Simon, Florence Price and
Aldemaro Romero, as well as a new
Beethoven Arrangement by Ruben Rengel

Out Digitally July 28 on Deutsche Grammophon

Learn more about Sphinx Organization on [NBC News](#) and [PBS NewsHour](#)

Sphinx Virtuosi Makes UK Debut on July 30 at Snape Maltings Concert Hall

“Their music spoke for itself. In fact, it sung for itself ... Each of these works had a radiance ...
It was ... a concert of inventiveness, virtuosity, and joy, real joy” – *ConcertoNet*

www.sphinxmusic.org

New York, NY (June 23, 2023) — On Friday, July 28, 2023, Deutsche Grammophon introduces the **Sphinx Virtuosi** to a global stage via the release of its debut album, *Songs for Our Times*. Hailed as “topnotch” by *The New York Times*, this groundbreaking self-conducted American string ensemble comprises 18 exceptional Black and Latinx artists and has curated an album featuring works by outstanding composers and artistic visionaries of color. Its strikingly diverse tracks include the world premiere recordings of **Valerie Coleman's** *Tracing Visions* and **Jessie Montgomery's** *Divided*, both written expressly for Sphinx Virtuosi, which commissions new music annually, in line with its desire to expand its repertoire and connect with new audiences.

Songs for Our Times shines a light both on a community of composers often under-represented in programming and on the breathtaking musicianship of these young professional string players. Two singles, featuring music by **Aldemaro Romero** and **Florence Price**, will be released on **June 30** and **July 14** respectively.

The ensemble is presented annually at Carnegie Hall, as well as other high profile concert halls throughout the U.S., and will make its **UK debut** at **Snape Maltings Concert Hall** on **July 30** with a program that includes **Carlos Simon's** *Between Worlds* and **Philip Herbert's** *Elegy: In memoriam Stephen Lawrence*.

Woven through the most recent compositions presented here are thematic threads of shared humanity,

resilience, protest and conflict. *Songs for Our Times* opens with *Global Warming* by **Michael Abels**, winner of the **2023 Pulitzer Prize for Music**. Though the work's blend of styles was originally influenced by the thaw in international relations after the fall of the Berlin Wall, its title has a new resonance today, and the music's ambiguous ending leaves its meaning open to interpretation. This work was one of the first by an African-American to be performed in South Africa after the election of President Nelson Mandela, and has been presented by over 200 of this country's professional and youth orchestras. Originally written for a full orchestra, the work was rearranged by Abels for string orchestra and percussion in 2018.

Carlos Simon's *Between Worlds*, for solo violin, performed here by 2021 Sphinx Competition Junior Winner **Amaryn Olmeda**, was inspired by the work of artist Bill Traylor, who was born into slavery and later endured the privations imposed by segregation. *Between Worlds* is filled with, in Simon's words, "elements of mythical folklore, race, and religion." Musically, this is a truly virtuosic and cinematic work. The plaintive and wandering opening becomes a restless, energetic, and almost phantasmagoric musical portrait of an ancestral spiritual conjurer.

Valerie Coleman's two-movement *Tracing Visions* was written to remind us of our shared humanity. The first movement, titled "Till," is both a reflection on the domestic terrorism enacted upon Emmett Till, Ruby Bridges, and the children of the Uvalde massacre and, in the composer's own words, the "fierce parental statement" that children should be protected. The darkness and rage of "Till" is followed by "Amandla!" (the Zulu word for "power"). Like Michael Abels' *Global Warming*, this movement depicts world consciousness and cultural unity. To celebrate this global unity and the depth of the Sphinx Organization's transformative work, Coleman craftily uses International Morse Code to spell "Sphinx," with that rhythmic motive serving as the movement's foundation.

Showcasing the talents of Cuban-American cellist **Tommy Mesa**, *Divided* is a response – to quote its composer, **Jessie Montgomery** – to "the sense of helplessness that people seem to feel amidst a world that seems to be in constant crisis, whether it is over racial injustice, gender or religious discrimination, greed, power and poverty, or climate change". This helplessness is first expressed in the opening statement, a tense gesture based on half-steps (B-flat – A – B natural – B-flat – A). As the orchestra joins, helplessness becomes a combination of rage and profound questioning – echoed through aggressive interjections from the orchestra and an unrelenting rhythmic urgency

Struggles of perhaps a more purely musical nature are to be found in *Sísifo na Cidade Grande* (Sisyphus in the Big City) by Brazilian violinist and composer **Ricardo Herz**. The displaced rhythmic punctuation immediately recalls Stravinsky and the changing meters found in his *Rite of Spring*; however, *Sísifo* is written with a consistent time signature of 25/16 (4+4+4+4+3+3+3), the conquering of which is no mean task. The challenging time signature, combined with melodic material hovering between the keys of C Major and C minor, is used by Herz to convey the futility of the mythological Sisyphus' struggle to reach a pinnacle.

Songs for Our Times also presents two 20th-century works. *Fuga con Pajarillo* by Venezuelan composer **Aldemaro Romero** combines fugal writing with the rhythm of the *pajarillo*, a dance in which the emphasis is placed on the second beat of each bar, while at the heart of the album lies a moving arrangement of the exquisite "Andante cantabile" from **Florence Price's** *String Quartet No. 2 in A minor*.

Finally, bringing the album to a dazzling conclusion is the finale of Beethoven's *Violin Sonata No. 9*, arranged by Venezuelan violinist **Rubén Rengel**, a member of the Sphinx family. This sonata was originally dedicated to the biracial violinist **George Polgreen Bridgetower** (1778-1860). Bridgetower held a prestigious position in European society for a time, regularly performing for royalty and on series including a highly regarded 1789 Parisian Concert Spirituel (placing him in Paris during the life of Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges). Honoring the work's original dedicatee, Rengel's version was described by ConcertoNet as "seamless, melodic, with Beethovenian propulsion".

The Sphinx Virtuosi is the premier touring entity of the Detroit-based **Sphinx Organization**. Founded by violinist, social entrepreneur and poet/journalist **Aaron P. Dworkin** in 1996 and now led by violinist and educator **Afa Dworkin**, this non-profit social justice enterprise is dedicated to increasing representation of Black and Latinx artists in classical music, recognising artistic excellence and transforming lives through the

power of diversity in the arts. The Sphinx Virtuosi champions these aims and ideals and is passionate about undertaking widespread outreach and engagement work as it tours the US and beyond.

About Sphinx Organization

The Sphinx Organization is the social justice organization dedicated to transforming lives through the power of diversity in the arts. Sphinx's four program areas – Education & Access, Artist Development, Performing Artists, and Arts Leadership – form a pipeline that develops and supports diversity and inclusion in classical music at every level: music education, artists performing on stage, the repertoire and programming being performed, the communities represented in audiences, and the artistic and administrative leadership within the field. Sphinx programs reach more than 100,000 students and artists, as well as live and broadcast audiences of more than two million annually, with an overall digital reach of 60 million. The organization has invested more than \$11M in the careers of Black and Latinx artists through its work with 375 partners worldwide. Read more about Sphinx's programs at www.sphinxmusic.org.

Songs For Our Times Track List

1. Michael Abels – *Global Warming* [8:34]
2. Aldemaro Romero – *Fuga con Pajarillo* [8:04]
Valerie Coleman – *Tracing Visions* for String Orchestra
3. ii. Till [5:52]
4. iii. Amandla! [5:15]
5. Carlos Simon – *Between Worlds* [4:32]
Amaryn Olmeda, violin
6. Florence Price – *String Quartet No. 2, Andante Cantabile* [7:06]
7. Jessie Montgomery – *Divided* [10:01]
Tommy Mesa, cello
8. Ricardo Herz – *Sísifo na Cidade Grande* [6:44]
9. Ludwig van Beethoven (arr. Rengel) – *Violin Sonata No. 9, Op. 47, "Bridgetower"*, Presto [6:42]

Total Time: 62:50

Recording Producer, Editor, and Mastering: Alan Bise

Recording Location for all tracks except Simon: University of South Florida, March 23-26, 2023

Recording Location for Simon: Cleveland Institute of Music, Mixon Hall, April 20, 2023

Cover Art Photography by Scott Jackson



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