



CITIZEN

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LEVINGSTON
PIANO**

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The genesis of this recording was an invitation to perform for the opening of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, an event which inspired me to meditate on the complex history of my birthplace, Mississippi. A storied, culturally-rich state, it has produced some of our country's most important artists – including William Faulkner, B.B. King, Leontyne Price, and Eudora Welty – but is also a place that has witnessed notably painful struggles with race, poverty, and equality. The scars are painful and deep. Here, among our colleges, churches, cotton fields and battlefields, contradictions abound. These disparate, but related, elements have long absorbed and confounded artists born in this mystical place.

In recent years, I have come to see that my beloved state only reveals more intensely what exists in other places in our world: the struggle for people to come to terms with one another's histories and differences. In this time of turmoil between peoples and nations, focused on issues of citizenship and patriotism, we continue this struggle. I chose to name this album "Citizen," not only because it contains works that reflect upon actual citizenship and human rights, but also to highlight that we are all citizens of one earth, and in order to survive, we must find ways to respect one another's differences, and strongly uphold each other's right to exist with dignity and freedom.

On this recording, I have gathered together works by composers who have contemplated these issues deeply. The voices of these artists plead for civility, humanity, and love, and each brings a sense of immediacy to the cause – offering not a clenched fist, but an open hand that reaches out with a welcoming embrace.

— BRUCE LEVINGSTON

WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

AMERICAN
MEN

NOLAN GASSER Born 1964

Marie Atkinson Hull (1890–1980) was born into an artistically gifted family in Summit, Mississippi at a time when society was highly codified and restrictive, particularly regarding race and gender. Women could not vote at the time of Hull's birth and those from her world were expected to marry or teach. Determined to become a painter, Hull first studied music, and then played and taught to finance a second education that allowed her to break her provincial bonds. She went on to study with some of the great artistic figures of her day including William Merritt Chase, and exhibited her work in many of the leading capitals of the world including Philadelphia, New York and Paris. During the Great Depression, Hull created an important series of portraits of tenant farmers and sharecroppers. In these works, she treated each subject equally, regardless of race, revealing the human drama, inner struggle, and indomitable spirit to live with dignity. In 1936, she painted the portrait of John Wesley Washington, a Mississippian born into slavery in 1847. In this intimate, profoundly touching work, Hull not only gave the portrait the complete name of her subject, but the additional title "An American Citizen." In doing this, Hull sought to restore to this man the full rights and dignity she believed were truly his, but had been denied him from his birth. This extraordinary act of respect and social commentary by a female artist from this most "Southern" of Southern states remains, as much as ever, a deeply resonant statement about this artist's humane vision for her society. It is also a reminder of the powerful voice for change an artist may bring to the world, even, and especially, in the most difficult of times.

Inspired by Marie Hull's painting of John Wesley Washington, composer Nolan Gasser has created a musical portrait of "An American Citizen." Gasser has distilled in sound the essence of a life of unimaginable losses and incessant uncertainty but also an unconquerable will to survive with joy and love and dignity. The music exudes an underlying tone of optimism and a powerful, if bittersweet, celebration of life. The composer consciously mingles a number of American and European idioms to build this emotionally complex work that mirror those found in the long lifespan of Washington: echoes of the innocent 19th century tunes of Stephen Foster, the improvisational flourishes of Chopin, the rhythmic snap of early ragtime and later bebop, and the melancholy, piquant colors of blues and jazz. Yet overall, there is the spirit of undying hope one finds in so much American music: a promise of freedom and a glimpse into the common humanity that these artists have portrayed in sound and oil.

Nolan Gasser is a critically acclaimed composer, pianist, and musicologist – most notably, the architect of Pandora Radio's Music Genome Project and the company's chief musicologist from its founding in 2000. His original compositions are performed frequently in such prestigious venues as Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, Alice Tully Hall, and La Salle Pleyel [Paris]. He is the composer of the opera *The Secret Garden*, the oratorio *Repast: An Oratorio in Honor of Mister Booker Wright*; and the musical *Benny and Joon*. He holds a PhD from Stanford university and is the author of *Why You Like It: The Science and Culture of Musical Taste*.

WILLIAM GRANT STILL

Born on May 11, 1895, Woodville, Mississippi

Died on March 3, 1978, Los Angeles

William Grant Still was born on May 11, 1895 in Woodville, Mississippi, the son of two teachers. He was the first African American to have a major orchestra play one of his compositions, *Afro-American Symphony*, and the first African American to conduct a major American symphony orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Still attended Oberlin Conservatory and the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston and his teachers included George Whitefield Chadwick and Edgar Varèse. His compositions have been performed across the world, including by the New York Philharmonic, the London Symphony and the Tokyo Philharmonic.

Many of his works reflect Still's concerns about the conditions of life for African Americans during his life as well as his deep interest in African music. Much of his music shows the influence of jazz, and often blends jazz-like harmonies and rhythms within classically-based musical structures. His elegantly lyrical *Summerland*, composed in 1935, memorably exhibits these qualities.

ACCORDING TO STILL'S DAUGHTER, JUDITH ANNE STILL:

"*Summerland* is my Father's view of life after death. He believed in the spiritual life, and in reincarnation. In dreams, great spiritual teachers took him to high places and taught him the secrets of the universe. He said that, after death, one does not have to reside with dark souls – dark souls are sent to dark places to offend each other. He said that after death the colors and the music are gorgeous and alive with meaning. All entities there help each other and many try to help struggling souls in the material world to move toward higher understanding."

SPECIAL NOTE FROM BRUCE LEVINGSTON:

When I spoke to Judith Anne Still about performing *Summerland* at Carnegie Hall in 2018, she asked if I might play the work in the original key of G-flat in which her father composed it. She explained that the initial publishing company had told her father in 1936 that "black composers" should not be published using such complicated keys, and so insisted on publishing the work in G major. Of course, in addition to the irony and insult, this is like telling a painter to use bright yellow rather than a rich, burnished sienna. On April 9, 2018, I premiered *Summerland* at Carnegie Hall in its original key of G-flat major, and it is this version which I play on this recording.

THREE MAZURKAS

FREDERIC CHOPIN

Born March 1, 1810, in Zelazowa Wola, Poland

Died October 17, 1849, in Paris

A traditional Polish folk dance, the mazurka was transformed by Chopin into a small, highly refined art form, one in which he confided some of his most daring and innovative ideas. These works not only reflect the composer's deep nostalgia for his birthplace, Poland, but also the profound sense of patriotism and pride he felt for his homeland. Though Chopin made Paris his residence as an adult, his emotions were often stirred by Poland's frequent defeats by periodic invaders of the time. Robert Schumann wrote: "If the mighty autocrat of the North [referring to the Czar of Russia, Nicholas I, who had crushed the Polish Revolution of 1830] knew what a dangerous enemy threatened him in Chopin's works, in the simple melodies of his mazurkas, he would forbid this music. Chopin's works are cannons buried beneath flowers."

The bittersweet Mazurka in C-sharp minor is filled with a wistful yearning and melancholic beauty; the playfully modal C major Mazurka artfully echoes the rustic folk origins of its form; and the plaintive, touching Mazurka in A minor reveals the composer's innermost emotions of pain and pride, mingled with sadness and joy to create this poignant, deeply moving poem.

ACCUMULATION OF PURPOSE

WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

DAVID T. LITTLE Born 1978

Accumulation of Purpose was inspired by the Freedom Riders, the civil rights activists who rode interstate buses across the American South in 1961 to protest racial segregation. Consistent with David Little's history of composing politically – and socially – engaged works, *Accumulation of Purpose* grew out of Little's personal self-reflection of how to engage with current-day issues of social injustice. *Accumulation of Purpose* was commissioned in honor of the recent opening of the Mississippi Museum of Civil Rights and Museum of Mississippi History and in celebration of the Bicentennial of the State of Mississippi.

BRUCE LEVINGSTON COMMENTS ABOUT THE WORK OF DAVID T. LITTLE:

David T. Little is an extraordinary composer and artist who has the ability to directly embrace, engage and transform complex societal issues into meaningful and impactful artistic experiences. His deep curiosity and unique sensibility allow him to delve into the dark recesses of the American psyche and explore and express through music the bittersweet, complex world of the Civil Rights era. He has composed a powerfully moving work that conveys the haunting sadness, pain, terror, and heroism of that tumultuous period in our country. It is a timely reminder of the fragility of democracy, the tremendous price paid for freedom, and the immense sacrifices demanded to bring about "a more perfect union."

David T. Little is "one of the most imaginative young composers" on the scene [The New Yorker], with "a knack for overturning musical conventions" [The New York Times]. His operas *Dog Days*, *JFK*, and *Vinkensport* (librettos by Royce Vavrek), and *Soldier Songs* have been widely acclaimed and performed around the globe, "prov[ing] beyond any doubt that opera has both a relevant present and a bright future" [The New York Times].

Little has been commissioned by the world's most prestigious institutions and performers, including recent projects for The Metropolitan Opera / Lincoln Center Theater new works program, The Kennedy Center, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, New World Symphony, London Sinfonietta, International Contemporary Ensemble, Kronos Quartet, and Beth Morrison Projects. His music has been presented by Carnegie Hall, Park Avenue Armory, Holland Festival, BAM Next Wave, LA Opera, Opéra de Montréal, and the LA Philharmonic.

From 2014–2017, Little was Composer-in-Residence with Opera Philadelphia and Music-Theatre Group. He has previously served as Executive Director of the MATA Festival and on the board of directors at Chamber Music America, and currently chairs the composition department at Mannes—The New School. The founding artistic director of the ensemble Newspeak, his music can be heard on New Amsterdam, Innova, and National Sawdust Tracks labels. He is published by Boosey & Hawkes.



LOCATIONS IN TIME

AUGUSTA GROSS Born 1944

Augusta Gross's works are extraordinarily intimate and personal. This music, like the composer herself, is a unique combination of past and present worlds. The descendant of a distinguished European family of scientists, lawmakers and musicians who suffered under the destructive authoritarian regimes of the mid-twentieth century, Gross's works reflect influences of the contrapuntal music of Bach and Chopin, as well as the American jazz-tinged sounds of Ellington and Still. In *Locations in Time*, she creates worlds of sound that look back to memories of places and people and, for a fleeting moment, brings them into the present. Her background as a distinguished psychologist informs the layers of meaning and nuances behind these deceptively direct, but subtly complex scores. Each work explores a distilled set of emotions and state of being. In "Other," there is the recurrent unease and questioning of feeling – and being – somehow different, the outsider, the other; in "Elegy," there is a resigned aching and sadness eloquently evoking the memory of a loved one tragically lost too soon; and, in "Toward Night," hidden passions mingle with quiet defiance to create a haunting landscape of a restless psyche and soul.

Augusta Gross is a composer of singularly thoughtful works that convey a distinctive, unique voice. Her music expresses a depth and pathos with the sparest and subtlest means of expression. Born into an illustrious family of musicians, scientists and scholars, Gross began her musical studies at an early age. She first studied piano, and, after writing numerous works on her own, compositional technique. While continually nurturing her many interests in the arts (Dr. Gross is also a gifted visual artist), she became a highly respected psychologist, with a special interest in diagnosing and treating individuals with learning difficulties. She eventually retired from practice and devoted herself completely to composition. Gross traces her interest in music and the development of her musical abilities to her longstanding curiosity about the nature of communicating emotional meaning through nonverbal methods. Her works have been performed and recorded by numerous prominent artists both in the United States as well as abroad.

C. PRICE WALDEN Born 1991

Price Walden is a gifted, young composer who was born in Mississippi. His touching personal story, refined sensibility, and unique compositional talents make him a vital, authentic witness and voice for the struggles of civil rights in our country. In *Sacred Spaces*, commissioned in honor of the opening of the Mississippi Museum of Civil Rights and Museum of Mississippi History and in honor of the state's Bicentennial, Walden has written a work that celebrates and commemorates the idea of the sacred, "safe" spaces that churches symbolized for African Americans, and others, during the Civil Rights era. Though sometimes desecrated, invaded, and even bombed, these places of worship and union were, and are, for many one of the few places of acceptance, love and safety. Written in three movements, Walden's work closes with a hymn that is a paen for freedom for all people.

When asked about his composition *Sacred Spaces*, Walden said:

I asked myself, "What do I have the right to say at the opening of a Civil Rights museum without putting myself at the center or falsely equating my struggles with those of the Civil Rights Movement?" In the concept of churches, where activists and others could find respite, recharge, and organize, I found a connection that felt true and not contrived, without pretending I knew about an experience I didn't. As a gay Christian in the South, I have come to see my church as a sanctuary. *Sacred Spaces* celebrates the freedom to have a safe space, which is something people ridicule, until they need a safe space."

Cecil Price Walden [b 1991] is a composer and pianist based in Oxford, Mississippi. He frequently writes works based on his experiences of the South. He studied music at the University of Mississippi. In October 2011, his large-scale work, *Leaves of Greens* was premiered at the Lyric Theatre in Oxford. Notable performances include the premiere of *hydrogen jukebox* by the University of Mississippi Wind Ensemble at the 2010 CBDNA Southern Regional and a performance of *Leaves of Greens* at the Atlanta Food & Wine Festival by the Atlanta Opera. 2017 saw the premiere of his first opera, *The Contract Player*, with librettist Lane Williamson. His song cycle, *Abide with Me: 5 songs of love* has been performed and heard throughout the country, and was recorded by Jos Milton for Albany Records. The American Record Guide wrote that Walden's settings of 'In the Garden' and 'Abide with Me' "transport them to a new dimension."

AMAZING GRACE

When the Civil Rights Museum of Mississippi opened in 2017, many great civil rights leaders who had been on the front lines attended, including Mrs. Myrlie Evers-Williams, the widow of Medgar Evers, who was brutally murdered in 1963 in his own driveway. Mrs. Evers-Williams sat only feet away from the weapon that had taken the life of her husband. At the time of the opening, she shared a conversation that she and Medgar had about why he put his own life on the line to fight racism and push for change:

“It’s not just about me. It is not just about you, but it is about each and every one of us who live in this state and who embrace this country, the United States of America. Because regardless of race, creed or color, we are all Americans.” Medgar continued, “We in America are still suffering from some of the same ills... that we have over the years. If Mississippi can rise to the occasion, then the rest of the country should be able to do the same thing.”

ANON.
Arranged by Price Walden
WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

The opening of that magnificent museum was a powerful, graphic, and important moment for our state, one that acknowledged its painful past, but also one that offered hope for the future. I knew that Mrs. Evers-Williams would be at that opening with many others who cared about our people and country, and so I commissioned Price Walden’s moving version of *Amazing Grace* as the final work to perform on the program. This piece was a fitting, symbolic choice because it was written by a former slave trader and speaks memorably of sorrow, grace and redemption (“I once was lost, but now am found”). Many versions of *Amazing Grace* have been heard, but its power lies in the fact that it resonates differently for everyone. For many, it simply evokes feelings of love, forgiveness and renewal. In this era of strife, pain and division in so much of our world, what could be better than more love, forgiveness and renewal?

— BRUCE LEVINGSTON

BRUCE LEVINGSTON

Pianist Bruce Levingston is one of the country's leading figures in contemporary classical music. He regularly appears in some of the world's most prestigious venues including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Royal Opera House of London. Many of today's most important composers have written music for him and his performances of their works have won notable critical acclaim. *The New York Times* has praised his "mastery of color and nuance" and *The New Yorker* has called him "a force for new music."

Levingston's recordings have also garnered numerous accolades. His album *Heavy Sleep* was named one of the "Best Classical Recordings of the Year" by *The New York Times*. *Gramophone* has called his playing "masterly" and praised his "compelling, colourful pianism." *The American Record Guide* called Levingston "a pianist's pianist."

Levingston has collaborated with some of the most gifted artists of our time including composer Philip Glass, prima ballerina assoluta Alessandra Ferri, dancer Herman Cornejo, actor Ethan Hawke, composer/singer Lisa Bielawa, authors Michael Cunningham and George Plimpton, Colin Jacobsen and Eric Jacobsen and the Brooklyn Rider, and choreographers Jorma Elo and Russell Maliphant. He has also worked with numerous cultural institutions involving art, dance, film and music including American Ballet Theatre, Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum, Rooftop Films, SFMoMA, Rooftop Films, Alliance Française/French Institute, Joyce Theater, the Aspen Institute and Aspen Music Festival.

Levingston is founder and artistic director of the music foundation Premiere Commission, Inc., which has commissioned and premiered over sixty new works, and is the author of *Bright Fields: The Mastery of Marie Hull*, the comprehensive biography and survey of the work of the noted Southern painter.

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David T. Little's *Accumulation of Purpose* was commissioned in honor of the Bicentennial of the State of Mississippi.

Price Walden's *Sacred Spaces* was commissioned in honor of the Bicentennial of the State of Mississippi and dedicated to Susan and Lester "Ruff" Glenn Fant III.

Price Walden's arrangement of *Amazing Grace* was commissioned in honor of the opening of the Mississippi Museum of Civil Rights and the arrangement is dedicated to Nancy and Don Barrett.

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30 x 25 ½ in. Collection of the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson.
Gift of Dr. Blair E. Batson, Jackson, MS, 2009.153.

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