



LARA DOWNES AMERICA AGAIN

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love

From *Let America Be America Again*, by Langston Hughes

AMERICA AGAIN

1. **MORTON GOULD** American Caprice 5:03
- 2-4. **LOU HARRISON** New York Waltzes:
 - I. Waltz in C 0:46
 - II. Hesitation Waltz 1:08
 - III. Waltz in A 1:19
5. **TRADITIONAL** Shenandoah 3:57
6. **AMY BEACH** From Blackbird Hills 3:50
7. **SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR** Deep River 5:16
8. **DAN VISCONTI** Nocturne from Lonesome Roads 1:51
9. **ERNEST BLOCH** At Sea 4:19
10. **GEORGE GERSHWIN** I Loves You, Porgy (arr. Nina Simone) 4:19
11. **ANGÉLICA NEGRÓN** Sueno Recurrente 2:46
12. **LEONARD BERNSTEIN** Anniversary for Stephen Sondheim 1:22
13. **DAVID SANFORD** Promise 2:40
14. **HOWARD HANSON** Slumber Song 2:34
15. **SCOTT JOPLIN** Gladiolus Rag 3:43
16. **IRVING BERLIN** Blue Skies (arr. Art Tatum) 3:23
17. **FLORENCE PRICE** Fantasie Negre 7:09
18. **AARON COPLAND** Sentimental Melody 1:35
19. **DUKE ELLINGTON** Melancholia 3:01
20. **ROY HARRIS** Li'l Boy Named David 3:16
21. **HAROLD ARLEN** Over the Rainbow 3:02

total time 66:31

The American dream is, perhaps by definition, an impossible one. But where would we be without it? This beautiful, impossible dream, of liberty and justice, of a better life in a better place, inspires us, time and again, to achieve the impossible - to journey into the vast unknown, to cross oceans, deserts, and mountains on a wing and a prayer. The Dream brought us here in the first place. The Dream carried the pioneers across miles of wilderness, and called multitudes over oceans and through the gates of Ellis Island. The Dream moved millions of black Americans to migrate north in search of "the warmth of other suns". The Dream inspired Dr. King to speak from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and rouse a generation to change. The Dream comes down to us from our parents, and we pass it along to our children. We hold onto the dream; still and again and despite everything, that America will be America again.

Langston Hughes wrote his poem in 1938. It was a different time, and America was a different place. The country was overwhelmed by the decade of depression that had crushed so many American dreams, and threatened by the gathering clouds of the war in Europe. It was a time when circumstances of birth and color of skin posed still-unchallenged restrictions to the liberty and justice that are at the heart of the American promise; divisions between races and religions ran straight down the middle of American life. Martin Luther King was a 10-year-old boy in 1938. His dream, and the dramatic changes it would bring to American history, was still to come.

America was a country divided, troubled, struggling and searching. But still, the dreamers dreamed their dream.

Today, as I write these words, we are living again in troubled times. For too many Americans, circumstance and skin color still keep the promise out of reach, the dream deferred. The hard-won rights and long-sought justice for which our parents and grandparents fought are too easily slipping away. The rifts and rivalries that divide us as a nation seem to run deeper than ever. But still, we dreamers keep dreaming our dream.

This music is a tribute to the generations of Americans who dream the impossible: black and white, men and women, immigrants and pioneers. It tells the story of their journeys, their loves and longings, their hardships and their hopes. American music is made of everything we are, coming from so many different people and places, expressing so many different dreams.

I hope this music carries you wherever you chase your dreams – across the sea, over the river, down lonesome roads, even over the rainbow. You can hear in this very American music, born of very American dreams, a promise: that if we keep dreaming, maybe, someday, even our wildest dream will come true.

—Lara Downes, March 2016

1. Morton Gould: *American Caprice* composed 1940

A mix of everything that is capricious about the American spirit - sweetness and sass, bluster and blues, hubris and humor - from a composer who lived the American Dream in music, starting out as a teenage piano player in Depression-era movie theaters and building a long and varied career that won him the nation's highest cultural honors.

2. Lou Harrison: *New York Waltzes* 1944-1994

Lou was a creature of West Coast nonconformity and freedom, and he preferred the solitude of a California cabin to the commotion of midtown Manhattan. His years as a young composer in New York were personally and professionally challenging, and these romantic little waltzes are a bit hesitant, starry-eyed and unrequited - familiar sentiments to all of us who give our fragile hearts, for a while or forever, to the big, brash city.

3. Traditional: *Shenandoah*

This song comes from traders who canoed down the Missouri River in the early 1800s, and it has since accompanied sailors on their journeys all around the world. For me, though, it's become an anthem of the week we spent recording this album in an old stone church in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley. I close my eyes and see the rolling green hills and stone fences of that very lovely part of America, where I've been fortunate to make so much music and such beloved friends.

4. Amy Beach: *From Blackbird Hills* 1922

Inspired by the vigorous rhythms of an Omaha tribal song, this lively ballad goes quiet and sad in the middle section, the composer's tribute to "*the ghosts of long dead Indians...looking sadly over the shoulders of the happy children at play.*" – a reminder that wherever and whenever we are in America, the ghosts of its first people are always with us.

5. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: *Deep River* 1905

This is a Spiritual sung by slaves for whom the only escape was in "that Promised Land, where all is peace". When I play it, I hear the divine Marian Anderson, who made this song famously her own. She knew a thing or two about black America's dream of freedom and equality, and she sang that dream loud from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939, with millions of Americans listening on their radios - a defining, unifying American moment.

6. Dan Visconti: *Nocturne from Lonesome Roads* 2012

This twangy melody connects me with a trail of weary travelers across time and place, crossing through Emigrant Gap, making their way West out of the Dust Bowl, hitchhiking down Highway 5 with a guitar on their backs and a dollar in their pockets... in this nation of wayfaring strangers, the lonesome road is a familiar and iconic symbol.

7. Ernest Bloch: *At Sea* 1922

I play this in homage to all the long, hard voyages made across stormy seas in pursuit of American dreams, bringing refugees and runaways to Plymouth Rock, to Ellis Island, to every American port and beach, through every possible hardship, to breathe free on these safer shores.

8. George Gershwin: *I Loves You, Porgy* (arr. Nina Simone) 1959
Nina Simone's take on this song is a moment of perfect convergence – a true American original bringing to a great American classic everything she knew about singing the Blues, about Bach (listen to the opening riff!), about being a woman, being black, and about being strong and powerless, all at the same time."

9. Angélica Negrón: *Sueno Recurrente* 2002
Angelica's *Recurring Dream* comes from her own American journey, born in Puerto Rico, now living in Brooklyn, and this hypnotic meditation speaks to me of the recurring dream of freedom, safety, hope, and happiness that calls generations of immigrants to America.

10. Leonard Bernstein: *Anniversary for Stephen Sondheim* 1988
Bernstein's incomparable ability to communicate his deep and abiding belief in the power of music changed American culture in his own time, and inspired the next generations of American musicians (myself included) always to follow his star. I love this fond portrait of his friend and creative partner Stephen Sondheim, who joined Lenny in expressing for us the eternal optimism, even in the darkest of times, that "somewhere, there's a place for us".

11. David Sanford: *Promise* 2009
David wrote this piece for me in a time when we were celebrating the audacity of hope, inspired by a phrase from Rita Dove's *Testimonial* – a poem about the infinite joy and promise of childhood: "*I gave my promise to the world, and the world followed me here.*" David and I are

both parents, and our faith in the promise of our children's future is, by necessity, fiercely tenacious, no matter what the odds.

12. Howard Hanson: *Slumber Song* ~1915
Just a lullaby, this one, just a quiet moment to sleep and dream, and wake up to a better tomorrow.

13. Scott Joplin: *Gladiolus Rag* 1909
The son of an ex-slave; a pianist trained by a German-born music teacher; a musician who elevated ragtime from brothel entertainment to international art form; a serious composer who died heartbroken, never knowing that his masterpiece would finally be performed, finally, half a century after his death – Joplin's life and music tell the story of the contradictions and conflicts that define American history and American life, that make us, for better or for worse, who we are.

14. Irving Berlin: *Blue Skies* (arr. Art Tatum) 1926
Irving Berlin wrote *Blue Skies* as a last-minute addition to one of his many musicals. The show was short-lived and is long forgotten, but the song was an instant hit, with the opening night audience demanding 24 encores. Soon afterwards, it became one of the very first musical moments in a talking picture, when Al Jolson sang it in *The Jazz Singer*. Tatum's arrangement brings his own boundless imagination and inimitable musicality to a Great American Songbook classic.



15. Florence Price: *Fantasia Negre* 1929

In the late 1920's, after a lynching too close to home in Little Rock, Price and her husband migrated north to Chicago with their two little girls. *Fantasia Negre* was the first piece she wrote there, a passionate fantasy based on the Spiritual *Sinner, Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass*. It was the start of her involvement in the creative flowering of the New Negro Arts Movement. Her collaborations with that group of artists, including Langston Hughes and Marian Anderson, awakened the world to the folk traditions of black America.

16. Aaron Copland: *Sentimental Melody* 1926

This was originally written as Blues #1 of Copland's *Four Piano Blues*, which I recorded on my 2001 album *American Ballads*. Fifteen years later, the road trip into American music that I started back then continues, long and winding. The bluesy, sweet sound of this sentimental little tune is just right for the journey.

17. Duke Ellington: *Melancholia* 1953

An interviewer once asked Duke Ellington where he got his ideas. The Duke answered: "Ideas? Oh man, I got a million dreams. That's all I do is dream." This melancholy meditation, I think, must have come straight from his dreams.

18. Roy Harris: *Li'l Boy Named David* ~1946

Harris' *American Ballads* was the title track of my 2001 album. This unpublished setting of the Spiritual *Li'l Boy Named David* was intended as part of Harris' never-completed *American Ballads Volume II*. I'm happy to include it here, and I want to thank my friend Geoff Burleson who introduced me to the piece, and shared the manuscript.

19. Harold Arlen: *Over the Rainbow* 1939

"*Somewhere over the rainbow skies are blue - And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true*"

This I wish for my country, for my children, for all of us – that the dreams we dare to dream will, somewhere, somehow, come true.

I dedicate this to all my ancestors, for their journeys to and through America, their dreams attained and dreams deferred. And to my children, for the promise they hold in their dreams.

—Lara Downes

American pianist Lara Downes has been called "a delightful artist with a unique blend of musicianship and showmanship" by NPR, and praised by the Washington Post for her stunning performances "rendered with drama and nuance". Known for her eclectic presentations of the piano repertoire - from iconic favorites to newly-commissioned works - her performances bridge musical genres and traditions, and engage a wide range of audiences with what San Francisco Classical Voice has called "an elegant example of how accessibility and a breezy relevance can exist, organically, in a classical music concert." Downes is the 2016 laureate of the Sphinx Organization Medals of Excellence award, recognizing her influence as an extraordinary artist of her generation, and her role as a leader in expanding audiences for classical music.

Born in San Francisco and raised in Europe, Downes' musical outlook reflects the diversity of her personal heritage and extensive travels. Her interest in connecting music to a wide and inclusive breadth of human experience mines her own mixed African American and Eastern European background and the impressions of her transatlantic adventures to produce a unique range of creative projects, from an exploration of the music of composers in exile to a centenary tribute to Billie Holiday, from an intimate portrait of Robert and Clara Schumann to a sweeping look at the musical breakthroughs of the American 20th Century, all captured with timeless relevance and a deeply personal style that the Huffington Post has called "addicting - Downes plays with an open, honest heart."

Downes' European training under Hans Graf and Rudolph Buchbinder led to early debuts at the Queen Elizabeth Hall London, the Vienna Konzerthaus and the Salle Gaveau Paris, and has won over audiences at diverse venues ranging from Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center to Le Poisson Rouge and Classical Revolution. Recent performances include Bargemusic, San Francisco Performances, the Montreal Chamber Music Festival, Portland Piano International and the University of Washington World Series, among many others. Her musical collaborations include diverse partnerships with artists including violinist Rachel Barton Pine, cellist Zuill Bailey, and the Brubeck Institute Jazz Quintet, composers including Eve Beglarian, Theo Bleckmann, John Corigliano, Daniel Felsenfeld, David Sanford and Bright Sheng, and interdisciplinary projects with writer Adam Gopnik and former U.S. Poet Laureate Rita Dove. Her original solo performance projects have received support from prominent organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts, the Barlow Endowment for Music Composition, the Center for Cultural Innovation and American Public Media.

Lara's solo recordings have met tremendous critical and popular acclaim. *Exiles' Café* (Steinway & Sons, 2013) topped the bestseller charts and was called "ravishing" by Fanfare magazine. *Some Other Time* (Steinway & Sons, 2014), a duo recording with cellist Zuill Bailey, debuted in the Billboard Top 10 and was called "luscious, moody and dreamy" by the The New York Times. Her recent chart-topping release, *A Billie Holiday Songbook*, has been embraced by both jazz and classical

critics and listeners, called “possibly the most intriguing Holiday tribute” of the centenary year by Jazz Weekly.

Lara’s live performances and recordings are heard regularly on national radio programs with features including NPR Music, Marketplace, Performance Today, Sirius XM Symphony Hall, WNYC’s New Sounds, and WFMT’s Impromptu.

Lara is the producer and host of The Green Room, a radio show about the lives of classical musicians, distributed nationally by the WFMT Network. Her essays and memoirs have been published in Listen Magazine, The Rumpus, Readers Digest, Arts Journal and San Francisco Classical Voice.

Lara serves as Artist in Residence at the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts, UC Davis where she mentors the next generation of young musicians as Director of the Mondavi Center National Young Artists Program.

Lara Downes is a Steinway Artist.

laradownes.com





Lara Downes
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