



Advance Program Notes

Fred Hersch, piano; Kurt Elling, vocals; and Kate McGarry, vocals
Leaves of Grass
Friday, April 26, 2019, 7:30 PM

These Advance Program Notes are provided online for our patrons who like to read about performances ahead of time. Printed programs will be provided to patrons at the performances. Programs are subject to change.

Fred Hersch, piano
Kurt Elling, vocals
Kate McGarry, vocals

Leaves of Grass

Music by Fred Hersch
Words by Walt Whitman

John Hollenbeck, drums
John Hebert, bass
Jody Redhage Ferber, cello
Nadje Noordhuis, trumpet
Alan Ferber, trombone
Bruce Williamson, woodwinds
Tony Malaby, saxophone

This evening's program will be announced from the stage.

Composer's Note

The inspiring words of Walt Whitman have been a part of my life for almost 30 years. I first read Whitman in an American literature course at the New England Conservatory in 1976. In particular, the poem *When I Heard at the Close of the Day* had a huge, validating impact on me, a young gay man just coming out. Some 20 years later I was on tour in Paris and, wandering the city, I was mysteriously seized with the urge to read Whitman. I found an English-language bookshop, bought *Leaves of Grass*, sat at an outdoor café, and read *Song of Myself* in one sitting. It was a revelation. The words of Walt Whitman (1819-1892) remain extraordinarily relevant today. They sound so contemporary that it is hard to believe many of the texts I have set to music were written more than 150 years ago.

His masterpiece, the poetry comprised in the collection *Leaves of Grass*, speaks both to society as a whole and to the individual directly. Is there a direct connection between Whitman and jazz? Certainly, the strange beauty of his idiosyncratic and improvisatory language, his freewheeling verse, his subject matter, and his irreverence link him directly to the American beat poets of the 1950s: Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and others.

The complete *Leaves of Grass* is more than 600 pages—*Song of Myself* alone runs to 60. To distill and create a libretto from this life's work of poems was a lengthy and personal process. After much internal debate, I chose not to include any of the Civil War poems, the New York poems, the Calamus (the so-called gay) poems, nor did I use some of Whitman's other most famous poems (*When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* and *O Captain, My Captain*). Rather, I found myself drawn to entire poems, titles of poems, and sections of larger poems that conveyed universal and inclusive sentiments: appreciation of the present moment, wonder at the miracle of nature in all its forms, freedom to be oneself and express that openly, and above all, open-hearted love of all beings. The words I ultimately selected reflect Whitman as philosophically akin to Thoreau, Emerson, or the Buddha—profoundly spiritual, but not related to the God of the traditional New England religion of his day. Whitman's unique life was an example: he practiced what he advocated.

In setting out to compose the music, I had no idea where these words would take me. But I followed my instincts and, away from the piano, simply started to sing the poems. Over time, musical themes emerged—and I began to find internal rhythms as I lived with the subtleties of the words. Like Whitman, I tried not to limit myself, and, when the words wanted to take me somewhere—stylistically, melodically, rhythmically, and harmonically—did my best to just get out of the way. The result is that the music, like Whitman's *Song of Myself*, "encompasses worlds and volumes of worlds." It is eclectic, energetic, personal and, I hope, moving. Formally, the closest comparison of this piece to a classical musical form would be a small-scale oratorio: not a song cycle, but an entire piece with a narrative sweep. For those who have not spent time with *Leaves of Grass*, I hope this piece will make you curious to do so. For those who know and love these words already, I hope my musical interpretation will allow you to consider them in a different light.

I was very fortunate to develop and document this piece with extraordinary vocal and instrumental musicians who are not only capable of singing, improvising, and playing any kind of music—but who also care about and believe in this project as much as I do. I am eternally grateful to them for helping me celebrate Whitman's words and spirit in music.

—Fred Hersch

Biographies



FRED HERSCH, *piano*

A select member of jazz's piano pantheon, Fred Hersch is a pervasively influential creative force who has shaped the music's course over more than three decades as an improviser, composer, educator, bandleader, collaborator, and recording artist. He has been proclaimed "the most arrestingly innovative pianist in jazz over the last decade" by *Vanity Fair*, "an elegant force of musical invention" by the *Los Angeles Times*, and "a living legend" by the *New Yorker*.

A 12-time Grammy nominee, Hersch has regularly garnered jazz's most prestigious awards, including recent distinctions as a 2016 Doris Duke Artist, 2016 and 2018 Jazz Pianist of the Year from the Jazz Journalists Association, and the 2017 Prix Honorem de Jazz from L'Académie Charles Cros for the totality of his career. He has long set the standard for expressive interpretation and inventive creativity in a stunning variety of settings, whether through his exquisite solo performances, as the leader

of one of jazz's era-defining trios, or in eloquent dialogue with his deeply attuned duo partners.

With more than three dozen albums to his credit as a leader or co-leader, Hersch consistently receives lavish critical praise and numerous international awards for each highly anticipated new release. His latest album with his long-standing trio, 2018's *Live in Europe* (Palmetto), documents one remarkable evening in Brussels and has been hailed as its best to date. His 2017 Palmetto album *Open Book* was, as the title implies, his most revealing and intimate solo outing and was nominated for two 2018 Grammy Awards.

The album's release coincided with the publication of Hersch's acclaimed memoir, *Good Things Happen Slowly* (Crown Archetype Books/Random House), which compellingly reveals the story of his life in music along with a frank recounting of his struggles and triumphs as the first openly gay, HIV-positive jazz musician. It was named one of 2017's Five Best Memoirs by the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. As a composer, Hersch has earned similar distinction with such visionary pieces as 2003's *Leaves of Grass*, a large-scale setting of Walt Whitman's poetry, and the 2010 multimedia project *My Coma Dreams*.



KURT ELLING, *voice*

Renowned for his singular combination of robust swing and poetic insight, Grammy winner Kurt Elling has secured his place among the world's foremost jazz vocalists. Declared "the standout male vocalist of our time" by the *New York Times*, Elling has garnered unprecedented accolades, including a 14-year run atop the *DownBeat* Critics Poll, a dozen Grammy nominations, and eight Jazz Journalists Association awards for "Male Singer of the Year."

Elling's voice is instantly recognizable, embracing listeners with his warm, rich baritone and navigating the full span of his four-octave range as a virtuoso instrumentalist and a compelling storyteller. Whether transforming timeless standards or crafting his own enthralling originals, Elling balances elegant lyricism and technical mastery with wry humor, emotional depth, and keen observations into the human condition.

"Elling combines authenticity with stunning originality," is how the *Wall Street Journal* describes his talents, while the *Guardian* has called him "a kind of Sinatra with superpowers." *The Toronto Star* has gone so far as to say that "Kurt Elling is the closest jazz will ever get to having its own saint," while the *Guardian* makes up one voice in a chorus calling him "one of jazz's all-time great vocalists."

Biographies, continued

Elling's most recent release, *The Questions*, vividly exemplifies his ability to respond to the world around him with both urgent immediacy and a unique perspective. Co-produced by NEA Jazz Master and acclaimed saxophonist Branford Marsalis, the album searches for answers to the culture's most divisive social, political, and spiritual issues in the songs of Bob Dylan, Carla Bley, and Leonard Bernstein, as well as in the poetry of Rumi and Wallace Stevens. Elling previously joined Marsalis and his long-running quartet for 2016's Grammy-nominated *Upward Spiral*, which *All About Jazz* hailed as "suffused with graciousness, beauty, and, on occasion, heartbreak."

Taking the long view of Elling's audacious and richly varied career, the *Washington Post* lauded, "Since the mid-1990s, no singer in jazz has been as daring, dynamic, or interesting as Kurt Elling. With his soaring vocal flights, his edgy lyrics, and sense of being on a musical mission, he has come to embody the creative spirit in jazz."



KATE MCGARRY, voice

More concerned with the essence of a song than idiomatic limitations, vocalist Kate McGarry has managed to attract the attention of tomorrow's jazz fans. Beyond an obvious affinity for swing, McGarry's eclectic repertoire and signature contralto convey a message with crystal clarity that precludes the need for gimmick or effect.

McGarry grew up in Hyannis, Massachusetts, one of 10 children in a musical family that spent many nights singing together. At the University of Massachusetts Amherst she earned a degree in Afro-American music and jazz, developing her organic vocal style through early training with Gospel music scholar Horace Boyer and iconic saxophonist Archie Shepp. After honing her craft for eight years in Los Angeles, McGarry moved to New York where her independently-produced (Steven Santoro) debut album, *Show Me*, was picked up by Palmetto Records—the label with whom she recorded five critically acclaimed CDs, including the Grammy-

nominated *If Less Is More, Nothing Is Everything*.

McGarry's musical collaborations have included projects or performances with jazz luminaries Fred Hersch, Kurt Elling, Maria Schneider, and John Hollenbeck, as well as with Tony winner Jason Robert Brown. She performs at jazz clubs and festivals throughout the U.S. and abroad, and as an educator teaches on the faculty of Manhattan School of Music.

McGarry won the *DownBeat* Critics Poll for Rising Female Vocalist in 2016 and has been a featured artist on NPR's *All Things Considered*, Marion McPartland's *Piano Jazz*, and *Jazz Set* with Dee Dee Bridgewater. The *Wall Street Journal* called her music, "Austere and elegant...an exceptionally appealing blend of jazz and folk." Currently residing in Durham, North Carolina, McGarry and husband/guitarist of 13 years, Keith Ganz—along with bandmate Gary Versace—are working on the release of their recording *The Subject Tonight Is Love*.

Engagement Events

Saturday, April 27, 2019

WORKSHOP WITH FRED HERSCH

While visiting Blacksburg, Fred Hersch will conduct a workshop with Virginia Tech jazz students.

Special thanks to Cyrus Pace, Jason Crafton, and Richard Masters

Go Beyond

As Hersch articulates in his composer's note, Whitman's words in *Leaves of Grass* possess the power and relevance to "speak both to society as a whole and to the individual directly." What portions of text, music, or both in tonight's performance resonate with you most as an individual? Which excerpts moved you to consider your role and contribution to a greater society?

In the Galleries

GERRY BANNAN

Thursday, May 9-Saturday, June 1, 2019

Ruth C. Horton Gallery

A number of years ago, Gerry Bannan developed an extraordinary series of large-scale still life drawings using black ballpoint pen on expansive sheets of Mylar. Sourcing Northern European Old Master paintings and prints, in particular the 16th-century German master engraver Albrecht Dürer and 17th-century Dutch masters, Bannan re-imagined the vanitas still life tradition—with its focus on the fragility of life and our own mortality—in exceptionally complex and intricate works.

In a departure from his characteristic ballpoint pen still lifes, Bannan has ventured in a new direction, working with watercolor on Yupo paper, a brilliant white Japanese watercolor paper. This exhibition presents a range of the artist's work but focuses on this new body of work, in which the artist, in addition to introducing color, introduces birds, plants, and other small creatures in vivid, meticulously rendered tableaux of forest and riverbank scenes.

Based in Roanoke, Bannan received a bachelor of fine arts in printmaking from Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia and a master of fine arts in painting from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. He is a long-term professor of fine arts at Patrick Henry Community College in Martinsville, Virginia. His work has been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions throughout the state of Virginia, as well as in Atlanta and Philadelphia.

For more information, please visit gerrybannan.com.

OPENING RECEPTION AND ARTIST TALK

Thursday, May 9, 2019, 5-7 PM

Grand Lobby

Free; refreshments provided

GALLERY HOURS

Monday-Friday, 10 AM-5:30 PM

Saturday, 10 AM-4 PM

To arrange a group tour or class visit, please contact Meggin Hicklin, exhibitions program manager, at megh79@vt.edu.