



Chameleon
Arts Ensemble
of Boston

PROGRAM NOTES

Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston

Deborah Boldin, Artistic Director

2025-2026 chamber music season chamber series 1: Beneath the setting sun

Saturday, October 11, 2025, 7:30 PM at First Church in Boston

Sunday, October 12, 2025, 4 PM at First Church in Boston

Program:

William Grant Still, *Summerland* for flute & piano

John Adams, *Road Movies* for violin & piano

Gabriel Fauré, Sonata No. 2 in g minor for cello & piano, Op. 117

Eleanor Alberga, *No-Man's-Land Lullaby* for violin & piano

Johannes Brahms, Quintet in b minor for clarinet & strings, Op. 115

Program notes by Gabriel Rice

William Grant Still (1895-1978) was known in his lifetime as the “Dean of African American Composers.” He was the first Black American composer to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra (*Afro-American Symphony* by the Rochester Philharmonic in 1931), the first to conduct a major orchestra (the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1936), the first to conduct a major orchestra in the deep south (the New Orleans Philharmonic in 1955), the first to conduct a radio orchestra of white musicians (*Deep River Hour* for several years beginning in 1932), the first to have an opera performed by a major company (*Troubled Island* by City Opera, New York in 1949), and the first to have an opera televised nationwide (*Bayou Legend* in 1981).

Born in Mississippi and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, Still initially enrolled at Wilberforce University to study medicine, but transferred to the Oberlin Conservatory of Music where he received a scholarship established specifically for him. He moved to New York at the invitation of W.C. Handy and entered the world of popular music as an arranger, orchestrator, and performer on the oboe, violin, and cello. Determined to continue his efforts in composition for the concert hall, Still was awarded another scholarship to the New England Conservatory to study with George Chadwick, but his most influential teacher was the ultra-modernist Edgard Varèse, who encouraged him to compose with more freedom and fully utilize his gift for lyricism, and programmed his music on concerts of the International Composers’ Guild.

Increased recognition in concert music circles led to friendship with Howard Hanson, Guggenheim and Rosenwald Fellowships, and commissions from, among others, Columbia

Broadcasting, the New York World's Fair, the League of Composers, and the Cleveland Orchestra. He moved to Los Angeles in early 1934, where he occasionally composed for film and television but mostly devoted himself to concert music and operas. The peak of Still's recognition during his lifetime was the production of *Troubled Island* by City Opera, New York in 1949, but he received many honors up until his passing in 1978, including a Master of Music from Wilberforce in 1936 and Honorary Doctorates from Howard University, Oberlin College, Bates College, the University of Arkansas, Pepperdine University, the New England Conservatory of Music, the Peabody Conservatory, and the University of Southern California. He also received a trophy of honor from the American Federation of Musicians Local 767 (the local for Black musicians in Los Angeles) and was honored in 1961 by the US Committee for the UN, the N.F.M.C., and the Aeolian Music Foundation for *The Peaceful Land*, an orchestral work cited as the best musical composition honoring the United Nations.

Summerland for flute and piano was originally the middle movement of a suite for solo piano titled *Three Visions*, composed for Still's wife Verna Arvey in 1936. There is also a version for chamber orchestra. The three movements of the suite tell the story of the human soul after death: *Dark Horsemen* depicts the judgement of the soul following its human existence; if the soul has lived a good life it may enter *Summerland*, or "heaven"; the final movement, *Radiant Pinnacle*, represents the reincarnation the soul may be allowed after a period of time, in order to learn more in human form and progress towards godly perfection.

Composer, conductor, and creative thinker **John Adams** (born 1947) occupies a unique position in the world of American music. His works stand out among contemporary classical compositions for their depth of expression, brilliance of sound, and the profoundly humanist nature of their themes.

Among Adams' works are several of the most performed contemporary classical pieces today: *Harmonielehre*, *Shaker Loops*, *Chamber Symphony*, *Absolute Jest*, *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*, and his Violin Concerto. His stage works, most created in collaboration with his longtime creative partner Peter Sellars, have transformed the genre of contemporary music theater, including *Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, *El Niño*, *Doctor Atomic*, *A Flowering Tree*, the Passion oratorio, *The Gospel According to the Other Mary*, *Girls of the Golden West*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

This season, *The Rock You Stand On* – Adams' new orchestral work for Marin Alsop – premieres with The Philadelphia Orchestra, then tours to Katowice (Poland), Manchester, New York, Vienna, and Chicago. Adams will conduct *After the Fall*, his new piano concerto for pianist Vikingur Ólafsson, with the Gothenburg Symphony, the New World Symphony, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. He also appears as guest conductor with the Houston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, the Santa Cecilia, and Hallé orchestras. Gustavo Dudamel will lead the LA Phil in the US premiere of Adams' *Frenzy*, and will tour the work to South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan.

Described by *The New York Times* as "our greatest living composer," Adams is the 2019 recipient of the Erasmus Prize "for notable contributions to European culture, society and social science"

– the only American composer to be so honored in the prize’s 61-year history. As an advocate of his composer colleagues Adams has premiered over 100 new works ranging from composers such as Glass, Riley, Rihm, Wolfe, and Gordon to works by young emerging composers. He received the 2021 Ditson Conductor’s Award from Columbia University in recognition for his “exceptional commitment to American composers.” Adams has additionally received honorary doctorates from Harvard, Yale, Northwestern University, Cambridge University, and the Juilliard School. Since 2009 he has held the position of Creative Chair with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. A provocative writer whose works has appeared in both *The New Yorker Magazine* and *The New York Times Book Review*, he is author of the highly acclaimed autobiography *Hallelujah Junction*.

As a conductor, Adams has appeared with the Berliner Philharmoniker, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, Wiener Symphoniker, the New York Philharmonic, the BBC Symphony and Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony, among others. He has had especially close relationships over four decades with the Cleveland Orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, where he has been Creative Chair since 2009.

Road Movies was commissioned by the Library of Congress and first performed there in 1995.

Composer’s program note:

After years of studiously avoiding the chamber music format I have suddenly begun to compose for the medium in real earnest. The 1992 Chamber Symphony was followed by the string quartet, *John's Book of Alleged Dances*, written for Kronos in 1994, and now comes *Road Movies*. For years the chamber music scenario remained a not particularly fertile bed in which to grow my musical ideas. My music of the 70s and 80s was principally about massed sonorities and the physical and emotional potency of big walls of triadic harmony.

These musical gestures were not really germane to chamber music with its democratic parceling of roles, its transparency and timbral delicacy. Moreover, the challenge of writing melodically, something that chamber music demands above and beyond all else, was yet to be solved. Fortunately, a breakthrough in melodic writing came about during the writing of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, an opera whose subject and mood required a whole new appraisal of my musical language.

The title *Road Movies* is total whimsy, probably suggested by the “groove” in the piano part, all of which is required to be played in a “swing” mode (second and fourth of every group of four notes are played slightly late).

Movement I is a relaxed drive down a not unfamiliar road. Material is recirculated in a sequence of recalls that suggest a rondo form. Movement II is a simple meditation of several small motives. A solitary figure in an empty desert landscape. Movement III is for four-wheel drives only, a big perpetual motion machine called “40% Swing.” On modern MIDI sequencers the desired amount of swing can be adjusted with almost ridiculous accuracy. 40% provides a giddy, bouncy ride, somewhere between an Ives ragtime and a

long rideout by the Goodman Orchestra, circa 1939. It is very difficult for violin and piano to maintain over the seven-minute stretch, especially in the tricky cross-hand style of the piano part. Relax, and leave the driving to us.

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) was born to the minor French aristocracy. His father, recognizing early musical talent, sent him to the newly established *École Niedermayer*, a Parisian training school for church musicians. It was there that he met and studied with Saint-Saëns, who broke from the school's curriculum to present his students with the latest in contemporary music. Fauré worked, often unhappily, as a church musician for most of the next three decades, serving at Notre Dame and as Saint-Saëns' assistant at the Madeleine. In 1896 he became chief organist there and then took over from Massenet as teacher of the composition class at the Paris Conservatoire, where his pupils included Ravel, Enescu, Koechlin, and Nadia Boulanger. The appointment brought him much more acclaim as a composer. He was named director of the Conservatoire in 1905 and proved effective in reforming and modernizing the institution, much to the displeasure of older, more reactionary faculty, many of whom resigned. Retirement in 1920 finally allowed him uninterrupted time to compose. Fauré is often considered the most advanced composer of his generation; his career spanned from the end of Romanticism to the second quarter of the twentieth century, a time in which musical language underwent tremendous changes. His very personal and innovative harmonic palette had wide-ranging influence, even, arguably, towards Debussy.

Fauré's second Cello Sonata was written between March and November of 1921. As Chameleon audiences may remember from last May's program, the second Piano Quintet was composed around the same time, a period of significant changes in his life, not least of which was increasing hearing problems that precipitated his retirement from the Conservatoire, including deafness but also distortion of pitches in the extreme registers. Fortunately, he had always been able to compose away from the keyboard, and his high standing in French musical culture led to numerous commissions and celebrations of his work. One such commission was a funeral march for a ceremony commemorating the 100th anniversary of the death of Napoleon. He confided in his wife that he found "the subject and the occasion thoroughly intimidating," but he felt compelled to comply, and the theme he came up with stuck with him so doggedly that it found its way into the Andante movement of the new cello sonata.

The rest of the sonata is just as engaging and, like the quintet, remarkably sunny in character considering Fauré's health troubles. Following the premiere in May of 1922, his old friend Vincent d'Indy wrote him in appreciation: "I want to tell you that I'm still under the spell of your beautiful Cello Sonata...The Andante is a masterpiece of sensitivity and expression and I love the finale, so perky and delightful...How lucky you are to stay young like that!"

Eleanor Alberga (b. 1949) is a highly regarded British composer with commissions from the BBC Proms and The Royal Opera, Covent Garden. With a substantial output ranging from solo instrumental works to full-scale symphonic works and opera, her music is performed all over the world.

In April 2024, her Piano Concerto was given its World Premiere in Liverpool to a flourish of positive reviews, with the performance streamed on Medici TV and BBC Radio 3. The work was commissioned by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra in conjunction with the Leeds International Piano Competition and premiered by the competition's most recent winner Alim Beisembayev with the orchestra's Musical Director Domingo Hindoyan conducting.

Other recent commissions and premieres for large forces have included her Symphony No.1 "Strata" – just released on the Resonus label in a premiere recording by the BBC Symphony Orchestra – her Trumpet Concerto "Invocation," written for Pacho Flores and the London Schools Symphony Orchestra, and *Rise up, O Sun!*, a setting of William Blake's poem for full orchestra and chorus, commissioned to open the 2023 Three Choirs Festival in Gloucester Cathedral.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, Eleanor Alberga decided at the age of five to be a concert pianist. Five years later, she was composing works for the piano. In 1968 she won the biennial Royal Schools of Music Scholarship for the West Indies, which she took up in 1970 at the Royal Academy of Music in London studying piano and singing.

A budding career as a solo pianist – she was one of three finalists in the International Piano Concerto Competition in Dudley, UK in 1974 – was soon augmented by composition with her arrival at the London Contemporary Dance Theatre in 1978. Under the inspirational leadership of its Artistic Director, Robert Cohan, she became one of the very few pianists with the deepest understanding of modern dance, and her company class improvisations became the stuff of legend. These in turn led to works commissioned and conceived for dance by the company, and she later became the company's Musical Director, conducting, composing, and playing on LCDT's many tours.

At different times over the course of her early career, she was a member of the African dance company Fontomfrom and played guitar and sang with the Jamaican Folk Singers. She was part of the duo Double Exposure with her husband, the violinist Thomas Bowes, and more recently they together founded and nurtured the Arcadia Festival, an original music festival in the English countryside where they live.

However, it was on leaving the London Contemporary Dance Theatre that she was able to fully embark on her calling as a composer. Since then, interest in her music across all genres – orchestral, chamber, vocal, as well as works for stage and screen – has accelerated, while her output has continued to grow. In 2015 her commissioned work *Arise, Athena!* for the opening of the Last Night of the BBC Proms was seen and heard by millions and cemented a reputation as a composer of huge originality and consummate skill.

Eleanor Alberga has gathered a number of awards, most notably a NESTA Fellowship in 2000 and a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award in 2019. In 2020 she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music. She was awarded an OBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours 2021 for Services to British Music.

No-Man's-Land Lullaby was composed in the summer of 1996 and brings together two

contrasting inspirations: the harsh realities of World War I and the innocence and gentle comfort of Brahms' famous cradle song, which recurs throughout in dreamlike fragments.

Composer's program note:

I had planned a somewhat lightweight and predominantly upbeat piece. However, I was to receive visitations which ensured that the piece which emerged as *No-Man's-Land Lullaby* has neither of these qualities. Indeed, for me the work became a kind of acknowledgement of my European heritage and a realization that two World Wars are part of my history also.

Visiting parts of central Europe over the summer of 1996, I was struck by the almost unreal beauty of the landscapes. Yet, I received a heavy sadness in the atmosphere that took me back to the events of half a century ago, some of which had been played out against this very scenery. At the same time, I was visited by a melody. It arrived unbidden and would not leave me alone. It seemed, however, to offer comfort.

It was the imagery of the First World War that finally brought these things together, especially the image of men dying slowly and uncomforted in a place called "no-man's-land." I am especially indebted to Paul Fussell's book *The Great War and Modern Memory* for laying out so clearly the life of soldiers in the trenches. The piece is cast in three sections and is entirely based on the melody that emerges most identifiably towards the end.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) was a native of Hamburg, Germany. His father, a double bass player, was the first member of his family to be a professional musician and had to make a living without much support. Much of the younger Brahms' early musical training was put to use arranging and composing for dance orchestras and other small ensembles performing for public and private functions. He showed early promise as a pianist, nearly embarking on a career as a child prodigy showcase performer. Instead, he directed his energies toward more extensive composition study. In 1848, a flood of Hungarian refugees came through Hamburg, and Brahms met the violinist Eduard Reményi, who later engaged him as accompanist for a concert tour. Reményi taught Brahms the authentic *alla zingarese* style that became an important part of his musical vocabulary. While on tour he met the violinist Joseph Joachim, who, although only in his early twenties himself, was already one of Germany's most prominent musicians. They quickly formed a bond that would last their lifetimes, despite the inevitable periods of estrangement that would spring up between two such strong personalities. Joachim convinced Brahms to travel to Düsseldorf to introduce himself to Robert and Clara Schumann, and musical history was set in motion.

Robert Schumann wasted no time in proclaiming the young Brahms the savior of Germanic music – the implication being that he would save it from the likes of Wagner and Liszt. Within a month of their first meeting, he published an article in the *Neue Zeitschrift* under the title "Neue Bahnen" ("New Paths") describing the 20-year-old Brahms as "someone [who] must and would suddenly appear, destined to give ideal presentation to the highest expression of the time, who

would bring us his mastership not in the process of development, but springing forth like Minerva fully armed from the head of Jove. And he is come, a young blood by whose cradle graces and heroes kept watch... ‘This is one of the elect’...” The purple language continues, revealing at least as much about the manic side of Schumann’s mental illness as it does about his assessment of Brahms’ talent. Following Robert’s nervous breakdown less than a year later, Brahms spent a great deal of time with Clara and, although he was fourteen years younger, fell in love with her. He remained devoted to her throughout his life, although the initial passion faded to a more appropriate and realistic affection between confidantes.

By the end of his life, Brahms had fulfilled the spirit of Robert Schumann’s predictions, serving as the foil to Wagner in the minds of those who placed supreme value on upholding and furthering tradition. In truth, the two men shared a real, if grudging, mutual admiration. For those of us who care more about the music itself than the politics of the 19th century musical world, the significance of Brahms’ work lies in his synthesis of Classical balance with Romantic humanity and emotion, and his ability to honor tradition while creating an instantly recognizable personal voice.

By 1891 Brahms felt that he was ready to retire, that he had written all the music he needed to write. Fortunately for all of us, however, he met Richard Mühlfeld, a remarkable clarinetist and a member of the Ducal Orchestra at Meiningen. He was so impressed with Mühlfeld that he spent many hours working with him to understand the full capabilities of the instrument and then wrote two pieces for him in quick succession: the Trio for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano Op. 114 and the Quintet for Clarinet and Strings, Op. 115. Two years later he added the two sonatas, Op. 120, and soon created equally satisfying versions for viola. The Quintet and the Trio were premiered on December 12, 1891, with the Joachim Quartet joining Mühlfeld and Brahms.

Mühlfeld impressed Brahms not only with his captivating phrasing and musical sense, but also with his command of the wide array of colors available in the different ranges of the clarinet, from clear, bright high notes to the sometimes-breathy and mysterious middle, to the dark, earthy low range known as the *chalmereau* register. The combination of clarinet and string quartet, with its wonderfully expressive palette of colors and textures, had already been established beautifully by none other than Mozart, to which Brahms’ contribution owes quite a bit; both composers were masters of the theme and variations form used for the finales of their quintets.

Brahms’ quintet is far more than a tribute to Mozart’s example, however. The sweet/sad feeling that permeates it is pure late Brahms, as is the harmonic ambiguity of the opening – is it in the dark, fragile key of b minor or its bright, clear relative D Major? Even after the sunny D Major arpeggio in the clarinet about a minute and half in, the ensemble returns almost immediately to b minor, vacillating back and forth for the rest of the movement.

The second movement begins in the expected manner of a mournful, poignant adagio, but transforms into something quite a bit more unique inspired by the *alla zingarese* style of Brahms’ formative years. The British musicologist Donald Francis Tovey remarks: “It is unlike anything else in classical music, but if one has the good fortune to hear a genuine Hungarian band whose leader happens to be a clarinetist, one will be thrilled on recognizing exactly Brahms’s treatment of the instrument here.”

All in all, the Clarinet Quintet is widely considered one of Brahms' most profound chamber works. From first note to last, we feel ourselves in the hands of a master of his craft; the contrasting moods of the two related keys that frames the conversation of the first movement informs the unfolding narrative throughout, and the generally autumnal, sometimes nostalgic character is continually balanced with a sense of restlessness and the coiled energy inherent in the virtuosic clarinet lines. Finally, rather than the typical triumphant finale, Brahms brings us back to music nearly identical to the ending of the first movement – he has taken us on a journey and returned us home, gently to rest, grateful for the experience.

- Gabriel Rice

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