

**William Grant Still (1895-1978): *Danzas de Panama* (1948)**

Long known as the “Dean of African-American Classical Composers,” William Grant Still had the distinction of becoming a legend in his own lifetime. Composer of over 200 works, he was the first African-American to conduct a major American symphony orchestra, have a symphony performed by a leading orchestra, have an opera performed by a major opera company, and have an opera performed on national television. Because of his close association and collaboration with prominent African-American literary and cultural figures, Still is considered to be part of the Harlem Renaissance.

*Danzas de Panama* are based on a collection of Panamanian folk tunes that were collected by the American ethnomusicologist Elisabeth Waldo in the 1940s. Each of the four movements has at least two and sometimes three separate dances within it. The first movement, Tamborito, opens with the players percussively striking the sides of their instruments, creating the rhythm for a colorful introduction which leads to a slower, melancholy tune. For the rest of the movement, Still ingeniously juxtaposes these two dances, with variations in tempo and mood. Next comes Mejorana, which sounds like a carefree Panamanian waltz with a forceful, somehow ominous middle section. The slowish third movement, Punto, is gentle and contemplative, reminiscent of what one might hear in the movies when Mexican cowboys return to their hacienda at the end of a day’s work. The middle section in 6/8 is in the minor and more robust. The last movement, Cumbia y Congo, begins again with a percussive introduction to a high-spirited dance, and culminates in a brilliant and lively coda.

**Benjamin Britten (1913-1976): *Les Illuminations*, Op. 18 (1939)**

Benjamin Britten was an English composer, conductor and pianist, whose operas were considered the finest in the English language since those of Henry Purcell in the 17th century. Britten was a child prodigy—learning to play the piano at the age of two and composing his first piece at five—and grew up to be the central figure of the British classical music of his time. He was a prolific composer and his large body of works included opera, other vocal music, orchestral and chamber pieces. He was the first musician to receive life peerage, and become Baron Britten. He and his partner in life and music, Peter Pears, established the Britten-Pears School in 1972 to nurture young musicians and composers.

Rimbaud’s collection of prose poetry, *Les Illuminations*, would go on to influence just about every poetic movement that followed his premature retirement from literature at the young age of 21. Benjamin Britten was most likely introduced to the

work by his close friend W.H. Auden, and he was immediately inspired to set the poems to music. He composed *Les Illuminations* during the period leading up to World War II, completing much of the piece during his tour of the United States, during which he would begin his life-long romantic relationship with the tenor, Peter Pears. While the piece was written for the soprano Sophie Wyss, one of its most beautiful movements, *Being Beauteous*, is dedicated to Pears, and the cycle became a staple of the tenor's repertoire very soon after its premiere in 1940. The cycle's main recurring theme is a setting of Rimbaud's words, 'J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage' (I alone hold the key to this savage parade), a sentiment that was a central theme in Britten's writing: only the artist, who is perpetually on the outside looking in, is able to make any sense of the savage parade that is the adventure of living in this world.

—Nicholas Phan

### **Hanna Benn (b. 1988): *Where Springs Not Fail* (2016)**



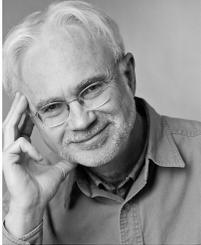
Hanna Benn is a composer based in the Pacific Northwest, part of a growing movement of creative people exploring the intersection of genres and the ways in which traditional classical music theory evolves amidst today's technologies and cultural experiences. Her early exposure to a wide variety of music—Anglican choral music, jazz fusion, violin and piano lessons—has evolved into a unique style of composing, one that includes a taste for electronic beats mixed with new age synth, all built on a foundation of jazz rhythms and classical rules of musical composition.

*Where Springs Not Fail* is full of gorgeous and lush string writing, inspired from the poem "Heaven-Haven: A nun takes the veil" by Gerard Manley Hopkins. This is a work of deep beauty, fully capable of transporting the listener right to that place "where springs not fail . . . where no storms come."

#### **Heaven-Haven**

##### *A nun takes the veil*

I have desired to go  
Where springs not fail,  
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail  
And a few lilies blow.  
And I have asked to be  
Where no storms come,  
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,  
And out of the swing of the sea.

**John Adams (b. 1947): *Shaker Loops* (1978/1982)**

Composer, conductor, and creative thinker – John Adams 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. Over the past 40 years, Adams’s music has played a decisive role in turning the tide of contemporary musical aesthetics away from academic modernism and toward a more expansive, expressive language, entirely characteristic of his New World surroundings.

*Shaker Loops*, born out of the large-scale Minimalism developed by Steve Reich and Philip Glass in the 1970s, was a breakthrough work for the young John Adams. In its initial form, it was a string quartet titled *Wavemaker*; as Adams explained in a program note, “I gradually developed a scheme for composing that was partly indebted to the repetitive procedures of Minimalism and partly an outgrowth of my interest in waveforms.” Unsatisfied with his first attempt, he expanded the score into a string septet (and ultimately string orchestra) and changed the title to *Shaker Loops*.

The “loops” idea was a technique from the era of tape music where small lengths of prerecorded tape attached end to end could repeat melodic or rhythmic figures ad infinitum. The Shakers got into the act partly as a pun on the musical term “to shake,” meaning either to make a tremolo with the bow across the string or else to trill rapidly from one note to another.

The flip side of the pun was suggested by my own childhood memories of growing up not far from a defunct Shaker colony near Canterbury, New Hampshire. “Although, as has since been pointed out to me, the term “Shaker” itself is derogatory, it nevertheless summons up the vision of these otherwise pious and industrious souls caught up in the ecstatic frenzy of a dance that culminated in an epiphany of physical and spiritual transcendence. This dynamic, almost electrically charged element, so out of place in the orderly mechanistic universe of Minimalism, gave the music its *raison d’être* and ultimately led to the full realization of the piece.

—John Adams