

GCSU Department of Music

Guest Artist Recital

Alma Ensemble

“Hear Us Roar”

Sarah Wardle Jones, flute

Michelle Smith Johnson, clarinet

Erica Sipes, piano

Tuesday, March 25, 2025, 7:30 p.m.

Max Noah Recital Hall

and live streamed on facebook.com/GCMusicDepartment



Program

Valse Volante

Helen Stowasser
(b. 1933)

Sarah Wardle Jones, flute
Michelle Smith Johnson, clarinet
Erica Sipes, piano

Small Ways

World Premiere

Lisa Neher
(b. 1983)

- I. Rising
- II. Small Ways
- III. Possibilities

Youngmi Kim, soprano
Sarah Wardle Jones, flute
Michelle Smith Johnson, clarinet
Erica Sipes, piano

Clouds

Florence Price
(1887–1953)

Erica Sipes, piano

Short Intermission (10 minutes)

Portraits of Langston

- III. Le Grand Duc Mambo
- IV. Silver Rain
- V. Parisian Cabaret

Valerie Coleman
(b. 1970)

Trio, Op. 45

- I. Allegro deciso
- II. Andante
- III. Scherzo
- IV. Presto

Louise Farrenc
(1804–1875)
arr. Michelle Smith Johnson

Sarah Wardle Jones, flute
Michelle Smith Johnson, clarinet
Erica Sipes, piano

Program Notes

Helen Stowasser's *Valse Volante* (translated as "Flying Waltz") is a charming and lively chamber work for flute, clarinet, and piano that captures the graceful motion and buoyant spirit of a Viennese waltz with a contemporary twist.

The piece showcases Stowasser's keen sense of melody and rhythmic playfulness, with the flute and clarinet weaving elegant, soaring lines above the piano's rich harmonic foundation. The waltz rhythm propels the music forward, creating an effervescent and whimsical character, while unexpected harmonic shifts and playful exchanges between the instruments add intrigue and delight.

Stowasser, an Australian composer and educator, was known for her contributions to music education and composition, and *Valse Volante* reflects her ability to blend traditional dance forms with fresh, engaging textures. This piece offers performers and audiences alike a joyful, lighthearted journey through the timeless elegance of the waltz, reimagined with a sense of airborne freedom and energy.

Lisa Neher's *Small Ways*, composed for flute, clarinet, and piano, draws its inspiration from the poignant poetry of Lisa Kagan. In her poem "Small Ways," Kagan evokes a sense of gentleness and resilience found in nature, reflecting on how flowers bloom with quiet dignity, unaware of the tumultuous world around them. This sentiment resonates throughout Neher's composition, which captures the delicate interplay between the instruments, mirroring the soft emergence of beauty amidst challenges.

Small Ways

by Lisa Kagan

from Coming Home to Myself

There is something kind rising

up from the earth right now

gentleness in the way the flowers open

they do not know of politics and pandemics

so they make good company

they are quiet

announcing over and over again

in their small ways

that beauty is still possible.

Small Ways is a celebration of hope and resilience, inviting listeners to reflect on the quiet beauty that surrounds us and to find solace in nature's enduring presence. This world premiere marks an exciting moment not only for the performers but also for the audience, as they embark on a journey of sound and emotion inspired by the evocative words of Kagan.

The importance of Florence Price's *Clouds* derives from its engagement with the very freedom of expression that was crucial to mid-twentieth-century music generally, and to societal identity for African Americans and women in particular. Not only does this work bring together in a single

coherent composition stylistic idioms that are rarely found together in a single piece, but it does so under the descriptive moniker of clouds, which in literature, poetry, and African American art in particular are one of the most potent and ubiquitous symbols of freedom — freedom of movement, freedom of shape and form, freedom of mood, freedom from virtually every restriction that binds humans and other objects. By integrating disparate musical styles, none of which bows to the prejudicial restrictions that Price's world would have placed upon her because of her race and her sex, under a title so powerfully evocative of freedom, Price in *Clouds* asserts her ability to resist — to refuse to let her mind be segregated, her imagination stilled, her genius bowed by others' expectations.

Valerie Coleman is an acclaimed American composer, flutist, and educator known for her innovative contributions to contemporary classical music. A graduate of the University of Michigan and the Mannes School of Music, Coleman is celebrated for her ability to blend diverse musical styles, incorporating elements of jazz, African American traditions, and classical forms into her compositions.

As a founding member of the internationally recognized woodwind quintet Imani Winds, she has gained prominence for her engaging performances and compositions that reflect cultural heritage and social themes. In addition to her composing and performing, Coleman is dedicated to music education and advocacy, inspiring the next generation of musicians through her teaching and mentorship.

Portraits of Langston is a vibrant and evocative work written for flute, clarinet, and piano that pays homage to the profound influence of Langston Hughes, one of the most celebrated figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Composed in 2016, this work captures the essence of Hughes's poetry, celebrating themes of identity, culture, and the richness of African American life through a captivating blend of musical styles.

In this performance, we will present three of the six movements from the suite, accompanied by poetry read by Michelle Smith Johnson.

Louise Farrenc's *Trio, Op. 45* is a remarkable chamber work that showcases the composer's talent and innovative spirit during the 19th century. Farrenc, a prominent French composer and pianist, was known for her strong musical voice in a male-dominated field. Her compositions are characterized by their elegance, depth, and mastery of form, and the *Trio, Op. 45* is no exception.

Originally written for piano, violin, and cello, this piece has been thoughtfully arranged for flute, clarinet, and piano by Michelle Smith Johnson, allowing for a fresh interpretation that highlights the unique qualities of each instrument.

In this performance, featuring Sarah Wardle Jones on flute, Michelle Smith Johnson on clarinet, and Erica Sipes on piano, audiences will experience the brilliance of Louise Farrenc's *Trio, Op. 45*, reimagined in a new arrangement that celebrates her legacy and the rich textures of the woodwind and piano combination. This work is not only a testament to Farrenc's compositional prowess but also a celebration of the collaborative spirit of chamber music.

Biographies

Sarah Wardle Jones, flutist, is an accomplished performer and educator. She currently serves as adjunct flute professor at Radford University where she leads the flute studio and flute choir. As co-founder and flutist of Alma Ensemble, Sarah maintains an active touring and performance schedule across the state.

When not making music, she serves as UX Specialist at LeadPoint Digital, a digital marketing agency in Roanoke, VA, where she writes user-focused web content. Sarah earned a master's degree in music performance from Bowling Green State University, where she studied with Nina Assimakopoulos, and an MFA in creative nonfiction from Queens University of Charlotte.

In her spare time, Sarah enjoys practicing yoga, reading, and spending time with her husband and son.

Michelle Smith Johnson, clarinetist and accomplished music educator, is currently serving as a middle and elementary school orchestra director for her fourteenth year with Roanoke City Public Schools. Due to her outstanding achievements in music education and her positive impact on the lives of her students, Michelle was honored as John P. Fishwick Middle School's 2014 Teacher of the Year and received the Superintendent's Award in 2022.

In addition to her work as a public school music educator, Michelle serves as instructor of clarinet at Radford University. Michelle also enjoys freelance orchestra work, performing with the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra, among other performance endeavors across the state of Virginia.

As a co-founder of Alma Ensemble, she works with her co-founders and community partners to amplify the voices of underrepresented composers and to foster community engagement through chamber music.

Michelle holds performance and Music Education degrees from Radford University as well as a Master of Music in Instrumental Conducting at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

In her spare time, Michelle loves traveling, golf, gardening, DIY home-improvement projects, cooking, and spending time with her husband Sheldon and their two Shih Tzu rescues Song and Justine.

Erica Sipes, pianist, received her bachelor's and master's degrees in piano performance from the Eastman School of Music. She currently works at Radford University as a collaborative pianist and practice coach. Previously, she has freelanced as a piano collaborator and coach in Michigan, Idaho, and Virginia. She has also performed with the Roanoke Symphony on occasion and has performed as a piano soloist with the New River Valley Symphony. In the summer of 2012 Ms. Sipes officially launched her own business as a practice coach, offering coaching, workshops, planning sessions, and practice boot-camps for anyone that could use some help with practicing. She is also a prominent blogger, crafting a website called 'Beyond the Notes', writing frequently about her views on performing, learning music, and the classical music world in general.

Additionally, Erica hosts "Sightreading Maverick" every Sunday on her YouTube channel where she takes submissions from audience members and sightreads pieces live!

THE ALMA ENSEMBLE: OUR VISION, MISSION, AND PURPOSE

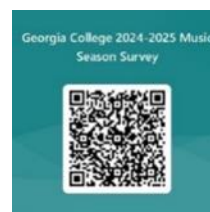
The Alma Ensemble was founded by flutist Sarah Wardle Jones, clarinetist Michelle Smith Johnson, and pianist Erica Sipes. It was birthed from a desire of the founding members to create music in a way that is empowering and personally resonant. We place a high priority on playing music by other women composers, educating our audiences by creating context for the pieces we select, and challenging traditional performance paradigms that inhibit, rather than enhance, our ability to communicate and connect with an audience. In fact, we chose the name “Alma” because it speaks to our mission on several levels. Because we want to do our part in promoting the artistic work of women, we chose Alma Mahler as our namesake precisely because she could have used the social support that we ourselves, by comparison, enjoy. She is most famous for her relationships with prominent artistic men, but she was a composer in her own right who never received the opportunities of her romantic counterparts. “Alma” also means “nourishment” or “soul” which is something that we endeavor to bring to each performance for ourselves and our audiences.

Practically, this means that we have committed to highlighting at least one female composer on each performance. We also take the time to research and perform works of historical women to increase awareness about their valuable contribution to the field. We also work to develop relationships with living women composers to perform, promote and commission their work.

In each performance we strive to provide context for the pieces we perform. We feel this does a service to our audience as well as the composer. Other educational aspects of our performances are in development as we seek more opportunities to perform for schools and students.

Perhaps most importantly, we want to bring a sense of authenticity to our work. We formed this ensemble because we each had experienced the limitations and artistic sterility of performing music according to convention simply because it was expected of us. Like the women who have come before us, we want to reject expectations that stand in the way of creative expression and upend any performance custom that does not serve our ability to communicate clearly or powerfully with an audience. Our feeling is that the best art creates connection and communication between people. We aim to continually grow in our capacity to draw listeners into the creative process by including unconventional elements into our performances including other art mediums, elements of audience participation, or other genres of music that best suit the creative vision of our presentation.

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Upcoming Events:

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From Stage and Screen GCSU Choral Ensembles

Jennifer Flory and Dana Gorzelany-Mostaks, directors
Saturday, March 29, 7:30 p.m.
First Baptist Church
and live streamed on FB

GCSU Orchestra Concert

Robert Radmer, viola soloist
Bryan E. Hall, conductor
Tuesday, April 1, 7:30 p.m.
Russell Auditorium
and live streamed on FB

GCSU Wind Symphony

Cliff Towner, conductor
Thursday, April 3, 7:30 p.m.
Russell Auditorium
and live streamed on FB

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Impresario (\$5000+)

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Jackie Bell
Lawrence & Susan Boss

Dr. and Mrs. Stephen Boyle
George & Polly Echols
Lee Echols
Kenny Franks

Gorzelany Family
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Tom & Sandra Rosseter

Maestro (\$2500-4999)

Brett & Sarah Miller family

Virtuoso (\$1000-2499)

Charlotte H. Bearden
David & Micki Carr
President Cathy Cox and
Mr. Mark Dehler

The Episcopal Church of the
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Jennifer Gorzelany
Judith Greer
Nancy

William & Becky Humphrey
Margaret S. Judkins
Stan & Marilyn McMahan
Mrs. Eliza G. Nesmith
Mary Elizabeth Phillips

Family of Fielding Whipple
J. Noland & Leah White
Jim Willoughby
Patricia P. Zimmermann

Artist (\$500-999)

Frances B. Florencourt:
IMO Gertrude Treanor
Jennifer Flory

Keith & Simin Hall
Sherry & Robert Henry
David H. Johnson

Newnan FUMC
Don & Sheryl Parker
Douglas & Kyle Rick

Luis Samper
Cliff & Gina Towner
Walker United Methodist Church

Patron (\$250-499)

Walter M. Bowman Jr.
Dr. and Mrs. Jim Craig, Jr.
Melanie L. DeVore

Ana Edwards (IMO)
Dimples Kelly Edwards)
James & Tricia Etheridge
Jane & Joe Mangum

Doris Moody
Kay Newman
Kenneth & Diane Saladin: (IMO)
Clyde Tipton)

Kristine F. Smith
Harriett L. Whipple
George & Rhonda P. Wood

Sustainer (\$100-249)

Paul Accettura
Roger & Carol Austin
family
Peggy Bartolotta
Joanne C. Battle
Sue Bennett
Karen Berman: in honor
of Dr. Bradley Sowell
Marcia Brelsford
Janice T. Callaway

Shirley G. Day
Larry & Sharon Edwards
Robert Erst
Jane & Joe Flaherty
Thom & Heather Galloway
Lamar & Ruth Garrard
Gerald & Elaine Grady
Michael & Sylvia Graham
James & Lupe S. Guyton
Bryan Emmon Hall

Jimmy Hemphill
Steve & Lynne Jordan
Christopher A. Karow
David & Laura Leach
Ellen Markwalter
Lori & Albert McGalliard
Jenny & Larry Moore
Richard & Arlene Mueller
Dianna Odum

Ricky & Chris O'Steen
Joy & Barry Pendry
Kate & Roy Phillips
Sara A. Simcox
Robert Tanner
Craig Turner
Katie G. Whipple
Virginia Wilkerson
Robin & Susan Wright

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