

Sunday, February 1, 2026, 3pm  
Hertz Hall

Steven Banks, *baritone saxophone*  
Xak Bjerken, *piano*  
*Golden Silhouettes*

PROGRAM

Camille SAINT-SAËNS (1835–1921) Sonata for Bassoon and Piano in G major,  
Op. 168 (1921)  
Allegro moderato  
Allegro scherzando  
Molto adagio – Allegro moderato

John MUSTO (b. 1954) *Shadow of the Blues* (1987)  
(excerpts from the song cycle for voice and piano)  
Silhouette  
Litany  
Island  
Could Be

Carlos SIMON (b. 1986) *hear them* (2020)

INTERMISSION

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827) Seven Variations on “Bei Männern,  
welche Liebe fühlen,” WoO 46 (1801)  
Theme. Andante  
Variation 1  
Variation 2  
Variation 3  
Variation 4  
Variation 5. Si prenda il tempo un poco  
più vivace  
Variation 6. Adagio  
Variation 7. Allegro, ma non troppo  
Coda (C minor)

Samuel BARBER (1910–1981) Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op. 6 (1932)  
Allegro ma non troppo  
Adagio (in combination with a scherzo)  
Allegro appassionato

*This performance is made possible in part by Joe W. Laymon, Kiese Laymon, Jeanne Laymon,  
Thomas Laymon, and Eve Dunbar and Cade Catherine Dunbar-Laymona.*

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### *Golden Silhouettes*

Steven Banks' recital today brings together music spanning more than 225 years, from Beethoven and Saint-Saëns to works by contemporary American composers Carlos Simon and John Musto, all heard through the distinctive lens of the baritone saxophone. Joined by longtime collaborator Xak Bjerken at the piano, Banks places the instrument at the center of a repertoire not originally conceived for it, inviting listeners to hear familiar music from a different instrumental perspective.

As Jeremy Geffen, Executive Director of Cal Performances, has observed, Banks' playing is marked by a "striking sonic imagination and musicality"—qualities he recalls encountering early on, including in what he has described as "one of the finest performances I have heard of Mozart's Oboe Quartet, played on the saxophone."

Long associated with jazz and popular idioms, the saxophone has continued to stake an expanding claim within classical chamber music. This program reflects both the instrument's expressive range and the collaborative depth Banks has developed through working closely with Bjerken.

In conversation with Thomas May, longtime Cal Performances annotator and feature writer, Banks speaks about each work on the program in turn, describing how the repertoire takes on new meaning through the baritone saxophone.

**Thomas May:** This program feels both newly minted and deeply personal. Is this something you've been touring with, or is it a fresh creation?

**Steven Banks:** It's a brand-new program, and this is only the second time we've performed it. We have played Carlos Simon's *hear them* before, but everything else on the program is new for us as a set. There's still a sense of discovery happening for both of us.

**TM:** Your partnership with pianist Xak Bjerken has been evolving for several years now. How did that collaboration begin?

**SB:** I was teaching at Ithaca College for three years, starting in 2019—and soon the pandemic hit. During that time, Xak and I were essentially each other's only musical collaborators. I had just won the Young Concert Artists Auditions, and we were preparing my debut recital. I had also written a large new piece for that program, so we were collaborating very closely on its creation. Carlos Simon's *hear them* was written for that same debut recital.

Because of the pandemic shutdown, we spent a lot of time working together in a focused way, and we got to know each other musically at a deep level. Xak has had such a rich and varied career, and for a young musician like me, that perspective is invaluable.

That also ties directly into this program: I'd never played the Beethoven or the Barber before, but Xak has performed both many times. Being able to approach these composers alongside someone who has lived with their music for decades has been an invaluable learning experience.

**TM:** The program's juxtapositions are striking: very recent music written specifically for you alongside canonical works by Beethoven and Barber, and then Saint-Saëns and John Musto. What holds it all together for you?

**SB:** I don't know that there's a single anchor in the traditional sense. I think of this program as a kind of tasting. Most people who come to a saxophone recital don't know quite what to expect. Part of what excites me about this program is that it offers multiple perspectives on what the saxophone can do—specifically, the baritone saxophone. That's where the title *Golden Silhouettes* comes from. We're taking the shadows of these pieces and putting them through the lens of this instrument.



## CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

**Sonata for Bassoon and Piano in G major, Op. 168**

The Bassoon Sonata dates from the final year of Saint-Saëns' long life and belongs to a late trilogy of sonatas for wind instruments. It reflects a period in which Saint-Saëns, who had come of age as an adventurous and insatiably curious musical figure, turned toward clarity, concision, and finely honed instrumental character as he grew increasingly skeptical of Modernist aesthetics.

Light on its feet yet meticulously crafted, the Bassoon Sonata balances wit and lyricism, exploiting the instrument's agile articulation and its capacity for warm, singing lines. Cast in three movements, it alternates playful irony with moments of unexpected introspection—qualities that have made it a staple of the bassoon repertoire.

Saint-Saëns had experienced the early decades of the saxophone's existence—the instrument having been invented by Adolphe Sax in the 1840s—and he was among the composers who wrote for it in both chamber and larger ensemble contexts, including a passage for saxophone quartet in his early choral setting of Psalm 137, *Super flumina Babylonis* (*On the Waters of Babylon*) from 1854. That historical overlap lends a certain legitimacy to hearing this music through a different reed voice.

**TM:** The bassoon is often associated with a sly, tongue-in-cheek personality. What happens to this piece when it's heard through the baritone saxophone instead?

**SB:** One thing I notice right away is that pianists often feel liberated when they play with a saxophone. I certainly don't think of this as taking anything away from the bassoon, but it does mean they can play more fully without constantly worrying about balance.

What I hope comes across is that the singing quality of the melodies, the playful humor, and even the delicacy—especially in the opening of the third movement—are all heightened a bit. Everything feels turned up a few notches. I play quite a bit of oboe repertoire on soprano saxophone, and people often describe that transition in a similar way: it's everything they loved before, but somehow amplified.

**TM:** Is this an arrangement you created, or are you essentially playing the original score?

**SB:** I don't think of these as arrangements. I'm literally playing the bassoon part and making the necessary transpositions. The same is true throughout the program, whether it's the Beethoven, the Musto, or the Barber. There are occasional octave adjustments, but structurally nothing has been altered. It's in the same key; the notes are the notes.

In that sense, maybe the real through-line of this program is simply that it's all featuring baritone saxophone.

## JOHN MUSTO

***Shadow of the Blues* (excerpts from the song cycle for voice and piano)**

Born in Brooklyn in 1954, John Musto is a composer, pianist, and conductor known especially for his operas and vocal music. His stage works, including *Volpone* and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, are admired for their dramatic clarity and idiomatic vocal writing. Across his output, Musto combines classical forms with harmonic and rhythmic inflections drawn from jazz, an approach that has made his music particularly compelling in theatrical and song-based contexts.

Musto's song cycle *Shadow of the Blues* (1987) sets four poems by Langston Hughes—"Silhouette," "Litany," "Island," and "Could Be" [see sidebar]—drawn from

the poet's early period. The cycle engages Hughes' language with directness and musical sensitivity, adopting a vocal style shaped by both classical art song and blues-inflected idioms.

Banks performs the original vocal lines of selected songs from the cycle on baritone saxophone, allowing Hughes' poetry to be heard through the instrument's vocal timbre. The selections approach the blues as an expressive framework rather than a fixed genre—a framework that aligns closely with the saxophone's capacity for speech-like inflection and tonal nuance.

**TM:** How did you first encounter John Musto's music, and what drew you to this piece in particular?

**SB:** I hadn't known Musto's music before I encountered the "Litany" movement on a vocal recital in North Carolina and fell in love with it. There's something in that movement that reminds me of Ravel, to whom I'm generally very drawn. The connection solidified when I read all of the poetry. These poems by Langston Hughes are powerful.

### *From The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*

#### **Silhouette**

Southern gentle lady,  
Do not swoon.  
They've just hung a black man  
In the dark of the moon.  
  
They've hung a black man  
To a roadside tree  
In the dark of the moon  
For the world to see  
How Dixie protects  
Its white womanhood.

Southern gentle lady,  
Be good!  
Be good!

#### **Prayer**

Gather up  
In the arms of your pity  
The sick, the deprived,  
The desperate, the tired,  
All the scum  
Of our weary city.  
  
Gather up  
In the arms of your pity.  
Gather up  
In the arms of your love—  
Those who expect  
No love from above.

#### **Island**

Wave of sorrow,  
Do not drown me now:  
  
I see the island  
Still ahead somehow.  
  
I see the island  
And its sands are fair:  
  
Wave of sorrow,  
Take me there.

#### **Could Be**

Could be Hastings Street,  
Or Lenox Avenue,  
Could be 18th & Vine  
And still be true.  
  
Could be 5th & Mound,  
Could be Rampart:  
When you pawned my watch  
You pawned my heart.  
  
Could be you love me,  
Could be that you don't.  
Might be that you'll come back,  
Like as not you won't.  
  
Hastings Street is weary,  
Also Lenox Avenue.  
Any place is dreary  
Without my watch and you.

**TM:** You're playing the original vocal lines rather than a newly composed instrumental part. How does that shape your approach?

**SB:** That's right: I'm just playing the vocal line from the original songs. The piece gives the saxophone a chance to do a little bit of the jazzy thing that people might be expecting in a saxophone recital, especially in "Could Be."

But the text is central. "Silhouette," in particular, is very stark. The poetry doesn't soften what it's saying, and I think the saxophone can carry that directness in a very particular way.

## CARLOS SIMON

### *hear them*

Commissioned by Young Concert Artists and Washington Performing Arts for Steven Banks, *hear them* was composed in 2020 and takes its inspiration directly from Simon's sense of ancestral presence. "I have been constantly aware of the presence of my ancestors in my life," the composer writes. "The benevolent forefathers and foremothers are there to help, guide, and assist."

*hear them* is inspired by a poem by Nayyirah Waheed, an American poet whose spare, aphoristic writing has reached a wide readership. The poem appears in her 2013 collection *salt.*, a book composed largely of brief, minimalistic texts addressing identity and emotional survival with striking economy of language.

### communication

if you cannot  
hear  
them.

ask the ancestors  
to speak louder.  
they only whisper  
so  
as not to frighten you.

they know  
they have been convinced.  
coerced.  
spooked.  
from your skin.

—Nayyirah Waheed,  
*from salt.* (2013)

**TM:** This piece was written specifically for you. How did the collaboration with Carlos Simon come about?

**SB:** For my Young Concert Artists debut, I put out a call for scores from Black composers. I received a lot, and I really enjoyed Carlos' music. I had met him slightly before he became as widely known as he is now. At the time, I knew him more from the band world, where he was doing a lot of the work he's now known for, but at the wind ensemble level.

We had a conversation during COVID about how it would have been nice to be in the same room and improvise together, but that wasn't possible. So Carlos recorded some improvisations at the piano and sent them to me. I overdubbed improvisations of my own in reaction to them and sent those back. The piece is essentially an amalgamation of those improvisations that he then composed into a more formal structure. It was a different kind of collaboration.

**TM:** What does the title signify?

**SB:** The title comes from a phrase in the poem by Nayyirah Waheed, which I recite before the piece begins. The piece is meant as a reminder to listen to the cautionary tales of those who came before us. Some sounds in the piece represent what Carlos calls "ancestral cries." You can almost imagine people shrieking and trying to warn you from far away—but you're not exactly sure what they're trying to say.

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN****Seven Variations on “Bei Männern,  
welche Liebe fühlen,” WoO 46**

Beethoven composed this set of variations in 1801 on a famous tune from Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, an opera he deeply admired. The original number is a duet sung by Pamina and Papageno in Act I, as the two characters reflect—simply and sincerely—on the consolations of love and companionship. Set in an unadorned, folk-like vein, the duet embodies the opera’s humane idealism, shared across differences of class and temperament.

Written originally for cello and piano, Beethoven’s variations retain the duet’s melodic clarity while subjecting it to a wide range of transformations. Rather than obscure the theme, he tests its resilience, exploring contrasts of lyricism and humor with virtuosity.

**TM:** This piece is new to your repertoire. What led you to include it in the program?

**SB:** Beethoven in general is pretty new to me as a performer—which is an odd thing to say as a classical musician, but not so much as a saxophonist. I’ve wanted to engage with his music more, since I’m also a composer, and there are certain things about the way Beethoven writes that I admire. Hak and I came to this piece together, and we’re enjoying the sheer beauty and the florid ways in which he varies the theme.

**TM:** In a way, the piece in this format almost feels like a metaphor for the saxophone itself—its ever-changing identity, built from variations on a simple idea.

**SB:** Yes, exactly. There’s something about having this very straightforward tune and then watching it spin off in all these directions. That sense of transformation really resonates with the saxophone for me.

**TM:** Beethoven takes his theme from an opera. How does that influence how the saxophone functions here?

**SB:** The saxophone is a very vocal instrument—in some ways, it’s even more operatic than strings, and that opens up a different way of approaching this music that works particularly well on the saxophone. It’s about having a different way of playing within a vocal tradition.

**SAMUEL BARBER****Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op. 6**

Samuel Barber composed the Cello Sonata in 1932, during the remarkable early phase of his career that quickly established him as one of the most distinctive American composers of his generation. A prodigy student at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, Barber moved with striking assurance into professional life, producing a series of works in his twenties that brought him international attention. Even at this early stage, his music revealed the qualities that would remain central to his voice: an intense, unabashed lyricism and a strong sense of formal control.

Cast in three movements, the Cello Sonata belongs to this formative period, alongside works such as the *Overture to The School for Scandal* (1931), and already displays the long-breathed melodic writing and distinctive harmonic language that would define his mature style.

**TM:** What drew you to Barber’s Cello Sonata, and how has working on it shaped your thinking?

**SB:** Similarly to the Beethoven, Barber’s musical language is deeply compelling to me, and I’ve been excited to spend time letting it settle in, both as a musician and as a composer. He has such a distinct harmonic voice,

and we've been having a great time digging into the language of the piece.

There are a lot of things that have become performance practice on the cello that feel extraneous to what's actually in the score—like taking time in certain places because it feels right on the instrument. We're trying to think more about the form underneath and make sure it remains clear.

**TM:** Does the saxophone change the expressive character of the piece?

**SB:** I think sometimes when I hear it played by cellists, it feels like the piece is about the cello. We're trying to approach it in a way where it's more about Samuel Barber. The saxophone can't sustain a note forever, and that changes how the piece feels. It's very different from any recordings I've heard.

#### ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Hailed by the *Washington Post* as “the saxophone’s best friend, fiercest advocate and primary virtuoso in the classical realm,” performer and composer **Steven Banks** strives to bring his instrument to the heart of the classical world. He commissions and writes music that expands the repertoire for saxophone, introducing audiences to new possibilities for artistic expression. Banks is a devoted and intentional supporter of diverse voices in the future of classical music. His work on stage and on the page prompted *Seen and Heard International* to write, “Banks has the potential to be one of the transformational musicians of the 21st century.”

This season, Banks will bring his “charismatic confidence, technical flawlessness, adventurous phrasing, [and] unbelievably sweet tones” (*Seen and Heard*) to debut performances with the St. Louis, Indianapolis, Oregon, and Montreal symphony orchestras. In Europe, he makes debut appearances with the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, BBC Symphony at the Barbican, Deutsche Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, and BBC National Orchestra of Wales. In recent seasons, he has made impressive debuts and built lasting relationships with the Cleveland Orchestra, Seattle Symphony, Pittsburgh Symphony, Boston Symphony Orchestra, New World Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, Aspen Festival Orchestra, and the symphony orchestras of Cincinnati, Utah, San Diego,

and Detroit. He enjoys collaborating with conductors including Xian Zhang, Manfred Honeck, Stéphane Dénève, Rafael Payare, Peter Oundjian, Ruth Reinhardt, and Miguel Harth-Bedoya.

Banks is committed to establishing the saxophone as a vital voice in classical music by commissioning works that showcase its expressive capabilities. This season, he premieres Joan Tower's poignant new concerto *Love Returns* at the Colorado Music Festival, with additional consortium performances by the National Symphony Orchestra Washington, Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, and Toronto Symphony, among others. Billy Childs' *Diaspora*, written for Banks and commissioned by Young Concert Artists and 10 orchestras—the largest consortium ever for a saxophone work—marks a major milestone in Banks' mission. His growing list of recent premieres includes Carlos Simón's *hear them*, Augusta Read Thomas' *Hæmosu's Celestial Chariot Ride*, Christopher Theofanidis' *Visions of the Hereafter*, and many others.

In recital, Banks appears with pianist Xak Bjerken at prestigious series including Davies Symphony Hall, Chamber Music Northwest, Merkin Hall, the Kennedy Center, the Kravis Center, Festival Napa Valley, and Chamber Music Sedona. As a chamber musician, he enjoys deep collaborations with the Miró Quartet and Verona

Quartet, joining both ensembles for tours of newly co-created programs. Banks is a founding member of the award-winning all-saxophone ensemble Kenari Quartet.

Described as “colorful and continuously fascinating” (*The Boston Musical Intelligencer*), Banks’ compositions are increasingly in demand, reflecting his rising profile as a composer. He has been commissioned by Young Concert Artists and the chamber music festivals of Tulsa, Tucson, Bridgehampton, and Chamber Music North West. His recent works include *Reflections and Exaltations*, *Come What May*, and *Cries, Sighs and Dreams*—all scored for saxophone and string quartet—and *Begin Again* for baritone saxophone, cello, piano, and meditation guide.

Banks’ solo works *Through My Mother’s Eyes* (commissioned by Chicago Symphony for Hilary Hahn) and *Fantasy on Recurring Daydreams* (premiered by pianist Zhu Wang) have received critical acclaim. His saxophone and piano works, including *Come As You Are*, are among the most performed pieces by saxophonists worldwide.

As part of his ongoing advocacy for diversity and inclusion, Banks is excited to launch the *Come As You Are* project this season—an innovative community engagement initiative in partnership with orchestras, designed to increase representation in the concert hall through vibrant community performances and affordable ticket access. In addition, Banks spoke at TEDxNorthwesternU about overcoming institutional prejudices in the industry. He also co-created the Learning to Listen roundtable to explore the nuances of the Black experience in classical music, as well as Illuminate!, a conversation series on education, activism, and the LGBTQIA+ community in classical music, created in partnership with the Sphinx Organization.

Banks is proud to be the first saxophonist to receive a prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant and earn First Prize at the Young Con-

cert Artists Susan Wadsworth International Auditions. A saxophone and chamber music faculty member and Artist-in-Residence at the Cleveland Institute of Music, he has previously held teaching positions at Ithaca College, Baldwin Wallace Conservatory, and the University of Hartford. Banks studied with Taimur Sullivan, Otis Murphy Jr., and Galvin Crisp, earning degrees from Indiana University’s Jacobs School of Music and Northwestern University’s Bienen School of Music. He is an endorsing artist for Conn-Selmer instruments and D’Addario Woodwinds.

Pianist **Xak Bjerken** has appeared as soloist with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the Thailand Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and has performed at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Glinka Hall in St. Petersburg, the Konzerthaus in Berlin, and the Basilica of Santa Cecilia in Rome. He was for many years a member of the Los Angeles Piano Quartet, and has held chamber music residencies at Tanglewood, the Avaloch Farm Music Institute, and the Spoleto Festival, and has taught and performed at the Aspen Music Festival, Kneisel Hall, Icicle Creek, and the Kfar Blum festival in Israel. Bjerken performs regularly with members of the Boston Symphony Orchestras, and for over 20 years he has directed Ensemble X, the new-music group founded by Steven Stucky. Bjerken has worked closely with composers György Kurtak, Sofia Gubaidulina, and George Benjamin, and recently recorded two albums of original compositions with the Bluegrass ensemble EZRA. He is professor of music at Cornell University where he co-directs the international chamber music festival Mayfest with his wife, pianist Miri Yampolsky. Bjerken studied with Aube Tzerko at the UCLA and received his master’s and doctoral degrees from the Peabody Conservatory as a student of and teaching assistant to Leon Fleisher.