

The Ph.D./D.M.A. Programs in Music



Aug 29, 2025 6:00 p.m.

Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall

Joseph Vaz, *piano*

Cell Fone Blues (2000) Ed Bland
(1926-2013)

2 Poèmes, Op. 32 (1903) Alexander Scriabin
(1872-1915)
I. Andante cantabile

Prelude No. 6 (1928) Ruth Crawford Seeger
(1901-1953)

Trois Mouvements de Pétrouchka (1921) Igor Stravinsky
(1882-1971)
II. Chez Pétrouchka

Classical Soul (1992) Ed Bland
I.
II.
III.

Cantéyodjayâ (1949) Olivier Messiaen
(1908-1992)

Four Pictures from Òyó Calabashes (1964/1991) Akin Euba
(1935-2020)
I. Igbá Kẹrin - Àwọ̀n Abà̀mì Èyẹ
II. Igbá Kẹ̀ta
III. Igbá Kẹ̀jì
IV. Igbá Kìnní - Akèrègbè Baba Èmu

Lucky Charms (2002) Ed Bland

Willow Weep for Me (1932) Ann Ronell arr. Art Tatum
(1905-1993)/(1909-1956)

This recital is given in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the D.M.A. degree.
Please switch off your cell phones and refrain from taking flash pictures.

About the Program

This program is centered around the music and influences of the composer Ed Bland (1926-2013), the subject of my dissertation work. Bland was a politically and philosophically vocal African American composer whose music was influenced by various traditions, including European and American modernist classical music, Black American vernacular styles (such as gospel, jazz, and funk), and West African drumming. His musical origins as a jazz clarinet protégé in Chicago and his work experience as an arranger, composer, and producer for the record and film industries across three decades made him native to the African American vernacular. Intensive study in Western composition at universities and conservatories and self-guided study of West African music recordings led to a fairly prolific output of concert music. These musical influences, as well as Bland's status as an outsider to 'mainstream' classical music, led to a distinct compositional style that was as eclectic as his listening. Bland is now best known for the 1959 documentary film *The Cry of Jazz*, which he co-wrote and directed, and which was added to the United States National Film Registry in the Library of Congress in 2010.

Ed Bland, "Cell Fone Blues"

This short piece is first in Bland's *Urban Counterpoint*, a work comprising 31 pieces for solo piano. The analysis of these pieces is the subject of my dissertation, and Bland wrote an accompanying manifesto for these pieces:

"The curse of pop music and jazz is that they are too predictable. Ideally art music should demand unpredictability. In these piano works, the musical language used is in the vernacular (which is the language of pop music and jazz). Unpredictability is introduced into this setting through a rampaging polyphonic/polymetric texture.

Because of the importing of unpredictability into the mix, the listener is forced to think about the musical relationships. What would ordinarily have been a vernacular pop/jazz situation is now replaced by a serious/art music situation. This replacement is what the 29 short piano works (Vols.1-4) and the longer *Classical Soul* and *Three Chaconnes in Blue* (Vol. 5) address. The 29 are stand-alone pieces. A unifying factor can be found in the effects these works give of Tatum-like improvisation in a contrapuntal situation."

"Cell Fone Blues" was not chronologically the first piece that Bland wrote in *Urban Counterpoint*, but in his numbering of the 31 pieces, it is first. Its relatively simple texture and compositional clarity make "Cell Fone Blues" the perfect opener to *Urban Counterpoint*; it is a sort of statement of intent, in which the foundations of Bland's compositional style are laid out in the clearest terms. A slow twelve-bar bebop blues is followed by five variations that add elements of Bland's compositional method one by one: his mode of counterpoint informed by Black vernacular harmony and rhythm, polymetric textures, jazz-informed licks and stock phrases, and more.

This piece was one of two of Bland's works to be published by Oxford University Press in William Chapman Nyaho's collection *Piano Music of Africa and the African Diaspora*, potentially making it one of his most well-known concert works.

Alexander Scriabin, Poème, Op.32, No. 1

Scriabin's music, along with Chopin's and Debussy's, was influential for Bland in the fields of harmony and sonority during his student days in Chicago. This poem, the first in a set of two, comes from the beginning of Scriabin's move from a firmly Romantic idiom, influenced above all by Chopin's piano music, into what would become his own highly individual, complex harmonic language. Dated to 1903, the piece is a fragrant, mystical thing, and remained one of his favorite compositions, showing up in many of his own recitals for years.

Ruth Crawford Seeger, Prelude No. 6

Bland called Ruth Crawford Seeger a "great American composer," one of the many modernists that he studied as a composition student and independently later in life. This short piece comes from a set of four preludes (Nos. 6-9) published in 1928, a time during which Crawford Seeger was interested in the music of Scriabin, Dane Rudhyar, and Djane Lavoie-Herz (her piano teacher, to whom the preludes are dedicated). The sound of Scriabin's late harmony is easily heard in this piece, and the tempo marking "Andante mystico" evokes his characteristic mysticism and theosophy. Tenaciously dissonant, the prelude is remarkable for Crawford Seeger's use of pianistic color.

Igor Stravinsky, "Chez Pétrouchka"

Stravinsky, and specifically his ballet *Le sacre du printemps*, was the reason that Bland decided to begin composing concert music. As a clarinetist in a Chicago high school, Bland was primed for a career as a jazz performer before a fateful jam session (at which no less a talent than Art Tatum was present, sharing his pianistic gifts with young, Black musicians in the city). At a break in the jamming, someone put on a record of *Le sacre* and Bland said that he was immediately transfixed:

"My world changed when I heard a recording of Stravinsky's "Rite Of Spring." Not only was the music alive, it swung! I decided to become a composer because I could then have a freer formal expanse than was offered by jazz, and a much more plentiful, colorful palette and powerful instrumental device at my disposal. I felt that if I could uncover the secret of why Stravinsky's music swung, and combine that knowledge with what I knew about swinging from my jazz background, I might be on a fruitful mission."

Bland later said that prolonged exposure to Stravinsky's three best known ballets, including *Pétrouchka*, led him to composition. *Pétrouchka*, a ballet about three puppets brought to life by a magician, was originally written for the 1911 Paris season of the Ballets Russes, a ballet company under the direction of Sergei Diaghilev. Choreographed by Michel Fokine, the production is often performed today with original designs and choreography. Ten years after its premiere, Stravinsky arranged parts of the ballet into a virtuosic piano solo set, in an attempt to convince celebrated pianist Arthur Rubinstein to perform his music.

The result, *Trois mouvements de Pétrouchka*, is now a staple of the 20th century piano repertoire. Stravinsky was clear that the three pieces were not simple transcriptions of the ballet, but that he meant to transform the compositional material of *Pétrouchka* into a pianistic piece. The second of the *Trois mouvements*, titled "Chez Pétrouchka" (Petrushka's Room) is the second tableau of the ballet. In it, the Magician has kicked Petrushka into his room, where the latter pulls himself together while pitying himself, cursing the Magician, and daydreaming about the Ballerina, the puppet whom he loves. At one point, the Ballerina comes into Petrushka's room, and Petrushka begins a manic show

of leaps and gestures, meant to impress her. However, it has the opposite effect, scaring her out of the room, and Petrushka defeatedly falls to the floor once again, followed by another round of cursing the Magician. As part of the larger tragedy of the human spirit represented in the full ballet, this tableau is full of Petrushka's wildly swinging emotions.

Ed Bland, *Classical Soul*

Classical Soul is the first work of *Urban Counterpoint* that Bland composed, written in 1992 while living in Los Angeles. One of two three-movement works in the set, *Classical Soul* was once described by Bland as "Ives meets Ray Charles." Dedicated to the "piano wizardry" of Art Tatum and Fats Waller, this piece is one of the most atonal works in *Urban Counterpoint*, and in fact, the relation of atonality and the Black vernacular is the musical thesis of these three movements. Bland described the piece in his own program note:

"I consider Classical Soul to be my most significant piano work because of the difficult challenges. The overall task here is to take the Black gospel idiom and transform it into serious music without losing the gospel feel, hitting any false postures or attitudes. It is very difficult to lie or be untrue artistically when dealing with the Black gospel syntax. One of the biggest problems was harmonic, i.e., how to travel back and forth from tonal, chorale, hymnlike harmonies to atonal textures and have the work seem of whole cloth both technically and emotionally.

Movement 1 was the most difficult. How to make the transition from this musically simple hymn into gospel and into atonality and in and out. Movements 2 and 3 had the same problem at different tempo and different material."

Olivier Messiaen, *Cantéyodjayá*

Olivier Messiaen was an idiosyncratic composer with a highly individual compositional voice. As one of the most influential composers and teachers of the 20th century, his impact is extensive in the world of modern classical music. Although Bland did not cite Messiaen in his various essays and interviews, he did cite Messiaen's students such as Karlheinz Stockhausen and Pierre Boulez, as contemporary modernists that he studied and kept track of, and Messiaen's student Lalo Schiffrin opened doors for Bland in the film music world while he lived in Los Angeles. Even without the direct connection, however, I see a parallel between these two composers, whose highly recognizable music was the result of an uncompromising aesthetic-philosophical vision. Their visions had nothing to do with each other, but I find the comparison interesting nonetheless.

Cantéyodjayá is a long, single-movement work, written in 1948 while Messiaen was teaching at the summer music school at the Berkshire Music Center in Tanglewood, Massachusetts. It incorporates several of Messiaen's distinctive compositional techniques, including heavy use of Indian classical music rhythms or *talas*, idiosyncratic use of serial techniques (including quasi-total serialism in select passages), and self-quotation galore.

Akin Euba, *Four Pictures from Òyó Calabashes*

Nigerian composer Akin Euba is known as the "father of African Pianism" today, due to his invention of the term and influence on its academic scene. The idea of 'African pianism,' as conceived of and developed by Euba from the early 1960s on, has flourished in compositional and

academic circles since the late 20th century. African pianism takes as its basis that “musical instruments are important markers of identity” and that since the piano bears resemblance to certain African xylophones, thumb pianos, plucked lutes, and drum chimes, its importance in African art music is outsized compared to other Western instruments.

Bland was involved in this scene, as he presented a paper at a 1999 symposium on African pianism at the University of Pittsburgh (organized by Euba), which he entitled “Cultural Feedback: African and American Export Loop.” In this paper, Bland mused on the relationship between African American music and West African music, and outlined the history and tradition of African American blues and jazz pianists.

In *Four Pictures from Ọjọ Calabashes*, Euba presents four extremely short impressions, with each movement lasting only thirty seconds to two minutes long. Curiously, the titles of the movements are numbered in reverse order, with the first (“Igbá Kẹrín”) being titled “Number Four” and the fourth (“Igbá Kíní”) titled “Number One.” Additionally, only these two pieces programmatic titles: Euba translates “Àwọ̀n Abàmi Èyẹ” to “Supernatural Birds” in the first piece, and “Akèrègbè Baba Èmu” to “The Gourd, Master of the Palmwine.”

Ed Bland, “Lucky Charms”

This short piece is the eighteenth in *Urban Counterpoint*, coming from Volume 3: Jazz. The two hands meander through an enigmatic chord progression until they come to an ambiguous ending, as Bland’s works often do.

Ann Ronell/arr. Art Tatum, “Willow Weep For Me”

As the guiding light for Bland’s piano writing in *Urban Counterpoint*, Art Tatum’s pianism closes this recital. Originally written by Tin Pan Alley songwriter Ann Ronell, “Willow Weep for Me” became a jazz standard covered by all manner of musicians, but Tatum’s version is a jewel, and he recorded the song six different times. Though essentially a downtempo tune, Tatum introduced all sorts of virtuosity, always with his signature casual genius.

Thank you to: Mary Batten for supporting my research on Ed Bland with the love that he deserves; Judith Olson for answering my questions about *Urban Counterpoint*, and for your key recording of Ed’s music; my advisor, Kofi Agawu, for imbuing my dissertation research and analysis with your brilliance; Herman Bennett and the IRADAC scholars for reading the earliest drafts of my writing, and providing examples of profound, clear academic thinking; my parents for always supporting my musical endeavors; my teachers, especially Julian Martin, for guiding my imagination and my ear; Rebecca Moranis for listening to my music and my complaints about playing the piano, reading my writing, and generally treating me more seriously than I deserve; Bobby Carlson for always having something truly interesting to say (or play) about the piano; Ed Bland for being the first professional musician to ever take my music seriously, and asking me questions that no one else could; and all my family, friends and colleagues for making me who I am, as a musician and person.

About the Artist

Pianist **Joseph Vaz** has performed internationally as a soloist and chamber musician across North America and Europe, in venues from Carnegie Hall to the Arnold Schönberg Center in Vienna.

Born in Faro, Portugal, Joseph now lives in New York City, where he is the 2025-2027 piano fellow for Carnegie Hall's Ensemble Connect, and is also a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center. Vaz has studied with renowned performers and pedagogues, including Julian Martin, Ran Dank, and Emile Naoumoff. He is a laureate of several national and international competitions, with recent appearances at the Pacific Stars International (2nd Prize), James Mottram International Piano Competition, and the Wideman International Piano Competition.

Joseph frequently performs at international festivals, including recent appearances at the Gilmore Piano Festival, Sarasota Music Festival, Lucerne Festival Academy, and Aspen Music Festival. He has been lucky to have the opportunity to collaborate alongside Emile Naoumoff, Charles Neidich, Susan Botti, Mike Block, Sylvia Kahan, Peter Volpe, and other inspirational mentors, and to perform for several acclaimed artists and pedagogues, including Byron Janis, Gabriela Montero, Robert Levin, Tamara Stefanovich, Jon Nakamatsu, Ursula Oppens, Awadagin Pratt, Mark Steinberg, David Dubal, George Benjamin, and Beat Furrer, among others. His orchestral debut came with the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra in 2015, and he has also performed as soloist with Harmonia Orchestra Seattle, the Seven Hills Sinfonietta and other orchestral ensembles.

Joseph is a dedicated collaborator who regularly performs chamber music on series in New York City and beyond. As a proponent of new music, Joseph has worked closely with several composers on pieces for world premieres. His debut album, "*Galanteries: The Solo Piano Music of William White*," was released by PARMA Recordings in January 2025, and has been heard on radio stations throughout the USA (WMBR, KKUP, WCVE, WRUV).

Academically, Joseph's recent scholarly work focuses on the piano music of eclectic composer Ed Bland. He has received support from the CUNY Graduate Center and the Baisley P. Elebash Award to conduct research and analysis of Bland's piano music set, Urban Counterpoint. Outside of music, he holds a Bachelor's degree in mathematics and a minor in French from Indiana University, and loves reading modernist literature.