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Conservatory

# Concert Program

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# NEC Wind Ensemble

William Drury, Conductor of Wind Ensembles

with

James M. Stephenson, guest conductor

Weizhe Bai '24 MM, conductor

Thursday, October 12, 2023

7:30 p.m.

NEC's Jordan Hall

## PROGRAM

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**James M. Stephenson**  
(b. 1969 )

**Octet (2021)**  
agitato lyrical  
andante cantare  
presto energico

James M. Stephenson, conductor

**Johannes Brahms**  
(1833–1897)  
arr. Mark Popkin

**Variations on a Theme by Haydn, op. 56**  
Theme: Andante  
Variation 1: Andante con moto  
Variation 2: Vivace  
Variation 3: Con moto  
Variation 4: Andante  
Variation 5: Vivace  
Variation 6: Vivace  
Variation 7: Grazioso  
Variation 8: Presto non troppo  
Finale: Andante

Weizhe Bai '24 MM, conductor

*Short Break*

**James M. Stephenson**

**Symphony No. 2, "Voices"**  
for symphonic winds (2016)  
Prelude: 'of Passion'  
Shouts and Murmurs  
Of One

James M. Stephenson, conductor

## **Stephenson**    *Octet*

This piece is certainly meant to stand on its own, but so much of it is indebted to the gold-standard of octets – composed by Igor Stravinsky in 1923 – that a paired performance would certainly be most welcome.

I played Stravinsky's *Octet* probably nearly 10 times during my career as a trumpet player. It was always a tremendous reward to try to accomplish all of the subtleties and clever writing he incorporated for all of the musicians.

One thing I have always loved about Stravinsky's writing is how he dovetails lines, handing from one instrument to the other, and how it is therefore the players' responsibilities to make those seamless. It's like handing a baton from one runner to the next in a relay race.

But in the macro sense, composers are always handing the baton to each other, from one generation to the next. While I could never claim to be near Stravinsky's level, I feel like we're hanging out together while I'm writing a piece like this. He's handing his piece to me like a baton in a relay, and I take it and do my own thing with it. As a result, there are tributes to him throughout this piece; some obvious, and some really subtle.

The first movement employs some of the aforementioned dove-tailing immediately during a brief introduction. Right away, however, the music "grooves" in a modern way, as if to signify that we are no longer in the world of 100 years ago.

The second movement is entirely lyrical (no theme and variations like Stravinsky's), and allows various soloists the spotlight, while accompanied by (again) a dovetailing effect over an unusual 9/8 pattern.

The third movement might be the most closely related to that of Stravinsky. Similar rhythmic and spiky writing are used, but again, presented in a language a bit more related to this century.

The ending, however, is entirely a tribute (I admittedly felt "risky" in writing it). The ending to his octet is absolutely magical. It takes us to another world. Mine attempts some of that—again, in an obvious tribute. I thought about shortening some of the repeated segments, but then I thought: "no—let's see if we can allow the audience to enter some sort of zen-zoning-out phase." To get the effect, the players will have to be totally committed to it. The last chord is entirely Stravinsky's—but with the flute up an octave to signify that this octet is new!

## **Brahms**    *Variations on a Theme by Haydn, op. 56*

Good things often come in modest packages, and this work is unquestionably an example of that rule. We have often observed that Johannes Brahms was the major successor to the legacy of Beethoven, in a century filled with musical progressives who moved in other directions. The darlings of that time—and in many regards, of today, as well—were those, like Wagner and Liszt, who opted for hyper-expressive means that explored new forms and which relaxed the conventions of the classic style. Brahms was the champion of those who eschewed extra-musical associations (stories and ideas, if you will), and persisted in composing music that referred to nothing but itself. He resisted more than anyone the blandishments of Wagner and

company.

This set of variations for orchestra was written in 1873, and is eloquent testimony to the composer's growing mastery of the technique of variation. The variations are based upon a simple little theme that at the time of Brahms' composition was thought to be by Joseph Haydn—we now know that the attribution is incorrect. But, the name lives on, in any case. Brahms' variations are not the common kind that takes a memorable melody and simply embellishes it with growing animation and figuration as one follows along with the skeleton of the melody. Rather, those of Brahms' "Haydn" variations are what are known as "character" variations. They abstract some small aspect—often without a clear connection in the listener's mind—and create a series of meditations and rhapsodic developments in which the melody is not often palpable.

The theme itself, however simple, is interesting in that it is composed of two five-measure phrases—more commonly one will find four-measure phrases. The extra bar can easily be heard as the third measure in each of the two main phrases (count it for yourself). Following the statement of the theme are eight character variations and an extended finale. Hearing a connection between a character variation and the original theme can be difficult, but a close listen to the second variation will reveal how Brahms has constructed an entire section out of just the first three notes of the theme. Listen for it for a lesson in imagination! Other variations ensue accordingly. Particularly ingratiating is the seventh variation, wherein one hears, perhaps most clearly, a connection with the style of Brahms' wonderful short works for piano, especially the ballades and intermezzos. Brahms often composed works first for two pianos before orchestrating them, and if you listen to that version of this work, the putative connection is easy to hear.

The finale is a *tour de force* of Brahms' mastery of the higher techniques of traditional composition. J. S. Bach, himself, would have been proud of Brahms' infusion into this section all manner of contrapuntal devices. It's a veritable textbook of counterpoint: canons, double counterpoint, and more. But, the important point is that they don't have to be understood, or even heard clearly, to sense the profound, but universal appeal of one of Brahms' greatest achievements. And, it all takes place without the slightest need for a story. This is music spun from music, alone.

– William Runyan

### **Stephenson**    *Symphony No. 2, "Voices"*

On April 23, 2016, my mother, Shirley S. Stephenson, passed away, at the age of 74. It was the first time anyone that close to me had died, and I honestly didn't know how to respond. As this new piece – the symphony – was the next major work on my plate, I thought the music would come pouring forth, as one would imagine in the movies, or in a novel. However, the opposite happened, and I was stuck, not knowing how to cope, and not knowing what to write. Eventually, after a month or so, I sat at the piano, and pounded a low E-flat octave, followed by an anguished chord answer. I did this three times, with three new response-chords, essentially recreating how I felt. This became the opening of the symphony, with emphasis on

the bass trombone, who gets the loudest low E-flat. I vowed I wouldn't return to E-flat (major) until the end of the piece, thus setting forth a compositional and emotional goal all at once: an E-flat to E-flat sustaining of long-term tension, technically speaking, and the final arrival at E-flat major (letter I, 3rd movement) being a cathartic and powerful personal moment, when I finally would come to terms with the loss of my mother. The voice in the piece is that of my mother, an untrained alto, which is why I ask for it without vibrato. In the end, she finally sings once last time, conveying to me that "all will be ok".

I think it is the most difficult times we endure that force us, inspire us, to dig deeper than we could ever imagine. On the one hand, I am, of course, deeply saddened by the loss of my mother; but on the other, I will always have this piece – which is the most personal to me – to in essence keep her alive in my heart. I always tear up at letter I. Always. But they are tears of joy and treasured memories of 74 years with my mother.

### **Upcoming Wind Ensemble Concerts**

**NEC SYMPHONIC WINDS**, William Drury, conductor  
*Nielsen Symphony for Brass and Organ*; *Firsova Oblivion*;  
*Nieske Like Dancing* (world premiere)  
**Wednesday, November 29, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall**

**NEC WIND ENSEMBLE**, Robert Spittal, guest conductor  
*Strauss Serenade in E-flat Major, op. 7*; *Harbison Three City Blocks*;  
*Spittal Concerto for Wind Ensemble* (2023)  
**Thursday, November 30, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall**

## NEC Wind Ensemble

James M. Stephenson, *guest conductor*

<i>Flute</i>	<i>Saxophone</i>	<i>Euphonium</i>
Anne Chao	Ethan Shen	Roger Dahlin
Jeong Won Choe	Zeyi Tian	Jason Sato
Shengyu Cui	Cheng Wang	
Jay Kim	Juchen Wang	<i>Tuba</i>
Jungyoon Kim		James Curto
Amelia Libbey	<i>French horn</i>	Masaru Lin
Yechan Min	Grace Clarke	
Subin Oh	Jihao Li	<i>Percussion</i>
	Yeonjo Oh	Ross Jarrell
<i>Oboe</i>	Willow Otten	Danial Kukuk
Kian Hirayama	Noah Silverman	Michael Rogers
Abigail Hope-Hull	Quanbin Zhu	Jeff Sagurton
Sojeong Kim		Halle Hayoung Song
Alexander Lenser	<i>Trumpet</i>	Lucas Vogelmann
Christian Paniagua	Daniel Barak	
	Ko Te Chen	<i>Harp</i>
<i>Clarinet</i>	Matthew Dao	Yoonsu Cha
Hyunwoo Chun	Eddy Lanois	
Phoebe Kuan	Reynolds Martin	<i>Piano</i>
Hyeokwoo Kweon	Nelson Martinez	Yujin Han
Chasity Thompson	Alex Prokop	
Cole Turkel		<i>Bass</i>
	<i>Trombone</i>	Alyssa Burkhalter
<i>Bassoon</i>	Ethan Lehman	
Zoe Beck	Quinn McGillis	<i>Mezzo-soprano</i>
Adam Chen	Noah Nichilo	Sianna Monti
Garrett Comrie	Kevin Smith	
Matthew Heldt		<i>Wind Ensemble Graduate</i>
Abigail Heyrich	<i>Bass Trombone</i>	<i>Assistants</i>
Evan Judson	Scott Odou	Weizhe Bai
Erik Paul	David Paligora	Rachel Brake

**Jim Stephenson's** music has been described as "astonishingly inventive" (*Musical America*). Since becoming a full-time composer in 2007, he has enjoyed premieres in all walks of the musical landscape, including The Chicago Symphony (Muti), San Francisco Ballet, Boston Pops, and "The President's Own" US Marine Band. The latter premiered his *Fanfare for Democracy* at the Inauguration of President Joe Biden. Other orchestras premiering Stephenson's works include the Minnesota Orchestra (twice), St. Louis Symphony, Houston Symphony, Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music, ROCO chamber orchestra, Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra of Boston, and many others. His 2023 one-act comedic opera, *Càraboo* - "the true story of a false princess" - marked his first foray into the world of opera.

His award-winning catalog contains four symphonies, and roughly 30–each concertos and sonatas written for nearly every instrument, with premieres having been presented by renowned musicians across the globe. Using music to tell a story is a foremost and recent passion, and his educational work for young audiences, *Once Upon a Symphony*, is indicative of that, having received nearly 400 performances world-wide.

As a conductor, he has conducted the Traverse Symphony, Chattanooga Symphony, Modesto Symphony, Naples Philharmonic, along with symphonies of Bozeman, Wyoming, Southwest Florida, and others across the US. As an educator, he has visited numerous universities around the world, conducting and lecturing with the hopes of sharing how important each unique and individual voice is to the music world.

Stephenson resides with his wife, Sally, in the Chicago area, and is the proud father of four beautiful children. He spends his non-composing time traveling, doing athletic activity of almost any kind (he has ridden his bike across the country and run marathons), sometimes mowing the lawn, sometimes shoveling snow, and sometimes sampling good wine with good friends.

He is a proud alumnus of New England Conservatory.

### **Upcoming Concerts at NEC**

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**NEC SYMPHONY**, David Loebel, conductor

*Coleman Seven O'Clock Shout*; Haydn *Symphony No. 95*; Sibelius *Symphony No. 2*  
**Tuesday, October 17, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall**

**LIEDERABEND LXVII: "Lovers and Other Monsters: Celebrating the Legacy of Baudelaire"**

**Wednesday, October 18, 2023 at 6:00 p.m., Williams Hall**

**NEC CHAMBER SINGERS**, Erica J. Washburn, conductor

*"Wanting Memories"* - reflective music by Barnwell, Barnum, Bosba, Brahms, David, Davids, Ives, McDowall, Panufnik, Peduto, and Wilby  
**Wednesday, October 18, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall**

**NEC JAZZ ORCHESTRA: The Music of George Russell**

Ken Schaphorst, conductor

**Thursday, October 19, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall**



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