

21C Music Festival
Michelle Cann and the Imani Winds
Saturday, January 18, 2025 at 8pm
Mazzoleni Concert Hall

Michelle Cann, piano

Imani Winds

Brandon Patrick George, flute

Toyin Spellman-Diaz, oboe

Mark Dover, clarinet

Kevin Newton, horn

Monica Ellis, bassoon & narrator

PROGRAM

Paquito D'Rivera: *A Little Cuban Waltz**

Lalo Schifrin: *La Nouvelle Orléans*

Francis Poulenc: Trio for Oboe, Bassoon, and Piano, FP 43

- I. Lent-Presto
- II. Andante con moto
- III. Rondo: Très vif

INTERMISSION

Valerie Coleman: *Portraits of Langston* (Canadian premiere)

- I. Prelude. Helen Keller
- II. Danse Africaine
- III. Le Grand Duc Mambo
- IV. Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret
- V. Harlem's Summer Night

Francis Poulenc: Sextet, FP 100

- I. Allegro vivace
- II. Divertissement
- III. Finale

**Written for Imani Winds and commissioned by the Imani Winds Foundation. Premiered on June 16, 2023, New York City.*

THE MICHAEL AND SONJA KOERNER FUND FOR CLASSICAL PROGRAMMING

The Royal Conservatory's mission to develop future generations of musicians and to bring the world's greatest performers to Toronto has been made possible, in large part, due to the generosity of Michael and Sonja Koerner. In 2022, the Koerners invested \$10 million to create The Michael and Sonja Koerner Fund for Classical Programming, securing the future of the finest classical music concerts at Koerner Hall and our other performance venues. This latest investment, along with the naming of Michael and Sonja Koerner Hall, support of Glenn Gould School students through The Michael & Sonja Koerner Scholarships, the donation of The Michael and Sonja Koerner Early Instrument Collection, the naming of The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Cello Program and The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Chair in Cello, and support of the annual 21C Music Festival, underscores the Koerner family's dedication to music and to the RCM.

Paquito D'Rivera

Born in Havana, Cuba, June 4, 1948

A Little Cuban Waltz (2023)

Cuban-born Paquito D'Rivera works in a variety of musical genres. In his teens, he was a founding member of the Orquesta Cubana de Musica Moderna and was co-director of the innovative musical group Irakere. Their explosive mixture of jazz, rock, classical, and traditional Cuban music broke new ground. They toured extensively throughout America and Europe and won a Grammy and several nominations. With a discography that now includes over 30 solo albums, D'Rivera has won five Grammy and 11 Latin Grammy awards. His ensembles include a Quintet and Big Band which carry his name, and he continues to perform with symphony orchestras, frequently introducing his own compositions and numerous commissions to new audiences. D'Rivera is the author of two books: *My Saxual Life* and a novel *Oh, La Habana*. He has received many Lifetime Achievement awards, summed up by the National Endowment for the Arts website this way: "Paquito D'Rivera has become the consummate multinational ambassador, creating and promoting a cross-culture of music that moves effortlessly among jazz, Latin, and Mozart."

About *A Little Cuban Waltz*, Paquito D'Rivera writes: "In the days when my old friends of Imani Winds commissioned me to write a new composition for their wonderful quintet, *Down Beat* magazine had published a note-by-note transcription of the clarinet solo I recorded over my song, "I Missed You Too!" on the CD of the same name with Cuban pianist Chucho Valdés. Said song is a jazz waltz and the present piece is a recreation of the totally improvised solo I played on that historic recording session."

Lalo Schifrin

Born June 21, 1932, Buenos Aires, Argentina

La Nouvelle Orléans (1987)

Like many musicians of his generation, Argentina-born Lalo Schifrin found a vibrant jazz scene while studying in Paris. Schifrin, whose father was concertmaster of the Teatro Colón, studied at the Paris Conservatoire with two notable composers, Olivier Messiaen and Charles Koechlin. He was 18 and already skilled as a jazz performer when he won a scholarship to study in the French capital. He soon represented Argentina at the Paris International Jazz Festival. When he returned home to Buenos Aires, he continued working in both genres: conducting, arranging, and playing piano. In 1958, Dizzie Gillespie persuaded him to move to New York, where he joined Gillespie's quintet as pianist and arranger and worked and recorded with other leading jazz musicians. Schifrin's biggest success then began with more than 100 film and television scores. These include *Mission: Impossible*, *Bullitt*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *Dirty Harry*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *The Four Musketeers*, *Voyage of the Damned*, and many more. He toured throughout the world with his own show *Jazz Meets the Symphony* and with the *Three Tenors* – Carreras, Domingo, and Pavarotti.

Schifrin wrote his eight-minute, single-movement wind quintet *La Nouvelle Orléans* in 1987. It pays tribute to the past and present of this great city of music and marries contemporary classical with jazz idioms. The piece builds gradually over a recurring, march-like riff, soon punctuated by brief, explosive, improvisatory-style sections and solos. The clarinet introduces the traditional funeral march *Eleven macks a ridin' to the grave yard, an' only ten a comin' back!* And it is not long before the quintet turns into a Dixieland band for a high-spirited close.

Francis Poulenc

Born in Paris, France, January 7, 1899; died there, January 30, 1963

Trio for Oboe, Bassoon, and Piano, FP 43 (1926)

This is one of French composer Francis Poulenc's earliest mature works and his most successful chamber piece to date. With sketches dating back to 1921, Poulenc laboured over its composition, crafting the effortless nonchalance that lights up its pages. "It is in a style new to me, yet, at the same time very Poulenc," he wrote to Belgian critic Paul Collaer as he worked. The opening offers a neo-classical flourish from each instrument in turn, suggesting a playful nod to the 18th century French Baroque. He briefly acknowledges a direction Stravinsky was pursuing at the time, though with an air of irony. A spirited Presto then darts gleefully through a spiky, busy sequence of themes, punctuated by more lyrical passages. This gentler music flirts with sentimentality, only to be abruptly shifted by a sudden change of pace.

Like Debussy's late sonatas, Poulenc's trio celebrates clarity of language, elegance of line, and formal balance. This is clear in the graceful middle movement, the Andante, music he described as "very sweet and melancholy." Poulenc's love of wind instruments shines in this lyrical movement, which often resembles an aria between oboe and bassoon. Here, Poulenc drops his mask, revealing a more vulnerable side. The Rondo finale sparkles with exuberance, life, and wit, balancing what his long-time colleague, baritone Pierre Bernac, described as "a mixture of triviality and nobility." "I quite like my Trio," Poulenc reflected, "because it comes over clearly and is well balanced."

Sextet, for piano and wind quintet, FP 100 (1932/1939)

Even in his chamber music, Poulenc epitomises the urbane, witty, and rebellious spirit of French music between the wars. This is certainly true of his Sextet, begun in 1932 and thoroughly revised seven years later. Here, Poulenc – one of the least formally educated composers – may reflect the jazz influences that swept through Paris in the early 20th century. Ragtime, Dixieland, Harlem jazz, Charleston, foxtrot, cakewalk, and shimmy: for Parisians, 'jazz' was an eclectic cocktail. From this mix, Poulenc distils individuality in his instrumental writing. His five wind instruments rarely blend as one; they often compete, with the loudest voice prevailing.

In the opening movement, marked "violent and impetuous," a punchy clarinet riff vies with a brilliant flute scale and a horn whoop. Each instrument asserts itself with a brief two- or three-bar phrase, much like a jazz soloist opening a 16-bar solo. The piano remains busy, driving the rhythm, energising the group, and adding syncopation. The middle section ventures close to sentimentality and introduces both passionate solos and mysterious wind writing. The Sextet is "chamber music of the most straightforward kind," Poulenc explained. "It is an homage to the wind instruments I have loved from the moment I began composing."

The second movement, Divertissement, follows Poulenc's favourite three-part structure, with reflective, lyrical outer sections framing a livelier centre. In the exuberant finale, we enter the music hall, where ideas jump good-naturedly from one to another, giving an impression of spontaneity – though they are carefully balanced. Poulenc was a perfectionist. Of his first draft, premiered in 1933, he wrote to his mentor, Nadia Boulanger: "There were some good ideas in it, but the whole thing was badly put together. With the proportions altered and better balanced, it comes over very clearly." Listen to how Poulenc assembles a glittering kaleidoscope of melodic fragments in the finale, creating a brightly coloured jigsaw puzzle. The structure is cumulative, carefully calculated, and the ending is a surprise.

Valerie Coleman

Born in Louisville, KY, September 3, 1970

Portraits of Langston, for flute, clarinet, piano, and narrator (2007)

Louisville, KY-born composer Valerie Coleman is the founder, creator, and former flutist of the Imani Winds. She is a 2025 Grammy nominee for her septet *Revelry* (2019).

Valerie Coleman writes: "The early 1900s marked a new era for African Americans. For the first time the disciplines of visual art, music, and literature simultaneously took a turn to celebrate African American culture. As a result, the 'Harlem Renaissance' was born. Langston Hughes was at the centre of that cultural explosion, and like many African American artists who lived in Harlem, Hughes had dreams of living in Europe – of living a life unfettered by segregation.

“Portraits of Langston is a suite in six short movements and is my take on Hughes’s poetic memories of Harlem and Europe (mainly Paris). I chose Langston not because of who he is in literature, but because he was an eyewitness to legends born. His poems are so descriptive of the era, with references to settings and individuals that influenced him: Josephine Baker, Helen Keller, the nightlife/music of Harlem jazz clubs, and Parisian cabarets. The imagery that Hughes provides gives me quite an historical palette, inspiring me to illustrate a work truly unique to wind duo repertoire.

*“Each movement is a musical sketch of selected (and lesser known) poems from Langston Hughes’s vast library. Stylistically, the music incorporates many different elements that are translated into woodwind technique: stride piano technique, big band swing, cabaret music, mambo, African drumming, and even traditional spirituals. *Le Grand Duc Mambo* is the only exception. It is a musical sketch of the Jazz Club in the scandalous red-light district of Montmartre, where Langston worked as a busboy for 25 cents a night.”*

- Schifrin and Poulenc program notes copyright © 2025 Keith Horner

Michelle Cann

Piano

Lauded as “exquisite” by *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and “a pianist of sterling artistry” by *Gramophone*, Michelle Cann is one of the most sought-after pianists of her generation. Recent engagements include appearances with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra, The Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Her honours include the Sphinx Medal of Excellence and the Andrew Wolf Chamber Music Award. In 2024, she was named the inaugural Christel DeHaan Artistic Partner of the American Pianists Association, responsible for artistic oversight of the American Pianists Awards.

Highlights of Cann’s 2024-25 season include appearances with the San Francisco Symphony, the Cincinnati Symphony, and London’s Philharmonia Orchestra. She performs solo and collaborative recitals on prominent series such as the 92nd Street Y, New York; Duke University; The Royal Conservatory of Music; and Shriver Hall Concert Series. She also performs a recital as the headline artist at the National Conference of the Music Teachers National Association.

Recognized as a leading interpreter of the piano music of Florence Price, Cann performed the New York City premiere of Price’s Piano Concerto in One Movement with The Dream Unfinished Orchestra in 2016. Her recording of the concerto with the New York Youth Symphony won a Grammy Award in 2023 for Best Orchestral Performance. Her acclaimed debut solo album *Revival*, featuring music by Price and Margaret Bonds, was released in 2023.

Cann holds bachelor’s and master’s degrees in piano performance from the Cleveland Institute of Music and an Artist’s Diploma from the Curtis Institute of Music. She joined the Curtis piano faculty in 2020 as the inaugural Eleanor Sokoloff Chair in Piano Studies. She is also on the piano faculty of the Manhattan School of Music.

Imani Winds

Imani Winds is the 2024 Grammy Award winner in the Classical Compendium category for Jeff Scott’s “Passion for Bach and Coltrane” released on their record label, Imani Winds Media. Their 11th studio album *BeLonging*, composed by and performed with Andy Akiho, was released June 2024.

27 seasons of full-time touring has brought Imani Winds to virtually every major chamber music series, performing arts centre, and summer festival in the US. They regularly perform in prominent venues, including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, and the Kennedy Center, and have a presence at festivals such as Chamber Music Northwest, Chautauqua Institution, and Banff Centre.

Their international presence includes concerts throughout Asia, Brazil, Australia, England, New Zealand, and Europe.

They serve as Curtis Institute of Music’s first ever Faculty Wind Quintet, and each summer present the highly successful Imani Winds Chamber Music Festival, launched in 2010.

In 2019, the group extended their mission even further by creating the non-profit organization, Imani Winds Foundation, which exists to support, connect, and uplift their initiatives.

In 2021, Imani Winds released, *Bruits*, which received a 2022 Grammy nomination (their 2nd) for Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance.

To date, one of Imani Winds' most humbling recognitions is a permanent presence in the classical music section of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.

Michelle Cann and the Imani Winds are making their Royal Conservatory debuts.