

DIFFICULT GRACE
A Currents Series Concert presented by the San Diego Symphony
May 31, 2025
Jacobs Music Center

Seth Parker Woods, Cello
Roderick George, Choreographer and Dancer
Christopher Botta, Sound engineer
Thomas Dunn, Lighting designer

Fredrick Gifford
b. 1972

Difficult Grace (2019)
(with artwork by Barbara Earl Thomas)

Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson
1932 - 2004

from ***Lamentations: Black/Folk Song Suite for Solo Cello*** (1973)
iii. Calvary Ostinato

Monty Adkins
b.1972

Winter Tendrils (2014/2020)
(with film by Zoë McLean)

Nathalie Joachim
b.1983

The Race: 1915 (2019)
(with projected images of Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series*)

Freida Abtan
b. 1976

My Heart Is A River (2020)
Opening Out
Seeping In

Duration: approx. 40 mins

INTERMISSION (15 mins)

Ted Hearne
b. 1982

Freefucked (2021)
(with text by Kemi Alabi, from *Against Heaven*)
1. Ff 1
2. A Wedding, or What We Unlearned from Descartes
3. Ff 2
4. The Lion Tamer's Daughter vs. the Ledge
5. After We Ruin My Love's Heart, the God of Annihilation Prays Back to Me

Pierre Alexandre Tremblay
b. 1975

asinglewordisnotenough 3 [invariant] (2015)

Duration: approx. 30 mins

Notes on the Program

Fredrick Gifford: *Difficult Grace* (2019)

Images: Barbara Earl Thomas (b.1948) *GRACE*, 2019

Text: *Primitives*, by Dudley Randall

As Seth Parker Woods and I brainstormed a project that would simultaneously feature his voice and cello playing, I asked if he would be willing to share several authors and works that were important for him. In reading through these, I was struck by Dudley Randall's poem, "Primitives" – and *Difficult Grace* began. I wanted to create a musical process, a kind of sonic network of relations that would set Randall's original poem in dialogue with itself in musical time, both verbally and sonically. In *Difficult Grace*, I hoped to create a work where aspects of Randall's poem (rhythms, durations, phonetic timbre, syntax and meaning) would generate each musical gesture (even the title is a line from this poem); and Seth's voice and cello would be the instrument – all of the sounds in the live electronics layers are untransformed recordings of his performance.

Monty Adkins: *Winter Tendrils* for cello and electronics (2014/2020)

Film: Zoe McLean

Winter Tendrils was commissioned by the Swedish Arts Council for cellist Seth Parker Woods. The work is inspired by an image by the composer of freshly fallen snow on the fragile bare branches of a tree. This image was subsequently processed and overlaid on itself several times. The composition follows a similar model. In the first part the solo cello presents the main musical line. In the second part the 'tendrils' from this line are superimposed. These lines are transposed and fragmented. As a result, five canonic lines (tendrils) spin off from the initial line and are heard simultaneously. The canons are strict, but not heard in their entirety. This creates a rich harmonic web akin to the final processed image. The second section of the work draws on materials from the first, creating further tendrils from the harmonic, timbral and melodic implications of the opening movement.

Nathalie Joachim: *The Race: 1915* for cello and electronics (2019)

Images: Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) Selections from *The Migration Series*, 1940-41

The Race: 1915 is inspired by the colorful vibrancy and nostalgic realism of visual artist Jacob Lawrence's "The Migration Series", which depicts images of African Americans as they embarked on one of the most expansive migratory movements in history. The work, for solo cello and electronics, combines blues inspired melodies (including a quote from "Praise God We Are Not Weary by Tom Brown and Tom Lemonier) with the angst and uncertainty of transient movement, against a colorfully active and vibrant electronic palette. It addresses at once the uprooting and resilience of black people in America.

The work calls for the performer to recite text sourced from *The Chicago Defender*, one of the most important and historic black newspapers. Weekly issues of *The Chicago Defender* played an essential role in promoting The Great Migration, and all of the text set within this musical work is excerpted from editions published in 1915 - the year marking the beginning of the movement which would span nearly six decades. By citing the atrocities faced by African Americans in the oppressive and violent Jim Crow south, and providing resources for those seeking freedom, millions were compelled to embark on incredibly challenging journeys, leading to the development of the northern and western city centers of the United States. The publication adopted the term "the Race", which was used in lieu of the terms negro or black - a significant and powerful statement of self.

"Nine human beings hanged within 24 hours

...and today, a lynching party is pursuing a tenth member of the race. Look at it: see these men hanging from a limb of a tree

Then look at the other race farmers who were made to come and look at them. Race woman slain like cattle on public street

...she begged for help, but not a hand was turned.

The race that has slated for the country, felled the trees,

built its railroads, labored day and night

was not given opportunity

No person identified with this intelligent and progressing race should allow this. Any effort to deprive us of our rights

should be referred to the authorities

because such is against the Constitution of these United States."

The following images from *The Migration Series* by Jacob Lawrence courtesy of The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation and The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Panel 1: During World War I there was a great migration North by southern African Americans.

Panel 6: The trains were crowded with migrants.

Panel 16: After a lynching the migration quickened.

Panel 32: The railroad stations in the South were crowded with northbound travelers.

Panel 46: Industries boarded their workers in unhealthy quarters. Labor camps were numerous.

Panel 58: In the North the African American had more educational opportunities.

Freida Abtan: *My heart is a river* for cello, electronics and film (2020)

- *Opening Out*

- *Seeping In*

In memory of Raphael Abtan

My heart is a river is a piece for video, live cello and pre-processed accompaniment. Narratively, the piece traces the borders between dreams and identity. A cello player performs, and stories emerge from his instrument. In these dreams, he shares a picnic with a friend and they plan an adventure. They sail through rough waters using the cello as a boat. At their destination, they mirror movement against an invisible barrier.

The music in the piece uses spectral processing to transform the sounds of a cello into physical materials such as water and skipping rocks. The live cellist, Seth Parker Woods, plays with a click track for tight synchronization with the pre-recorded electronic accompaniment.

My heart is a river was a commission by the Seattle Symphony for its 2020 season. It was composed by Freida Abtan using Seth Woods' improvised material and was premiered in the Octave 9 surround audiovisual concert hall. The video features performances by both Seth Woods and Tamzin O'Garro.

Coleridge Taylor-Perkinson: *Lamentations: Black/Folk Song Suite for Cello* (1973)

Although Perkinson expressed his supreme enjoyment for writing for large ensembles, he often seemed most at home when composing with a specific player in mind. Perkinson wrote *Lamentations*, a suite for solo cello, in 1973 for cellist Ronald Lipscomb, who gave the premier performance at New York's Alice Tully Hall. The piece is subtitled "Black/Folk Song Suite;" the composer explained, "the common denominator of these tunes is the reflection and statement of a people's crying out." The first movement, labeled "Fuguing Tune," draws on both the traditional fugue, as developed by J.S. Bach (one of Perkinson's favorite composers and primary influences), and a type of composition called "Fuging Tunes," popularized by 18th-century American composer William Billings. Perkinson composed the second movement, "Song Form," in an AABA format, a parallel to the similarly titled movement of his *Sinfonietta* (if not to the earlier work's tone and texture). The third movement features another trope of the Calvary spiritual. Titled "Calvary Ostinato," the movement features a repeating pizzicato bass line over which Perkinson composed another form of the Calvary melody. In the virtuosic final movement, Perkinson has the cello maintain a constant pulsing pedal note (alternately D and C) while creating intricate melodies around the repeated note, including a brief quotation of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

- Gregory Weinstein

Ted Hearne: *Freefucked* (2021)*

Freefucked is a suite of songs set to poems by Kemi Alabi, from their first full length poetry collection "Against Heaven". Xan Phillips calls Alabi's poems "a sacrament to the underworld, ushering in a vast network of ritual and erotic apertures." Kemi's poems honor the wounds of inheritance while simultaneously activating their magic. My musical setting for Seth seeks to reflect this vast network and duality through soulful singing, a patchwork of sharp musical juxtapositions and references, and vocal processing that evokes a multiplicity of voices.

Freefucked © 2022 by Unsettlement Music (ASCAP).

*The poems "A Wedding, or What We Unlearned from Descartes," "free fucked," "The Lion Tamer's Daughter vs. the Ledge" and "After We Ruin My Love's Heart, the God of Annihilation Prays Back to Me" are from *Against Heaven* by Kemi Alabi © 2022 and used with permission of the author and Graywolf Press.

Pierre Alexandre Tremblay: *asinglewordisnotenough 3 [invariant]* for cello and electronics (2015)

"Traduttore, traditore," says the Italian proverb. "Traduire, c'est avoir l'honnêteté de s'en tenir à une imperfection allusive," nuances the translator Pierre Leyris. This series of pieces looks at the impossibility of translating, firstly, the text, then, the context. The multiple nuances of words and images, flatten, lost, unseizable.

Moreover, it is also a reflection on the inexpressible, where music and silence, allow some states / sentiment / experience to be expressed with more power / precision / nuances. Therefore, this suite of pieces should be taken as different expressions of a single impression, whose sense is multiplied by their common / composed / remembered past. Explain / comment / multiply the music by music, or as Harold Bloom says so elegantly: "The meaning of a poem can only be another poem."

This third piece / iteration / instance is the first with a live / acoustic instrument / source. Whereas the original electronic explores the gestural / embodiment limits of fixed media, here the cello reaches for a world of articulated transients / noises / textures / splices. Ideas are expand / shrank / distorted at the limit of recognition, to allow / free their essence from their broken shell.

Thanks to Seth Parker Woods for his faith, his talent, his enthusiasm and his patience; to Lydia Rilling and Andreas Pysiewicz for the TU Berlin session; to Alex Harker for his patient MSP support.