

Paul Bowles

A PICNIC CANTATA

libretto by James Schuyler

STEVEN BLIER
MICHAEL BARRETT
BARRY CENTANNI

AMANDA LYNN BOTTOMS
NAOMI LOUISA O'CONNELL
AMY OWENS
CHELSEA SHEPHARD



Notes on the album

by Steven Blier

A Picnic Cantata is the result of a one-time collaboration between a quartet of dazzlingly gifted artists: the piano-duo team of Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale (marquee names in 1953), the composer Paul Bowles (also their housemate), and the fledgling poet James Schuyler, then years away from publishing his first book of poetry. When the pianists received a commission for a new vocal work from the arts patroness Alice Esty, they tapped Bowles to compose the music and Schuyler to write the libretto. By that point, Bowles's career as a composer was being overshadowed by his growing success as a novelist. Yet the group proved extremely compatible. Schuyler was especially compatible with Gold, with whom he began an affair, while Fizdale, Gold's long-time lover, was enjoying his own extra-marital dalliance with the poet Frank O'Hara.

The result was *A Picnic Cantata*, an enchanting piece that balances sensuality with... an enchanting piece, balancing sensuality with innocence, lightness with hints of foreboding. In this hyper-realistic world, a picnic basket seems to hold the entire contents of Zabar's, a car materializes on cue, and the gathering together of four friends, two sopranos and two altos, seems like an act of providence. Schuyler melds the directness of Gertrude Stein with the fantasy of Maurice Sendak, allowing simple things to become paradoxical and mysterious.

In Paul Bowles, he found an ideal collaborator. The composer uses a range of vivid colors to paint the picnic journey: bitonality, Poulenc-style post-impressionism, the exotic sounds of Morocco and Ceylon, and pure American tunefulness.

A Picnic Cantata premiered at New York's Town Hall in 1953, sung by a quartet of Black singers who were students at Juilliard. Although it was well received, it never was published. Ever since NYFOS rediscovered the piece in the early 1990s, we vowed to produce the first stereo recording of this unique work. This recording is the joyous realization of that dream.

FOR FULL PROGRAM NOTES, GO TO www.nyfos.org/nyfosrecords

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THE ARTISTS



MICHAEL BARRETT - Michael Barrett has been an active musician and impresario for the last four decades. He co-founded NYFOS with Steven Blier over 30 years ago and also founded the Moab Music Festival where he is currently Music Director and celebrating his 30th Anniversary season. Michael was mentored by Leonard Bernstein and was his assistant conductor for the final years of the great Maestro's career. An active conductor and pianist, Michael takes special interest in mentoring the latest generation of talented musicians. He also takes delight in working with contemporary composers and is thrilled to share Paul Bowles' Picnic Cantata with the public.



STEVEN BLIER - Steven Blier is the Artistic Director of the New York Festival of Song, which he co-founded in 1988 with fellow pianist Michael Barrett. Since the Festival's inception, he has programmed, performed, translated, and annotated more than 160 vocal recitals with art song repertoire spanning from Schubert to Szymanowski, and popular song from early vaudeville to Lennon-McCartney. Mr. Blier's recital partners have included Renée Fleming, Cecilia Bartoli, Samuel Ramey, Susan Graham, Jessye Norman, and Julia Bullock, in venues ranging from Carnegie Hall to La Scala. He is currently on the faculty of The Juilliard School; his discography includes the premiere recording of Leonard Bernstein's *Arias and Barcarolles*, which won a Grammy Award. *Opera News* proclaimed Blier "the coolest dude in town."



AMANDA LYNN BOTTOMS - Heralded for her "superb vocal and dramatic chops" by *Opera News*, with "stunning vocal beauty and absolute sincerity of expression" in *Chicago Classical Review*, mezzo-soprano Amanda Lynn Bottoms is an artist beloved by organizations including the Santa Fe Opera, LA Opera, Opera Philadelphia, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, Philadelphia Orchestra, NYFOS, UCLA Symphony, Cecilia Chorus at Carnegie Hall, Opera Columbus, Lansing Symphony Orchestra and NHK Symphony Orchestra of Tokyo. Bottoms has received recognition from prestigious international competitions including George London Foundation, Loren L. Zachary Society, Operalia, Gerda Lissner, Opera Index, and Metropolitan Opera National Council Regionals. Bottoms is an alumna of the Cafritz Young Artist Program at Washington National Opera and holds a Certificate of Professional Studies in Opera from the Curtis Institute of Music, a Master of Music degree from The Juilliard School where she was a Kovner Fellow, and a Bachelor of Music degree from SUNY Fredonia.



BARRY CENTANNI - A graduate of the Juilliard School, Barry is principal percussionist for the Orchestra of St. Luke's. His engagements with St. Luke's have included recordings for Sony, Music Masters, Telarc and Deutsche Grammophon, as well as appearances on "Live from Lincoln Center". As a freelance musician, he has performed on "Late Night with David Letterman", as well as "Saturday Night Live". He has also appeared with the bands Yes, the Moody Blues and Metallica and with artists such as Tony Bennett, Sting, Elton John, and Frank Sinatra. He has also performed as an extra percussionist for the Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society, the American Symphony, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, the Little Orchestra Society, the American Composers Orchestra, the New York Pops, and others.



NAOMI LOUISA O'CONNELL - Naomi Louisa O'Connell's performance career encompasses a broad spectrum of theatrical and operatic repertoire, ranging from plays to operas, recitals and cabarets to sound sculptures and virtual reality performance art. Hailed by *The New York Times* as "a natural in the recital format" for her Carnegie Hall debut recital *Witches, Bitches & Women in Britches* at Weill Recital Hall, she performs regularly in concerts internationally. Works in development include a theatrical song cycle (for which O'Connell is also the librettist) with composer Emma O'Halloran. Upcoming engagements include performances with LA Opera, Boston Lyric Opera, Prototype Festival, and Dublin Theatre Festival.



AMY OWENS - Award-winning soprano Amy Owens is known for her "high-flying vocals" and "scene-stealing" charisma on operatic and symphonic stages, as well as her innovative, multi-disciplinary pursuits in music and entrepreneurship (*Opera News*). She has performed with Santa Fe Opera, Wolf Trap Opera, Dallas Opera, Houston Grand Opera, National Symphony, Utah Symphony, and other renowned orchestras across the U.S. Notable roles include Cunegonde in *Candide* and Soprano Soloist in *Carmina Burana*, and she has created the title roles in world premieres of *Sweet Potato Kicks the Sun* with Santa Fe Opera and *Listen, Wilhelmina!* with Wolf Trap Opera.



CHELSEA SHEPHARD - Praised for her "rich and vibrant artistry," soprano Chelsea Shephard performs full-time with the Metropolitan Opera Chorus. She first appeared with the company as Eurydice in composer Matthew Aucoin's workshop presentation. The Michigan native made her solo Carnegie Hall debut in *Brahms' Requiem* and returned for Smyth's *The Prison* (NY premiere). With NYFOS, her repertoire spans Bel Canto/Can Belto to Songs of Protest to Bernstein's Songfest. Operatic roles include Beth (*Little Women*), title roles (*La Calisto*, *Dido*, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*), and Mozart's Pamina and Susanna—with companies such as Madison Opera, Opera Grand Rapids, Haymarket Opera, and Madison Bach Musicians. Education includes degrees from Rice University (M.M) and DePaul University (B.M.).

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- I. I feel funny today (4:41)**
- II. In our search for order (4:45)**
- III. In sun and shade on picnic tables (4:39)**
- IV. Happy birthday, Taurus! (1:34)**
- V. I knew this other man was married (4:31)**
- VI. I never miss the garden section (2:40)**
- VII. How quick we came from where we were (5:41)**



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