

**BENNINGTON COLLEGE  
PRESENTS.....**

**JOHN VAN BUSKIRK, pianist**

**IN CONCERT**

**A Return Visit to North America  
Bennington, Vermont**



**Sunday, May 31, 2009**

**8:00 PM**

**Deane Carriage Barn**

One English word cannot be found to equate with the French 'regard' used in the title of this work. Literally, it means 'look' but carries additional connotations such as 'aspect' or 'reverence'. The movement *Regards de l'étoile* translates into *Gaze/Aspect of the Star* and is followed under this title by a French phrase meaning: *the impact of grace...the star shines guilelessly, surmounted by a cross*. Just a few bars into this short piece we hear the "Theme de l'étoile et de la croix" or "Theme of the star and cross" which appears in many other movements as well. For Messiaen the Star and the Cross have the same theme because the one opens and the other closes the term of Christ's life on earth.

Elegy #1, with its recognizable, though hauntingly non-literal, quotation from Schumann's *Fantasiestücke* Op. 12 #3 "Warum?" (Why?), is dedicated to the memory of Shawn's Bennington colleague, pianist Marianné "Wille" Finckel. It sets the tone of serious interior response to exterior events...and asks the question so many of us ask when confronted by the death of a loved one or friend: "Why?" (Frank Daykin)

Shawn's tender *Waltz*, first of the *Two Nostalgic Pieces*, "is almost a modern take on Satie's "Je te veux," evokes a dream ballroom. The *Boogie-Woogie*, reinterprets the conventions of stride piano with numerous rhythmic dislocations. Instead of being "about" the loss of someone in particular, this music laments the loss of a musical past that threatens to be obscured either by sterile academicism or public neglect. Allen Shawn's rare gift is his ability to confide his innermost thoughts and feelings through music that is at once well-crafted, non-cliché and emotionally accessible." (Frank Daykin)

"*The Banjo* is Gottschalk in the front-row seat at the minstrel show. It shows the composer at his smiling-American best with the kind of crackling good commercial showpieces which Gottschalk pulls off so well, though perhaps never again quite as well as here. Just as the piece seems on the verge of becoming too repetitious, a tune very close to Stephen Foster's "Camptown Races" emerges and we're off to a *prestissimo* finish which sounds like a virtuoso banjo-picker on a particularly good day." [Richard Jackson]

## Program

<i>Souvenir de Porto Rico</i> (1857) <i>Marche des</i>	Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-1869)
<i>Messages</i> (U.S premiere) (2006)	Allen Shawn (b. 1948)
wistful, flowing ominous, brutal scherzando plaintive dashing, reckless ringing	
<i>Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen</i> (1875) <i>Variations on a motif from Bach</i>	Franz Liszt (1811-1886)
pause	
<i>Regard de l'étoile</i> (1944) from <i>Vingt Regards sur l'enfant-Jésus</i>	Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)
<i>Elegy No. 1</i> (2007)	Shawn
<i>Nostalgic Pieces</i> (2007) <i>Waltz</i> <i>Boogie-Woogie</i>	Shawn
<i>The Banjo</i> (1855)	Gottschalk
after thought:	
<i>Lullaby-Rag</i> (1984)	Shawn



Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Gottschalk was the oldest of eight children, with a German Jewish father who had emigrated from London and a French Catholic mother from Haiti. Louis Moreau Gottschalk of Louisiana, as he called himself, had the distinction of being the first American concert artist to gain international fame prior to a career in America. Fresh from New Orleans at age thirteen, his application for entrance to the Paris Conservatoire was rejected without an audition. During his ten-year residence in Europe, Gottschalk made the transition from brilliant student to a piano virtuoso and composer lionized in salons and concert halls. Hector Berlioz, for some time one of Gottschalk's most important supporters, wrote: "Mr. Gottschalk was born in America, whence he has brought a host of curious chants from Creoles and Negroes; he has made from them the themes of his most delicious compositions...in which the nonchalant graces of tropical melody assuage so agreeably our restless and insatiable passion for novelty."

Gottschalk left Europe in 1853 to tour without surcease throughout the Americas, Cuba and the West Indies. His *Notes of a Pianist*, an amalgam of travelogue and autobiography, sketches a fascinating picture of his life and times. Tours of Puerto Rico, Haiti and other islands also furnished him with new material. He found the tango rhythms and insinuating melodic patterns of tropical music irresistible. His *Souvenir* is full of characteristic syncopation and sensuous tunes. The main tune here is the Puerto Rican song 'Si me dan pasteles, les dén melos calientes' ['If you give me cakes, give them to me hot'] a chant-like melody sung by strolling bands during the Puerto Rican Christmas season. Its syncopations based on the Afro-Caribbean *tresillo* and *cinquillo* rhythms ... lighten the ponderous theme, which builds to an extraordinary climax...[pace Richard Jackson and S. Frederick Starr]

Allen Shawn presented me with his *Messages* as a gift just before my family and I left America to take up residence in Dunedin. The pieces are a set of miniatures—short, related works of a concentrated essence, communicated without any unnecessary frills. The variety of texture and melody is very persuasive. Frank Daykin writes: "The six pieces are unified by their reference to the note A, whether heard as a single note, a tonal center, or implied by one of its neighbors a half-step away on either side, or even by its absence." If this "A" has an extra-musical connotation, I believe it has to do with absence, the absence or departure of a friend or loved-one... (along the lines of Bach's *Capriccio on the Departure of a Beloved Brother* or Beethoven's *Les Adieux* sonata).

Liszt moved from Weimar to Rome in 1861 as preparations were underway for his long-awaited and long-delayed marriage to the Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein. The Pope's last minute reversal of his earlier sanction of her divorce scotched these plans permanently. This disappointment, shortly after the death of Liszt's son Daniel at the age of 21, was followed soon after by the death of his daughter, Blandine, in 1862. In the light of these vicissitudes it is hardly surprising that Liszt began composing sacred music—the *Hungarian Coronation Mass*, the oratorios *St. Elisabeth* and *Christus* as well as the two *Legends*, for piano, based on stories of St. Francis of Assisi.

*Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*, (*Weeping, Lamenting, Sorrowing, Disheartened*) is an early cantata by Bach which opens with a movement that Bach used again as the Crucifixus of the *B minor Mass*. Liszt's *Variations* take Bach's theme as a starting point. After a brief, powerful introduction, the *Variations* quote the cantata exactly. A passacaglia follows, developed from the implications of Bach's chromaticism. The four-bar structure of the theme is gradually stretched and developed with increasing freedom. A section now follows that contains the elements of improvisation and meditation. The reappearance of the theme/motif brings this section to a dramatic climax; preparing the close, the chorale which Bach uses in his cantata: "Was Gott tut das ist wohlgetan" ("What God does is well-done"). This is an important work in Liszt's output, considered by many to be the equal in achievement to his weighty *Sonata in b minor*.

Messiaen, whose centenary we celebrate this year, is a protean figure in Twentieth-Century music, an original, like Debussy—who is arguably the only other French composer of equal importance. Messiaen's highly individualistic voice has its roots in modal scales, bird songs, the complex rhythms of classical Indian music and is presented by textures in which the piano or orchestra replicate the dense colourful registrations of the organ. His strong Catholic faith and synesthetic sensibilities are also elements that infuse his musical expression at every turn.



### ***About the Artist...***

John Van Buskirk, a versatile pianist, has played from Los Angeles and New York to Budapest and Prince Edward Island to the Netherland Antilles as a recitalist, chamber music player and recital partner to singers and instrumentalists. He graduated from the Eastman School of Music and Holds a Master's Degree from Juilliard School; he completed post-graduate study at the Liszt Academy in Budapest. While living in New York City he played in The Music Today Ensemble, The New York Chamber Symphony and the Mostly Mozart Orchestra of Lincoln Center. In New England, he taught at Bennington College, Westfield State College and Smith College. He has played for broadcast on NPR and the BBC. Mr. Van Buskirk has made myriad recordings as a member of the New York Chamber Symphony and the Harmonie Ensemble among others. His solo recordings include *Music of Robert Schumann*—Newport Classics, *The Art of the Fortepiano*—Lyricord as well as *Songs of Robert Schumann*, with Jane Bryden, soprano—Gasparo. Mr. Van Buskirk has played with the Mendelssohn Quartet, members of the Guarneri Quartet, the Jacques Thibaud String Trio, the Ying Quartet and at music festivals throughout New England. He recently relocated to Dunedin, New Zealand where he performs with Tessa Petersen as the violin/piano duo *La Belle Alliance*. His most recent recording is of Allen Shawn's *Messages* (dedicated to him), included along with the composer's performances on an Albany CD (Allen Shawn Piano Music, Vol. II).