



Liner Notes for "A Walk In The Kelp Forest"

- 1. A Day With Degas – At the Races (Jeff Wu)**
- 2. A Day With Degas – Daydreams of a Ballerina (Jeff Wu)**
- 3. A Day With Degas – A Parade for Pablo (Jeff Wu)**

The theme for Row Twelve's 2020 concert season was going to be "Pictures at an Exhibition". With a nod of appreciation to Modest Mussorgsky, we decided that the inspiration for our version of "Pictures" would be drawn not from the halls and salons of Tsarist Saint Petersburg but from the vast collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Toward that end we met at the MFA on a cold January morning and meandered through its galleries, making sure to pay our respects to Paul Gauguin's "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?", the Tahiti-set masterpiece which provided the impetus for our 2019 program. One could almost hear Mussorgsky's "Promenade" playing in the background as we made our rounds, though we never achieved so stately a pace. By the end of the morning our eyes had reached a state of over-satiety, and we promenaded to the museum's lovely courtyard café to see if our stomachs could do the same. In keeping with our usual practice, we talked about everything but the business at hand as we did justice to the excellent cuisine. By coffee and dessert, though, we had reached agreement on several important matters, one being that 2020 looked to be an exceptionally promising year, musically and otherwise, and another being that our March concert would be based on Edgar Degas's painting, "At the Races in the Countryside". After lunch I circled back for another look at the Degas. I didn't know in which countryside he drew the first sketches for his painting but began to feel in the rise and fall of hooves on the race course a rhythm of quiet Iberian intensity. Turning around I saw in another part of the gallery Degas's sculpture, "Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer". The little dancer did not see me, though, not with her head tilted back and her eyes closed in a state of reverie. What is she daydreaming about, I wondered, standing there with her right foot pointed forward and her hands tucked behind her arched back. With the first wisps of a musical answer forming in my head I left the museum and wandered back into the January chill.

2020, of course, did not live up to its promise, our March concert never happened, and our summer, fall, and winter performances followed suit. The simple pleasures of visiting a museum, having lunch with friends, and even standing within twenty feet of another human being without wearing a surgical mask seemed like both distant memory and impossible aspiration. The sound of music, imagined and otherwise, became likewise muted, and my unmelodious year came to a fittingly dissonant end marked by fever, delirium, and doubts about whether water would ever taste like water again. But my appetite gradually returned and with it the first stirrings of resurrected musical ambition. I wished I could see "At the Races" and "Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer" in person again but like every other art fan around the world had to do my viewing online, a pursuit that eventually led me to other museums and to another Degas painting, "The Parade". My eyes were drawn to the horses in the procession before drifting to the crowd behind the rail. There lies the story, I thought, for nobody loves a parade more than a little boy, and

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though I could not pick him out in the painting I imagined that somewhere in the crowd, skipping alongside the horses to the thunder of hooves and the fanfare of trumpets, was a happy little eight-year-old named Pablo.

With that third musical impression formed I began to work on the three pieces that would become “A Day With Degas”. The finished product, though, could be just as aptly titled “A Morning With Friends”, for whenever I set pencil to manuscript paper during the dark months of that first pandemic winter it was not so much the brilliance of Edgar Degas as the memory of good food, good conversation, and, most of all, good company that warmed and illuminated my, ahem, Modest efforts, which we hope you will enjoy.

4. “Flower Dream” (Karen S. Henry)

“Flower Dream” first appeared in *All Will Fall Away*, Poems by Karen S. Henry.

5. Crocus Pocus (Jeff Wu)

Two boys in their Sunday suits
Run through their yard, forgetting their boots
Though snow melts in the mid-March sun
And the season of mud has just begun.
Their game takes them by the stockade fence
Where a splash of color first presents
With tiny petals of white and plum
A sign that spring has finally come.
The boys cry out with sheer delight
And run for Mom to share this sight,
Leading the way with little hands
And earnest “Come and see!” commands.
These buds so small won’t fill a vase
And yet they have their magic ways
Of lifting wintered spirits up
When they smile so sweet from a Dixie cup.
The boys have grown, the fence is gone,
And weeds have taken over the lawn,
But spring’s first blooms still mist the focus
Of eyes that remember Crocus Pocus.

6. “Taste” (Karen S. Henry)

“Taste” first appeared in *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, Vol. II – 2017. For the CD, Jeff Wu composed and performed the solo accompanying the poem.

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7. Cinderella Rides With Django to the Montmartre Ball (Jeff Wu)

We invite you to imagine yourself sitting in a sidewalk café in Paris. It is a warm evening in the summer of 1937. Your newspaper is filled with rumblings of evil doings in the lands to the east, but for now you are enjoying an aperitif before heading across the river and up the hill to Montmartre, where the chicest of the chic gather every night to surrender their world-weary ways to the irresistible beat of jazz. It was the likes of Sidney Bechet and Louis Armstrong and Cole Porter who brought this new American music to the City of Light, but by now the Continent has adopted the syncopated syntax of jazz for its own. A busker plays her flute in front of the café. Her wistful air, to borrow a phrase from Verlaine, fills your heart with a monotonous languor. She will not go home with many francs tonight, you think. Her plaintive melody will cause people to reach into their pockets not for a few spare francs but for their handkerchiefs. Not only that, but her cape and hood, so unfitting on such a warm evening, lend her shadowed features an aspect of the eerie otherworld. It is time to move on to the earthly exuberance of Montmartre; perhaps you will drop by its best-known jazz club, Bricktop’s, to hear Django Reinhardt, the three-fingered Gypsy guitarist. You are about to drain the last drop of your aperitif – admittedly your fourth when you only meant to have three – when you notice a thin, pale young woman emerging from the alley next to the café. Her hands are chapped and her cheeks are smeared with soot. You had seen this young woman when you visited the *toilettes pour hommes* and saw her scrubbing the kitchen’s greasy floor while the widow who owns the café pointed a scolding finger at the pile of unwashed dishes in the greasy sink. You expect the scullery maid to be stooped from her night’s labors, but she refuses to give in to her weariness and carries herself with pride. Moved by the young woman’s dignity and seized by a moment of absinthe-inspired gallantry you settle your bill and wobble toward her with the intention of hailing a cab on her behalf and paying for her ride home, handsome tip for the driver included. Perhaps it is true, you think – absinthe does make the heart grow fonder. But before you reach the young woman she is accosted by the busker, who draws her from the light of the street lamp and back into the alley. You hasten your pace, fearing the young woman to be in danger. But just before you barge in on their little scene you see that the busker has thrown back her hood; you recognize the curly black hair and piercing eyes from newsstand covers and realize that she is none other than Coco Chanel, and seeing also that her flute has been transformed into a magic wand you wonder with a shake of your head exactly how much essence of wormwood the bartender infused into your drink. Coco Chanel whispers a few unheard words to the young woman. The young woman smiles and nods and with a touch of the wand on her shoulder her rags are transformed into a little black dress and the soot on her cheeks and the grease under her fingernails disappear and you see that you were right, the burdens of a hard life have not yet worn away her beauty and vitality. Coco Chanel points her wand at a pile of refuse outside the café’s kitchen door and an old melon is transformed into a gleaming Bugatti; another quick jab of her wand and poof! a cat with an injured front paw is transmogrified into a dark-haired man with a pencil mustache on his upper lip and a guitar in his three-fingered left hand. “*Bon soir, Mademoiselle,*” he says, “I am Django

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Reinhardt. I am performing this evening in Montmartre, and you shall be my guest at the ball.” After strumming with Romani élan the opening fanfare of “Nuages” he hands the young woman into the back seat of their chrome-trimmed chariot. Coco Chanel slides behind the wheel of the Bugatti and with a roar of its many cylinders whisks her riders off into the night, but not before you hear the young woman say, “*Merci, Monsieur Reinhardt, my name is Ella...*”

8. “Young Woman Next to Old Woman” in Gauguin’s “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?” (Karen S. Henry)

“Young Woman Next to Old Woman” was part of “The Painting Speaks: Monologues from Gauguin’s masterpiece *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* Each character in the painting (including the dog and the lizard in the claws of the “strange white bird”) were given voice in the Row Twelve June 9, 2019 Garden Recital. For the CD, Jeff Wu composed and performed the solo accompanying the poem.

9. “Kintsugi” (Karen S. Henry)

“Kintsugi” first appeared in *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, Vol. VII – Fall 2021

10. Rag for Gene (Marc Lauritsen)

“I composed this rag (in my head) in 2007 while driving to Cleveland and performed it at a memorial service for my father in law, Gene Bahniuk. He was a fan of ragtime music, among many other things. I've only played the piece that one time. The recording later served as a soundtrack for a short film by Gene's granddaughter Whitney that I believe was shown at a Row Twelve concert, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AITON6vDEk”

11. “Birch Bark” (Karen S. Henry)

“Birch Bark” first appeared in *Stoneboat*, 10.2, 2020.

12. Shamba Samba (East African Folk Song, arr. Jeff Wu)

A shamba is a small farm in East Africa. The shambas in our village, nestled against or perhaps even straddling the Kenya-Uganda border, were no bigger than a typical back yard garden in suburban America. Their smallness was accentuated by the vastness of the sky and by the massive bulk of Mount Elgon, which filled the northern horizon with its brooding and ever shifting shadows of dark green, purple, and black and from which our clinic heard news every now and then of a child being trampled by a forest elephant. The only larger scale farm in the region was a tea plantation about 25 miles to the south, where it was explained in response to my inquiry about the three enormous piles of drying harvest that the tea leaves on the left were of the best quality and would be

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sent to Europe, those in the middle pile were second best and would be kept domestically, and the last and most tasteless pile of leaves was headed for America. That was in the spring of 1987; one wonders all these years later whether we are still consigned to the far right.

The smallness of the typical shamba combined with a lack of other pressing engagements made for a desultory work day, at least when it came to agricultural activities. The procurement of water, the preparation of meals, the washing of clothes, and the three mile walk to the market, not to mention the raising of children, kept the women moving all day. The men often seemed rather tired from supervising all this effort. Perhaps that’s why they applied their hoes to their rows of crops, which curved this way and that in conformity to their non-rectilinear plots, in such unhurried fashion. Chickens followed the farmers up and down their rows of corn and potatoes and the weed-like greens whose name in the local dialect meant “keeps you alive until tomorrow”, pecking at the freshly hoed dirt and providing the farmers with both company and assistance, the former by keeping up a steady squawk and the latter by converting newly unearthed pests into fertilizer. It appeared to be a symbiotic relationship between man and chicken, at least until the chickens made their way into the pot.

We were in Kenya throughout the rainy season and never ceased to wonder at the enormity of the daily deluge. The blue mid-afternoon sky would suddenly turn black, though I never saw storm clouds blowing in from a distance; they simply seemed to condense out of the not so thin air. We would gather the inpatients from the shade of the clinic’s mango tree and bring them back inside. If visiting family members did not live nearby they would come inside as well, and for the next hour the clinic would be as crowded as one of the region’s over-packed public transit mini-buses, with doctors and nurses and patients and families alike listening to the howling wind and watching the sideways-blown rain lash at the earth. Afterward we would finish the clinic’s business for the day and walk home, often beneath a rainbow that made even Mount Elgon seem less menacing. The rain had turned to steam by then and at times I could barely breathe. The farmers, on the other hand, seemed to find the change in the air refreshing and were at their liveliest during that last hour before the prompt equatorial sunset. We would sometimes hear them singing as they and their chickens finished their workdays with a final turning of the newly watered earth. The shambas were small enough for the farmers to harmonize with each other from their neighboring plots. Much of their music had no discernable beginning or end and like a forest brook rarely traveled in a straight line, twisting and turning instead in a series of syncopated surprises. Once in a while, though, there would emerge from that polyrhythmic milieu a melodic structure and time signature that could be more easily grasped by my Western-trained ear. I remember one song in particular, begun when a man with a fine bass voice dropped into a trance-like “Bmmm, bup bmmm, bup bmmm, bup bmmm...” Others built harmonies atop that wordless foundation, and as we walked through the dusk to its

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triplet sway it was easy to believe that we were listening to the heartbeat of the earth itself. A melody eventually arose from that pulsation of sound, a lilting air in three that lulled the sun below the western horizon and brought the day’s labors to a quiet close. When expended the melody sank back into its gently beating undercurrent, and by the time the last bass notes faded into the drawing darkness even the chickens had fallen into a pensive hush.

I never found out the name of that song or what it was about. I don’t know if it came from local musical tradition or from the outside world, brought perhaps by the Dutch missionaries who had built the clinic or by the Ugandans who sought in our village refuge from their homeland’s civil war. I don’t even know if I remember the melody correctly, having only heard it once, though I did find a sketch of it years later, scrawled on some crudely drawn staff lines and tucked into a textbook of tropical parasitic diseases. And so we will simply, if perhaps incorrectly, present it as an arrangement of an East African folk song, re-imagined as a samba, and hope that you will hear in its unhurried paces the end of another quiet day on a Kenyan shamba.

13. Gauguin’s Dream – Cool as a Kook (Jeff Wu)

14. Gauguin’s Dream – A Walk in the Kelp Forest (Jeff Wu)

15. Gauguin’s Dream – Tahiti for Two (Jeff Wu)

Modern historians inform us that Paul Gauguin’s sojourn in the South Pacific was more scheme than dream. For now, though, we invite you to imagine the night that Paul Gauguin first dreamed of going to Tahiti. The night begins with the artist prowling the dark streets of Paris. There is a hint of defeat in the slope of his shoulders; perhaps he has just come from his latest poorly attended exhibition, where critics whispered with intentional loudness about the flatness of his perspective and the lack of shading in his colors. But look more closely as Paul Gauguin enters the circle of light cast by a Parisian gas lamp and you will see in his cynical smirk and light-footed stride the confidence and alertness of an alley cat. He knows that he will not fail to catch the next mouse; he is simply pondering his next move. He is as cool as a kook. Hazy images and shimmering splashes of color drift through his mind. He reaches out but cannot quite grasp them. No matter. The mouse will return. With his restless energy spent at last by his nocturnal promenade he goes home to his sparsely furnished garret, and as he lies down on his unmade bed you might hear in the final downward glissando of the bass the descent of the artist into a state of slumber.

Paul Gauguin opens his eyes. The hazy images and splashes of color are once again before him; the mouse has returned, and this time he will not let it out of his grasp. He floats rather than climbs out of bed and puzzles at his weightlessness. His feet cannot find the ground and he reaches for a nearby tree to keep himself from falling. His hand touches not bark but something softer and more yielding. A ray of sunlight penetrates the murk and in its illuminating sparkle he realizes that he is not on land but in the depths of the

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ocean and that he is not in a brown and green forest of trees but in a rainbow-hued forest of kelp. Like a man freed from gravity in outer space he marvels at the balletic fluidity with which he can waltz through his watery world. You might feel in the rise and fall of the bass line the endless rocking of the waves and in the lilting voice of the flute the artist’s delight in his newfound buoyancy. Tired from his walk in the kelp forest Paul Gauguin feels his limbs go limp and in the final descending line of the coda you might hear the artist sinking peacefully into the narcosis of the deep.

Paul Gauguin awakens to find that the sea has delivered him onto an endless white sand beach. The breeze is soft and the air is moist. He is in the tropics. Music drifts from the trees behind the beach. Though he does not know this music its beat irresistibly draws him to his feet and he begins to dance on the sand. A bronze-skinned woman of exotic beauty emerges from the trees and begins to dance with him. “Where am I?” he asks. “Tahiti,” she replies. “For two,” he adds. Soon he and the woman are joined by more like her and they all dance together to a village under the trees. How I wish I had my paint and my brush and my canvas, he thinks, how foolish of me to come to Tahiti without them. But it is Gauguin’s dream so a brush without explanation appears in his hand and on the palette which appears in his other hand he mixes greens and blues and bronzes that he has never before seen or even imagined. And with one eye on the dancing Tahitians and his own body still swaying to the beat of the music Paul Gauguin turns to his canvas and begins to paint.

We hope you enjoy this performance of “Gauguin’s Dream”. One last note before we begin; please don’t awaken Paul Gauguin from his dream by applauding between movements, though like any artist he will welcome any praise from his critics once he applies the final flourish to his canvas!

16. A Parade for Pablo, Reprise (Jeff Wu)