

BLAIR MASTER SERIES

World Premiere Performance

The Ghosts of Chinatown

David Samuel VIOLA

Dashon Burton BARITONE

Sun-A Park PIANO

SEPTEMBER 11, 2026

TURNER RECITAL HALL | 7:30 P.M.



VANDERBILT
Blair School *of* Music

Program

World Premiere Performance of

THE GHOSTS OF CHINATOWN (2026)

Daixuan Ai COMPOSER

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li LIBRETTO

1. Prelude
2. Snow In June
3. First Interlude
4. Let Me Go!
5. Second Interlude
6. Prosperity Was A Dream
7. Third Interlude
8. I Deserve To Be Forgotten
9. Last Interlude
10. To Forgive Is To Begin To Remember

*This evening's performance is presented
without an Intermission*

Biographies

David Samuel is an internationally acclaimed violist, currently Assistant Professor of Viola at Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music. Originally from Canada, his career has taken him across Denmark, New York, New Zealand, Norway, San Francisco, and Toronto, both as a performer and educator. As a founding member of the Afiara String Quartet, Samuel earned top prizes at major competitions including the ARD International Music Competition, Banff International String Quartet Competition, and Concert Artists Guild Competition, as well as the Young Canadian Musicians Award. He is known for innovative collaborations that blend classical music with new media and interdisciplinary art.

Samuel's diverse career also includes roles with the Alexander String Quartet, Ensemble MidtVest in Denmark and as Associate Principal Viola of the Auckland Philharmonia in New Zealand. He has taught at several institutions, such as the University of Stavanger, San Francisco State University, SFCM Pre-College, and the University of Auckland, where he was Convenor of Classical Performance. He has performed with renowned artists like Pinchas Zukerman and members of the Emerson and Juilliard String Quartets, gracing legendary venues including Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall, and the Kennedy Center. His discography spans classical masterpieces, contemporary commissions, and reinterpretations of popular music, released on labels including Brilliant Classics, Dacapo, Delos, Etcetera, Foghorn Classics and Naxos. Samuel holds degrees from The Juilliard School and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. His greatest joys are his wife, violinist Yuri Cho, and their cat, Milo.

Dashon Burton, bass-baritone, is celebrated for his versatility across Bach, spirituals, contemporary music, and the orchestral concert repertoire. A three-time GRAMMY Award winner, he has established an international career as a concert soloist, collaborator, and educator. He has performed with leading ensembles including the Cleveland Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, Boston Symphony Orchestra, St. Louis Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, and New Jersey Symphony, with appearances at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Hollywood Bowl, Wigmore Hall, Barbican Hall, Suntory Hall in Tokyo, and the Salzburg Festival.

Especially admired for his Baroque and oratorio singing, Burton's repertoire includes Bach's *Passions*, Handel's *Messiah*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem*, and Mozart's *Requiem*, alongside staged roles including Don Fernando in *Fidelio*, Sarastro in *Die Zauberflöte*, Jupiter in *Castor et Pollux*, and *Sweeney Todd*. His recordings include *Songs of Struggle & Redemption*, *Sanctuary Road*, *Holocaust, 1944*, and *The Listeners*. He is assistant professor of voice at Vanderbilt University Blair School of Music and maintains an active international career as a performer, teacher, and mentor.

Acclaimed for her “exquisite clarity” and “remarkable virtuosity,” Korean-American pianist **Sun-A Park** is emerging as one of the most exciting artists of her generation. Since debuting with the New Jersey and Houston Symphony Orchestras, she has performed in major venues worldwide, including the Kennedy Center, Carnegie Hall, Juilliard Theater, Steinmetz Hall, and the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

Park has appeared as a soloist with orchestras such as the Yale Philharmonia, Albany Symphony, Sendai City Orchestra (Japan), Orchester Haydn (Italy), and the Symphonic Orchestras of Castilla y León and Ciudad de Granada (Spain). She has collaborated with renowned conductors including Peter Oundjian, Eiji Oue, and Krzysztof Urbanski, and has been featured in recital series across the U.S., Europe, and Asia.

A prizewinner of numerous competitions, she received first prizes at the Olga and Serge Koussevitzky Young Artists Awards and the Kosciuszko Chopin Competition, and top honors at the Jaén, Sendai, Busoni, and Gina Bachauer International Piano Competitions.

Deeply committed to historical performance, Park has studied fortepiano with Alexander Lubimov and Kristian Bezuidenhout and performed at the Virtuoso e Belcanto Festival and Peabody Institute. Her recording of early keyboard sonatas by Muzio Clementi was released on Naxos in 2019.

Born in Busan and raised in New Jersey, Park studied at The Juilliard School, Hochschule für Musik Hannover, and Yale School of Music. She currently serves as assistant professor of piano at Vanderbilt University Blair School of Music.

Daixuan Ai is a Chinese-American composer, performer, teacher, and interdisciplinary artist known for her innovative fusion of traditional and modern, Eastern and Western musical styles. Born in Hunan, China, Daix started her music journey at the age of three when her parents put her in front of a piano for the first time. Somehow she knew then that she would devote her life to music.

At the age of 10, she became one of the selected few young pianists in the country to attend the Wuhan Conservatory of Music. Daix came to the US as an exchange student at the age of 14 and found that music offered a sense of home and belonging, helping her adapt to the new language, cultural, and social environment of suburban Cleveland, Ohio.

Daix's compositions have been performed by many ensembles such as the Chicago Symphony Civic Orchestra, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, Albany Symphony Orchestra, Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra, Aspen Contemporary Ensemble, and Cabrillo Contemporary Music Festival Orchestra. Her works often explore themes of identity, violence, healing, and social justice, and she has been recognized for her efforts to raise awareness about Asian American rights issues. Her sinfonieta, *Silent Theater*, written after a hate crime against an Asian American student in a town she lived in, received the 2025 BMI Foundation Ellen Taaffe Zwilich Award for most outstanding score in classical music.

Daix is currently a doctoral candidate in music composition and theory at Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, where she studied composition with Gabriel Jenks and Aaron Travers, and jazz piano with Luke Gillespie. She had previously earned a master's degree in composition at IU, and a bachelor's degree in composition from Baldwin Wallace Conservatory.

Dennis Yueh-Yeh Li is a director/playwright. His works explore sexuality, power structure and diaspora experiences, culminating often in devised, immersive and participatory theatre. Dennis excels at adapting modern classics, connecting them with timely sociopolitical issues. His directorial portfolio spans across plays, musical theatre, and opera. His playwriting focuses on queer and diasporic lived experiences, and has received support from organizations including Queens Council for the Arts. Master's in Performance Studies, NYU.

Dennis is an alumnus of Drama League's New York Directing Fellowship, Target Margin Theater's Institute Fellowship, and a member of Lincoln Center Theater Directors Lab. Dennis worked with The Living Theatre and is Al Límite Collective's founding member. Currently, Dennis is the Director of Performance, Storytelling & Community at the Museum of Chinese in America. www.dennisyuehyehli.com

Composer Notes

On the night of October 24, 1871, a mob of around five hundred residents of Los Angeles descended on a single block known as Calle de los Negros and brutally murdered eighteen Chinese immigrants. This incident remains as one of the largest racially motivated massacres in American history, yet it is still largely forgotten. *The Ghosts of Chinatown* is my effort to bring this tragedy to light—not to assign blame or seek resolution, but simply to remember the victims, so their stories are told and their lives were not lost in vain.

The song cycle narrates the stories of three victims of the massacre, recounting their memories of the tragic night. The story unfolds through the perspective of a solo singer—a photographer who has just photographed the old Los Angeles Chinatown before it is set to be demolished to make way for new buildings and a highway entrance in downtown LA.

As he develops the film in a darkroom, the images begin to emerge in the developing bath, and he starts to encounter the lingering spirits of those who were killed at those very locations. This experience taps into a superstitious belief from the early days of photography, when people thought that those strange boxes called cameras had the power to capture souls and render them immortal.

Wanting to learn more about the massacre, the photographer allows the trapped souls to possess him, enabling them to share their stories through him. The first spirit to appear is Dr. Gene Tong, a beloved doctor of both Eastern and Western medicine who served various communities in Los Angeles, including white, Hispanic, and Chinese communities. He was well-educated and fluent in both English and Spanish.

The second ghost is Ah Wing, a laborer who worked at a luxury hotel called Pico House. His story is significant because he was the first Chinese person to be lynched. When the police and a mob of Angelenos trapped all the residents of Chinatown in their complex to catch the Tong fighters (Chinese gang members) responsible for the death of Robert Thompson, a white man who tried to intervene in a gunfight between the Tongs and LA policemen, the situation escalated. All but one of the Tong fighters had already fled on a train

back to San Francisco, while the innocent residents of Chinatown were held hostage in their own homes, fearing for their lives.

When Ah Wing tried to break through the barricade, the mob captured him. Although the police directed that he should be taken to jail, the mob decided to take "justice" into their own hands. The lynching of Ah Wing fueled the bloodlust and fury of the crowd, which had grown to over 500 Angelenos. They realized they could act without police interference and subsequently took the lives of 17 more people.

The identity of the last ghost remains unknown. He was the only Tong fighter involved in the original killing of Robert Thompson. Through a song sung in Sprechstimme, which means "spoken voice" in German, he expresses his regret for participating in the gang fight and for the brutal deaths of his innocent countrymen, who paid the price for the crimes of his organization.

Here are some symbols and imagery that may help in understanding this song cycle:

The "Queues" refer to a traditional hairstyle worn by Chinese men. This hairstyle consisted of long, braided hair that symbolized loyalty to the Qing dynasty. It represented tradition, pride, and identity; cutting one's queues was equivalent to being disowned and exiled from one's family and country. When Chinese migrants first arrived in the United States, their long braids were often viewed as peculiar, leading to discrimination and negative stereotypes. To drag a Chinese man by his queue, or to cut it off—like the mob did to the victims of the massacre—was regarded as the utmost humiliation and mockery for a man of the Qing dynasty.

The imagery of "snowfall in June" symbolizes profound and unavenged injustice in Chinese culture. This imagery originates from the story of a child bride named Dou E, who was wrongfully convicted of a crime after she rejected a suitor. Following her execution, three supernatural phenomena occurred: blood rain, snow in June, and a three-year drought.

The last song quotes a melody from a traditional Chinese funeral dirge known as Āiyuè (哀乐). This music is designated as national funeral music and is used during major memorial activities for high-ranking officials and respected public figures. My intention with this closing piece is to offer the victims a proper farewell, allowing their souls to be freed and their memories to be carried on by the rest of us.

~ *Daixuan Ai*

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