

THE ST. OLAF COLLEGE DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC  
*Guest Recital*

# ~Nois Quartet

Julian Velasco, *soprano saxophone*

Natalia Warthen, *alto saxophone*

Jordan Lulloff, *tenor saxophone*

János Csontos, *baritone saxophone*

THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 2025 • URNESS RECITAL HALL • 11:30 A.M.

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## PROGRAM

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*To Speak As One* (2023)

Bobby Ge  
(b.1996)

*Eternal Present* (2023)

I. Now

Shelley Washington  
(b.1991)

*Break Away* (2013/2025)

I. Lifting

II. Songbird

III. Smoke

IV. Quick Pass

V. Break Away

Jessie Montgomery  
(b.1981)

*arr. ~Nois Quartet*

*Running in a Field of Flowers* (2023)

I. Meditation

II. Descent

III. Searing Joy

Travis Laplante  
(b.1982)

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## COMPOSERS' PROGRAM NOTES

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### **To Speak As One**

The more people I've spoken with, the more I have come to cherish moments of shared understanding. For me, language often feels rather insufficient as a means of expressing thought – like trying to portray a three-dimensional image on a flat surface. Understanding someone's words is a delicate process of reconstructing the ineffable depth and interiority of their thoughts, and quite frequently, much is lost in translation.

These ideas provided the seed for **To Speak As One**. To me, the saxophone quartet as an ensemble naturally contends with such questions of mutual understanding and communication. It is conversational in scale; its instruments share much in common both registrally and timbrally; virtually any technique that can be done on one can be done on any other. The result is an ensemble that very easily behaves as a hyperinstrument, able to blend and move with uncommon unity.

Over the course of the piece, I sought to shift throughout between treating the quartet as a singular entity versus four unique players. The resulting work scatters its lines across the group, assigning disparate notes and rhythms to each musician as they discover the composite together. Players enter and peel off constantly, and even in moments of stasis, there is an element of confusion - it's not always clear which instrument is playing which sounds. Even with all its raucous effects and lurching instability, though, **To Speak As One** is intended to be an intimate piece, ultimately focusing on how a small ensemble – with all their cuing, breathing, and eye contact – can discover ways to nonverbally find shared understanding with one another.

This piece was begun while in residence at Copland House, Cortlandt Manor, New York, as a recipient of the Copland House Residency Award.

### **Eternal Present**

The Entirety of past and present and future progresses down the boardwalk, blazing/crawling only forward into the next [ ] on the Great Moving Panorama of Forever. Just beyond the shoreline I am adrift in parallel to her—swimming, floating, sinking.

We, ships in the night/day/afternoon, are acquaintances. Sometimes friends, often enemies. She's sadly almost always too busy to slow down and socialize. There are times (tide dependent) I can keep up in the shallows to chat, but sometimes (often) I am swept back to the deeper sea- unmoored and doggy paddling again.

I am often (rarely) jealous of beachgoers who can get up and leave with her as they please. I watch them pack their picnics, quickly say their goodbyes, and rush off. But I also see this sort of spaghettification of things they leave behind in their haste to catch up.

She, O great Mother Time, hurtles forward, trailed by the wrappers/keys/loose change/emotions/people/memories/ other things left behind and forgotten, her bag overflowing. When I'm able to join her (often/sometimes/rarely), I try picking up those bits and bobs of comet tail, tucking them into pockets, balancing them on my head, holding them in my arms, but the more I carry, the slower I go. Though her gravity pulls me along I can't seem to keep up.

I'm blinded, yet bound, by her.

She must be so tired. I want to hug her and let her know that it's ok to unpack that supermassive beach bag and dump all the clutter– to lighten up for a bit and just tread water with me offshore. But people make so many demands of her (there are apparently many high expectations for an enormous intangible wisp of concept) so probably not. Would it be so bad for Time to take some time off? Who gives marching orders to a god?

But at least for Now, back to sea for me. I'll just swim (float) (sink) side-by-side and empty handed, watching her go go go– a bright streak across the Always.

### **Break Away**

*Break Away* was written for PUBLIQuartet (PQ) in 2013 for a premiere at the Music of Now festival at Symphony Space. The piece was born out of a series of improvisations that PQ was working on while in residency at the Banff Centre where we formed a suite of short pieces riffing on several different styles of music from hip-hop to electronica to twentieth-century modern. Woven among some of my own chosen specific imagery, I adapted some of the techniques from that suite into this five-movement work.

The score calls on the quartet to both play with and “break away” from the score at various points, thereby attempting a seamless dialogue between the written score and the whims of the quartet, in which the piece takes on further transformation at each performance.

The first movement, *Lilting*, is an homage to Anton Webern with a focus on gestural dialogue. The second movement, *Songbird*, is an image of an individual's voice trying to emerge against a harsh facade and includes the first improvised passages in the work. The third movement, *Smoke*, is loosely based on the form of a jazz tune of my own design. The fourth movement, *Quick Pass*, serves as a transition to the final movement *Break Away*, in which the quartet incorporates its most open improvised sections.

### ***Running in a Field of Flowers***

When I was a young child I have a vivid memory of running through a field with a sense of complete joy and freedom. It was as if each flower and blade of grass was singing to me and I could hear a beautiful song that existed inside the air.

When I remember this experience I don't desire to go back to my youth, or even romanticize an innocence that I no longer carry. I simply remember a time in my life when I was consciously more connected to the Earth through listening, before the human-centric conditionings of this life set in. It is part of my life's work to repair this connection inside of myself. I hope that the sounds inside *Running Through a Field of Flowers* communicates at least a sliver of this essential and once passionate love affair between humanity and the Earth, despite the relationship's current decimation.

The musical structure of *Running in a Field of Flowers* is symbolic of a journey taken deeper and deeper into ourselves, to a place where we can hear both the earth's cry and the love without end that is all around and inside us and cannot be destroyed, only forgotten. A huge thank you to ~Nois saxophone quartet for their generosity to this composition. I have composed three previous albums of saxophone quartet music and this is my first experience not also performing in the ensemble. This has been an exceedingly vulnerable experience. Thankfully, I've been filled with happiness to hear the music come alive without my presence in the ensemble. This is largely due to ~Nois's ability to play and listen beyond the notes into a deeper level of communication between each other and the audience. This experience gives me tremendous hope for the future.

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## **ABOUT THE ARTISTS**

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Take your preconceptions of 'noise' and toss them out the window. Equal parts "fiendishly good and fiendishly goofy" (Chicago Tribune), ~Nois Quartet is a "prolific, charismatic young ensemble that is swiftly becoming the American saxophone quartet du jour" (Musical America). Founded in 2016, the Chicago-based ensemble is dedicated to championing new music for saxophone and building community through innovative, inclusive, and exceptional musical experiences.

~Nois has presented over 200 performances and has "continued to legitimize the saxophone quartet as a premier ensemble formation for classical music" (Brutal New Music). Their performances have spanned 28 states, including invitations to perform at some of the top festivals, concert series, and academic institutions in the nation. The ensemble has also been awarded top prizes at numerous prestigious chamber music competitions including the M-Prize International Arts Competition, the Fischhoff National Chamber Music Competition, and was once deemed, "Too loud for the Farmers' Market" (Evanston Local, Illinois 1st Ward Constituent).

At the core of ~Nois' ethos is a fierce dedication to the commissioning of living composers, leading to over 120 world-premieres to date. The members of ~Nois have had the privilege of working closely with some of the world's leading voices in composition to create new works for saxophone quartet, including Jessie Montgomery, Nico Muhly, Shawn Okpebholo, and Augusta Read Thomas. ~Nois has had the honor of sharing the stage with some of today's most prolific ensembles including Third Coast Percussion, Sō Percussion, the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the United States Navy Band, and the Northwestern University Symphonic Wind Ensemble.

~Nois is Julian Velasco (he/him), Natalia Warthen (she/her), Jordan Lulloff (he/him), and János Csontos (he/him). For more information, please visit [www.noisquartet.org](http://www.noisquartet.org).