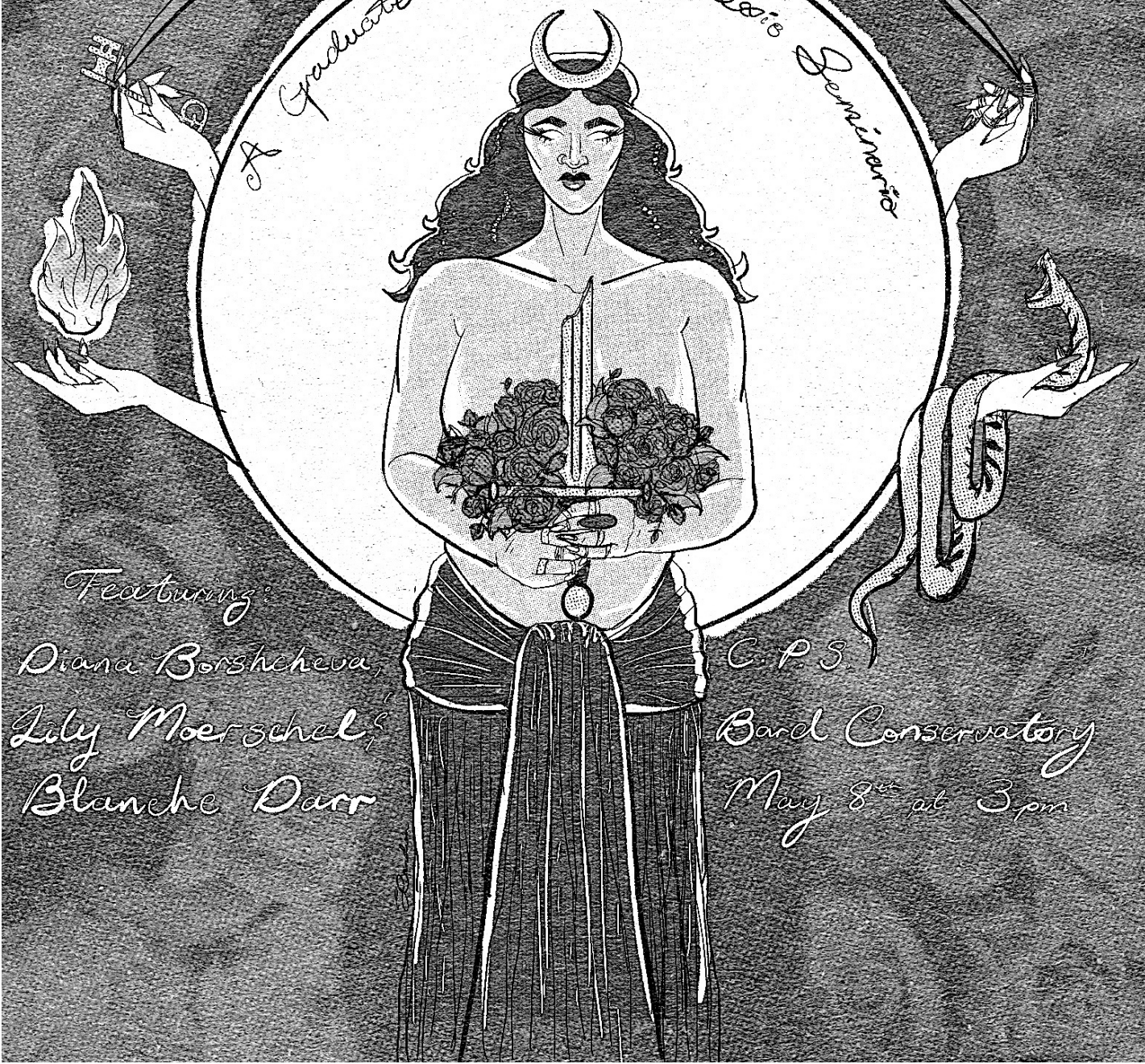


# Femme Festale

A Graduate Recital by Alessie Seminars



Featuring:

Diana Borshcheva,  
Lily Moerschel,  
Blanche Darr

C.P.S.

Bard Conservatory  
May 8<sup>th</sup> at 3pm

## ~ Preface ~

This program has been a labor of love and is especially near and dear to me for many reasons — one of them being that it is my first hour-long solo performance since my graduation recital in my senior year of high school. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, my recital commemorating my undergraduate degree was canceled and I was unable to present my work. The program was similar in content to this one, since it seems I tend to be drawn towards telling stories regarding the feminine experience, but I most definitely can assure you it was significantly more conventional than what you are about to hear.

The list of lessons my experience at Bard has given me is quite long, but I would say the most powerful and most difficult to learn is that there is not much to be gained from hiding. That being said, I wanted to encapsulate everything I have been exposed to here at Bard in terms of musicality, artistry, language, and more within this concert. This recital — the monologue which begins the program, the challenging music, the diversity of repertoire — is not only a culmination of my artistic explorations at Bard, it is also a culmination of my journey healing as a singer and as a person.

I have always been drawn to the character of the femme fatale, and am elated to be able to share this story with you all. A femme fatale (literally "fatal woman," or man eater) is a character that is portrayed as a mysterious, beautiful, and seductive woman whose charms lead her lovers to their demise. Her ability to lure, entice or even hypnotize her victim with a spell was seen, from the earliest stories in which she appears, hence, the femme fatale today is still often described as having a power akin to a witch. Femmes fatales are villainous (or morally ambiguous), and are always associated with a sense of mystery.

This concert will trace the course of a journey of a femme fatale through songs of intimacy, power, vulnerability, injustice, ancestral magic, and healing.

This recital is born of my own journey, but is (I think) relatable to many.



## ~ Revenge ~

### ***Les Illuminations***

### **Benjamin Britten, Arthur Rimbaud**

Benjamin Britten began writing *Les Illuminations* in March 1939 in Suffolk, England and completed the work by October 1939 in Amityville, Long Island. It was the first of his song cycles to gain popularity amongst the public. The cycle was originally written for a soprano, and although tenors often perform it, Britten's biographer David Matthews commented that the work is "so much more sensuous when sung by the soprano voice for which the songs were conceived." The first performance of the cycle was given by Sophie Wyss, to whom the work is dedicated, on January 30th, 1940 at the Aeolian Hall, London. The cycle begins with the statement, "J'ai seul la clef de cette parade sauvage" (I alone hold the key to this savage parade) which is an excerpt from Arthur Rimbaud's poem "Parade". The two movements from Britten's work that you will hear today are the first and seventh in the cycle, "Fanfare" and "Being Beauteous."

Having set a number of English texts, Britten was looking to take the first steps in setting text in a foreign language. W. H. Auden introduced Britten to the prose poems of Arthur Rimbaud, and these fantastical works were immediately inspiring to Britten. Britten wrote the following in a 1940 program note: "Rimbaud's short life as a poet was an erratic and turbulent one, generally near starvation and often homeless, sometimes with his friend Verlaine, sometimes alone, and much of it was set in the most sordid surroundings, in Paris, Brussels, and London; but throughout it, the boy's inspiration remained radiant and intense. The word 'Illuminations' suggests both the vision of a mystic and a brightly coloured picture ...."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sfsymphony.org/Data/Event-Data/Program-Notes/B/Britten-Les-Illuminations,-Opus-18>

## Her Kind

David Conte, Anne Sexton

"Her Kind" is the second song in David Conte's Sexton Songs for soprano and piano (or optional chamber ensemble). Published in 1960, Anne Sexton's poem "Her Kind" is a satire on what was considered to be the quintessential American housewife of the 1960's. Conte said on composing the work: "Through my study of Sexton's poetry and her life, I gradually formed an image of her as a kind of cabaret performer, a microphone in one hand and a cigarette in the other, delivering her funny (and often devastating) jokes. In my musical settings I have tried to mirror Sexton's vernacular language and popular images with a style that evokes aspects of jazz and cabaret, and mixes sustained aria-type music with recitative passages." The cabaret inspiration in this song is evoked in the piano and vocal parts that both have a rhythmic swing through the use of triplets.

## 7 Romances on Poems by Alexander Blok

Dmitri Shostakovich

"Ophelia's Song," the first song in the group you will hear today, was written early in 1967 when cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and his wife soprano Galina Vishnevskaya asked Shostakovich to write them a work they could perform together. In the three days following this composition, Shostakovich set another Blok poem: "Gamayun Bird of Prophecy" for voice and piano to be performed by Vishnevskaya and himself. "We Were Together", for violin and voice, was added to bring his violinist friend David Oistrakh into the collaboration. *Seven Romances on Poems by Alexander Blok* premiered during the fiftieth anniversary year of the October Revolution; this event held additional poignancy for the composer and performers who at the time were examining their relationship with the government.

"Ophelia's Song" tells the devastating tale of a lover left abandoned, through the lens of Shakespeare's Ophelia. The opening motif in the cello represents the yearning Ophelia feels for her love, Hamlet. "Gamayun Bird of Prophecy" tells a chilling and frightening tale of war and bloodshed which Shostakovich highlights through an ascending declamatory chord progression in the piano, played fortissimo. The vocal line is also marked forte, to express the speaker's awestruck reaction to Gamayun's power.

## ~ Mother & Time ~

## A Letter to My Daughter

Lori Laitman, Anne Ranasinghe

*Daughters* was commissioned by pianist Kirsten Taylor and premiered October 19th, 1998. Lori Laitman discovered the text for this work while seeking out poetry for another set she was composing, on the stories of people who experienced the Holocaust. In an effort to gain more perspective on her poetry, Laitman reached out to Anne Ranasinghe and developed a friendship with her. Laitman sets the text in the low part of the soprano voice, not only to evoke the mature age of the speaker, but also to highlight the deep grief and fear the mother feels for her daughter.

## Walpurgisnacht

Johannes Brahms, Wilhelm Häring

This song was the inspiration for this part of the program, depicting the relationship between a mother and daughter, and the magical powers in their ancestry. "Walpurgisnacht" is a duet for mezzo and soprano that portrays the conversation between mother and daughter. In the German culture, "Walpurgisnacht" (Saint Walpurgis Night) is a feast day that begins April 30th and ends on the evening of May 1st. There are many different iterations of this event, but what is described in this poem is Hexennacht ('Witches' Night'). It is said to be the night when witches congregate for a large celebration on the Brocken to await the arrival of spring. In this scene, the mother and daughter's conversation is accompanied by roars of thunder and the howling of wind. The song begins with a flying piano part, fast paced and urgent, representing the turbulent weather outside. The gentle daughter begins her trepidatious statement "Dear Mother, the wind and rain howls tonight." Brahms sets this text, and all of the other daughter's lines, with an ascending line, while the mother answers with a descending line as she comforts her sweet daughter's anxieties. This vocal interplay conjures up the image of the witches flying up through the air and landing on the roofs of houses and on the mountaintop.

## Ma première lettre

Cécile Chaminade, Rosemonde Gérard

Cécile Chaminade composed “Ma première lettre” on a poem by Rosemonde Gérard in 1893. The woman in the poem finds the first letter she ever wrote, and through this discovery reflects upon the passage of time. All of the emotions described in the letter are a distant and dead memory to her.

At the height of Chaminade’s career her music achieved extraordinary popularity through its gracefulness and feminine charm. Although this style of music went out of fashion in her later years, we can now appreciate it for its timelessness and elegantly crafted style.



## Vier Lieder

Arnold Schönberg, Richard Dehmel

*Vier Lieder*, Schönberg’s Op. 2, is a cycle of four songs set to three poems by Richard Dehmel’s<sup>2</sup> *Weib und Welt* (Woman and World), and one by Johannes Schlaf. (The final song in this set has been omitted from this program because of Schlaf’s affiliation with the Nazi Party.) *Weib und Welt* triggered a scandal in the late 1890s when Börries von Münchhausen, a deeply conservative poet, condemned the work on grounds of obscenity and blasphemy. This is especially apparent in the poem “Schenk mir deinen goldenen kamm” which is a sensual depiction of the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Dehmel was ultimately tried in court and his book was ordered to be burned. However, he managed to be acquitted which is why we are able to enjoy this work today. This poetry is made all the more magnificent because of Schönberg’s brilliant setting. “Erwartung” (Anticipation) paints a dreamscape of a little red villa near a dead oak tree. Here, a man presents a ghostly woman with a ring of three opals (a stone that represents love, passion and eroticism). The mystery and yearning in this song is brought to life by Schönberg’s use of chromatic harmony to create a state of mystery and longing. It is about having the desire to be vulnerable and intimate with someone in direct yet intense ways. Schönberg’s use of syncopation creates a feeling of sensuality. In “Erhebung”, the poet describes an exalted moment with a lover. Schönberg sets the text with an ascending vocal line and running piano figurations, depicting the lovers’ flight towards the sun.<sup>3</sup>



## Farther From the Heart

Eve Beglarian, Jane Bowles

“Farther From the Heart” is a song from Armenian-American composer Eve Beglarian’s project *A Book of Days*. Composer and performer Eve Beglarian is described by the Los Angeles Times as a “humane, idealistic rebel and a musical sensualist.” The poem was written by Jane Bowles in 1942. Beglarian writes on her website that *A Book of Days* is: “A long-term project I conceived in 2001, a book of days of text/music/visuals, one for each day of the year. I think of these pieces as “mulling over” pieces, made in the spirit of commonplace books, collections of found thought that please me, and of medieval books of days. The pieces generally begin from found text for which I write music, and some are then illuminated (by video rather than medieval miniatures). My hope is that over time, you will be able to experience this book of days not only as a quotidian and seasonal cycle, but also as a record of one life lived over however many years I end up being granted.” She also shares that she had been “mulling over this 1942 poem by Jane Bowles since I first encountered it in 2000. I think the poem is unbearably sad: the embodiment of a specific kind of mid-20th-century female unhappiness. I do not live this life, but I am very conscious of having escaped it. The song showed up unannounced one day while I was in residence at Ucross in the spring of 2016.” This unbearable sadness is reflected in the piano part with its sparseness and repetitive motivic cell. The cyclical nature of the text and its setting represent the speaker’s inability to escape her own emotional trap set in place by society’s expectations of women. As the song continues, the vocal tessitura climbs higher and higher, leading to the painful lines “And I lean on anyone’s shoulder / Because anyone’s warmer than me.” The opening text returns with the same musical motif as the beginning, indicating a lack of cathartic release.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 1898, 1899, 1901, 1910, 1915, ?, 1940, and 1907. “Richard Dehmel.” Oxford Lieder. Accessed April 15, 2022. <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/poet/349>.

<sup>3</sup> The Early Works of Arnold Schoenberg, 1893–1908. <https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft5t1nb3gn&chunk.id=d0e4270&toc.id=&brand=ucpress>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://evbv.com/bookofday/>

# ~ Healing ~

## **Four Poems of Nikita Gill**

**Melissa Dunphy**

*Four poems of Nikita Gill* is a song cycle commissioned by Dr. Carol Lines through a Juliet Hardtner Endowed Professorship at McNeese State University. This program was created for the seniors at McNeese State University to commission works to be performed on their graduation recitals. *Four poems of Nikita Gill* is about the process of healing through magic, empowerment and growth. Gill often writes poetry about love, and enjoys retelling famous fairytales with a feminist twist. Her literary inspirations include Sylvia Plath, Dr. Maya Angelou and Robert Frost. Composer Melissa Dunphy was born to refugee parents and raised in Australia. Dunphy immigrated to the United States in 2003 and has since become an award-winning and acclaimed composer specializing in vocal, political, and theatrical music. Dunphy said, "As a composer, I believe that music is not only a form of expression but a means of communication. My primary mission is to connect with my audience so that they discover and understand the ideas, emotions, and narratives in my music. I want my music to be relevant to the world around it and exist in that world. It is inspired by and explores real-world issues of social justice and personal relationships. I am deeply committed to bringing the voices of women and minorities to the stage, either by telling their stories, or telling stories from their perspective." Dunphy's setting of these powerful poems is brilliant. In "Sorcery" the first and last musical motifs in the piano contain wandering eighth notes which create a mysterious atmosphere. This gesture highlights the lines "Every day, I magic myself alive again" and "Tell me again, how healing is not a magical thing." The two songs "From the Ashes She Became" and "You Have Become a Forest" have a lovely romantic quality to them that is suggestive of the ballads sung by Disney heroines.



# ~ The Piano Meditations ~

## **Drawing Down the Moon**

**Luke Duffy**

"This piece traces the parts of a Wiccan ritual of the same name, where a coven will attempt to convene and communicate with a female deity. It is presented in three parts in this piece: the 'Invocation', represented by a lyrical invitation to the Goddess; the 'Incantation', a slower and more meditative motif that repeats and repeats; and 'Goddess Incarnate', where the Goddess herself is made flesh through the priestess and speaks to her, affirming, warm, and powerful."

*-Luke Duffy*

"Last spring I began hosting a music series in Upstate NY with the idea to support local musicians by providing the space and opportunity to perform. One of the concerts was dedicated to solo piano music written by living composers that I know personally. I reached out to Luke two weeks prior to the performance date just to confirm with him that it would be ok for me to perform one of his older cycles. His response was "So, you're telling me I have two weeks to compose a new set for you." It was a clear miscommunication but I went with it, as a joke. Apparently, he was serious about it and accepted the challenge. I remember he asked me "What kind of piece would be your dream though?", and I said "Two or three movements of memories." Then I asked him how much I should pay. He answered "Just a personalized good luck spell, or some sort of magical protection; I know you're a witch."

"In 12 days I had a new score of a three movement cycle. It was personal, it was mine, it was for me."

*-Diana Borshcheva*

# ~ Thank you... ~

From the bottom of my heart, **Thank You** to all of you for coming out to support!

Thank you to my incredible collaborative pianist Diana Borshcheva who has been the most sensitive and magical collaborator.

To Lily Moerschel and Blanche Darr for being beyond generous with their time and musicianship.

To the phenomenal faculty I have had the honor and privilege of working with: Kayo, Stephanie, Erika, Lucy, Liz, Richard, and all of the other amazing professors/mentors here at Bard.

To Jay Condon for the stunning program cover and poster art.

To Ann Gabler and Tricia Reed in the concert office for their behind the scenes work in making today's recital possible.

To Melanie, Sarah, Sam, Kirbily, Micah and Joanne for being the most incredible group of people I have ever had the opportunity to be a part of.

And my sweet angel, Lilly; I wouldn't be here without you.