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**CURATED BY MEAD COMPOSER-IN-RESIDENCE JESSIE MONTGOMERY,
CSO MusicNOW'S 2023/24 SERIES BEGINS ON DEC 3 WITH
"MONTGOMERY AND THE BLACKNIFICENT 7"**

Connecting Chicago audiences with the widest possible range of today's new music, the **2023/24 CSO MusicNOW** series begins at Symphony Center on **Sunday, December 3**, with "**Montgomery and the Blacknificent 7.**" Curated by CSO Mead Composer-in-Residence **Jessie Montgomery** — *Musical America's 2023 Composer of the Year* — the program presents new and recent work by members of the Black composers' collective known as the **Blacknificent 7**. Together with the **world premiere** of a CSO MusicNOW commission from acclaimed composer and soprano **Jasmine Barnes**, the program comprises chamber compositions by **Joel Thompson** and Chicago-based composer **Shawn E. Okpebholo**; two works by **Dave Ragland** addressing human rights violations; and the **Chicago premiere** of **Damien Geter's** *Annunciation* for tenor and chamber ensemble, featuring **Russell Thomas**, the internationally renowned operatic tenor for whom the work was written. The group is completed by Grammy nominee **Carlos Simon** and Montgomery herself; both accomplished improvisers, as well as creators, the two will frame the program with an extemporized introduction, interlude and postlude, played on organ and violin. With musicians from the **[Chicago Symphony Orchestra](#)**, the performance will feature Barnes and Geter, who appear as vocal soloists, and conductor **Donald Lee III**. Members of the Blacknificent 7 will also take part in a **preconcert panel** at 3pm in the Grainger Ballroom, presented by Chicago Humanities in collaboration with the CSOA on "**The Modern Artist Collective**," hosted by WFMT's **LaRob K. Rafael**, artistic director of Hearing in Color.

The seven Black composers first got to know one another during the pandemic lockdowns of 2020, when six of them appeared on the same Facebook Live talk show. The experience was so rewarding that they agreed to continue their conversation by group chat, soon adding a seventh member — Simon — and dubbing themselves "**The Blacknificent 7.**" Offering a safe space to support one another and share their musical and societal struggles and successes, the chat is, as group member Okpebholo

observes, “a big deal when you are in a profession under-represented with Black people.”

One of the most compelling and sought-after voices in new music today, series curator **Jessie Montgomery** is now in her third season as the CSO's Mead Composer-in-Residence. A winner of both the Sphinx Medal of Excellence and the ASCAP Foundation's Leonard Bernstein Award, she is “pretty much changing the canon for American orchestras” (*New York Times*). About the Blacknificent 7 concert, she notes:

“This program connects audiences with the music and ideas of a group of composers and performers who support one another and grow together in our ongoing work. The Blacknificent 7 represents only a part of the expanding community of Black composers whose work is being heard and celebrated in concert settings of all kinds. I'm delighted that this season's first MusicNOW concert will offer an opportunity to discover the music of these exceptional artists that are part of my musical family.”

The program showcases the **world premiere** of ***The United States Welcomes You*** (2023), a **CSO MusicNOW commission** from acclaimed soprano and Emmy-winning composer **Jasmine Barnes**, whose work has been hailed as “the best possible blend of Billie Holiday and Claude Debussy” (*Boston Globe*). Set to a poem of the same name by Pulitzer Prize-winner and former U.S. poet laureate **Tracy K. Smith**, the piece addresses mistrust and the fear of difference. Barnes explains:

“My personal interpretation of this poem is that the United States' authoritative figures ... know that the nation's laws support them and many abuse this position to cause harm towards those who are different and therefore unprotected by the same laws. These stances of fear and mistrust are the dividers between communities and the maintainers of prejudice. I also imagined the text to be similar to customs questioning when returning to the country, or for immigrants entering the country: starting with a welcome with good intentions, and morphing into an invasive interrogative style, creating discomfort.”

Scored for two vocalists, flute, piano and string quartet, Barnes's composition will feature herself and bass-baritone **Damien Geter** as soloists and will be conducted by **Donald Lee III**, the inaugural conductor/pianist of Lyric Opera of Chicago's emerging artist program.

Best known for *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, his Emmy-winning choral tribute to seven Black men killed by the police and other authority figures, **Joel Thompson** currently serves as Houston Grand Opera's first full-time Composer-in-Residence. It was after ingesting all of one day's major news stories that he composed his string quartet ***In Response to the Madness*** (2019). Describing the work as a “stream-of-consciousness response to the political mayhem, the massacres, the climate and our seemingly futile attempts at trying to make things better,” Thompson hopes this work “gives voice to our current angst and perhaps inspires us to change our tune.”

In spring 2022, MusicNOW featured two works by Grammy-nominated Chicago-based composer **Shawn E. Okpebholo**, whose music has been variously described as

“searing” (*Chicago Tribune*), “powerful” (*BBC Music*) and “devastatingly beautiful” (*Washington Post*). Here he is represented by **CryptologiE** (2014), a quintet for flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano. “The source material for this work is a calculated serial pitch set of [my family’s] birthdays; a Morse code rhythm that decodes my oldest daughter’s name; and intentional repeated ostinato and recurring pitches of the first letters of my wife’s and daughters’ names,” he explains. “The mood of this work is a combination of their personalities: highly energetic, sweet and methodical.”

Dave Ragland’s numerous honors include four Emmy nominations and the 2021 American Prize in Composition. Originally scored for vocalist and small ensemble, and now performed in an instrumental version, ***Eight Tones for Elijah*** (2021) serves as Ragland’s moving tribute to young Colorado violinist Elijah McClain, who died after being arrested and assaulted by police as he walked home. The composer writes: “It is dedicated to all Black Americans who have died unjustly by police and authoritative action. The work is to be performed as an aleatoric canon — by a soloist or ensemble. There is no strict adherence to meter, note duration or time. Performers are encouraged to shorten and lengthen notes at their own respective discretion.” Also on the program is Ragland’s ***I Believe*** (2016), an art-song setting of words found on the walls of a Holocaust concentration camp, featuring soprano **Jasmine Barnes** as soloist.

Given “but one word to sum up composer and bass-baritone **Damien Geter**,” the *Washington Post* would have to “go with ‘major’.” Montgomery first featured Geter as both composer and performer in a spring 2022 CSO MusicNOW concert, and now, under the baton of **Donald Lee III**, Geter’s song cycle ***Annunciation*** (2023) receives its **Chicago premiere**. Scored for tenor, harp and strings, the work is framed as “a series of seven visions that capture a moment of ecstasy between the narrator (or singer) and his lover,” Geter says. “The cello plays the part of the singer’s lover throughout.” Set to a libretto by Joshua Banbury, 2022 Librettist-in-Residence of the American Lyric Theater, the cycle was commissioned by tenor **Russell Thomas**, whose voice “marries Wagnerian stamina and Italianate beauty” (*Wall Street Journal*). A regular headliner at such distinguished international houses and festivals as the Metropolitan Opera, Royal Opera House and Salzburg Festival, it was Thomas who gave the work’s world premiere performance, when Geter’s score impressed the *San Francisco Classical Voice* as “music that grabs the listener,” and the tenor demonstrated his “vocal emotionality and expressive freedom.”

About Mead Composer-in-Residence Jessie Montgomery

Jessie Montgomery serves as curator of the CSO MusicNOW series. It was through performances of her music in the series’ 2018/19 season that she first fostered a connection with Chicago audiences, helping to inspire the CSO’s continued commitment to her work. Now in her third season as the orchestra’s Mead Composer-in-Residence, she has developed a significant presence in Chicago. In the first two seasons of her tenure, Riccardo Muti led the CSO’s world premiere performances of her CSO-commissioned orchestral works *Hymn for Everyone* and *Transfigure to Grace*, the first of which may also be heard on CSO Resound’s Grammy-nominated 2023 release *Contemporary American Composers*. Her music was performed by the Civic Orchestra of Chicago in both the 2021/22 and 2023/24 seasons, as well as being presented in 2021/22 and 2022/23 CSO MusicNOW programs. In June 2024, the MusicNOW series

will feature not only Joshua Bell's performance of "Space," Montgomery's contribution to the five-part suite for violin and orchestra *The Elements*, but also the world premiere of her third CSO commission: a new percussion concerto for CSO Principal Percussion Cynthia Yeh. Further deepening her ties to the local community, Montgomery now serves on the Advisory Board of the CSO's African American Network, which presents an annual series of curated and hosted programs to engage Chicago's culturally rich African American community. She also mentors Chicago youth as they create new chamber works through the CSO's ongoing Young Composers Initiative, which launched last season.

Tickets and patron information

Tickets for CSO MusicNOW's "Montgomery and the Blacknificent 7" concert on Sunday, December 3 at 4:30pm start at \$30. A preconcert panel presented by Chicago Humanities takes place from 3–4pm in the Grainger Ballroom and is open to all December 3 ticketholders. Concertgoers are invited to enjoy a casual afterparty and meet-and-greet with the artists hosted by the African American Network.

Subscriptions for the four-concert 2023/24 CSO MusicNOW series at Symphony Center start at \$90. The series comprises two Sunday performances at 4:30pm and two Saturday programs at 7:30pm. The CSO MusicNOW experience includes preconcert events and post-concert parties to mix and mingle with the artists and fellow concertgoers. Subscriptions to the 2023/24 CSO MusicNOW series are available now with more information available at cso.org/musicnow.

Tickets for all CSO MusicNOW concerts can be purchased by contacting Patron Services. Representatives are available to assist with ticket packages by web chat at cso.org, by calling [312-294-3000](tel:312-294-3000) (Monday–Saturday, 10am–5pm), or by emailing patronservices@cso.org.

All artists and programs are subject to change.

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CSO MusicNOW

Montgomery and the Blacknificent 7

Sunday, December 3, at 4:30 p.m. | Preconcert panel at 3:00 p.m.

**Symphony Center
Chicago, IL**

Program curated by Jessie Montgomery, CSO Mead Composer-in-Residence
Jasmine Barnes, soprano
Russell Thomas, tenor
Damien Geter, bass-baritone
Jessie Montgomery, violin
Carlos Simon, organ
Donald Lee III, conductor
Musicians from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

THOMPSON: *In Response to the Madness* for string quartet
OKPEBHLO: *CryptOlogiE* for flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano
RAGLAND: *Eight Tones for Elijah* for flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano
RAGLAND: *I Believe* for vocalist and piano (with Jasmine Barnes, soprano)
BARNES: *The United States Welcomes You* for two vocalists, flute, piano and string quartet
(world premiere of CSO MusicNOW commission; with Jasmine Barnes, soprano & Damien Geter, bass-baritone)
GETER: *Annunciation* for tenor, harp and strings (Chicago premiere; with Russell Thomas, tenor)

Please note that this program includes content intended for mature audiences.

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