

# The Boston Musical Intelligencer

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## Sing Out Strong: DeColonized Voices

by LAURA STANFIELD PRICHARD



Cerise Lim Jacobs

This week, White Snake Projects streamed a live song recital with a twist. The second edition of the local “Sing Out Strong” commissioning project cathartically combined best practices in pre-recorded video with live singing, live composer comments, artist bios, and multiple opportunities for audience members to contribute and react to the performances through Zoom [online video [HERE](#)]. As NEC pianist and conductor Timothy Steele told the eager online audience at for the May 13<sup>th</sup> concert, “This performance was done in layers, and I had the privilege of being the first layer.”

Noted librettist Cerise Lim Jacobs put out a call for composers and writers this January to reimagine the original live concept, following the model she developed for last year’s successful community-based “Sing Out Strong: Immigrant Voices” program, [described [HERE](#)], a collaboration with Juventas New Music Ensemble [reviewed [HERE](#)], and the world premiere opera *I am a Dreamer Who Longer Dreams*, [reviewed [HERE](#)].

Jacobs selected the texts in partnership with Toni Jackson of Boston International Newcomer’s Academy (BINcA) and Richie Wheelock, the lead educator at 826 Boston, a nonprofit youth writing and publishing organization. BINcA is a local public high school devoted to recently arrived immigrants, and five BINcA student poems were selected this year; ten local students have had their writing featured on recent White Snake Productions concerts. Wheelock clarified the process of choosing and guiding student poetry submissions: “My partner in the work on “Sing Out Strong” throughout has been Richie Wheelock, the lead educator in our 826 Boston Writers Room. He chose the students to be involved each year and he and I encouraged the students to participate. We both attended a “Sing Out Strong” community performance in the summer and the opera performance in September [2019] along with two students. We saw the whole arc—the gathering of submissions, the community performances, and then the professional full performance of the opera. We are so grateful for the richness of Cerise’s work and the depth of her commitment to the school.”

The theme for this concert (“DeColonized Voices”) links to the upcoming premiere of *Cosmic Cowboy: A Space Opera* by MIT composer Elena Ruehr with a libretto by Jacobs. Since 2020 may see local celebrations of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pilgrim’s landing on Plymouth Rock, Jacobs hopes that *Cosmic Cowboy* and this recital of new songs act as an opportunity “to explore the human instinct to dominate and/or subjugate people unlike oneself by looking at colonial history. Colonization [has drawn up] borders [and] has created a legacy of conflict, precipitating mass migrations of people.”

Local opera companies have begun to provide opportunities to watch previously recorded operas online, including [Boston Baroque](#), [Beth Morrison Projects](#), and [The Metropolitan Opera](#).

European opera companies have moved quickly to follow suit, and [OperaWire](#) maintains a list of free streaming options.

Broadway singers salvaged Stephen Sondheim’s 90<sup>th</sup>-birthday bash by providing a fascinating series of karaoke-like performers over invisible pianos and orchestras framed by live chatting [HERE](#), but none of these really replicates the “live” experience of seeing performers interact and hearing audience feedback...

Usually, a concert hall is a collective hive, so White Snake Productions decided to channel that energy into a groundbreaking hybrid that featured all the faces and voices of those involved. Creative energy still had to be divided into solitary units, with each composer, instrumentalist, singer, sound technician, and videographer working from home. But to be at such an innovative, well-balanced “live” concert event — hearing the live audience response to each song, reading comments from listeners in real time, and enjoying the multi-layered successes of the performers proved a pleasure to behold.

Composers and authors selected became final at the end of February 2020, and song collaborations completed by early April. Although most development of texts and musical settings is traditionally done at home, the presentation of a public concert requires a diverse, talented staff of producers, technicians, and managers. Associate Producer Rachel Sturm curated the online event, beginning with a ten-minute tutorial on Zoom encouraging listeners to explore the ways that the layout and quality of the concert experience could be optimized. A summary of those tips appears on the WSP website [HERE](#).

Videographer Kathy Wittman of [Ball Square Films](#), a favorite collaborator of Boston’s Odyssey Opera, Boston Baroque, Blue Heron, and the Boston Early Music Festival, filmed pianist/conductor Timothy Steele (first layer, appearing on the left screen of two) and cellists Agnes Kim and Clare Monfredo (second layer, appearing on the right). These images were underlaid with subtitles in white, and perfectly balanced to give the impression of a live chamber duo, although Kim spoke poignantly about the challenges of one-way communication: “getting cues” from and responding to the pianist, but not being able to signal back to him. WSP Music Director Tian Hui Ng and GRAMMY®-award winning Audio Producer Antonio Oliart, a longtime member of the team at WGBH, masterfully balanced the acoustic sound and the occasional use of pre-recorded electronic music and *musique concrete*. Vocalists [Brianna Robinson](#), a second-year Jane and Steven Akin Emerging Artist at Boston Lyric Opera, and [Jaime Kathleen Korkos](#), a local favorite from recent productions of Odyssey Opera’s *La belle Helène* and BLO’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, performed live, floating above the instrumentalists on the screen.

The program consisted of ten texts by local professionals from Singapore, the Nipmuc Tribe of Massachusetts, and the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma; an anonymous writer from Hong Kong; and students from Cape Verde, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, VietNam, and Yale University. The eight featured composers included Guggenheim

Fellow Elena Ruehr, Dartmouth Music Professor Kui Dong, American Indian classical composer Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate, California native Brian Morales, Cornell doctoral student Daniel Reza Sabzghabaei, multimedia artist Michele Cheng, German-born music psychotherapist and composer Peter Michael "Mike" von der Nahmer, and Avik Sarkar, the youngest winner of the BMI Student Composer Award. Cheng and Sarkar are returning composers to this type of project: they were featured composers in WSP's 2019 "Sing Out Strong" recitals. Full artist bios and full concert program appear [HERE](#).



Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate

At 8:05, Jacobs gave a heartfelt welcome emphasizing the special nature of the hybrid concert. She thanked Mount Holyoke College for hosting the online event so that "three times more people could attend," acknowledged the many partners required for this type of community-based multimedia work, and reminded the audience, "We are lucky that we are all able to come together today." Before the start of the formal performance, at roughly 8:20pm, listeners were directed to the online program book, encouraged to attend an online talkback following the show, and instructed on how to contribute to the "live" dynamic through written chatting and "unmuting" for applause and audience comment following each song. Although the event was free, donations were solicited to support BINcA, supporting local students and their families.

Though listed in alphabetical order by title in the program, the songs actually unfolded in a more dramatic sequence, alternating the vocalists when possible, and contrasting musical styles. Texts for all of the songs, in concert order, are now available [HERE](#).

A short introduction by an author or composer and a title slide, preceded each song, beginning with Stephanie Henry's [moving setting](#) of the tragic first-person narrative *Colonialism*, written by Cape Verde native Geovanna de Andrade:

My story hits my chest and cuts my heart  
 It's my skin color, my only designation...  
 I'm invisible before your white eyes  
 You own me because you found me  
 But my mom gave me life, she gave me life free  
 I remember her face  
 When the palm of our hands touched, for the last time

In the next two songs, Jaime Korkos partnered closely with her cello partners, who sometimes doubled the vocal lines and sometimes sang, providing a more complex texture in *Who We Are*. Composer [Daniel Reza Sabzghabaei](#) discussed the way he used clusters of tones and multiple voices to "bring out the authentic feeling" and "words that are emboldened" in Massachusetts native [Larry Spotted Crow Mann's](#) hypnotic poem *Who We Are*:

We are the Wampum Belt  
 Open at both Ends –  
**Still**  
 Weaving Our Story.  
 [...]  
 We are the Cedar Basket,  
 Sewn from the Roots of the Universe

## Forever

### Expanding Our Spirit.

Jerod Tate's song in Chickasaw and English *Ithánali/I Know* (for which he wrote both text and music) was the most closely linked to the theme of WSP's new operatic production, *Cosmic Cowboy*. What if the first astronaut on Mars was a Native American woman? How would it feel to be both a colonizer and a member of a colonized people? Jamie Korkos's singing of this introspective, illusive personal exploration stunned the audience.

This is the moment.  
The old ones, they know.  
Now I will listen and follow.  
Now I know.  
Anchonkash, (my heart) is clear.

Brianna Robinson excelled in this close-up medium, bringing the heart-wringing frustration of her opening sung monologue *Colonialism* into sharp contrast with the central set of three poems (two of which were spoken). Toni Jackson and Chinese-American composer [Kui Dong](#) introduced the fourth song, an autobiographical litany by Dominican student Melody Guerrero, in which twelve of the thirteen lines began with the text "Where I'm from..." Kui Dong's suspended harmonies were not organized by a clear pulse, but outlined clear tonal centers and created a cloud of sound around the vocalist. The modal interaction between Robinson's melodic phrases and Agnes Kim's rhapsodic cello work acted as a salve for the acerbic, often ironic poem *Dominican*.

Timothy Steele set Lordorina Hercules' poem *Fight* as a mostly-spoken monologue supported by body percussion and piano and Agnes Kim playing a variety of household objects. Hercules framed her aggressive, vibrant three-section narrative with a refrain, emphasizing elements of "the fight" waged by Haitians to ensure that future generations would enjoy more safety and freedom than their forebears. [Michele Cheng](#)'s innovative use of found objects brought out the pulse of Hercules' poetry, elevating each part of the story to a mesmerizing climax.

The six and seventh texts reflected on the power inherent in the naming and (colonial) renaming of places. *Congo Song* by Chiruzza Muhimuzi, a recent arrival to Boston from the Democratic Republic of Congo, was ably introduced by the poet and recited by Brianna Robinson. His words vividly conveyed losses of power, possession, and personal voice as told by his grandfather:

Their occupation of our land was slow, slow  
They renamed our mountains, rivers, lakes and plants  
Even though they all had names

Jacobs' complex poem *A Colonized Flower*, inspired by a visual image of a flower renamed. Places a first-person narrative in the flower's own voice ("I don't know my true name For Raffles named me after himself...") explores the power of losing one's identity:

I'm the world's largest flower  
Three feet wide, fifteen pounds strong  
And stinking of carrion to attract my prey  
I lived for centuries  
In the rainforests of Southeast Asia  
Before I was "discovered" on May 19, 1818

[Elena Ruehr](#)'s gently ironic setting fluctuated between a five-note motive (most often heard in the piano) and a lush European-style anthem texture, featuring Jaime Korkos'

beautiful singing and Agnes Kim on cello. WSP's next opera premiere, *Cosmic Cowboy*, will feature these same compositional partners in their first extended collaboration (Jacobs' sixth libretto and Ruehr's fifth completed opera) [HERE](#).

The two most dramatically unified songs of the evening, both sung by Brianna Robinson, followed. Vy Lee's hopeful *I Was Born in South Vietnam* began with a short historical listing of invaders and rallied to a rousing call for unity and forgiveness. [Brian Morales](#)'s imaginative use of the cello as a fully dramatic partner (contrasting string tremolo with humming), and his transparent, silence-filled scoring for piano (delicate piano clusters and plucked strings) brought out a feeling of loss and solidarity with the author. His hopeful coda supported Lee's optimism through slow triadic motion and a steady rhythmic pulse.

Colonized three times by the North  
For one thousand years by China  
Sixty-one years by France  
Then war with America  
What we really need now  
Is freedom and happiness.



Elena Ruehr (file photo)

*Parting*, Avik Sarkar's elegiac description of his family's experiences during the partition of India in 1947. A first-generation South Asian American, graduate of BB&N, current Yale student, and alumni of From the Top, provided the climax and biggest artistic success of the evening [HERE](#). Sarkar has a remarkable command of his subject, recreating its full sensory experience through highly unified music and text. His use of the cello both supported the voice and echoed short themes, acting as an aural reflection mirroring vivid memories. Set in Barishal, Bangladesh, Sarkar's moving narrative summons the emotions of two sisters amid a lush, liquid world of fruit markets, rainy monsoons, and water lilies.

My grandmother recalls  
her sister's voice—in fragments, remnants  
of mosaics—and under her breath she whispers  
*Come back, come back.*  
But the lilies float on, apart.

The final work on this profound and topical song recital sounded the most muscular and modern, combining pre-recorded percussion, musique concrète, gamelan, and sustained whistles with piano, cello, and voice. Cerise Lim Jacobs read an introduction by the anonymous author, and composer [Mike von der Nahmer](#), who described his approach to the four sections of text, beginning "I cry for you my Hong Kong/ I weep for you my Hong Kong/ I mourn for you my Hong Kong/ My heart hurts for your children." *A Terrible Nightmare in Hong Kong* deals with the loss of freedom, broken promises, and defiance in the face of re-colonization.

The hour-plus event and packed more of an emotional punch than last year's first "Sing Out Strong" set of ten new songs. This hybrid, multimedia experiment succeeded, and White Snake Productions has set a new standard for online concerts in the age of pandemic.

## R E C E N T   C O M M E N T S

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**Laura Prichard teaches throughout the Boston area as a certified K-12 teacher of music/dance/art, as a theater pianist (Winchester Cooperative Theater), and at the university level (Harvard Libraries, Bunker Hill CC, and formerly at Northeastern and UMass). She was the Assistant Director for the Grammy Award-winning San Francisco Symphony Chorus from 1995-2003, under Vance George.**

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Photos of all of the writers and composers appear here: <https://www.whitesnakeprojects.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Sing-Out-Strong-Decolonized-Program-May-13.pdf>

***Comment by Laura Prichard – May 17, 2020 at 4:44 pm***

Thank you so much, Laura, for taking the time to attend the concert and to write such a beautiful review! I really appreciate your kind words; they mean so much!

All my best,

Avik

***Comment by Avik Sarkar – May 23, 2020 at 10:39 pm***

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