

Oberlin Presents Grammy-Winning Imani Winds in Concert

by Stephanie Manning

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When flutist Brandon Patrick George '08 attended [Imani Winds'](#) Artist Recital Series performance back in 2007, he never imagined that he would one day sit in the flute chair. "Being able to perform with my colleagues is such an honor," he says about returning to Oberlin with the pioneering wind quintet on [March 7](#). The ensemble last appeared in Warner Concert Hall in 2021 when they gave a short performance and enjoyed a wonderful dialogue with students

during a generous Q&A.

The ensemble—who recently won their first Grammy for their album *Passion for Bach and Coltrane*—will present a contemporary program that George says is connected to two key parts of Imani Winds' mission: "to highlight the shared humanity between all individuals from all walks of life, and to advocate for change."

Carlos Simon's *Giants* celebrates the stories of influential Black American figures, while Andy Akiho's *BeLoud, BeLoved, BeLonging* combines the sounds of protests at an immigrant detention center with the incarcerated individuals at Rikers Island. The program continues with Damien Geter's playful *I Said What I Said* and Billy Taylor's jazz-influenced *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free*.

The Oberlin performance is a homecoming not just for George, but also for bassoonist Monica Ellis '95. Oboist Toyin Spellman-Diaz '94 is currently on leave, but her former

student and recent Curtis Institute of Music graduate Mekhi Gladden is stepping into her shoes.

“We are delighted to have Mekhi with us for this season,” George says. “The opportunity to watch a young musician blossom and then sit next to them makes us very proud.”



A more permanent personnel change for Imani Winds occurred in 2021, when Oberlin Associate Professor of Horn [Jeff Scott](#) retired from the ensemble after 24 years. “I’m still with them in spirit,” says Scott, who continues to contribute to the group through his compositions. It was his piece, *Passion for Bach and Coltrane*, that helped win the ensemble a [Grammy](#) this year.

Another of Scott’s works is also central to Imani Winds’ Oberlin performance in March. *Fallen Petals of Nameless Flowers*, a commission from Chamber

Music Detroit, tells the story of four juvenile lifers—young men who were sentenced without parole, spending decades in a Michigan prison before the Supreme Court ruled the practice unconstitutional in 2012.

The subject was a difficult one for Scott to approach. “I was like, man, I’m going to write about the dark side of human society and American society,” he says. “So, how do you do that and make it something that people will want to hear?”

The answer came in the form of poet Robert Laidler, who had been working on a project with the [Chamber Music Detroit](#) community engagement manager Bryan Jones—a formerly incarcerated individual himself—to connect with juvenile lifers.

“I can never compose in a vacuum,” Scott says. “It could be a picture, it could be a memory, but I need something to sort of get the inspiration from. And with this, poetry was definitely the conduit.”

The emotional arc of Laidler’s poems helped Scott navigate his way through the dark subject matter, which discusses themes about making wrong choices and tumultuous childhoods. He also decided to add cellist Seth Parker Woods and pianist Cory Smythe onto the instrumentation of wind quintet with narrator. “If you’re going to do a piece of this magnitude, you need more instruments to really bring up more colors,” he says.

At the piece’s premiere in Detroit in 2022, the men who inspired the piece and their families were all in attendance. “To know that they had spent so much of their youthful

life in prison, and here we are celebrating that they persevered—it was powerful,” Scott says.

Woods and Smythe will join Imani Winds in Oberlin for the work’s second-ever performance. While Laidler was the narrator for the premiere, the text will be narrated by actor Michael Braugher '14 for this performance.



L-R: Braugher, Woods, and Smythe

Scott is now part of the welcoming party for [Imani Winds’ March visit](#), which will also include a preconcert panel discussion and six master classes for students in the Winds Department. He says the Oberlin influence was evident during his time with the group. “No matter where we went, if we played a concert and there was a meet and greet or some sort of gathering, somehow the Obies just kind of surfaced and found one another,” he says, adding he never experienced the phenomenon with any other school.

“There’s a pride of having either attended, taught, or just being associated with Oberlin that people wear like a badge—like, ‘Hey, I’m part of the family.’”

Event Details for Thursday, March 7

6:45 PM Panel Discussion

The stories behind *Fallen Petals of Nameless Flowers*

Panelists: Monica Ellis '95, Imani Winds bassoonist; Bryan Jones, Chamber Music Detroit director of community and patron engagement; [Jody Kerchner](#), Oberlin professor of music education; Jeff Scott, composer and Oberlin associate professor of horn

7:30 PM Concert

Imani Winds with cellist Seth Parker Woods, pianist Cory Smythe,

and actor Michael Braugher '14

Free admission

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