



2025-2026 Musical Interludes

Songs About Place

Program Notes

Places shape us – through their landscapes, architecture and atmosphere; and sometimes through a single moment of light or sound. **Songs About Place** invites us to hear how a setting is transformed into sound, and how a place, in all its forms, becomes a unique experience.

Each piece on this program reflects a distinct sense of place: Piazzolla's Buenos Aires at the turn of the century, Ravel's Basque and Malaysian influences, Liszt's impressions of Italy, Norman's meditation on a Roman chapel, and Dvořák's time in America. Together, they reveal how sound can capture the character of a setting and how our sense of place shapes the music we create and enjoy.

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Astor Piazzolla's (1921-1992) ***Histoire du Tango*** traces the evolution of tango from its origins in early twentieth-century Buenos Aires to its modern concert form. The opening movement, ***Bordel 1900***, evokes the lively dance halls and brothels where tango first took shape, incorporating African rhythms, European harmonies, and local folk melodies. Piazzolla describes this high-spirited tango as "full of charm and vivacity, that gives the impression of the good spirits and volubility of the French, Italian, and Spanish women who lived in these brothels, enticing the policemen, thieves, sailors, and hoodlums who visited them." Written in 1985, the work was part of Piazzolla's lifelong effort to bring tango into the classical realm without losing the genre's spirit.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) composed his ***Piano Trio in A Minor*** in 1914 in the Basque town of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, just before enlisting in World War I. The trio's opening movement, *Modéré*, is in sonata form and draws on the asymmetrical rhythms of the Basque zortziko dance form (in 8/8 divided as 3 + 2 + 3). The movement includes modal harmonies reminiscent of regional folk music to reflect the landscape and character of the composer's homeland. The second movement, *Pantoum: Assez vif*, takes its title from a Malaysian verse form, in which the second and fourth lines of each four-line stanza become the first and third lines of the next. This movement is based on a traditional scherzo and trio (A-B-A form), with its themes and time signatures mirroring the poem's overlapping structure.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) composed ***Venezia e Napoli*** ("Venice and Naples") as a supplement to the second volume of his *Années de pèlerinage* ("Years of Pilgrimage"), a three-part collection reflecting his travels



through Switzerland and Italy. Revised and published in 1861, *Venezia e Napoli* concludes with the ***Tarantella***, a virtuosic finale based on Neapolitan folk tunes that Liszt encountered in Italy. In particular, the title refers to a southern Italian dance once believed to cure tarantula bites through frenzied, agitated movements — which Liszt conveys through rapid scales, quick repeated notes, fast tempos, and rhythmic intensity. The piece is based on themes by the French composer, Guillaume-Louis Cottrau, with three distinct sections: Presto — Canzona Napolitana — Prestissimo.

Andrew Norman (b. 1979) composed ***Sabina*** in 2008, after completing his fellowship at the American Academy in Rome.

“In October 2006, I visited the ancient church of Santa Sabina on Rome's Aventine Hill. I entered very early in the morning, while it was still dark, and as I listened to the morning mass I watched the sunrise from within the church. The light in Santa Sabina is breathtaking; the large clerestory windows are not made of glass but of translucent stone, and when light shines through these intricately patterned windows, luminous designs appear all over the church's marble and mosaic surfaces. As I watched the light grow and change that morning, I was struck by both its enveloping, golden warmth and the delicacy and complexity of its effects. I sketched the material for this piece soon after that unforgettable experience.”

Scored for solo viola, *Sabina* unfolds gradually and quietly, using sustained tones, harmonics<sup>1</sup>, and subtle changes in dynamics and color to mirror that transformation of light and space. Moments of stillness and resonance invite the listener to experience sound as something that shifts and expands over time.

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) composed his **String Quartet No. 12 in F Major, Op. 96, “American”** in 1893 while spending the summer in Spillville, Iowa, a small Czech immigrant community. Written in just two weeks, the quartet reflects both the sounds of his surroundings and his fascination with American musical idioms. As in his Symphony No. 9, “From the New World,” completed earlier that year, Dvořák incorporates pentatonic scales and rhythmic patterns reminiscent of spirituals and Native American songs. The third movement, *Molto vivace*, suggests a rustic dance animated by rhythmic drive and birdsong (specifically the Scarlet tanager he heard in Spillville), with a slower trio section in the middle. The *Finale* is lively and joyful in traditional rondo form (A–B–A–C–A–B–A), with a hymnlike melody midway through to contrast the folk-like melodies Dvořák uses throughout the movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Harmonics are created by lightly touching a string at a specific point —without pressing it all the way down—while drawing the bow across or plucking the string. The result is a higher-pitched, bell-like tone.